

Baltic States Compete With Russia in TV Battle for Hearts and Minds

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Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are nervous of a newly assertive Russia and fret that their large Russian-speaking minorities could be susceptible to Moscow's message over the airwaves.

RIGA/VILNIUS — Responding to what they see as a wave of Kremlin propaganda over Ukraine, the governments of the three Baltic states are keeping a wary eye on pro-Moscow television channels and stepping up their own broadcasts in Russian.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, all part of the Soviet Union until 1991, are nervous of a newly assertive Russia and fret that their large Russian-speaking minorities could be susceptible to Moscow's message.

But at a time of dramatic developments in eastern Ukraine, with fierce battles followed by a new cease-fire deal this week, the Baltic efforts to fight back over the airwaves look modest so far.

On Thursday night, Russian television's flagship "Vremya" (Time) news program, beamed into the homes of more than a million Russian-speakers in the Baltics, ran nearly a full hour

of emotionally charged coverage on the fighting and the latest truce between Ukrainian government forces and pro-Russian rebels.

Many Ukrainian soldiers are realizing this is "not an anti-terrorist operation but a fratricidal war," a correspondent declared; the "Kiev regime" was pursuing an ideology of lies and subjecting its people to a "North Korean-style" news blackout.

From the conflict zone in the east, another reporter repeated charges, denied in Kiev, that Ukraine is using cluster bombs in civilian areas.

By contrast, the Russian-language news on Latvian state broadcaster LTV ran about five minutes of reports on the cease-fire, including soundbites from Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and a poor sound quality telephone interview with the rebels' defense minister.

While the daily bulletins from Moscow are full of reports from the conflict zone accusing Ukrainian forces of shelling populated areas and killing innocent civilians, LTV's coverage in Russian has focused in recent days on diplomatic developments instead of events on the ground.

Ethnic Divisions

Occupied and annexed by Josef Stalin in World War II, the Baltic states saw mass immigration by Russians in the Soviet period. Lithuania was the only one of the three to give its ethnic Russians automatic citizenship when the Baltics won back their independence a generation ago.

In Latvia and Estonia, many ethnic Russians have what those countries call, respectively, "non-citizen" or "alien" passports, which allow them to travel but not to vote in national elections. Their status and rights have long been a bone of contention with Moscow.

Now the Baltic governments worry that Russia's Putin may try to exploit their ethnic divisions in the same way that Western governments accuse him of destabilizing Ukraine, where more than 5,000 people have been killed since last April.

Moscow denies sending arms and troops into eastern Ukraine, and portrays the Ukrainian military, backed by "parties of war" in Kiev and Washington, as the aggressor.

"Russia is increasing its propaganda campaign that supports the political and military actions and ambitions of the Russian government," said Estonian Foreign Minister Keit Pentus-Rosimannus.

In response, Baltic governments have resorted to a variety of tactics.

Lithuania last year banned broadcasts of Gazprom-owned Russian television channel NTV Mir for three months for showing a film that "intentionally spread lies" about events from the independence year of 1991. Last month it banned another channel, REN TV Baltic, for "war instigation" in its coverage of the Ukraine conflict.

Latvia has levied largely symbolic fines of 7,200 euros (\$8,200) on PBK, a widely watched

channel that rebroadcasts Russian networks' programs into the Baltic states, for coverage it said was one-sided and was used to justify "Russia's aggression in Ukraine".

'Banning Channels Is Bad'

But some people doubt the wisdom of such measures.

"Fighting Putin with Putin's methods" is not a good solution, said Kestutis Girnius at the Vilnius-based Institute of International Relations and Political Sciences.

"If you think that Russians are pushing their propaganda, you need to answer with objective news," he said.

PBK is owned by Russian-born Latvian businessman Oleg Solodov and Russian citizen Alexei Plyasunov through their company Baltic Media Alliance, which defends its right to screen programs made in Moscow.

"The content of news created in Russia is their opinion ... We, as a channel, don't hold to any of these political views," said Ginta Krivma, its head of strategic development.

"Television censorship is not acceptable, banning channels is bad in any country. We also believe that our viewer is intelligent and educated and able to evaluate the information we deliver."

In the competition for viewers, PBK holds a trump card: apart from news, it offers a range of popular talent shows, movies and crime dramas made in Russia.

Krivma said PBK had felt "no impact" from the Latvian public broadcaster's foray into Russian-language programming, part of a 700,000-euro initiative announced by the Latvian government last year.

Lies and Half-Truths

On the streets of Latvia's capital Riga, interviews with Russian-speakers suggested skepticism towards all sides in the information struggle.

"I believe that there's propaganda in any television, newspaper, magazine, online website," said Juliana Moskina, a 27-year-old economist who, like many of the roughly 700,000 Russian-speakers in Latvia's population of 2 million, watches mainly Russian television.

In a government-commissioned poll last summer, 41 percent of ethnic minority Latvians, mainly Russian-speakers, said they did not support either side in the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine. Thirty-six percent backed Russia and 15 percent were in favor of Ukraine.

In the same survey, 58 percent of respondents said they were proud to be citizens or residents of Latvia, up from 35 percent in 2009.

Pensioner Auseklis Udris, 67, said he followed both Latvian and Russian news to get a wider view on events.

"Latvia is a member of NATO, and so Latvian media has to sing its songs," he said. "I trust 50 percent of what is reported on Russian channels and 50 percent of Latvian channels."

Jurijs Bistros, 62, delivered a more scathing verdict: "Everybody is lying or telling some half-truth."

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