Human wrongs

How state-backed media helped the Kremlin weaponise social conservatism

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Hilary and Trinity Terms

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Introduction

Over the past two years, the world has been obsessing with Russian propaganda, “disinformation war” the Kremlin wages on the West.

These concerns reached a high just after 2016 amid fears that Donald Trump’s presidential campaign was boosted by Russian online trolls, reportedly curated by the Kremlin, inserting themselves into it in an attempt to influence the outcome of an election. Western countries, one by one, began to fear that they too were under attack.

The UK authorities started looking for Russian influence in the Brexit referendum. France accused Russia of meddling in its presidential elections, too, and supporting Marine Le Pen over Emmanuel Macron. After getting elected, Macron came down hard on Russia’s state-run TV channel RT, widely seen both in the West and in Russia as a propaganda outlet.

These are all serious issues, and a lot of researchers and government officials from different countries are now working hard to assess the actual damage Russian propaganda inflicted on Western democracies.

In the meantime, in my opinion, an important piece is missing in this discussion. It is those who Russian propaganda started targeting much earlier and influenced much more effectively. It is us, Russians.

For six years at the very least - since 2012, when Vladimir Putin came back to the Kremlin as president for the third time - we have been influenced by Russian propaganda on a daily basis.

It is pitting us against each other; it cultivates all sorts of negative emotions, from fear to anger; it erodes trust and tolerance towards anyone whose opinion is different; and it is essentially setting us back years and years on the path to respecting human rights and building a healthy civic society.

The effects were seen during the World Cup that took place in Russia in the summer of 2018. Amid its triumphant festiveness, Russian women who dated or simply flirted with foreign football fans were being harassed by Russian men, who accused them of all sorts of things, from immoral behaviour to betraying their country by choosing foreign men over Russian ones.

Harassment took place both online (men organised into groups in social networks, shared photos and contact details of “treacherous” women and discussed ways of punishing them) and in the streets (men would approach women spending time with foreigners and, best case scenario, lecture them about morality and patriotism; worst case scenario, they insulted them, spit in their faces and physically tried to
drag them away from foreigners).

Propaganda narratives describing Russia as a besieged fortress attacked by the decadent West and calling for defending the country’s “traditional values,” threatened by western influences, may not have caused this. But, wide-spread that it is - 86 percent of Russians still get their news and information about the world from TV, which is dominated by state-run TV channels.

And this is exactly what my paper is devoted to: Russian propaganda promoting these narratives. I believe that it is important to dissect it, to look at the tools and methods propaganda uses, the effects it has on Russian society, in order to figure out what we, independent journalists, can do to avert this ugly effects.

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Chapter 1. Politics behind the “traditional values” crusade

December 12, 2012 was a tough day for foreign correspondents in Moscow. It was the day President Vladimir Putin was giving his annual State of the Nation address, and something he said stood out, puzzling those who were translating bits of his speech into English.

“It pains me to say this, but I must say it nonetheless,” Putin said. “These days Russian society clearly lacks dukhovniye skrepy - mercy, sympathy, mutual compassion, support and assistance… We must support institutions that are the bearers of traditional values and pass [these values] on from generation to generation.”

Officials took notes, as they always do with these addresses, hoping to later interpret it into instructions on what policies to adopt.

Bloggers immediately started mocking it, turning it into a meme and an ironic label that the Kremlin’s pivot to conservatism would carry for years to come. For another two or three years, there wouldn’t be any crackdown on online users making fun of the President or his political endeavours, so sarcasm and jokes flowed freely.

And foreign correspondents in Moscow struggled to find an English equivalent to an unusual, archaic term that even for a Russian ear stuck out of bureaucratic, formal language Putin usually resorts to in his speeches.

The New York Times eventually translated dukhovniye skrepy as spiritual ties. Despite Putin being rather vague in explaining what constitutes “spiritual ties,” the public deciphered the message (it came several months after highly controversial prosecution of the Pussy Riot band for offending religious believers’ feelings) rather quickly: Russia was pivoting to social conservatism.

Liberal years of Dmitry Medvedev’s “modernisation” were over; times of patriotism, morality and nationalism lay ahead.

The end of the status quo for the Kremlin

The Kremlin’s rhetoric doesn’t offer a straight-forward definition to “spiritual ties” and “traditional values”; there is no doctrine or manifesto that would describe them. They remain “an imprecise notion,” in which certain themes - such as traditional morality and traditional family, often as they are outlined in Orthodoxy - keep recurring, Dmitry Dubrovsky, sociologist with the Moscow-based Higher School of Economics, and Irina du Quenoy, research fellow at the Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and Public Affairs in Georgetown University, wrote in a report on religion in violence in Russia, released in June by the Center for Strategic and International
In the early 2010s, on the eve of his triumphant comeback to the Kremlin, Putin saw his approval ratings going down and the previous narrative - about him being the leader who brought prosperity, peace and stability to Russia after the “wild 1990s” - having run its course.

Putin breezed though his first eight years as Russian president (2000-2008) and the subsequent four years as the prime minister (2008-2012) with consistent economic growth as his strongest card.

According to the World Bank data, between 1999 and 2011 Russia’s GDP has been consistently growing and exceeded $2 trillion in 2011, compared to $196 billion in 1999. In 2012, its growth slowed down, but up until 2013 the numbers kept going up.

The situation was similar with the population’s real income: It kept growing faster by the year between 2001 (8.7 per cent growth) and 2007 (12.1 per cent growth). In 2008 the growth slowed down to 2.4 percent due to the world economic crisis, but picked up the pace and was at 5.9 per cent in 2010.

After the turbulent 1990s, Russians were all of a sudden able to afford things: cell phones, computers, cars, even real estate. As Dmitry Oreshkin, independent political analyst and columnist with The New Times magazine points out, it was the result of the harsh market reforms of the 1990s. But propaganda explained that growing incomes were Putin’s doing, and he remained popular - very few questioned him staying in power for so long.

Little by little, Putin was building his power vertical (a system in which political power is centralised and accumulated in the Kremlin, with the rest of the actors reporting to the Kremlin and / or being heavily controlled by it) and monopolising political processes, making sure he has each and every one of them under control.

With one hand, he took. In 2004 the Kremlin abolished elections of regional governors and started appointing them instead; between 2006 and 2009, it instituted new legal criteria that made registering a political party (or renewing existing registration) much more difficult, and the number of political parties in Russia fell from 32 to 7.

With another hand, he gave. Liberal, pro-Western intelligentsia was allowed to do whatever they wanted - stage controversial plays, launch critical media outlets, etc. - as long as they don’t get involved in politics, says Alexei Makarkin, leading expert at the Center for Political Technologies, a Moscow-based think-tank. The people got more patriotic and Orthodoxy-related national holidays and monuments that reminded them of Russia’s grandeur. And the West got the impression that Russia was finally open to democratic ideas and civil society.
And yet, right on the eve of Putin’s triumphant re-election in 2012, an angry mob showed up at his doorstep, disrupting the status quo.

**Looking for a new narrative**

Putin’s Russia has never seen protests as big as the ones that erupted in 2011-2012, following widely reported rigging of the 2011 State Duma - Russia’s lower chamber of parliament - elections. The fact that tens of thousands of people took to the streets in the cold of Moscow winter, weeks before ten-day New Year holidays, during which most Russians are so into festivities they can’t be bothered by anything else, took the Kremlin off guard.

“They did not in the least expect anything like that,” recalls Mikhail Fishman, anchor at the independent TV channel Dozhd. “[All of a sudden Putin’s] ratings were down, and he had real opposition, enemies that unite and march on the streets.”

Blatant rigging of the Duma elections was merely adding insult to a injury. By that time the country’s economic growth started to slow down. In 2012, Russia’s GDP grew by only $158 billion - unlike in 2011, a year which added $527 billion to the country’s main economic parameter. At the same time the population’s real income showed almost no growth at all - just 0.5 per cent.

Effects of the 1990s reforms were wearing off, says Oreshkin, because Putin’s “power vertical” (mostly former and active *siloviki* - members of the intelligence and law enforcement community), instead of boosting competition and working on attracting foreign investments, focused on accumulating resources and privileges in their lap.

This is what Alexei Navalny, Russia’s most prominent opposition politician at the moment, would successfully build his political brand on in 2010s: relentless anti-corruption crusade exposing lavish real estate in Russia and abroad, world’s most expensive yachts and private jets, lucrative businesses and off-shore deals that can be traced back to Putin’s allies.

The regime could no longer promise its constituency prosperity and had unexpected, large-scale, repeating uprisings on its hands. Someone needed to blamed for it - a common enemy people would unite against.

Soon enough the West became such an enemy, as did, by extension, pro-Western middle class urbanites that were the core of the protests. The Kremlin was killing several birds with one stone - deflecting from the mounting economic problems, discrediting the protesting crowds and rallying the nation around a common threat.

‘To hell with gadgets, give us back our ships bell’
Unlike Dmitry Medvedev, Russian president between 2004 and 2008 who maintained the image of a progressive leader who uses Twitter, plays with his iPad and is on the side of young liberals, stylistically Putin always positioned himself as the friend of the ordinary, or average, citizens.

Arkady Ostrovsky, Russia editor with The Economist and author of The Invention of Russia: From Gorbachev’s Freedom to Putin’s War, recalls how in August 2010, when the Moscow region was suffocating from the largest wildfires in the newest Russian history, an anonymous blogger posted an angry complaint on the internet, full of obscenities, demanding to return an old ships bell to his home village.

Villagers used to ring the old ships bell to warn of a fire. Now, in the village, there was no bell, but also no money for proper firefighting equipment. “Give us back our old ships bell,” the post read. “And I will pay for a firefighting vehicle for mine and two other villages out of my own pocket, if you relieve me of taxes for life.”

Putin, prime minister at the time, wrote a proper response to the blogger, promising to return the bell.

Several years later, the kind of people who yearned for the ships bell are those who Putin would be addressing with his talk of traditional values.

In his 2013 State of the Nation address, Putin would talk about it a much more straight-forward way than the year before. He would juxtapose “Russia, with its great history and culture and centuries-old experience” and “so-called tolerance, genderless and infertile.”

“Today many countries are reassessing [their] norms and morality,” Putin said. “Societies are forced to not just accept [people’s] healthy rights to freedom of religion, politics and private life, but also to accept the good and the bad as equal things. <…> But we know that there are more and more people in the world that support our position - defending traditional values that for thousands of years remained the basis of civilisation: values of a traditional family, religious, spiritual life…”

Values that need defending

A look at legislation, policies and public statements made over the past five-six years gives a clear idea of what kind of traditional values the regime promoted and in what way.

First and foremost, it asserted the growing importance of the Orthodox Church - by showcasing the Pussy Riot trial and introducing a new offence, “insulting religious believers’ feelings,” to the Criminal Code. The Church would later get other perks, too - lucrative real estate deals, a place in the school curriculum, an opportunity to
propose legislative initiatives to the parliament. But the Pussy Riot case and the following “religious believers’ feelings” law would send the strongest message, analysts agree, and this message would be significantly amplified by the propaganda.

