



DECIPHERING RUSSIA'S MESSAGES IN THE POST SOVIET SPACE

Benyamin Poghosyan, PhD,

Executive Director, Political Science Association of Armenia

Since the Russia – Georgia war in 2008 one of the key geopolitical features of the post-Soviet space has been the Russian effort to reinstall its influence over former Soviet republics and diminish the role of the Euro-Atlantic community. The 2008 war, the 2014 Crimea crisis, and the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine are examples of Russian use of hard power to pursue geopolitical interests in the region. However, one of the key tools in the Russian arsenal to regain its dominant position within the post-Soviet world is the effective use of propaganda and information campaigns against the Euro-Atlantic institutions. In these efforts, Russia exploits the vulnerabilities and resentments within the post-Soviet societies. Deciphering the

messages of Russian information warfare is of vital importance for the formulation of any coherent policy aimed at containing Russia.

A clear understanding of the challenges faced by the post-Soviet societies is key in the Russian information campaign strategy. Despite significant differences in the level of economic development, as well as in historical, cultural and religious backgrounds, all post-Soviet states, except the Baltic states, have one common feature: a rather complicated nexus of business, politics and criminal elements, leading to a strictly negative stance towards the new political and economic elites among most of the population. Almost everybody in the post-

Soviet space has a strong belief that the new class of extra- wealthy people, often dubbed as oligarchs, has accumulated wealth through a systematic violation of laws. Due to the inextricable links between wealthy businessmen and political elites, this belief has a negative impact on the perception of societies over the legitimacy of the authorities.

An increasing part of the society, especially from the young and the middle-age generations, views the nexus of politics, business and criminal elements as one of the key obstacles against the establishment of effective and efficient state institutions, which should guarantee the sustainable development of the newly independent states. Those generations view the Euro-Atlantic community as a viable source for assistance in their efforts to genuinely reform the state institutions and bring the post-Soviet space closer to the Western European governance standards.

Russia is not able to suggest efficient ways for systemic change in post-Soviet societies, and thereby turn the younger generations pro-Russian. Russia itself is suffering from the same diseases, and millions of immigrants entering and leaving Russia from neighboring states are bringing to their homeland the image of rampant corruption, lack of rule of law, almost no transparency and accountability within state institutions. Thus, even if Russia tried to present itself as

a viable source of assistance to support reforms for neighboring states, it would fail to do so. Russia understands her governance weaknesses very well, that is why her message to the societies of post-Soviet states is different. It comprises three core elements:

1. Corruption, lack of rule of law and of accountability are not the exclusive features of the non-Western world. The US and the EU are suffering from the same problems, but they are more successful than Russia in disguising them. So, don't believe that closer cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic community will cure your institutional problems.
2. The Western powers are just speaking of human rights and other democratic values. In fact, they would pursue narrow national interests, and would be ready to cooperate and support states with miserable records of democracy and human rights protection if it served their interests.
3. Western reforms in the post-Soviet space have failed to bring any real changes into the state system, but they resulted in the decline of people's prosperity and living standards. The states with Western orientation have received very little, if anything, but have lost a lot from their geopolitical orientation.

To promote the first message, Russia widely used every information concerning corruption scandals in the higher echelons of the US and EU member states. They aimed at making every citizen living in the post-Soviet space believe that the ruling elites are stealing money and breaching laws everywhere from Washington to Warsaw. So that people shouldn't express anger against political elites, and shouldn't blame the Russian influence, since that would be the case everywhere. It's not surprising that while discussing the issues of rule of law and accountability more citizens from the post-Soviet space are arguing that the widespread corruption and robbery is a common feature of every single state. There is no efficient way to fight it. If societies in developed states were not able to overcome this, there would be no chances to do that within nations in transition.

The second narrative is being supported by the US strategic alliance with Gulf monarchies, or with states such as Egypt and Turkey. The growing EU – China ties are also exploited to show that the EU is ready to forget about human rights and other democratic values if its core economic interests measured in hundreds of billion dollars are at stake. This pattern is presented as a clear proof of the US, and partly the EU, hypocrisy when stating the necessity to protect the core values of democracy.

The third message is perhaps the most significant. It capitalizes mainly on the lack

of progress in Moldova and Ukraine after shifting their foreign policy orientations towards the West. The main case to the point is Ukraine. The failure of the Orange Revolution to bring systemic changes resulted in the election of pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich as the President of Ukraine in 2010 – scenario that would have been hardly credible immediately after the Orange revolution. This situation was effectively used by Russia to prove its message: Western supported reforms in the post-Soviet space were not able to bring positive transformations in the state system, but due to the ensuing deterioration of relations with Russia they would negatively impact the socio-economic situation of the state.

The aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution gave Russia ample opportunities to promote this vision further. The daily reports from Ukraine on authorities' failure to launch real fight against corruption, the growing resentment and fatigue even in Western capitals regarding the inability of new authorities to implement meaningful reforms only supported the Russian narrative. Besides, the situation in the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts, as well as the stark deterioration of the overall socio-economic situation in Ukraine have been presented by Russia as proofs of the catastrophic implications of the Western promoted "reforms": corruption and oligarchs remain – but ordinary citizens suffer from war and a sharp decline of their living standards.

Russia has effectively used, for the same purpose, the indictments against former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, and the decision to sentence him *in absentia* by a Georgian court. The message is clear: even the most hailed reformist in the post-Soviet world used to be an authoritarian ruler and breached the law. Thus, during the Saakashvili period, Georgia has not gained much from its Euro-Atlantic integration course. Moreover, that policy resulted in the sharp deterioration of relations with Russia, which was the main reason behind the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, and ultimately ushered in the full loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Russia has also used in an efficient way the Western support for the Moldovan ruling elite as a proof of Western hypocrisy concerning its desire to promote democracy and rule of law in the post-Soviet space. Given the widespread allegations of criminal activities against two pro-European leaders – Vladimir Filat¹, and Vladimir Plahotniuc- Russia has presented the US and the EU support to them as clear signs of Western infringements of its own values and goals for the sake of geopolitical interests in the struggle against Russia.

In conclusion, the core Russian message in the post-Soviet space has been: we don't promise to support your struggle against the

nexus of business, politics and criminal elements, but neither the West is able and willing to do that. No Western supported reforms in the post-Soviet space have met their stated goal of achieving systemic reforms, but they have resulted in a sharp deterioration of relations with Russia. This, in turn, has had a negative impact on the prosperity of the citizens, and, in some cases, it even brought about war and loss of territory. Although neither Russia nor the West were able to significantly transform the state systems in the post-Soviet republics, being a friend of Russia would bring stability and some economic benefits (reduced gas prices, favorable conditions to enter Russian markets, and possibilities for labor migrants to work and send back remittances). Thus, every reasonable politician and citizen should make a choice: push back against Russia and embrace the Euro-Atlantic integration while receiving no tangible results and facing tough challenges or be Russia's friend and enjoy at least some level of stability and security.

¹ in 2016, Filat, who served as Moldovan Prime Minister in 2009-2013, was sentenced to nine years in jail on corruption charges.