

'Information Wars' in Russian Politics

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"Everybody understands that television is the main institution for the country's governance. Not the army, nor the secret service, nor law enforcement authorities, but TV." Russian film critic Daniil Dondurei, quoted in the Financial Times, 16 December, 2009.

Globalization at the end of the 20th century brought about an integration of societies around the world. For state and local governments in the US, long-accustomed to relative isolation from the world, globalization has meant the internationalization of "home-town" industries with impacts including movement of jobs overseas, increased foreign ownership of companies, and a more complex operating environment for everything from raw materials to marketing. State and local governments now operate in a world where every government—from local to federal—must compete with others around the world for consumers, tourists, entrepreneurs, investors, students, international events as well as for the attention of other governments and the world media. As a result, state and local governments are engaged in a quest for competitive identity by pursuit of strategies sometimes referred to as nation branding, place marketing, or other terms. At the heart of those efforts is the need to understand the media in other countries to help us develop and present an identity that is competitive in a globalized world.

As a result, government public relations practitioners are now much more frequently required to access and understand foreign media including story content, media vehicles, marketing campaigns, and media coverage. Sometimes the need is immediate. For example, Florida government public relations practitioners learned several hard lessons in the 1990s after several killings of foreign tourists. European travel to Florida abruptly dropped 25% with massive economic consequences as banner headlines such as "Gunned Down Like Animals" ran in London tabloids. Not only should practitioners have been quicker in pointing out that Florida was safer than most destinations for British tourists, but they were slow to access and understand the foreign media as well as lacking a plan to deal with such a media-inspired crisis.

In other situations, government public relations practitioners are called on to understand the politics and culture in other countries to address ongoing rather than immediate needs. For example, in the Southwestern US many cities maintain a watch on the Mexican political responses to drug wars while in New York City, Arab and Israeli news media impact trade, tourism, and even local politics. In many countries, not only are the politics and culture different but the media operates far differently than in the US. As a result, what is published in the media especially during political campaigns is often far more complex and difficult to understand than it would appear by reading many popular news sources.

This particular case is intended to help highlight for practitioners the potential differences in media relations practices by government officials and campaigners in other countries. For example, how often does the mayor of a major US city buy several television stations in the middle of a reelection campaign in order to gain more airtime for political ads? The case also illustrates the necessity to go beyond news headlines and generalizations about other countries in order to fully carry out the work of a government public relations professional in operating in a globalized world.

The events in the case take place in the Ural region of Russia, an area roughly the size of the eastern United States. The region straddles eastern European Russia and Western Asiatic Russia and extends from the Arctic Ocean on the north to the Kazakhstan border on the south. The region is often referred to as the industrial heart of Russia. The natural resources include vast deposits of iron and other ores as well as the majority of the country's oil and gas reserves. These resources support some of the world's largest metallurgical enterprises including the second largest titanium plant in the world as well as a sizable portion of the country's chemical and heavy manufacturing firms.

The largest government unit in the region is the Sverdlovsk Oblast, a political unit analogous to an American state; Sverdlovsk also has the greatest gross domestic product of any government unit in the region. The capital is

Yekaterinburg, one of the four largest cities in Russia and the center of heavy industry and steel-making. The city is also a major transportation hub and trading center for goods moving between Europe, Central Asia, and Siberia. Despite their importance to international commerce and influence on Russian domestic and international politics, the city and the oblast are relatively unknown outside the country as foreigners were barred during Soviet times due to the economic and military importance of the area, including production of biological and nuclear weapons.

“Information Wars” in Russia

The secrecy shrouding the region typifies the general lack of transparency in the Russian state, a society with a low level of political pluralism and an entrenched power structure. Media outlets are strongly influenced or even controlled by the government, far different than countries where the news media has a skeptical or adversarial relationship with the government. During the decline of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, there was a well-known but brief period of *glasnost* or openness and freedom of speech. In the 1990s, Russia entered a period remarkable for the deliberate, self-conscious, and intense use of information as a resource in the struggle for power among competing groups.