Then the regime would move on to family values. The idea of salvaging traditional Russian family as an entity gave the authorities grounds to go after all sorts of regulations and policies, from the notorious “gay propaganda” law to the no less notorious decriminalisation of domestic violence and aggressive and highly manipulative anti-abortion campaigning.

The lawmaker who drafted both of the bills, Yelena Mizulina, would become famous for a number of ultra-conservative legislative initiatives. Until early 2017, Mizulina was a member of A Just Russia, one of the three major political parties in the parliament that constitute so-called “in-system opposition”: their existence creates the illusion of a multiparty, democratic system, yet in reality they openly support the Kremlin.

Some of Mizulina’s initiatives, like restricting abortion, imposing a tax on divorcing couples or increasing the role of Orthodox priests in resolving various family issues, would never become actual laws. But they would still float around as news stories and contribute to forming opinions.

The third pillar would be the glorious Russian past. “We’re seeing that there attempts to re-program societies in many countries, including re-programming the society in our country,” Putin commented at a meeting with historians. “It can’t be done without attempts to re-write history, polish it in accordance with someone’s geopolitical interests.”

Much of the ensuing propaganda effort will be devoted to history - to some extent, there will be more propaganda on the history front than on any others. The government would organise and aggressively promote large-scale multimedia exhibitions, glorifying various parts of Russian history; Russian-made (and sponsored by the state) historical blockbusters and sagas would flood movie theatres; budgets would be allocated for parades and various reenactment events. Organisations and people who try to draw attention to rather dark periods of Russian history would face government scrutiny and, sometimes, prosecution.

As a result, “spiritual ties” and “traditional values” in the Kremlin’s interpretation would be at odds with the universally accepted human rights concepts, such as freedom of speech, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of religion, gender equality, right to the security of person and LGBT rights.

Propaganda would play an important role in this crusade. As some analysts and scholars point out, to a large extent the concept of “spiritual ties” exists only in
propaganda. While many Russians consider themselves conservative and welcome the idea of returning to traditional values, Russian society in general is far from the Orthodox, family-oriented ideal the Kremlin is after.

Russia is one of countries with the highest divorce rates in the world; more than half of all marriages every year end in divorce, and this number has been growing steadily over the past years. Russia’s abortion rates are also times higher than in other developed countries. And while the majority of Russians - as many as 85 percent - identify themselves as Orthodox, polls show that very few of them actually go to church or perform religious rituals.

Yet the idea of being special because of Russia’s unique spirituality - as opposed to the West with its alien principles - has always had a certain appeal among Russians. After all, it has been floating around for almost two centuries, feeding public discussions and becoming basis for state ideologies.

In runs in the history

The first debates about Russia’s exceptional place in the world can be traced all the way back to the 19th century - to the era of “romantic nationalism,” as historian Andrei Zorin calls it, that rested on categories like “national character” and “people’s soul.”

In 1830, sophist Pyotr Chaadayev published a manifesto called “Philosophical Letters,” arguing that Russia mistakenly chose Eastern Christianity as its national religion and is now left detached from both the Catholic West and the Islamic East, having failed to become part of either of the two great civilisational models.

Letters made waves in the intelligentsia circles and fuelled discussions about where the country is headed. Intellectual elites found themselves divided into two camps: Westernizers insisted Russia should follow the lead of Europe, while Slavophiles believed the it needed to turn to its own, unique path that is defined by its Orthodox spirituality.

Soon enough Slavophile ideas found the most powerful ally of all - tsar Nicholas I. In 1834, Nicholas I adopted the famous Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality doctrine, drafted by his Minister of Education Sergei Uvarov. It merely stated that Russia can’t “live” and “grow” without the three crucial elements: Orthodoxy as a religion, autocratic rule of a strongman leader and the people who unconditionally defer to both.

Interestingly enough, the name of the doctrine was a response to the French Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité. That is how, for the first time in history, a special development path - based on spirituality and opposition to the West - became Russia’s national ideology.
The next regime that would tell Russians they are special would be the Soviet Union. Soviet ideologues would juxtapose Russia, marching into the great communist future, and the West that is agonising in its imperialist and capitalist decay. They would replace Orthodox spirituality with “socialist” moral standards, adjusted to the needs of the time, but the main gist would remain roughly the same - special path, exceptional place in the world, unconditional deference to a strongman leader.

For a while after collapse of the Soviet Union, the unique path notion would disappear from the state discourse. It wouldn’t be until 2010s that President Putin returned to exploiting the idea in its “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality” packaging.

**Why propaganda is important**

Portraying Russia as the last bastion of conservative values “against decadent, atheistic, gay cosmopolitans went into overdrive with the February 2014 EuroMaidan Revolution in Ukraine, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and the start of the ongoing separatist war in eastern Ukraine’s Donbas region,” Graeme Roberston, professor of political science with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Samuel Greene, professor with the King’s College in London, wrote in October 2017.

It paid off really well - Putin’s approval ratings skyrocketed from the modest 54 percent in 2013 to the impressive 83 percent in 2014. And it’s the propaganda effort that is to be credited for it, because Russian rulers are not good at leading by example.

They don’t really understand how to be conservative in the classic sense of the word, explained Marianna Muravyova, law professor from the University of Helsinki: “They grew up in the Soviet Union which was in essence a rather modernist, progress- and future-oriented project” that aimed at destroying old traditions rather than preserving them.

One example many commentators mention in that respect is Putin divorcing soon after urging officials and people to get behind the “spiritual ties” idea. “You never see him or others in public with his parents or families; you never see them feeding the poor in soup kitchens; twice a year - for Christmas and on Easter - they go to church, but people are hardly buying it,” Muravyova said.

That’s where the loyal and powerful media system the Kremlin spent years creating came in handy.
Chapter 2. Media landscape in Russia: Scorched Earth.
A personal narrative.

My professional life split into “before” and “after” on Dec. 9, 2013, when I found out from the news that RIA Novosti - the news agency I was working for - ceased to exist.

It started as a normal working day. As an editor managing a team of ten reporters, I was on my way to the office when one of my journalists emailed me a link to a news story with a short caption: “Daria, what the hell is going on?!”

Once I clicked on the link, it became clear why my team member was so agitated. “Putin Shuts Down RIA Novosti,” the headline of the story read.

That morning Putin signed a decree liquidating us (which, with the agency being a state-run organisation, he had the right to do) and setting up a new agency called Rossiya Segodnya (Russian for “Russia Today”) in its stead. The new agency, according to the decree, was to focus of explaining and promoting Russia’s policies abroad. Dmitry Kiselyov, outspoken TV anchor renowned for his vigorous support of the Kremlin, was to become the new agency’s director.

Kremlin officials would cite economical reasons - the new agency was set to merge with Golos Rossii, government-run radio station, thus saving the budget money.

Hardly anyone at the agency would buy it, however. RIA Novosti cost the government several times less than, say, state TV behemoth VGTRK; plus, with a good dozen of rapidly developing brands and products, the agency was making its own money, too.

Svetlana Mironyuk, editor in chief at the time, would offer no explanation at an urgently called staff meeting that day. She would say she herself found out about the liquidation from the news. She would looked shocked at the meeting, sound bitter, and at some point her voice would crack - with tears.

For hours, days, weeks, months (and even years) that followed we would all talk about what really happened. It was a shock for many because RIA Novosti was a state-run news agency; surely there must have been other means of controlling its output.

Were we becoming too self-sustainable and independent? Did we anger the Kremlin by extensively covering the 2011-2012 protests, offering live broadcasts from
Bolotnaya Square and giving air time to opposition leaders? Has Mironyuk fallen out with some of the mighty officials in the Presidential Administration?..

In its own news report, RIA Novosti’s English-language service noted that “the move... is the latest in a series of shifts in Russia’s news landscape, which appear to point toward a tightening of state control in the already heavily regulated media sector”.

“It was a red card that Putin’s regime showed to everyone who was funded by the state and tried to act in the interests of anyone but the Kremlin,” says Vasily Gatov, Russian media researcher and visiting fellow at the USC Annenberg Center for Communication Leadership and Policy. “It marked a whole new era for Russian media - the era of choosing between underground, marginalised independence and state control.”

New president laying grounds

What happened to RIA Novosti in 2013 was hardly an isolated case. Rather, it was part of a trend that slowly started to unfold almost immediately after Putin took power in 2000.

Putin understood the power of the media all too well. He saw the media helping Boris Yeltsin rise from the ashes in 1996 and getting him re-elected despite his approvals wobbling around the 3-percent mark. He saw the media help himself, a young and unknown bureaucrat who never ran for elected office, win a presidential election four months after being unexpectedly appointed acting president by Yeltsin.

Seeds of this need to control the media were planted years before - during the Boris Yeltsin era in the 1990s, a decade that is usually remembered (especially by foreign journalists) as the golden era of the free press in Russia.

On one hand, Yeltsin did understand the importance of free press and tolerated critical outlets, recalls Tatyana Lysova, former editor in chief of Vedomosti, Russia’s independent business daily. On the other hand, his team - sometimes through the hands of loyal businessmen and oligarchs - provided material support for the media in the form of funds, property, subsidies, tax reliefs.

It wasn’t big money, says Gatov, yet it proved enough for the authorities to develop the “we’re paying you, so why are you criticising us?” irritation.

So taking control over the media became one of Putin’s first objectives. In May 2000, two days after Putin won the vote, Kommersant Vlast, a prominent politics weekly, published a document - a policy paper that outline reforming Presidential Administration - reportedly leaked from the Presidential Administration, in which this objective was openly stated.
“New president of the Russian Federation… doesn’t need a self-regulating political system. He needs a political body [within the Presidential Administration] that will not only be able to foresee and create political situations it needs… but also truly control political and societal processes in Russia and neighbouring states,” the document read.

“Since all political forces in Russia use printed and online media in order to influence voters, establishing control over media is of strategical importance,” it went on.

It remains unclear whether the document was actually adopted or whether Putin approved of it. However, over the next decade the Kremlin would get busy doing just that: Establishing control over privately-owned media outlets by ousting owners the regime deemed not loyal enough and replacing them with loyal ones, together boosting the presence of state-run media.

**The Kremlin tightens its grip**

First, the regime turned to national TV channels - the most important and popular medium in Russia by far.

In 2001, NTV, a privately-owned channel known for its harsh stance towards the Kremlin, went through a tumultuous ownership change. Oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky, owner of the channel at the time, was pressured into giving up his media assets to Gazprom, the state-controlled gas giant.

Dozens of prominent journalists left the channel in protest and moved to another national TV station, TV-6, but it was shut down in 2002.

That same year, in 2001, the Kremlin tightened its grip over Channel One, Russia’s most popular TV channel at the time, too. Tycoon Boris Berezovsky, who, some analysts point out, helped create Putin’s impressive public persona ahead of the 2000 elections, gave up his 49% of shares. Soon enough, government officials - or people with close ties to them - became members of the channel’s board of directors.

The one TV network the government owned directly, VGTRK, was expanding in the meantime. Between 2002 and 2009, the network boosted its presence from two national channels to four, with two of them broadcasting round the clock, and launched two radio stations (in addition to two already existing ones).

