

Expect More Anti-U.S. Venom in the State Media

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President Vladimir Putin has destroyed RIA Novosti, Russia's largest news agency. With a single stroke, he has leveled a powerful brand that the government had spent about \$1 billion developing over the past decade. In place of RIA Novosti, the authorities will create a new agency called *Rossia Sevodnya*, which means "Russia Today," headed by Dmitry Kiselyov. He will dismantle the outgoing team headed by Svetlana Mironyuk, who labored over those 10 years to create a modern, world-class new agency. Putin's decree last week announcing the liquidation of RIA Novosti came as a complete surprise to the agency's 2,000 employees.

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Kremlin officials justified the decision as a way to improve efficiency and cut costs. But the dismantling of RIA Novosti could not be a more inefficient and wanton waste of the state's resources. What is the point of spending so much time and money building up a world-class brand and then summarily destroying it? That is like eliminating the Coca-Cola brand and replacing it with Volga Kvass — and all in the name of greater efficiency. How is it "efficient" to destroy an agency that has long led Russian media in the use of modern technology, that is by far the most quoted domestic news agency, and that is ranked almost on par with leading foreign media? If the authorities really wanted to save money, they could have simply made budget cuts without demolishing an efficiently operating organization.

Senior officials have long had it in for Mironyuk. They disliked the fact that Mironyuk was too independent and that she refused to quickly carry out orders from superiors. The long-standing intrigue was resolved in a typically Russian fashion: by dismantling the entire organization that Mironyuk headed. It was like getting rid of a pesky neighbor by leveling his entire apartment building.

Of course, RIA Novosti was not an independent news agency. It was state-owned and carried out government policy and propaganda. But it worked very professionally by trying to objectively report all the basic information on domestic and international events.

As a result, RIA Novosti earned a much-deserved reputation over the years as a reliable source of information, whereas other state propaganda arms — for example, state-controlled NTV with its infamous pseudo-documentaries like "Anatomy of a Protest" — became seen as rogue media outlets by nearly everyone except Putin's core electorate.

I remember well how RIA Novosti presented live broadcasts of the mass protests at Bolotnaya Ploshchad, Prospekt Akademika Sakharova and at Bolshaya Yakimanka Ulitsa, how it covered protests by environmentalists and human rights activists, and how it covered the court cases against Bolotnaya Ploshchad protesters and anti-corruption whistleblower Alexei Navalny. These events were never covered in the same objective fashion by other state-controlled media outlets, with the possible exception of Echo Moskvyy, which is majority-controlled by Gazprom Media.

Dmitry Kiselyov, who will oversee the liquidation of RIA Novosti and build a new state media empire in its place, is a notorious and bitter critic of the West, liberalism and the protest movement in Russia and Ukraine. By appointing Kiselyov as the new director of Rossiya Sevodnya, the Kremlin has signaled a radical shift in its propaganda style: using the heavy ax of Kiselyov to replace the soft power of Mironyuk. The pro-Kremlin journalists Kiselyov will cultivate at Rossiya Sevodnya will likely take on the same venomous anti-U.S., anti-gay and anti-liberal tone that is so prominent on Kiselyov's own news analysis program and talk shows on state-controlled Rossiya 1 television. Kiselyov's media agency will whip up a new level of hysteria about the country being surrounded by enemies and anti-Russian U.S.

conspiracies, which will be cynically presented as "news" and "analysis."

In all likelihood, the unexpected, impulsive decision to dismantle RIA Novosti was a result of the huge anti-government protests in Ukraine, which has sparked panic in the Kremlin of the prospect of similar protests in Moscow and other cities. In addition, the events in Kiev most likely provided a convenient excuse for competitors to carry out their hopes for dismantling RIA Novosti.

Kiselyov's Rossia Sevodnya will become a blunt propaganda tool of the Kremlin. With its stated mission to "restore the image of Russia as an important country with good global intentions," the new media company is effectively resurrecting Soviet-era propaganda outlets like the Political News Agency and TASS.

The Kremlin has made it clear that it no longer needs news. From now on, it needs only propaganda.

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