In the late 1990s, these struggles reached their zenith. They were often referred to as “information wars”—a phrase popularized during the Persian Gulf War of 1991 when the US Air Force deployed their “Information Warfare Squadrons” and CNN’s coverage of the war began today’s 24-hour news cycle. These wars were waged by organized groups with overlapping financial, political, and industrial interests. The groups were usually led by “oligarchs,” powerful and wealthy entrepreneurs who dominated large areas of economic and political life. As they lost power in recent years to the government, information warfare continued but moved within the state itself in more disguised approaches that are reminiscent of former Soviet Union. Effective Russian information warfare has been most evident where equally-matched powerful interests opposed each other over a protracted period. Perhaps the best example can be found in the Sverdlovsk Oblast where the Governor and the Mayor of Yekaterinburg waged an information war for nearly two decades.

In the 1980s, the Sverdlovsk Oblast was at the cutting edge of political public relations in Russia. The regional Communist party boss Boris Yeltsin aggressively used media to expand his power. In 1985, he created for national television a well-designed and carefully managed question-and-answer session with young people. The resulting exposure resulted in his promotion to party boss for the Moscow region. After being forced out by Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, Yeltsin shifted the battleground to the media. While Gorbachev was skilful in using media to manipulate international opinion, Yeltsin’s hard-nosed, aggressive approach played at home much better than Gorbachev’s nuanced domestic politics. Yeltsin outmanoeuvred Gorbachev and went on to become President of Russia.

The strategies and tactics used by Yeltsin – especially the role of public relations and mass media – were not lost on his successors in Sverdlovsk, notably Sverdlovsk Governor Eduard Rossel. He seized the opportunity created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union to create a populist campaign during 1991-3 to have Sverdlovsk’s status upgraded to a republic within Russia rather than continuing as a region. The “Urals Republic” campaign focused on creating a heightened sense of self-importance and a feeling of being treated unfairly, for example by emphasizing the high rate of taxation compared with neighbouring regions. Such efforts challenged the central power of the new Russian government. As a result, President Yeltsin sacked Rossel as governor in October 1993 and replaced him with Alexei Strakhov. Rossel’s comeback defeat of Strakhov for governor was as dramatic as Yeltsin’s defeat of Gorbachev for president of Russia, although little is known of it outside of Russia. (Perhaps the best account was published by Rossel’s press secretary Alexander Levin in 1995, ‘How to Become a Governor in Today’s Russia’).

Rossel had built on his personal image as a local hero by portraying himself as an effective governor championing Ural autonomy who was ousted by Moscow’s efforts to subordinate regional ambitions to national priorities. He won election to the Federal Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament in December 1993. His team established a new political movement called Transformation of the Urals. This new movement successfully gained the support of much of the region’s political and economic elite thus assuring him election as chair of the region’s legislative body in April 1994. However, the fundamental power still lay in the hands of Strakhov, as governor and head of the executive branch.

Rossel then launched a national campaign to force the national government to allow popular election of regional governors. He was successful, and in 1995 Sverdlovsk was the site of the first gubernatorial electoral contest between a challenger, Rossel, and the Moscow-backed incumbent, Strakhov.

The Rossel-Strakhov Campaign

Rossel and Strakhov were not merely political opponents but represented quite distinct approaches to regional government. Alexei Strakhov relied heavily on support from Moscow and from the regional banking elite who exercised control over budgetary flows and human resources. However, these sources of support made it easier for Rossel's PR team to brand Strakhov as an agent of Moscow, far removed from the concerns of local people. To make matters worse, Strakhov showed little talent for communications with the public and a lack of judgement, which resulted in scandals and alienation of many regional leaders. His successes, such as successful lobbying for cash-strapped defence firms, often were seen as ploys to win votes. For his election campaign, Strakhov hired a Moscow public relations firm, but this backfired as well. Many voters viewed him as merely a piece in a Moscow-centered hierarchy; one unintentionally humorous poster created by his Moscow public relations firm showed a giant size pawn dominating a chess board of smaller pawns with the slogan 'let government show by what rules the citizen will be played'.