Finally, in 2005, a new state-funded TV channel was launched. It was called Russia Today and was supposed to “represent Russia abroad.” 25-year-old VGTRK correspondent Margarita Simonyan was appointed editor in chief. She said the channel would become “a Russian BBC” that will try to show Russia the way
foreigners see it.

Just two years before that, in 2003, the government singled out a small news agency among other VGTRK assets and set it up as a separate, yet still state-run, news organisation. It was called RIA Vesti, the not-so-well-known successor of the legendary soviet mouthpiece Sovinformburo founded several days after Nazi Germany attacked the USSR in 1941.

The decree of 2003 renamed it as RIA Novosti. Over the next 7-8 years it would grow into Russia’s flagship news agency, respected for its balanced, objective coverage; in 10 years, it would cease to exist.

Several years later the regime moved on to spreading its web of control over the most prominent newspapers.

In 2005, Gazprom Media bought Izvestia - one of the most prominent newspapers at the time.

In 2006, Berezovsky gave up his shares in the Kommersant publishing house that, among other products, was running Kommersant, a very influential business daily, to his partner Badri Patarkatsishvili. That same year Patarkatsishvili sold the company to Alisher Usmanov.

In 2007, Russia’s most popular tabloid - Komsomolskaya Pravda - also acquired a Kremlin-friendly owner: businessman Grigory Berezkin. Analysts and commentators at the time pointed out that the sale marks yet another move on the Kremlin’s part aimed at consolidating media resources.

At the same time in the early 2000s, Gatov recalls, more and more editors in chief started to participate in the famous Friday meetings with the Presidential Administration. Initially, in late 1990s, these meetings only involved top editors of state-run TV channels, who coordinated their coverage with the Kremlin. That changed soon after Putin took over.

“They start to build this peculiar relationship and [slowly get media managers to understand that] ‘our requests should not be ignored,”’ says Gatov. “Yet at that time these are still just requests, as in a tool of restraining [media] rather than censoring.”

**Four years of Medvedev: Quiet before the storm**

In 2008 Dmitry Medvedev took over as president. His four years in power are seen by many as a post-Soviet version of the Thaw.

Medvedev was younger and more progressive. He talked about “modernisation” and liberal values. He met with opposition leaders and discussed “rebooting”
Russia-U.S. relationship with then U.S. President Barack Obama. He publicly supported independent media and even visited the newsroom of Dozhd, the newly founded opposition-leaning TV channel.

At the time, Russian media market was hit pretty hard by the world-wide economic crisis. Still, independent voices grew in number and became stronger. Dozhd started to broadcast in 2010; privately owned news sites RBC, Gazeta.Ru and Lenta.Ru attracted millions of visitors.

Unlike Putin, Medvedev saw the media as something that gives feedback about what’s going on the country, believes Lysova: “He treated media with more attention and patience, and the authorities were much less aggressive towards us. Medvedev visited the Dozhd TV channel, despite its rather independent stance, and it was a sign of respect. These were some positive signals.”

Even state-run media offered balanced, decent coverage. However, everything changed with Putin coming back to the Kremlin, and him doing so on the heels of the biggest mass protests in Russia’s newest history. He clearly wasn’t happy with the defiance he saw, and neither were his cronies. to

“[The protests of 2011-2012] were a sign that [government-controlled] television doesn’t set the agenda anymore,” says Anna Kachkayeva, professor at the Higher School of Economics department of media. “It was a sign there was an alternative agenda out there, and this alternative agenda was living on its own.”

‘Links of the Goddamn Chain’

In an attempt to start controlling the agenda again, the regime fought the media on two main frontlines: administrative, by forcing defiant editors and journalists out, and legislative, by adopting laws restricting media organisations in different ways.

The first strike hit Kommersant in December 2011, several months before presidential election and in the very midst of protests. Kommersant Vlast, weekly politics magazine, ran a photo of a ballot with an obscene word written on it next to “Putin.” Usmanov, the owner, called it “petty hooliganism” and fired editor in chief Maxim Kovalsky.

By that time rumours that authorities started tightening their grip on the media have been already circulating for a while. In late November, deputy editor of Gazeta.Ru Roman Badanin quit the news site after the project Gazeta.Ru was doing with Golos, independent election watchdog, - Map of Election Rigging, - was taken off Gazeta.Ru’s website.

Commenting on the situation with Kommersant, journalist Filipp Dzyadko called it “one of the links of the same goddamn chain” - a phrase that for the media
community would soon become a go-to name for the incessant crackdown.

Then Dec. 9, 2013 happened; RIA Novosti was liquidated and replaced with a propaganda outlet aimed at promoting Russia’s policies abroad.

Two months later, in late January 2014 Dozhd, which was then operating as a cable channel and growing more and more popular, came under attack. On Jan. 26, 2014 the channel aired a poll about whether Leningrad should have surrendered to the Nazis during the World War II, thus avoiding the siege that killed millions.

The question sparked outrage - mostly among government officials. Lawmaker Irina Yarovaya called it an attempt to rehabilitate Nazism and a criminal offense; culture minister Vladimir Medinsky wrote on Twitter: “I don’t know how to call these people; they’re inhuman monsters;” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Dozhd journalists “violated something more than law - they crossed a red a line” of what’s morally appropriate for Russians; and speaker of the Federation Council Valentina Matviyenko called the question “blasphemy.”

Rokomnadzor, state media watchdog, and Prosceutor’s Office immediately launched probes into the channel. Two days later, chair of the Russia’s Cable Television Association Yury Pripachkin suggested the channel should be taken off cable networks. The next day cable operators started suspending Dozhd.

According to its founder Natalya Sindeyeva, representatives of cable operators she talked to said they received orders to find reasons to take Dozhd down. She said scrutiny of the channel intensified after it ran a story about an investigation opposition firebrand Alexei Navalny did into corruption among top-rank government officials in late 2013.

The crackdown on Dozhd coincided with revolutionary confrontation in Kiev being at its stormiest. Fights in the city grew violent; in less than a month, then president Victor Yanukovich would flee the country. This poured gasoline on an already existing blaze.

Soon after came the turn of Lenta.Ru - by that time, the most popular news website in Russia. In March 2014, its owner, media tycoon Alexander Mamut fired editor in chief Galina Timchenko, and appointed Alexei Goreslavsky, former editor in chief of Vzglyad.Ru, an online outlet famous for its eager support of the Kremlin.

Most of Lenta.Ru reporters supported Timchenko and issued a statement saying that “dismissal of an independent editor in chief and appointing a person who received orders, including directly from the Kremlin, is a violation of the media law which outlaws censorship.” They also announced quitting Lenta.Ru.

It remains unclear which stories angered prompted the crackdown; some
commentators suggest Lenta.Ru’s extensive coverage of the 2013-2014 revolution in Ukraine was the problem.

That same year the authorities blocked Grani.Ru, the opposition news website accused of “inciting illegal actions, including unsanctioned political rallies.” On top of that, TV channel Ren-TV, controlled by Putin’s ally Yury Kovalchuk since 2011, shut down the only remaining TV show that offered balanced political analysis, The Week With Marianna Maximovskaya.

The crackdown even reached remote regions of Siberia, where TV2, one of the oldest independent television networks in Russia, operated. In Dec. 2014, Tomsk Regional Broadcasting Center terminated its contract with TV2. For a couple of months, the channel, supported by local viewers, kept running internet and cable broadcasting, but then had to shut it down as well.

It didn’t end there. In May 2016, management of RBC media holding fired three senior editors of RBC - prominent journalists Elizaveta Osetinskaya, Roman Badanin and Maxim Solyus - reportedly as a result of pressure from the Kremlin for running stories about Putin’s daughters.

The new editors met with the editorial team later in 2016 and warned them that when it comes to reporting on the Kremlin, there’s a “solid double line” that journalists should not cross. Later that year RBC was sold to ESN - the same company that owns Komsomolskaya Pravda.

“That’s how we came to be in a situation where all big players are under control in one way or another,” says Ilya Krasilshchik, co-founder and publisher of the Meduza news website. Meduza was launched by former Lenta.Ru editor in chief Galina Timchenko and several of her team members - they all moved to Latvia and resumed doing journalism from there.

On top of inducing administrative and managerial turmoil in newsrooms, the regime came out with a whirlwind of laws and regulations that outlined various restrictions on the media.

Some were small and hardly political, like the 2014 law banning obscene language, or 2015 regulations banning “propaganda of narcotics” and writing reasons for and ways of committing suicide in news reports and stories.

Others had a clear political incentive - like the 2017 regulation that prohibits the media from urging readers to participate in protests, sharing information published by “undesirable organisations” and publishing links to websites of those organisations.

Finally, there were ones that simply gave authorities more tools to control
independent media organisations. In 2014, a law that prohibits foreigners from founding media outlets and limiting foreign ownership of media outlets to 20% was passed.

As a result, more than 800 media outlets had to separate from their foreign owners, and some - like Forbes Russia, for example - suffered significant editorial pressure from new owners.

In 2017, another “foreign agent” law was adopted. This one forced media organisations receiving vaguely defined foreign funding to register as “foreign agents” and put them under additional government scrutiny.

In addition to administrative pressure and restrictive legislation, authorities learned to manipulate Russia’s biggest news aggregator, Yandex.Novosti - a service millions of people use every day. Nowadays it is dominated by pro-Kremlin stories.

“As a result, the media scene is quite sterilised now. It mostly reflects the government’s agenda, at least on the issues that Presidential Administration considers sensitive,” says Lysova.

What constitutes Russian propaganda machine...

Essentially, the Kremlin created a hybrid propaganda system, where an outlet doesn’t have to be state-owned or state-funded to become a means of promoting narratives the regime needs.

Technically, two out of three biggest national TV channels - Channel One and NTV - don’t belong to the state: private companies own them. Yet authorities found a way to influence them - for instance, by subsidising some parts of their operation. And by placing loyal oligarchs and editors at the helm.

The same is true for the biggest newspapers - however, only in part. Some, like Komsomolskaya Pravda, are, on paper, privately-owned, but on its pages openly pro-Kremlin. Its editor in chief, Vladimir Sungorkin, was Putin’s delegate (member of a team of celebrities that officially put Putin forward as a candidate) during the 2018 election campaign.

At the same time RBC that now belongs to the same owner is still independent, balanced and rather critical in its reporting.

Similar difference can be seen between, say, Izvestia and Kommersant. Both are privately owned (by National Media Group controlled by Putin’s ally Yury Kovalchuk, and Alisher Usmanov, respectively), yet Izvestia is in its coverage supports government’s policies and has been long considered by media analysts a propaganda outlet. Kommersant, aside for several isolated cases of receiving slaps
on the wrist for certain politically sensitive stories, remains critical of the government in its reporting.

So why are some newspapers allowed more leeway than others? Journalists I’ve talked to suggest that it is because their reach, compared to pro-Kremlin news organisations, is so small that the regime doesn’t consider it worth the hassle; knowing that they can control them is enough.

A look at the reach of government-controlled media compared to the reach of independent media confirms this notion.

Television - state-funded, pro-Kremlin national TV channels - still remains the main source of news for the majority of Russians. Recent study by the Levada independent polling center shows that, as of December 2016, 86 percent of Russians were getting their news from TV. This number is steadily declining when it comes to young people, 18-24 years age group in particular; but still, most of young people get their news from TV, too, the study shows.

