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A User's Guide to Russian Propaganda

Six signs of disinformation, and the facts behind them

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Western press and media are having trouble distinguishing facts from Russian propaganda. This is understandable - the Russian propaganda machine is a mature and venerable institution that engages in an art that, for better or for worse, the West simply does not practice as often nor as effectively. The intent of this guide is to help those less accustomed to the ways of the Russian government to discern between reporting and propaganda. There are a few simple tell-tale signs.

Types of propaganda to look for - the signs, the impact, and the facts:

SIGN #1: Reporting that points to ethnic divisions and Kyiv's Maidan as a source of unrest.

IMPACT: Western media call into question the stability of the interim Ukrainian government, and speculate that Ukraine is a hotbed of prejudice on the brink of civil war.

FACT: Modern Ukraine has no history of ethnic conflict. Furthermore, the Maidan was a gathering place for Ukrainians of all ethnic backgrounds:

- A Facebook post by an Afghan-Ukrainian triggered the first mass protest at Kyiv's Maidan last November;
- An Armenian-Ukrainian and a Belarusian were the first to die at the hands of the government's internal police.
- Jewish-Ukrainians formed a self-defense unit to support Maidan in Kyiv and fight against the Yanukovich regime;
- Numerous Jewish thought-leaders and organizations have spoken out against Kremlin propaganda portraying Maidan participants as anti-Semites or neo-Nazis;
- Russian-Ukrainians are enlisting to protect their Ukrainian homeland against Russian armed forces;

- Crimean Tatars have been staunch supporters of Maidan and are actively resisting Russia's military aggressions in Crimea.

Just like the United States of America, Ukraine is multi-national and diverse. Are the diverse United States capable of being a unified democracy? Sure! So is Ukraine

[Tymothy Snyder](#) , [Alexander J.Motyl](#), and [Bernard-Henri Levy](#) are reputable thought-leaders who write knowledgeably about the multi-national Ukrainian identity.



Serhiy Nihoyan, the first murdered protester.
Photo credit: [Wikipedia](#) under CC BY-SA 3.0 US

SIGN #2: Reports of murders and violence attributed to “banderite” and “fascist” radicals.

IMPACT: Western media wonders whether the democratic and human rights movement might not be a front for “extremists”.

FACT: Some of the new government's detractors have used provocative slurs and the corrupt judicial system to manufacture or inflate charges to discredit the Maidan movement. Violent provocations have been staged by paid provocateurs in order to implicate activists in brutal crimes. Yet even the Ukrainian soldiers under siege in Crimea obey strict orders to maintain passive resistance - which they do, even as their friends and families are threatened by the occupying forces. The people of Ukraine are doing all they can to keep the peace in their pursuit of human rights and democracy. Theirs is a genuine quest for freedom.

SIGN #3: Assertions that ethnic Russians and Russian speakers are under threat.

IMPACT: Western media suspects the people of Ukraine of violent vengeance and spite instigated by the new government.

FACT: Russian media has broadcast images purportedly of refugees escaping to Russia through Ukraine's Eastern border - but in fact those were Ukrainian businessmen in line at the Polish-Ukrainian border, a daily routine, just like that of Americans who do business in Canada. Such are the tools of Russian propaganda. Russian language and culture thrive across the whole of Ukraine. Russian is one of Ukraine's two state languages, and was re-affirmed as such by the president of the interim government. Russian media and publications are freely imported and available throughout Ukraine, and represent the majority of publications available in Kyiv. Russian media will undoubtedly continue to thrive as an integral part of the multi-national Ukrainian landscape. On the other hand, several years ago some Ukrainian-language schools were shut down by regional Yanukovich authorities. Over time the Ukrainian government may wish to come to conduct all its business in Ukrainian, and so will wish to assure all students have access to an education in Ukrainian, if they desire it. Just as the United States government conducts its business in English and still makes information available in other languages, so has Ukraine been meeting the language requirements of its people.



*Ukraine-Poland border crossing Shehyni that was described as Ukraine-Russia border
Photo credit: Gazeta.Ua*

SIGN #4: Assertions that ethnic Russians in Crimea are at particular risk.

IMPACT: Western media question the fate of ethnic Russians in Crimea as a unique circumstance that justifies Russian government concerns in that region.