By contrast, Eduard Rossel put the emphasis on winning local support both from public opinion and from the regional elite. Instead hiring of a PR firm, Rossel allied himself with a local populist, Anton Bakov, whose young team took charge of running the campaign through the regional media. This led to the emergence of a 'horizontal' coalition, bringing together a wide range of groups including veterans, women, and business people as well as academic institutions. His coalition even brought in allegedly criminal organisations such as the notorious Uralmash gang who already possessed a substantial business portfolio in the region. Rossel's campaign played on a dual image – Rossel as the regional champion against Moscow and Rossel as the decisive establishment figure. His primary campaign poster showed Rossel grimly peering over a telephone receiver – responsive but very much in charge. Such dual images were copied in later Russian national elections.

The Strakhov-Rossel campaign illustrates the rise of more sophisticated 'political technologies' in regional gubernatorial elections, of which Sverdlovsk was the first. These more sophisticated technologies began at the regional level rather than at national level due to the higher level of competition as well as the greater voter understanding of issues related to government operations.

The media were polarised and mobilised in support of one or the other candidate. Strakhov was supported by state television (both federal and regional) and radio (the latter effective in smaller and more isolated settlements). Rossel was supported by private and independent channels (including several established for that purpose). Keeping with tradition, local newspapers published articles and speeches by the incumbent governor but Rossel was able to gain coverage by paying to get articles printed as well as providing financial support to the papers' publishers.

These media manipulation efforts were accompanied by the emergence of what would become famous across Russia and gain recognition elsewhere as "black PR." Black PR is the unethical use of information to counter the public relations campaign of an opponent by use of genuine and bogus compromising information (*kompromat*). The aggressive use of *kompromat* had begun earlier at the national level in 1993, in the conflict between Yeltsin and his former deputy and extreme nationalist Alexander Rutskoi. During that conflict, literal piles of incriminating material were delivered to the press. Over time, the focus of media activity in political campaigns moved from the actual allegation to how something was alleged and thus the importance for the major candidates to own and control media outlets. For example, Strakhov's campaign alleged that the Uralmash organized crime group supported Rossel while Rossel's media convinced the many voters that it was Strakhov who was supported by Uralmash.

Winning the PR war did not necessarily win the election, however. The long campaign of highly personalised negative sparring between the two main candidates resulted in voter fatigue and disillusion, which found expression in a sudden shift of support towards a third candidate. Valery Trushnikov, the first deputy governor, had run a positive campaign and was seen by many as a reliable professional manager and a happy medium between Rossel and Strakhov. Trushnikov's campaign demonstrated the development of a more mature campaigning approach in Russia. The first round of voting saw Rossel win 26%, Strakhov 23% and Trushnikov 20%. Before the run-off, Rossel made a bid for Trushnikov's votes, offering him the post of chair of the regional government, which

Trushnikov accepted. Rossel's boldness paid off – the second round saw him win with 59% against Strakhov's 32%. Rossel's victory in 1995 gave a major boost to the political public relations industry in Russia. As a result, similar tactics came to be employed in most sub-national elections as well in national parliamentary and presidential elections.

Governor versus Mayor

Having won the governorship, Rossel backed his political ally Bakov in the Yekaterinburg mayoral election against the incumbent Mayor Arkady Chernetsky. The latter was an experienced city manager and withstood the challenge from Bakov, a maverick businessman turned politician with a fairly traditional campaign emphasising the city administration's achievements. However, the pattern was set whereby the governor of the region and the mayor of the largest city operated rival regimes, with elections their battleground, so that the Mayor soon controlled the largest (anti-governor) faction in the regional legislature and the Governor controlled the most of the (anti-mayor) opposition on the City Council.

In 1999, it was Mayor Chernetsky's turn to take on Rossel in the election for governor. Rossel's strategy combined the key elements of the previous election – a PR media assault and deployment of a third candidate. The crucial difference was that this time the third candidate was an artificial one. Alexander Burkov, an associate of Governor Rossel's ally Bakov ran on a platform based on an environmentally-oriented protest organisation called "May," created for the purpose by himself and Bakov, with demonstrators recruited and paid to create a spectacle for the Governor Rossel's media. The latter were uncritical and positive in their reporting of May and its candidate, Burkov, even though the latter was formally standing against the Governor. This was in contrast with the same media's treatment of the other candidate, Mayor Chernetsky, who was the subject of a vicious public relations assault by all of the Governor's media, especially the main regional television station.