Figure 1. % of Russians (overall and across two age groups) who get their news from TV. Source: Levada.ru.

According to their own official websites, more than 98 percent of the country’s population have access to state-run Channel One and VGTRK’s Rossia 1 TV channel. The same is most likely true for NTV and other VGTRK channels, as well as state-run Channel Five: All of these are present in every household with a TV antenna, symbolic fee for which is usually included in one’s utility bill.
Latest numbers from Mediascope, an audience research company, show that as of December 2017 Rossia 1 (one of VGTRK channels) remained the most watched TV channel with 13.9-percent daily share of viewers watching it. Channel One took the second place with 12.9 percent, and NTV was third with 9 percent.

The picture is very similar with the biggest daily newspapers. Combined, the circulation of government-owned Rossiiskaya Gazeta, pro-Kremlin Komsomolskaya Pravda and pro-Kremlin Izvestia (417,950 copies daily between the three) is almost two times higher than that of critical Kommersant, Vedomosti and RBC Daily (229,097 daily copies between the three).

Pro-Kremlin news outlets have more audience online, too. According to the Rambler Top-100 rating for May 2018, top-five of news websites includes state-run RIA Novosti, online versions of pro-Kremlin tabloids Komsomolskaya Pravda and Moskovsky Komsomolets, and Vesti.Ru, website of the Rossia 1 TV channel.

…and what makes state-backed media so widely consumed

There are several factors that may explain the numbers I broke down in the previous section.

For a long time television was a medium that in a huge country like Russia was able to get information across to, pretty much, everyone everywhere. It was a cultural phenomenon that united people, made them feel part of a bigger community, says Natalya Roudakova, cultural anthropologist and author of Losing Pravda: Ethics in the Press in the Post-Truth Russia.

“You switch on TV so that you could feel you’re not alone,” she says. “It’s a comforting feeling, especially for older people who tend to more often feel lonely.”

In addition, television as a format is much more emotional because it has audio and video, points out Gatov. It also makes viewers develop a more personal relationship with it through presenters and anchors. Finally, it offers entertainment in addition to news and politics - unlike many newspapers and online outlets.

In general, it’s a source of information people are used to, a source of information that is always there and requires minimum actions in order to access it, says Denis Volkov, a sociologist with the Levada independent polling center. It is a way of spending time, it is often always on on background.

“And since two thirds of Russians are not interested in politics, they’re not interested in looking for alternative sources of information,” Volkov says.

They don’t really trust television or media in general. (This distrust stems from the 1990s, when media engaged in “information wars” between political forces and
However, because they are not interested in politics, they simply don’t go looking for information elsewhere, and propaganda eventually sticks, says Volkov: “It usually goes like ‘I don’t believe it, but I’ll figure it out; although I’m too lazy too, I don’t have time, I have a job and a family.’ And there, they’re left with the one thing that they’ve heard on television.”

What they’ve heard is usually very emotional, quite simple in terms of logic and very easy to digest. Often it also falls perfectly into how they themselves feel about the country, adds Kachkayeva: like nostalgia for the great country Soviet Union once was and the desire to have the rest of the world respect Russia again.

“These two collective emotions went into overdrive in 2014,” she says. “And they sent propaganda into overdrive, too.”

It is true. A look at state TV coverage in, say, 2012 and 2014 shows significant shift in the tone: it becomes much more emotional, often hysterical even. Pro-Kremlin media narratives about Russia being a besieged fortress, last bastion of traditional values and morality attacked by decadent, decaying West are the perfect example to study this tone.

Chapter 3. Fifty shades of Russian propaganda: Analyzing coverage

It was early April 2017. I was well into my second year as a leading reporter at The Moscow Times English-language weekly, when a group of Moscow students contacted us about a “fake news” story they found themselves in the midst of.

I met seven or eight of them in a courtyard in central Moscow the next morning. They were outraged and perplexed. The day before they spent two hours in the cold,
queuing outside the Supreme Court, where the judges were to rule on whether to ban Jehovah’s Witnesses as an “extremist organisation.”

Their university administration promised them a field trip, they said, during which they’d see justice in action. They were asked to dress nicely, not to post anything on social media and not to talk to the press when in court. But the students never made it to the courtroom.

Upon arrival (two hours before the hearing was scheduled to start, as they were instructed), they saw crowds of young people just like them (students from other universities, they overheard) trying to get into the courthouse. Determined to sit in on a real trial - even though none of them were law students - they joined the line, hoping to get in.

Instructed not to talk to the media, they silently turned around when cameramen approached them. Two hours later, it became clear that the courtroom was full and bailiffs were not letting more people in.

Angry, frozen and exhausted, the students left only to find out that same evening that several state-run media outlets, including two major TV channels, painted them as young members of Jehovah’s Witnesses, rallying in front of the court in order to support the “dangerous” and soon-to-be-outlawed organisation.

We never found out what the idea behind sending students to the court really was. Rector of the university refused to speak to us, TV channels involved ignored our requests for comments.

Jehovah’s Witnesses spokespeople told us they were surprised by the sudden appearance of large student groups, some of which had taken up space in the courtroom, making it difficult for the real supporters to get in.

Alexander Verkhovsky, director of the Moscow SOVA Center, which monitors abuses of anti-extremism legislation, told us government and Russia’s state-backed media were keen to portray Jehovah’s Witnesses as a cult that has dangerously large following and targets the youth.

That was the only explanation that made sense. It fell in line with the traditional values narrative - Russian Orthodox culture being attacked by foreign forces, and the youth falling victim to it. Tactics used to emphasise this perspective were not new, either: during the Soviet times, people were often bussed to rally for or against something to create the right picture in the media.

And it’s not the only one state propaganda in Russia uses these days. Manipulating facts; not giving air time to the other side of the conflict; using emotive, judgmental language; choosing what to cover in order to highlight perspective that is most
beneficial for the regime - all of these can be found in the Kremlin’s propaganda toolkit.

**Traditional values: Cornerstone topics**

“Traditional values,” “spiritual ties” as an ideological element emerged in 2012-2013, before the annexation of Crimea.

In his 2013 State of the Nation Address, Vladimir Putin talked about “traditional values” as “traditional family, human life that is not just about material things, but also about religion and spirituality” - things that “for thousands of years served as spiritual, moral basis for civilisation.”

Two topics were cornerstone to this narrative: Pussy Riot performing an anti-Putin song in Moscow’s biggest Orthodox cathedral and gay marriage being sweepingly legalised in a number of Western countries, which Russia countered with the notorious “gay propaganda” law and a ban on adoptions for same-sex couples.

Coverage of both in state-backed media painted a picture of good-hearted Russian people, standing strong by their beliefs and values, who all of a sudden found themselves under attack from cynical, decadent, degrading crowd that wants to impose its own values and disrupt the existing order.

Their values are foreign to Russians; what’s worse, they’re unnatural, unhealthy, and probably even insincere - as in, invented and sponsored by Western masterminds whose sole aim is to not let Russia grow strong, independent and self-sufficient.

The Russian government works hard to protect the people, taking on harsh, unpopular, yet necessary measures. These make them look bad in the West, but they’re willing to take it because more important things are at stake - things that are essential to the very existence of the great Russian nation.

**Coverage and narratives**

To look more closely at what tools Kremlin-controlled media used to create this narrative, I applied textual analysis to two samples of stories from two media outlets: Rossia 1, state-run TV channel and the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper, a daily that is not directly funded by the state, yet still controlled by the Kremlin.

I chose these two outlets because, in my opinion, they fully represent Russia’s hybrid, oligopoly propaganda system. Rossia 1 belongs to VGTRK, a giant media holding founded, funded and run by the government. It is the most popular TV channel at the moment, with 13.9 percent of daily share of viewers watching it in 2017, and thus is the biggest and loudest state-owned propaganda mouthpiece.
Komsomolskaya Pravda - daily newspaper with the biggest circulation in the country - is, on paper, privately owned but its longtime editor in chief, Vladimir Sungorkin, is vocal in his support for the regime. In 2018, he was an official delegate of Putin’s presidential campaign.

I analysed a total of 136 pieces of content released by both outlets (stories that were aired by Rossia 1, not those that were only published on their website).

These include news stories, longer features, op-eds, interviews and editorials that covered the Pussy Riot case in March-April 2012 and same-sex marriage and “gay propaganda” law in May-June 2013.

To compile the data sets, I did the search on websites of the outlets, as well as Russian news aggregating service Yandex.Novosti, using keywords “Pussy Riot,” “same-sex marriage,” “gay,” “LGBT,” “gay propaganda.”

Events and topics covered in the Pussy Riot data set include the band’s performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on Feb. 21, 2012; their rehearsal several days before in another Moscow cathedral; their arrest; court proceedings; clashes of their supporters and opponents in front of the courthouse; statements made by Patriarch Kirill; standing-in-prayer in support of the Church in several Russian cities; supporters of the Church organising rallies in Moscow.

The LGBT data set includes extensive coverage of gay marriage being legalised in the West - in France in particular because of mass protests taking place in Paris. It also touches upon LGBT parades in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. Finally, it talks about Russian officials working on “gay propaganda” law and banning adoption for countries where gay marriage is legal.

In both cases, I conducted my analysis from the standpoint of “traditional value vs. human rights” dichotomy. My working hypothesis was based on the premise that Russian traditional values come in direct conflict with some of the internationally recognised human rights, and that propaganda is a tool to promote the former and undermine the latter.

So I looked at how the two media outlets cover the conflict between a traditional value the topic represents (significance of the Church and Orthodoxy in one case, and traditional heterosexual family, in another) and a human rights notion that this value directly contradicts (freedom of speech and expression in one case, and equal rights and fair treatment for LGBT people in another case).

In my initial reading and watching round, I looked at whether these two sides of the conflict were represented in the coverage, how much space and airtime was devoted to both and whether outlets took sides.
After summarising these findings, I went through the data sets one more time, identifying over-arching themes and narratives that recur throughout both data sets. I identified four of them:

- “Attack on Russia”: Pussy Riot and LGBT as threat to existing order and values;
- “Satanic, liberal West” versus Russia, “last bastion of resistance;”
- “We are at war”: Russian society divided;
- “Fight for morality”: Russia defends existing order and values.

Finally, I went through the stories one more time, looking more closely at which reporting tools are being or not being used to enforce these themes and narratives, how writers describe characters of their stories, what kind of tone and language writers employ, who they quote, who they don’t quote, whose perspective they highlight and whose voices they give more prominence to.

**Quantitative findings: Attitude and the ‘two sides’ question**

In both data sets, I first and foremost looked at three things: where the outlet’s attitude to the issue in question was clear from stories, whether both sides of the conflict were represented in stories (as in, at least mentioned and introduced) and whether both sides of the conflict were given voice in stories (as in, quoted or allowed to speak about how their side sees the conflict).

My analysis showed that coverage of both the Pussy Riot case in 2012 and gay marriage and LGBT in 2013 was, in fact, colored by the outlets’ negative attitude to the issues.

A little more than half of all the stories I analyzed expressed this attitude clearly through emotive language, editorializing, and openly judging events, situations and characters in question (see Figure 2 below).

