

While Russia's narrative on Ukraine has been misleading, it should not be excluded from media reports in the West

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Throughout the Ukraine crisis there has been persistent criticism from the West that the Russian media have presented intentionally misleading information on the conflict. [Joanna Szostek](#) writes that while there are legitimate concerns about the standard of reporting in organisations such as the state-funded broadcaster RT, to ban or exclude Russian perspectives from western media would be counter-productive. She argues that the best way to generate dialogue between both sides would be for western media organisations to engage with the issue tactfully by making a commitment to explain the fears and resentments underlying Russian (and Ukrainian separatist) views.



On 31 October a conference took place at the University of Cambridge to discuss 'Ukraine and the Global Information War'. The event brought journalists, activists and academics together to reflect on media coverage of the Ukrainian crisis, with the problem of propaganda a particular concern. Several of the speakers represented organisations that have been working to [expose disinformation](#) in the Russian media and to [counter the Russian narrative](#) of events in Ukraine more generally.

Russia's international propaganda machine is so powerful, insidious and dangerous, argued some of these speakers, that much tougher measures are needed to block its effects. Calls were voiced for RT, Russia's state-funded broadcaster aimed at international audiences, to be outlawed. Some participants suggested that Western news outlets should be freed from the usual requirement to 'report both sides' on the basis that the Russian 'side' is largely derived from falsehoods, so repeating it merely serves the Kremlin's aim of muddying the waters. One eminent historian complained that the BBC's Ukraine coverage had been 'particularly irritating' with its rigid commitment to 'on the one hand, on the other hand' journalism.

Some of the [untrue stories](#) disseminated by Russian television during the conflict in Ukraine have certainly been outrageous and the activists who volunteer their time and energy to debunking fabrications deserve respect and support. Incessant Russian talk of the 'fascist coup' in Kyiv must infuriate the millions who joined Euromaidan out of a genuine desire to make their country less corrupt and more democratic.

Nevertheless, to ban RT or exclude the 'Russian perspective' from news reports would be counterproductive: it would serve only to reinforce impressions of Western hostility and 'double standards' in the eyes of the Russian public. The optimal response to one-sided Russian reporting is therefore not one-sided Western reporting or censorship, but tactful journalism that acknowledges and explains the fears and resentments underlying Russian (and Ukrainian separatist) views and behaviour, without recourse to crude vilification or inflammatory labelling.

'Russian propaganda' and its audiences

The Russian government considers mass communication a vital battleground of international politics. It has developed an extensive, well-funded media arsenal for projecting its preferred narrative to audiences both at home and abroad. Domestically, the Russian state enjoys control over news output at all the leading TV channels and loyalty from numerous print publications, radio stations, news websites and agencies. Alternative news sources presenting diverse viewpoints are available in Russia, but they have been marginalised quite effectively.

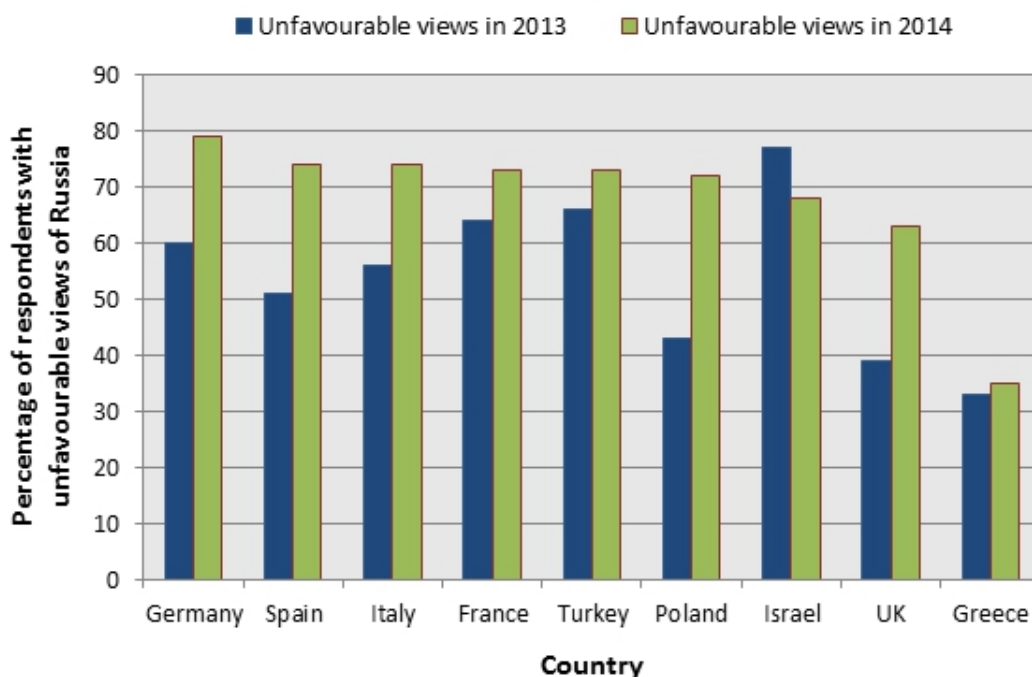
[Polls of Russian public opinion](#) invariably indicate close alignment between the state's narrative of international developments (blaming the United States, exonerating Russia) and the dominant perceptions in society. Meanwhile, journalists from the Russian state media now [speak quite openly](#) about their propaganda role: they claim to be fighting for their national interests in response to Western media doing the same.