The scale and ferocity of the attack was unprecedented and Chernetsky's campaign was seriously damaged. As a result, in the first round Chernetsky was pushed into third place by the previously unheard-of Burkov who had been given very gentle treatment by the Governor's media. This changed in the second round – the media turned on Burkov and the May movement and as a result Rossel was convincingly re-elected as governor. For his part, Chernetsky was re-elected as mayor but he was nonetheless politically on the defensive.

This election set in motion the equivalent of a public relations arms race. The mayor's forces bought two television stations to balance the Governor's hold on the main regional station; they also further politicized the newspapers that they controlled. In turn, the Governor in 2001 used the media outlets he controlled to get Uralmash criminal gang leader Khabarov elected to City Council so as to increase opposition to the Mayor. The governor's forces also were able to gain endorsement of Russia's new governing party, United Russia, for their candidate for mayor—Yuri Osinstev—and thus link Chernetsky's opponent to the governor and the President that in turn implied substantial benefits for the region in terms of "pork barrel" spending as well as political appointments.

Chernetsky then used an unusual tactic. He made an alliance with Bakov who had broken with Governor Rossel. Bakov who was a controversial figure who had faced criminal charges multiple times and was associated with gang activity as well as being too weak to defeat Governor Rossel. However, Bakov's candidacy gained widespread voter attention and he was able to speak authoritatively about the dangers of criminal activity in a way a more respectable candidate could not do. When the mayoral election came, Bakov led the campaign that convinced many voters that the city administration would be in the hands of the Uralmash gang should Chernetsky lose and Osinstev win.

The mayoral election in Ekaterinburg in 2003 was a remarkable victory in that public opinion was mobilised on a genuine issue – Governor Rossel and Osinstev had apparently allowed the Uralmash gang into their political camp. The public's reaction then prevented any further move in this direction, a case of an electoral public relations campaign focusing public opinion on a real issue and enabling a genuine assertion of democratic values.

Conclusion

The news media plays a crucial role in public life but that role differs, sometimes dramatically, from country to country. In Russia, the government heavily influences individual news outlets and promotes its own views on controlled media channels including national television. However, as the case demonstrates, these views are often

not monolithic and a close examination of the content and context can help persons in other countries see a much richer and more detailed picture. In addition, even while many local observers were highly critical of the intense media wars that lasted almost twenty years, these public relations conflicts encouraged pluralism within the regional elite and helped to mobilise the public to end a long chapter of criminal entry into regional and local administrative structures.

As well as differences, many political patterns are often similar. In his case, a classic use of a “stalking horse” third-party candidate to take down a stronger opponent would be admired by political professionals such as Tip O’Neil who is credited with saying, “All politics is local.”

Such a detailed picture in this case helped at least one major US manufacturing corporation expand operations in the Ural based on their confidence that the situation on-the-ground was far more calm and friendly to business than appeared from the limited US coverage of the long public relations wars. In addition, several other major corporations expanded their business services to a new region of the world using Yekaterinburg as a base of operations for Russia and the newly independent states.

For those interested in the national political situation, the case also demonstrates the power of key local elections to “roll-up” to influence those activities. From Yekaterinburg and the Urals came a string of personalities, such as Boris Yeltsin, who vastly changed the political landscape of Russia. For government public relations practitioners looking at another country, the case illustrates the values of not taking the news about goings-on in a national capital as a predictor of attitudes, beliefs, and actions throughout the country and thus being better prepared for possible future government policies.

Reflective Questions

How are the roles of communications directors for U.S. politicians different and similar to those of Governor Rossel and Mayor Chernetsky?

Why do the authors suggest that even in the absence of an independent press, pluralism can be increased in a society that has a low degree of transparency?

How much does Russian “black PR” differ from “negative campaigning” in the U.S.?