The coverage was also one-sided to a significant extent. In the vast majority of the stories, both sides of the conflict were not represented – not even mentioned or introduced in any way.

In even more stories, only one side was given voice through comments of those directly involved in the events, quotes of experts and supporters. This side was pro-government and pro-traditional values (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. Attitude and representing two sides, across both data sets.
A look at the data sets separately reveals the same trend – however, in different proportions.

Stories from the Pussy Riot data set (52 stories from Rossia 1 and Komsomolskaya Pravda in total, published over a two-month period) are mostly openly negative towards the band’s performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Even spot news stories often include one or two strong words (like “blasphemers” or “salacious” or even “whores”) describing members of the band that make the negative attitude clear to the reader (see figure 3 below).

At the same time two sides of the conflict are quite often represented and given voice – in a little less than half of all the stories. But not because the authors aim at balanced coverage: simply because in the case of Pussy Riot vast majority of the events covered in the months following the performance were court hearings, in which both sides were vocal enough.

Plus, traditionally, prosecutors in Russia are less open to talking to the press than defense lawyers – they almost never offer comments after hearings, like defense lawyers do. So in most stories, the other side was usually represented by the women’s lawyers, rarely their supporters and almost never freedom of speech advocates and human rights activists.

Figure 3. Attitude and representing two sides, the Pussy Riot data set (52 stories from Rossia 1 and Komsomolskaya Pravda, March-April 2012).
In the LGBT data set (84 stories from two outlets published a year later, in May-June 2013), there are much less stories that are openly negative towards the issue. As a matter of fact, neutral stories outnumber negative ones.

This is because spot news stories, traditionally neutral in tone, constitute more than half of the data set. Unlike with Pussy Riot, this time authors of the stories didn’t inject any negative color into them.

At the same time coverage of LGBT is much more one-sided – in the vast majority of stories, only one side of the conflict is represented and only one side is given voice.

Unlike in the Pussy Riot case, with LGBT state-backed media were not covering court hearings, which are by nature two-sided, so the “other” side was not so easily available to them and not technically needed for the coverage to be adequate.

The few times the “other” side was given voice were in stories covering LGBT rallies (usually small and unauthorized), in which reporters could not avoid quoting LGBT activists. But even then, these were usually short quotes with little context, so the voice given to LGBT, even when it was, was not a loud one.

Figure 4. Attitude and representing two sides, the LGBT data set (84 stories from Rossia 1 and Komsomolskaya Pravda, May-June 2013)
Human rights: Out of the equation

Media outlets I looked at barely saw human rights as part of the issues they were covering. Out of 136 pieces of content analysed, only 18 mention freedom of speech or LGBT rights, which amounts to 13.2 percent.

Figure 4. Articles that mention human rights in both data sets

If we look at the cases separately, the number of articles mentioning human rights is higher in the Pussy Riot data set - 10 out of 52 (19.2 percent), compared to 8 out of 84 (9.5 percent) in the gay propaganda data set. The context in which human rights are mentioned also shows that state-backed media did take a side in this conflict.
In its reports about Pussy Riot, Rossia 1 gives platform to Orthodox Church officials, who insist that what the group did “had nothing to do with human rights or liberal values.” It’s not a right for freedom of expression - it’s rather a “right for disgrace,” they say; in any case “one’s freedom ends where one’s pain begins.”

“We’re supposed to consider blasphemy and profanity as an expression of someone’s freedom, as something modern society should defend,” says Patriarch Kirill in one of the reports. “This phenomenon offended every believer.”

Komsomolskaya Pravda puts similar ideas into its columnists’ writing. One of them defines freedom of expression in regard to Pussy Riot as “doing everything that comes to mind: fouling in trolleybuses, vandalising graves, singing obscene songs in cathedrals.” In another column, the author quotes Voltaire - “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it,” a quote falsely attributed to him - and says that this notion, when applied to Pussy Riot, “starts to devalue and make a mockery of advocating for human rights.”

The rhetoric changes slightly in the 2013 gay propaganda coverage. Rare mentions of LGBT rights are surprisingly positive: Russia doesn’t discriminate against LGBT people, they’re free to live, work and exercise their rights, both Rossia 1 and Komsomolskaya Pravda report, quoting Vladimir Putin.

He spoke about the issue twice over the two months in 2013 I looked at, both times at international events (the Russia-EU summit in Yekaterinburg on June 3-4, 2013 and during his visit to Finland on June 25, 2013). Putin’s desire to look civilised in front of Western leaders is understandable: the big falling out with Europe and the U.S. is yet to come, authorities of Russia and EU are negotiating reliefs on the visa regime, and there’s some damage control to be done after the Pussy Riot scandal and news of drafting the “gay propaganda” law.

Rossia 1 famous anchor, Dmitry Kisleyev, enforces this notion in one of his news
shows on the heels of Russia-EU summit:

“A poll by [state-funded pollster] VTsIOM asked: under whose rule sexual minorities had it better? 2 percent say under [Vladimir] Brezhnev, 2 percent say under [Mikhail] Gorbachev, 7 percent say under [Boris] Yeltsin, 56 percent say under Putin. No comments needed - it’s a fact.”

In both cases we only see a state-backed perspective on human rights. None of the stories examined for this study quoted human rights advocates - freedom of speech or expression experts or LGBT rights specialists. It is unclear whether the poll quoted by Kiselyov was conducted among LGBT people.

‘Attack on Russia:’ Existing order and traditional values under attack

When it comes to talking about traditional values, both outlets tend to put them in the context of being under threat. Both Pussy Riot and LGBT people fighting for their rights are attacking Russia’s spirituality, “moral foundation” of its society, Orthodox traditions.

The two outlets both believe there are shadowy, powerful forces at play here, forces who want to undermine Russia. “It is beneficial for everyone who doesn’t want to see Russia strong and spiritual,” Gennady Zyuganov, longtime leader of Russia’s Communist Party, tells Rossia 1 in an interview devoted to the Pussy Riot scandal. He says he believes it’s a coordinated, planned “attack on Russia’s unity.”

Komsomolskaya Pravda reiterates this idea, mostly through its staff columnists, or straight-forward editorialising (which is one of the most handy tools in the newspaper, I found) in feature stories, in a very similar fashion: it’s an attack carefully planned by mysterious “them.”

“Theyir main goal is not religion as such, but rather Orthodox principles of our society. Discrediting Russian Orthodox Church is to undermine its role in the society, to stop it from standing up for the country.”

LGBT coverage in 2013 offers more clarity on who is attacking Russia and what the worse-case-scenario outcome would look like: it’s “gay lobby,” “global authorities,” often connected with one another, aiming at destroying family as an institution.

“If it happens, nothing will be left for us… Only normal men and women are able to salvage our country from literally going extinct,” a reporter editorialises in a long, two-part feature about gay marriage in France published by Komsomolskaya Pravda.
“Religion, church, order, traditions, family, patriotism - all these stand in the way of globalists... Global authority wants to destroy all ties that motivate a person to defend their values... If you don’t have a motherland, a family, a history, it means there’s nothing you need to fight for. All you need is food in the fridge and Coca Cola. Apathetic, egoistic person needs to have only one instinct - consumer instinct that responds to advertising. That’s why multinational corporations fund gay lobby,” a columnist at Komsomolskaya Pravda writes.

Then, of course, when it comes to LGBT, there’s a more immediate threat - to children. It is one of the most consistent narratives in the LGBT coverage studied for this paper. “Gay propaganda” may “distort their perception of life,” one lawmaker tells Rossia 1. It’s “a serious trauma,” another MP says in an interview to the channel.

Editorialising is a tool Rossia 1 often uses in its LGBT coverage, too: both news presenters and reporters allow themselves to express opinions when reporting on facts.

“Having made these [same-sex] parents legal and normal, French authorities went even further and started formatting children. They introduced textbooks in schools, in which sexless, violet creature is explaining tolerance to children. Do six-year-olds need to know that boys can put on make-up and wear dresses?” a Rossia 1 reporter says in a segment about France legalising same-sex marriages.

The same reporter quotes “American studies,” according to which one in three children in same-sex families is a victim of sexual abuse, and one in four has sexually transmitted diseases. She doesn’t specify what kind of studies assert that, when they were conducted and what institution conducted them.

Some of the Komsomolskaya Pravda stories talk about “gay lobby” deliberately targeting children in order to “turn” them, make them part of “gay culture.” Why and what for generally remains unclear; however, some reports point to pedophilia as a reason for it.

News anchor Dmitry Kiselyov warns in one of his shows that legalising gay marriage in the West may result in the same horrible things “Soviet sexual revolution of 1920s” brought to Russia: “millions of abandoned children, abortions and infanticide.” He does say that the civil war of the 1920 was a reason for it, too, but “sexual revolution,” in his words, was also a factor.

Finally, there are also rather mundane dangers that all these arguments and discussions lead to, if we look at the coverage of both cases from the point of view of events outlets choose to cover. In both cases protests and rallies, both in Russia and abroad, both for and against Pussy Riot and LGBT, make a significant amount of
headlines.

Reports often focus on disruptions these cause: fights, clashes, arrests, violence, and the “special security measures” law enforcement agencies has to take on.

In one of the most extreme examples, a columnist of Komsomolskaya Pravda asks: “A man was arrested in France for wearing a t-shirt with a traditional family depicted on it. Do we want that for Russia?!”

Interestingly enough, almost never any examples of Western depraved behaviour are sourced in the coverage - they are just asserted. The only example featured in of the Rossia 1 reports is that of pedophilia: the report talks about a same-sex couple that sexually assaulted their adopted children.

‘Satanic, liberal West’ versus Russia, ‘last bastion of resistance’

Intertwined with the idea of a threat, an attack on Russian traditional values, this theme reappears in news stories, features, op-eds and interviews from both data sets.

It is not as prominent during the first two months of the Pussy Riot coverage, but a look at stories that were published and aired closer to the end of the trial (July-August 2012) shows that it becomes one of the dominant themes as more and more Western celebrities and politicians express their support for the band.

A year later - in May-June 2013 - state-backed outlets would fully exploit its potential in their coverage of the issue of same-sex marriages in the West and the need to defend Russia by outlawing “gay propaganda.”

On one hand, the West is Russia’s determined adversary, because it doesn’t like how strong it has become. The stronger the USSR was, the more aggressive the West was towards it, a column in Komsomolskaya Pravda recalls.

According to the newspaper, “Satanic, liberal West… hates the world of faith and dignity” (which Russia, presumably, represents) and expresses it, among other things, by supporting Pussy Riot.

Another columnist suggests that opposition in Russia, which members of the Pussy Riot band are connected to, is heavily supported by U.S. authorities, whose goal is “to put an end to the existence of Russia in its current state.”

Western “hyperliberal” values that allow them to legally recognise gay marriage are foreign for Russia and other post-Soviet countries, notes a Rossia 1 reporter in a 2013 segment about an attempt to hold an LGBT parade in Georgia.
European Union lists “gay parades” and passing laws that protect LGBT people from discrimination as a condition for countries that want to be part of it, another reporter in another segment says, but in countries like Georgia and Moldova people, supported by the church, are resisting.