The Russian state media have audiences and influence in a number of post-Soviet countries. For instance, most of the population in Belarus watches Russian TV news, with support for Russian foreign policy [higher among regular viewers](#). In Ukraine, [a recent poll](#) found that 9 per cent of respondents (in a national sample that excluded Crimea) were continuing to watch Russian TV ‘regularly’ despite a government ban on cable transmissions, with another 29 per cent watching it ‘from time to time’. The influence of Russian news has been widely blamed for fuelling separatist sentiment in the south and east of Ukraine ever since the crisis began.

Outside the post-Soviet region, however, the Russian state media have a much harder time winning audience share. [RT claims](#) that some 644 million viewers (including over 120 million Europeans) have access to the channel across more than 100 countries. Yet having access is not the same as tuning in, paying attention and taking the content seriously. In the UK, for example, the number of people who watched RT for at least three consecutive minutes during October was in the region of [350,000 to 450,000 people](#) (less than 1 per cent of the population) per week.

For all the Ukrainian concern about being outgunned in the battle for international opinion, levels of international sympathy for Russia appear low. In spring 2014 the [Pew Research Center](#) asked respondents in 44 countries whether they had a ‘favourable’ or ‘unfavourable’ view of Russia. As the Chart below shows, in Germany, France, Italy and Spain well over 70 per cent were ‘unfavourably’ disposed towards Russia (a figure much higher than before the Ukraine crisis began). Even in Brazil and South Africa – two of the BRICS with which the Kremlin is so keen to develop ties – ‘unfavourable’ views of Russia among the public stood at over 50 per cent.

Chart: Percentage of citizens in selected countries with an ‘unfavourable’ view of Russia (2013 and 2014)



Note: The surveys contained two answers ‘favourable’ and ‘unfavourable’ but figures also include ‘don’t know’ responses so a figure below 50 per cent does not necessarily indicate that there were more ‘favourable’ than ‘unfavourable’ responses. Indeed Greece is the only country shown in the Chart with a more ‘favourable’ than ‘unfavourable’ view of Russia in either 2013 or 2014. **Source:** [Pew Research Center](#)

According to some commentators, the purpose of Russian propaganda is less to win outright support than to sow doubt, introduce ambiguity and thus weaken the resolve of those challenging the Kremlin. Even if this is so, Western

countries will not become any safer by rejecting all Russian arguments as ‘psychological operations’ or heavily-handedly obstructing their diffusion in public discourse.

The problem is that the Kremlin’s narrative has become far more than a tool for manipulating foreigners. It also structures how tens of millions of individuals at all levels of Russian society (not to mention some Ukrainians) think and perceive the world. Therefore, the more the Russian account of events is ignored, censored or condemned in the West as utterly illegitimate, the deeper public distrust of the West in Russia is likely to become – and this will hardly facilitate a reduction in current tensions.

Dialogue with Russians is not impossible, but requires tact

Immediately prior to the Cambridge conference I spent two months in Moscow researching media use and views of the West among students at a leading, internationally-oriented Russian university. The survey data I collected has yet to be processed and analysed, but among the students who took part in qualitative interviews almost all recognised the bias in Russian TV news. Most preferred not to rely on TV and used the internet instead to seek information from a range of sources.

However, they were still largely critical of the West’s role in Ukraine and complained that Western journalists were guilty, much like Russian ones, of failing to provide objective news coverage. These young, well-educated Russians speak English and own smartphones. They are not all ‘brainwashed’ and they try to build themselves a balanced picture of events – even visiting the websites of the BBC, *The Guardian*, *The Economist* or *The New York Times* to get a Western perspective. They represent an important section of Russian society that is open to dialogue, with which the West might be able to engage.

However, dialogue will only be possible if their views are treated tactfully, not dismissed out of hand by journalists and others as mere fantasies of Kremlin propaganda. Where divergent points of view exist, as they do on Ukraine, ‘on the one hand, on the other hand’ reporting is the only sensible option. Any other approach will just perpetuate reciprocal distrust and undermine any prospect of an improvement in relations.

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