FACT: In Crimea, Russia leases from Ukraine land for military bases. These Russian bases account in part for the large concentration of ethnic Russians there. As for Ukraine serving the needs of ethnic Russians in

Crimea, consider the ethnic composition of Crimea (based on the latest 2001 census), and the languages used in the 589 Crimean schools:

- 58% ethnically Russian; 56% of Crimean schools teach exclusively in Russian (330 schools)
- 24% ethnically Ukrainian; 1% of Crimean schools teach exclusively in Ukrainian (7 schools)
- 12% ethnically Crimean Tatar, 3% of Crimean schools teach exclusively in Crimean Tatar (15 schools)
- 6% ethnically other minorities. 40% of Crimean schools are bi- or tri-lingual (237 schools)

Ongoing shifts in the Crimean ethnic composition are due in part to the Crimean Tatars' return from exile. The Crimean Tatars were forcibly deported by the Soviet government over half a century ago. Since Ukraine declared independence in 1991, nearly 300,000 Crimean Tatars have been welcomed back to their homeland. In addition, Crimean Tatars have the highest birth rate in the peninsula.

The Ukrainian Revolution poses no threat to Russians in Crimea - but the Russian incursion into Crimea poses a very real and existential threat to the Crimean Tatars, who have pledged their allegiance to the government in Kyiv.



Crimean Tatars at a Human Rights Demonstration in Simferopol, Crimea
Photo credit: [Uznai Pravdu](#)

SIGN #5: Geographic obfuscation and confusion.

IMPACT: This decades- (centuries!) old canard calls into question Ukraine's boundaries and its right to exist as a sovereign nation. This propaganda has permeated western media, from subtleties like training the English-speaking west to write about "THE" Ukraine (implying it is a region, not a country), to more overt tactics like standardizing Ukrainian city names to their Russian transliterations. (КИЇВ/KYIV is the Ukrainian capital, and KIEV is the Russian transliteration of that name. For consistency, style guides should also apply the same Russian conventions to the capital of the USA, "Vashington", and to the home of their

founding Continental Congress, "Filadelfiya". Why not? Such standardizations in the western press would be as valid as is "Kiev.") Western adoption of Russian names for Ukrainian cities has helped Russia marginalize Ukraine as a sovereign nation.

Media standardizations have impact beyond their target readership: in the early days of Euromaidan, a couple of young Ukrainians spending a fearful night on the square were reading about "Kiev" in western press on-line. Demoralized, in their Facebook posts they wondered if the west could ever understand their goal, if the west could not even recognize their capital Kyiv as Ukrainian, not Russian. Morale and hope were critical to keeping the peace throughout the mass protests, and was undermined by misguided western style guides.

FACT: Ukrainian and Russian are distinct languages with common roots, also shared by Polish and other Slavic languages. Similarly, English and German share common roots, but are not mistakenly considered dialects of one another. As for history: Russia can no more claim Kyivan Rus' as its origin than the United States of America can claim King Arthur's Camelot as theirs.

SIGN #6: The reporting cites sources such as RT and Stephen F. Cohen whose assertions are often inconsistent with facts in evidence.

IMPACT: Western media prides itself on showing all sides of any story, and so disseminates propaganda in a doe-eyed pursuit of unbiased reporting.

FACT: "Propaganda" is not a "side". It is an adversarial tactic intended to mislead and deceive. By reporting propaganda as an alternative perspective, western media becomes part of the machinery helping Putin advance his war-mongering cause.

Commentators whose observations are often egregiously at odds with verifiable facts: Stephen Cohen, Seamus Milne, William F. Engdahl, Mark Almond, Daniel McAdams, Vladimir Posner.

Russian-owned media outlets who have broadcast verifiably false information: It is important to keep in mind that Russian-owned news sources such as *RT*, *Voice of Russia*, *ITAR-TASS*, *RIA-Novosti* and other outlets operate under constant government guidance and suppression. Truthful newscasters risk great personal costs. Western media, operating freely, mock their courage every time the propaganda is ignorantly repeated, lending it a Western air credibility instead of countering it with data and facts.

LATEST SURVEY DATA

Facts, of course, must be supported by data, also amply available. For example, consider the results of polling performed by [the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation \(DIF\)](#) and [Kyiv International Institute of Sociology](#). The polls were conducted over February 8-18, 2014, interviewing 2,032 respondents in all regions of Ukraine, including the Autonomous Republic of Crimea:

- 68% of the Ukrainians polled said they would like both countries to be independent and on friendly terms with each other, with open visa-free borders and with no border controls. (Russian polls by [Levada Center](#) mirror this result, with 59% of their Russian respondents supporting the same sentiment.)

- Overall, 12% of Ukrainian respondents would like unification with Russia. Broken down regionally, 26% of the respondents in the East and 19% of those in the South supported unification with Russia.
- A few years ago, 20% of Ukrainian respondents desired unification with Russia. The precipitous drop of that sentiment to 12% in this latest poll is of note.

Propaganda is a very powerful tool in times of war. Primary sources and data are readily available to verify the facts to counter that propaganda. Too many lives are at stake not to do so.