The West shouldn’t get involved in Russia’s affairs with its foreign values, both outlets say. Rossia 1 quotes Putin speaking at a press conference during his visit to Finland: “[Authorities] in Finland believe it is not necessary to restrict [gay propaganda] and don’t do anything to restrict it; we believe it is necessary, and we will restrict it, so I ask not to interfere with our internal affairs.”

Komsomolskaya Pravda quotes Alexei Pushkov, an outspoken lawmaker, reiterating this message: “[Angela] Merkel called on Russia to drop the ban on propaganda of homosexuality. This call will not be heard. A serious clash of values is looming.”

At the same time the West is portrayed as degrading, “drowning,” edging closer to “a total collapse” of its social order and national identity.

“The Old World is making its choice… Homosexuality cult, denouncing the idea of sin, betraying Christianity and traditional family, damaging children in same-sex marriages - all of this leads to ruining their identity and self-destruction,” Dmitry Kiselyov editorialises in one of his news shows.

Forces that fight against the change are big in numbers, according to both Rossia 1 and Komsomolskaya Pravda: in France, Brazil, Georgia “hundreds of thousands” take to the streets to protest gay marriage. To no avail: authorities, corrupted by “gay lobby” and busy earning political points by support LGBT, are not willing to listen. That makes conservative forces in the West turn to Russia for support and help. “Some really view Russia as a bastion of resistance against the international gay lobby,” a report in Komsomolskaya Pravda says.

Both outlets extensively cover a French and American delegation of conservative activists visiting Russian parliament and supporting Russian legislation banning “gay propaganda” and adoption for same-sex couples. “In their home countries, they are under severe pressure from gay lobby. There’s no doubt that Russia’s attempt to protect its children will prompt harsh response on the international level,” a Rossia 1 reporter summarises in one of the segments.

In most articles the most privileged perspective is that of Russian officials, much less often - that of Western conservative activists and politicians. Neither those who support Pussy Riot in the West, nor LGBT people who rally for same-sex marriages are offered a platform. The reasoning Western officials give for legalising same-sex
marriages is almost never quoted.

‘We are at war’ Russian society divided

Normal Russians, the ones that are reportedly victims of the attacks, or the ones outraged and offended, almost never - with one exception - make a proper appearance in the coverage I analysed.

Both outlets almost never quote them, too. We don’t get to hear what those offended by the Pussy Riot performance think of it - even though in the footage of the whole thing one can see outraged visitors of the cathedral screaming at the women and trying to take them outside. We also don’t get to listen to Russians who fear their children would be traumatised by “gay propaganda.”

Yet, through a range of other instruments, both outlets manage to paint a picture of a divided society, part of it is on the right side, and another part is on the wrong.

Employing emotive, judgmental language that often turns into flat-out name-calling, is one of the most used tools in that sense. Pieced together with silence from the “good” side, it creates an impression of collective finger-pointing: there they are, the bad guys, feel free to tear them apart.

Both outlets not only use it to depict people they condemn - members of the Pussy Riot band, their supporters, and LGBT people - in an unlikeable, unrelatable way; they also provoke emotional reactions from readers and viewers by throwing in emotionally charged words.

“Us vs. them” dichotomy is most visible in the Pussy Riot coverage. In Komsomolskaya Pravda, which allows itself much more opinions than the Rossia TV channel, Pussy Riot members Maria Alyokhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Yekaterina Samutsevich are referred to as “blasphemers,” “hooligans” (months before being convicted for hooliganism), “loose women,” “prisoners without conscience,” “provocateurs,” even “idiots” and “scumbags.”

The newspaper points out that Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina have children and accuse them on abandoning them.

Pussy Riot supporters, significant number of which rallied in front of the court house almost every day of the trial, are referred to in the paper as “opposition,” “liberals,” “lesbians, gays and other members of so-called ‘creative’ and ‘progressive’ class,” “weird suspicious people of unclear occupation, yet clear motives,” “journalists that describe the bloody [Putin] regime with enthusiasm,” even “pigs that are happy about believers grieving.”
Just like those presumably offended, they rarely get a chance to say something in the newspaper’s stories, but reporters describe them doing a lot of inappropriate things: signing silly songs, provoking fights, marching naked.

“We are at war - with loose women and decadent journalists… This is what they’re preparing for us after liberals take over: decadence and debauchery, desecrated sanctuaries, and severe crackdown on anyone who wants to live freely, with God in their heart and soul,” Maxim Shevchenko, TV journalist, wrote in a blog post, which Komsomolskaya Pravda quoted in one of the features.

Rossia 1 is more language-neutral, but it still depicts the women as deserving of censure. Reporters often talk about their other performances and how they rehearsed the most notorious one in yet another cathedral in Moscow - a cathedral that played a special role for believers during WWII. They pick at small details, such as Alyokhina reading her speech in court from a piece a paper and Tolokonnikova smiling carelessly while being convoyed to the courthouse, and point them out with reproach in their voices.

The channel also depicts supporters of the band as trouble-makers, and points out that “famous liberals” are among them, referring to opposition politicians who backed the Bolotnaya protests in 2011-2012.

Both outlets extensively cover rallies in support of the Church and traditional values.

Komsomolskaya Pravda also covers two random pro-Pussy Riot events, but the coverage shows supporters in the negative light. One, a motor rally organised by Tolokonnikova’s husband, is described very briefly and as something small an insignificant (“out of 50-60 people in the bus, almost half were journalists”). Another one - several activists from an unknown organisation called “Party of Love” trying to march naked through the Red Square - makes two separate news stories. In both, supporters look crazy and irrational.

It would be fair to say that tactics of Pussy Riot were genuinely shocking to many people. However, as sociologists point out, if it wasn’t for the extensive and often inflammatory coverage of the stunt, it would’ve gone unnoticed, just like many of the band’s other performances did.

In the LGBT data set both outlets refer to gay people as “sodomites,” “perverts,” “sick people,” “daddies that wear dresses.” At the same time they’re “aggressive,” “gay lobby,” and also “cool” and “fashionable” - as in dangerously attractive to young people; they’re part of “international gay lobby,” “gay conspiracy,” “gay slavery” “gay revolution.” Rossia 1 news anchor Dmitry Kiselyov even uses an
acronym KhTOM, which in Russian stands for “boorish totalitarian minority.”

In the set of articles I analysed, LGBT people were quoted only three times (and all three times on the pages of Komsomolskaya Pravda - Rossia 1 left them completely voiceless). In all three cases they themselves expressed negative attitude towards equal treatment of LGBT.

In one story, a man-to-woman transgender person said her condition was “not normal,” “an illness” which she is ashamed to demonstrate to her children. Reporter who interviewed her described her previous self as a man being “a normal guy,” warned readers that the character hadn’t been diagnosed with mental illnesses “yet” and included a comment from a psychologist who said that it is an anomaly that “can’t be cured.”

Two other examples can be found in a long feature dedicated to anti-gay marriage protests in France. The reporter talks to a gay man and a gay woman about them opposing the idea of same-sex families; a man also talks about how “awful” it was for him to live in a same-sex family.

“They’re trying to make us recognise their morals as traditional and shove it onto us,” the reporter who wrote the story said in a conversation with one of the characters.

Just like with Pussy Riot, both outlets devote a lot of attention and air time to show how many people around the world (“hundreds of thousands”) are protesting against LGBT marriages. In covering smaller Moscow protests, Rossia 1 refers to those supporting the ban on “gay propaganda” with clear sympathy, as “sturdily-built young people” and “grateful citizens” as opposed to “those lesbians whose sex is hard to distinguish.”

Last but not least, when illustrating stories with photos or footage, both outlets tend to pick the most stereotypical scenes from gay parades: half-naked or almost naked men wearing glitter, make-up and dancing or drag queens. In one of the reports from France, Rossia 1 reporter pointed and scantily dressed men in make-up and referred to them as “these [are potential] parents.”

‘Fight for morality:’ Russia defends existing order and values

This theme is common for both data sets, yet is covered from different angles. During the first two months of the Pussy Riot case Russia was already being criticised for arresting members of the band and opening a criminal investigation into their performance, so state-backed media focused on the people rallying against the group.
Both Rossia 1 and Komsomolskaya Pravda ran stories about rallies in support of the Church with “tens of thousands” of people “across the country” gathering at cathedrals for a special service dedicated to defending the Church and traditional values, organising motor rallies around Moscow, and uniting in outrage.

“Even bikers got involved in the fight for morality… Bearded old-timers and those who just started riding got together from different Russian cities - more than a thousand people in total - to support Russian Orthodox Church,” a Rossia 1 report about two of such motor rallies in Moscow said.

“Our mother - Russian Orthodox Church - was insulted. We want to express our protest against it, show that we’re not spineless, we won’t allow anyone to insult our mother,” singer Olga Kormukhina was quoted as saying in the same report.

Rossia 1 interviewed a number of celebrities, who had nothing to do with the church or Pussy Riot. However, they were well-liked and reputable: prominent film director Karen Shakhnazarov, famous Soviet and Russian conductor Vladimir Spivakov, another famous conductor Valery Gergiyev and many others all condemned the stunt and called on authorities to defend believers offended by it.

Another interesting element of the defending narrative was government and church officials repeating that there is no pressure whatsoever on the law enforcement, and the investigation would be fair and not influenced by anyone.

“Medvedev answered in a very diplomatic manner. ‘I didn’t make this decision, the judge did,’ he commented on the Pussy Riot case. ‘If I start commenting on court rulings, even high-profile ones, it will be interfering with justice… I am a president after all, and this [may be interpreted as] a signal to keep them in [detention] or let them out,’” then-president Dmitry Medvedev was quoted by Komsomolskaya Pravda.

Together, all of these elements created a very convincing picture: the people are united and standing strong, with famous ones on their side, too, law enforcement is being fair and politicians are not getting involved.

With the 2013 LGBT coverage, authorities take on the role of defenders. Significant part of the coverage of LGBT issues in Russia boils down to Russian lawmakers working on two legislative initiatives that would defend Russian children: ban on “gay propaganda” and ban on adoption for same-sex couples and countries that allow same-sex marriages.

“Reassessment of traditional family and spiritual values in a number of Western countries urge Russia to take measures. Measures that would protect these values,” a Rossia 1 presenter says in a news bulletin.
“Urges” is a verb often repeated in Rossia 1 reports and news bulletins in this context: Russia didn’t want to crackdown on LGBT, reporters and presenters imply, - it had to in response to what was happening around the world. Some of the characters of the stories - mostly conservative activists in France that participate in protests against gay marriage - say it more explicitly: gay people can do whatever they want in the privacy of their own bedrooms, but they should not be near children.

The law banning “gay propaganda” was still in the works when Russian parliament adopted legislation banning adoption for same-sex couples in countries, where gay marriage is legal. France, where same-sex marriages were legalised several weeks prior, was the lawmakers’ main concern.

“Russian children won’t be adopted by same-sex French families and single people. Russia retains control over children not ending up in same-sex families,” ultraconservative lawmaker Yelena Mizulina was quoted as saying by Rossia 1.

Lawmakers are backed by then deputy prime minister Olga Golodets (“We must be sure, we must create solid [legal] foundation that would spare our children from it [being adopted by same-sex couples]. It is absolutely not part of the norm, it’s not part of Russia’s traditions,” she was quoted as saying in a Komsomolskaya Pravda report) and, eventually, Vladimir Putin himself.

Speaking at the Russia-EU summit, Putin stressed that Russia doesn’t discriminate against LGBT people, but added that “if a law banning adoption for countries that allow same-sex marriage is adopted by our parliament, I will sign it.”

Other voices who join the unanimous choir of defenders are those of Western conservatives. In a report covering French activists visiting Moscow and meeting with Russian MPs, titled “The French are asking Russia to take the lead in the fight with gay lobby,” Komsomolskaya Pravda quotes several of them saying that Russia can help them in their fight.

“Russia is better than anyone suited to take the lead in the resistance to the ideology of sex-minorities,” French political analyst Emeric Chopard was quoted as saying in a Komsomolskaya Pravda story.

Russia has a mission, Russian lawmaker Yury Shuvalov agreed. It is to “create conditions in which distorted morality will not stick.” “It is time to talk about an international alliance of conservative forces, we won’t be able to tackle degradation alone,” he concluded in the same story.
Overview

The narratives that “traditional values” boil down to - Russia against the West, “us” versus “them,” threat, controversial actions as a necessary defence - are not unique to this particular part of Russian propaganda. Russia’s relationship with the West and with Ukraine is painted in the same colours, too. So is the crackdown on dissent inside the country, any international scandal, be it audacious state doping scheme exposed or poisoning of a former Russian spy in the UK.

They are reinforced by a number of tools described in this chapter.

Emotive language and editorialising engage the readers on an emotional level and offer judgment and opinion. Taking sides by subtly offering only one perspective on the issue and leaving all other once out of the frame leave the readers - bombarded by more information than ever these days and too busy, lazy or uninterested to look for other side of the story - with only one version of events in mind.

Finally, quoting authoritative, respectable speakers who only reflect what the narrative benefits from, strengthens the readers’ confidence in what they’ve read or heard.

The finished product comes out as a “simplistic, easily digestible, cliched picture,” as Denis Volkov, sociologist with the Levada independent polling center, puts it. “That’s why it sticks so easily - it light-weight, comprehensive, and caters to [the audience’s] expectations.”

Propagandists do understand people’s emotions quite well and what buttons they need to push, says Floriana Fossato, Oxford-based media researcher. One of the most effective of such buttons is nostalgia about Russia’s Soviet past - times of greatness, respect from the West, clear and simple morality.

Anna Kachakaeva, professor at the media department of the Moscow’s Higher School of Economics, echoes her sentiment. “[These narratives] go perfectly well together with the nostalgia, wishing that the rest of the world would respect us,” she says.

According to her, language and tone-wise propaganda today reminds her of Soviet dissidents’ writing, which, with its sarcastic tone, trolling, smirking, reading between the lines etc. appealed to a lot of people at the time. “It turned out this language works conveniently well with audiences now, too,” Kachkaeva added.

Other means of promoting ‘traditional values:’ The case of Special Correspondent
When it comes to propaganda on state TV channels (which, as I already mentioned in the previous chapter, remains the main source of information for the vast majority of Russians), news coverage is not the only medium. Political talk shows are another one, often much more intense and inflammatory.

In addition to the two data sets of coverage, I looked at one such show aired on Rossiya 1 in 2012-2013 called Special Correspondent. It was founded and run by a prominent TV journalist Arkady Mamontov in 2002. Mamontov, well-known for his coverage of war in Chechnya, military conflicts in Ingushetia and Dagestan in the 1990s, and his team of investigative reports specialised in documentaries exposing various social and political issues.

In 2012-2013 Special Correspondent was second most popular political talk show on Rossiya 1 and the most popular talk show that had an element of journalism - half-an-hour long investigative documentaries - in it.

During those two years Mamontov did three documentaries on Pussy Riot and two on LGBT. There also was a third one on LGBT in 2015, when same-sex marriage was made legal in the U.S. All six not just confirm my findings about Rossiya 1 coverage of the two topics - they give them a significant boost and bring the narratives described in this chapter further.

“Russia against the West,” “us versus the enemy,” “threat” and “defence” narratives turn into full-on conspiracy theories.

Special Correspondent also claimed that Boris Berezovsky, the Russian oligarch who fell out of Putin’s graces and fled to the UK, masterminded the Pussy Riot performance.

The programme also focused on the “international gay lobby,” being used by foreign government institutions to destroy Russian culture, values, and population. In the 2015 documentary, Mamontov talked about an institute in London that during World War II studied psychological warfare - “not just against Hitler, but against USSR, too,” and that’s where all decadent things, like “free love, swing, civil unions… projects like homosexuality.”

In the same documentary a German sociologist without credentials says that every U.S. embassy around the world has instructions on how to replace traditional values with non-traditional ones.

The goal of all conspiracies is the same - to destroy Russia, or at least destroy its “backbone.” Interestingly enough, both “threat” and “defence” narratives are so
hyped up that, put together in one story, they don’t add up.

On one hand, there’s the desperate “besieged fortress” situation: the threat is painted as big, imminent and incredibly dangerous. Forces behind both enemies are serious and resourceful, damage they can do is significant, and they have encircled Russia, leaving few opportunities to retreat.

On the other hand, there’s the “last bastion” notion: Russia fights back, stands strong, has a lot of support among conservative forces all around the world and is at the helm of an international resistance movement.

But both are emotionally charged, and when emotions run as high as they do in Russian political talk shows, it is really hard to notice logical discrepancies. In all of the six documentaries journalists who narrate them openly state their opinion, editorialise, use emotive language.

Before and after documentaries guests of Special Correspondent in the studio discuss the issue. Usually, there are 8 or 10 of them - lawmakers, writers, journalists, activists, and random celebrities. Some have no credentials and are simply described as “journalist” / “writer” / “singer.” Often, the show would have a foreigner - an American, usually - to answer for all the sins of the West and be the presenter’s punching bag.

The way the show is designed implies that different perspectives are offered to the viewer. The guests are divided into two groups: those that support the controversial issue on the table, be it the Pussy Riot performance of gay marriage, and those who don’t support it.

However, in the process of discussion it turns out that most of those who were supposed to defend LGBT rights, for example, are actually against it, too - they just advocate a milder approach to the issue.

The presenter - in 2012-2013 Mamontov himself, in 2015 rising star of Russian propaganda Alexei Popov - is usually clear from the start about the side he’s on, often through simple and blatant name-calling. Pussy Riot girls are referred to as “blasphemers,” “possessed,” gay men - as “sodomites,” “perverts,” “faggots.”

Guests in the studio interrupt and insult each other, yell and cry. The presenter not only isn’t stopping any of this - he does everything to keep the temperature high enough by badgering the few people whose opinion is different from his and bidding them against those who support his point of view.

This illusion of objectivity is created in the documentaries, too. Unlike in news
coverage, the other side gets a voice in the films.

In the Pussy Riot one, Mamontov’s colleague even gets to interview members of the band in pre-trial detention center where they are held. (It is very unusual for a country where even defence lawyers can’t always get access to their arrested clients, yet it is possible for a TV channel managed from the Kremlin.) In all three LGBT documentaries, journalists do talk to LGBT people and activists as well. However, in all six their voices are drowned out by the voices of their opponents, who outnumber them both by number and air time given.

Moreover, giving them a voice has a clear goal of confirming the main point of the documentary: they are enemies who are out to destroy our values, they are dangerous and unsympathetic.

Currently, there are several shows like Special Correspondent on the Rossia 1 TV channel. They differ in format slightly, but are similar in many ways: they’re emotional, loud and promote one perspective that supports the Kremlin’s view of events.

According to media analysts and sociologists polled for this paper, this format contributed greatly to the atmosphere of exasperation, outrage and indignation in the Russian society, keeping it polarised and deeply divided.

**Other means of promoting ‘traditional values’: ‘Positive’ propaganda**

Russian propaganda thrives on negativity. Unlike the Soviet propaganda that had a “positive” side to it - in the sense that in addition to stories about how horrible the West is, it also told stories about how great life in the Soviet Union is. How prolific the workers are, how good the living conditions are, how happy the nation is.

“Life has become better, comrades. Life has become more cheerful,” this famous phrase said by Joseph Stalin in 1935, at a congress of workers, became one of the Soviet Union’s poster slogans.

There are very few “positive” stories in the propaganda these days that would reinforce the narratives promoted by the Kremlin. First of all because media outlets in general these days are not big on positive stories, says Alexei Kovalev, Russian journalist and activist propaganda fact-checker. “Things that go well are not news. It’s the norm, they are supposed to go well, and when they don’t, they make headlines.”

Secondly, positive stories about life in Russia are harder to sell, says Arkady Ostrovsky from the Economist, because people know how things are in reality and
wouldn’t buy them.

A look at whether “traditional values” that are proclaimed in the Pussy Riot and LGBT coverage - important role of the Church and Orthodoxy in the lives of Russians, traditional heterosexual family - have any positive reinforcement in the state-backed media confirms this hypothesis.

During the two months of the Pussy Riot coverage that I examined (March-April 2012), the number of “positive” stories about the Russian Orthodox Church, published by Komsomolskaya Pravda and aired by Rossia 1, was almost two times lower (30 pieces of content compared to 56) than the number of stories about Pussy Riot.

When looking for these stories, I used key words “Russian Church” and selected stories that the Church as an institution was central to and that had nothing to do with the Pussy Riot scandal.

Only seven stories out of 30 talked about useful initiatives the Church took upon itself. Only two talked about the values that the Church stands by. The rest covered events with the Patriarch, opening new cathedrals and religious holidays and rituals.

The picture is similar with stories dedicated to traditional families, as opposed to stories about gay marriage and “gay propaganda” - only 24 “positive” stories in both outlets compared to 84 in May-June 2013. I used key words “family, Russia” when searching for these and selected those that talked about traditional family as a social institution.

As few as two pieces of content were stories about extraordinary traditional families - those with many children or parents who adopted children and powered through all the difficulties - that could inspire readers about the concept of traditional family. Seven stories talked about government policies that supported families and adoption. The rest were about foreign adoption issues (2013 was the year when Russia adopted the notorious “Dima Yakovlev law,” banning adoption for U.S. citizens. The move elicited public outcry, and propaganda machine worked hard to show how awful it is to allow foreigners to adopt Russian orphans) and various government award ceremonies or festive events that involved families.
Chapter 4. Conclusions: The bad, the good and the practical

Propaganda of traditional values, as described in the previous chapter, may have certainly started with the Pussy Riot story and the “gay propaganda” coverage, and it definitely didn’t end there.

Abortion, adoption, domestic violence, sex education initiatives, even HIV prevention – these and many other issues Russian officialdom would often spin into a “traditional values” angle, which state-backed media would readily reiterate.

It then would become available to a huge amount of Russians, given the reach state-backed media have, spreading a dangerous message: traditions (or certain perceptions of what traditions are) outrank human rights, which are not even worth including into the conversation.

Religion outranks freedom of expression. Offended feelings, one’s righteous indignation outranks freedom of speech. Traditional family outranks equality, choice, and even physical safety, as we saw in the case of decriminalising domestic abuse and the way conservative lawmakers, backed by Russian Orthodox Church, rationalised the measure. Traditional, Orthodox morals outrank public health concerns.

But does the message actually get through, does it stick and does it change people’s attitudes to human rights?

The bad

A look at certain societal changes suggests that it does.

First of all because there was a definitive rise of the anti-LGBT sentiment that had some real-life implications. Sociologists point out that, even though negative attitudes to LGBT were always present in the Russian mindset, given that being gay had been a criminal offence for decades in the Soviet era, their intensity spiked after 2013.

“It’s quite aggressive and obscure,” says Natalya Zorkaya, sociologist with the Levada independent polling center. “The majority still thinks that [being gay] is an illness... and aggression is there, too - aggression one usually feels towards someone different, someone foreign.”

In June 2017, St. Petersburg-based Center for Independent Social Research released a study revealing that since the “gay propaganda” law had been passed in 2013, LGBT hate crime doubled. Researchers analysed public records and found that the number
of hate crimes against LGBT adjudicated by courts spiked in 2013 and continued to grow: in 2011, there were only 32 of such cases, in 2012 - 33, in 2013 - 50, in 2014 - 52, in 2015 - 65.

Two months later Russian LGBT Network, a prominent Russian gay rights campaign group, published their own report on discrimination against LGBT people, noting the same trend. In an interview for this paper, Svetlana Zakharova, the group’s spokesperson, attributed the change not to the “gay propaganda” law, but to the aggressive information campaign around it.

“This constant coverage of LGBT [people] in national [state-backed] media as abnormal, as pedophiles and perverts, enemies of Russia and Western agents is the main reason why there’s so much hatred towards LGBT community in Russia,” Zakharova says.

“Number of crimes against LGBT has been growing since 2013, and often perpetrators are actually proud of themselves - they believe what they do is noble, and that the government supports them.”

Another thing sociologists noticed was the rise of violent Orthodox vigilante groups. These groups, having few to no ties to the regime or the Church, apparently see defending “traditional values” as their mission, in accomplishing which anything goes.

“The idea of the protection of ‘traditional values’ from various threats has, since 2012, been actively discussed at the government level, and disseminated through education, research, and mass media,” Dmitry Dubrovsky, sociologist with the Moscow-based Higher School of Economics, and Irina du Quenoy, research fellow at the Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and Public Affairs in Georgetown University, wrote in a report on religion in violence in Russia, released in June by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington D.C

“This has had the effect of reinforcing the dynamics already present within uncivil society itself, as the proliferation of the ‘traditional values’ trope inspires already active members of uncivil society to organize themselves in the protection of these values against enemies.”

The report mentions two groups in particular that came to prominence in the wake of the Pussy Riot scandal.

Bozhya Volya (“God’s Will”), led by a young and zealous activist Dmitry “Enteo” Tsorionov, was organised explicitly as a reaction to the Pussy Riot stunt. Between 2012 and 2016 it carried out a series of attacks on LGBT people, “nontraditional
sects,” “anti-Orthodox” exhibits and “blasphemous” theatre performances. In 2016, the group fell out with Tsorionov and reinvented itself as another organisation, this time called Pravoslavnaya Oborona (“Orthodox Defence”); the name alone says a lot about its mission.

Right around the same time - in 2012, on the heels of the Pussy Riot scandal - another group, called Sorok Sorokov, emerged in Moscow. According to the CSIS report, it brought together around 200 Orthodox activists and was backed by another 10,000 supporters from neighbouring regions. It is mostly famous for physically assaulting Muscovites protesting against plans to build a church in a park in the Western part of the city in 2015; its main “beat” is to deploy sturdy young people ready to fight to any conflict which the Church is part of.

“Total atmosphere of hysteria and the charged discourse of the ‘besieged camp’ make the real prevention of (Orthodox) violence in defence of ‘traditional values’ in contemporary Russia highly problematic,” the report says.

The most recent confirmation of this notion came in the summer of 2017, in the wake of the scandal around “Matilda” - a film about Russia’s last tsar Nicholas II having an affair with a Polish ballet dancer, Mathilde Kshessinska, produced by prominent Russian film director Alexei Uchitel. Uchitel is known for his pro-Kremlin views, and Putin publicly singing him praises, but this time it didn’t help him.

In 2000, Nicholas II was canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church as “passion bearer” - someone who faced his death with humility. This made Nicholas a saint; a saint of the lowest rank, as priests explained to me when I was covering the scandal, but still a saint.

The film, still in production stage, elicited protests and complaints from various groups of Orthodox activists - they considered depicting a saint having an affair blasphemy. They lodged complaints to the law enforcement and picketed the set, set cars near the studio on fire and threw Molotov cocktails into the windows of the studio. The Kremlin publicly condemned their actions.

All of this speaks in favour of the following hypothesis: Propaganda of traditional values steers Russians closer to radical conservatism and further away from understanding and appreciating the notion of human rights.

However, some sociologists suggest that the shift happened more on the emotional, temperamental level rather than that of values.

“Traditional values - the ones that come from the church and the authorities about traditional family, ‘healthy’ society etc. - are accepted by people, but at a rather
superficial level,” says Natalya Zorkaya from Levada. “It’s more about identifying with something than values. For example, 70 percent of Russians identify themselves as Orthodox believers, but only 14 percent actually go to Church.”

Zorkaya also calls it “a mobilising experience” - something that might drive people to action, but says that people actually value their modern, free way of living and are unwilling to go back to values that would restrict them in any way. She points out that divorce rates in Russia remain high and so do abortion rates, which illustrates that traditional family values have hardly taken at this point.

But at the same time the “besieged fortress” narrative that propaganda feeds people contributes to polarisation of the society, its atomisation even. By pointing out the enemy - be it opposition, or human rights advocates, or anyone else who disagrees with the narrative - and labelling them “hostile marginals,” “fifth column,” “traitors” or “foreign agents,” it incites animosity.

“As a result, the society is in this aggressive, hateful state,” says Zorkaya. “It accepted the idea that we are surrounded by enemies and that everyone wishes us ill.”

It is also more prone to venerating a lie than seeking out a truth, which the case of the “Matilda” film illustrated really well - an attitude encouraged and cultivated by propaganda.

The good

It is not all doom and gloom, however; there is a positive side to the story, too.

First of all because values - traditional or otherwise - and human rights have become part of public discussion over the past six years, and some analysts argue that more so than before.

“Take the terms we’re using, for instance: we’re all now saying LGBT instead of a number of terms with different connotations we used to call them,” says Marianna Muravyova, professor of Russian law and administration at the University of Helsinki. “We’re talking about it all the time, and the authorities are forced to talk about it. Conservative groups are forced to talk about it. Before, everyone was just silent.”

As any other frank and sensitive conversation, this one does get unpleasant and even ugly sometimes, but it’s an important one we, as a society, have to have with those in power - it’s these conversations that help us figure out our future, our identity and “what we’re building here together - what we’re ready to allow to power and
“It’s a scary conversation,” says Muravyova. “We fear that it might end in repressions, just like it did in the Soviet Union. But it’s one we need to have to move forward.”

And it’s actually changes in the media landscape that make this conversation possible. While propaganda remains widely accessible, widely spread and widely consumed, its consumption in younger generations - the ones willing to have this conversation, the ones advocating for change and the ones that are eventually going to become a majority - is slowly but surely going down.

According to Levada’s 2017 Russian Media Landscape report, more and more people prefer Internet to TV as their main source of news. The number of young people that look for news on TV has fallen from 94 percent of those aged 25-39 and 89 percent of those aged 18-24 in 2011 to 78 percent and 60 percent respectively in 2016.

Even with the Internet, there is still a long way to go. The top five of the websites most popular among Levada’s respondents include two major news aggregators that authorities learned to manipulate in order to make state-backed narratives dominate, and two pro-Kremlin news sites, so, as the report puts it, “the Internet does not necessarily offers an alternative narrative to the vast majority of consumers of online news.”

However, there is also a question of how long this is really going to last. During the six years of “killing all the big” independent media outlets, a lot of smaller, niche media outlets appeared, says Ilya Krasilshchik from Meduza. These outlets don’t have a clear owner that would be part of the system and easy to pressure. “This is the new reality - quickly growing outlets that have no owner which [Kremlin officials] can call [and force to cooperate],” he says.

Finally, there is also a variety of other platforms that contribute to forming public opinions, yet don’t fall into the “media outlet” category. YouTube bloggers, Telegram channels, social media communities is where young people often go these days when they go online. These are not necessarily political, but sometimes they are. In respect to YouTube bloggers, Levada’s report finds that “they contribute to gradually eroding TV channels’ assessment of what is happening in the world.”

In other words, the Kremlin still controls the narrative - but it is becoming increasingly hard for them to do it.

The practical
There are certain things we, Russia’s journalistic and media community, can do to make it even harder.

Going into this research project, I was contemplating the idea of a “counter narrative” - something that would counter what Dmitry Kiselyovs of the world tell people every Sunday from the silver screen. However, most journalists and media analysts I interviewed for this paper convinced me to look for answers in a different dimension.

“Let him talk,” Floriana Fossato told me. “There is literally nothing we should be doing about him and the likes. What we should be doing [in order to put the right messages out there] is finding a way to speak to young people. Finding a language they can understand and relate to.”

The first step towards that, in my opinion, is conducting thorough studies of young people’s news and information consumption and alternative media platforms. Both areas have been a bit of a black hole, analysts admit. “We know nothing about what and how young people consume,” Anna Kachkayeva from Higher School of Economics says. “It’s been changing too quickly over the past couple of years.”

The problem with existing numbers, Vasily Gatov from USC Annenberg Center for Communication Leadership and Policy points out, is that polls don’t really reflect the whole picture (they indicate certain issues, but not necessarily the scale of those issues), and the audience numbers we get from Mediascope, audience research organisation, can be manipulated by authorities just as easily as they manipulate legacy media.

Despite a lack of data, some media outlets have already found a working recipe for success.

Meduza, co-founded by Krasilshchik, is one of them. It is doing quite well, with a peak of 19 million users visiting the site in March 2018, according to Krasilshchik, and devotes quite a lot of air time to balanced human rights stories.

“It is important to not offer the audience only political and socially sensitive stories, but also cover things that go on in their lives, like cooking or interesting videos popping up in the Internet. Our world doesn’t solely consist of political and social issues; it just happened that we accentuate them. But there are other things in this world, too,” Krasilshchik says.

Informing people without entertaining them, he adds, is quite pointless nowadays. It simply doesn’t work.
There are a bunch of small, niche, young online outlets that do that. They mix serious issues with entertainment, experiment with storytelling formats and, most importantly in my opinion, employ calm, easy-going tone that doesn’t thrive on negative emotions and doesn’t make the reader angry and aggressive.

There’s MediaZona, an online outlet covering courts and prisons that was founded by a human rights NGO former Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina started; Takie Dela (“That’s the Thing”) online news site devoted to charity and everything that goes with it; Wonderzine, a “glossy” online magazine that extensively covers women’s rights issues - all of them appeal to younger audiences and promote human rights.

They’re not enough, of course. But it’s a place to start from.
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