Defending the Tower in the Age of Twitter: Lithuanian Lessons on Russian Disinformation

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January 13 is known as "Bloody Sunday" in Lithuania. Shortly after midnight on that date in 1991, Soviet tanks and infantry combat vehicles rolled in the darkness toward the Vilnius TV Tower. Tens of thousands of unarmed Lithuanians awaited them there, singing songs of defiance. After the troops encircled the crowd, loudspeakers falsely announced that the "separatist" Lithuanian government had been overthrown. "Go back to your parents and children," the recorded voice urged. The crowd was incredulous. At 1:50 a.m., the soldiers opened fire and the tanks lurched forward. 14 civilians died and over 700 were wounded. Lithuanians sitting in front of televisions across the country can still recall with chilling clarity the final broadcasted images—a Soviet soldier knocking down a camera and the last words from the anchor desk. Then the televisions went dark.

It was no accident that the signature battle for restored Lithuanian independence played out at the Vilnius TV Tower. Soviet commanders and Lithuanian patriots alike grasped the strategic importance of controlling information during a fluid crisis. A quarter century later, Lithuanian policymakers, along with their allies in the West, again find themselves faced with attempts to control information on the part of the Kremlin. But the rules of the game have changed. In the age of Twitter and countless other platforms for disseminating information, victory hinges on more than short-wave radios, underground publications, and control of a television tower.

Lithuania has changed tremendously as well since independence. In 2014, this country of three million celebrated its tenth anniversary as a member of both the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In January, it became the 19th country to adopt the Euro, and it is projected to have one of the highest European GDP growth rates this year. Lithuania is a stalwart US ally, and one of the most resolute voices in Europe in support of Ukraine's right to choose its future. The country is also a powerful reminder that states formerly occupied by authoritarian regimes can transform themselves into thriving, free, and democratic nations.

For some time now, Lithuania has been the Baltic Cassandra—repeatedly warning of Russian nefarious intentions in the "Near Abroad" and the prominence of disinformation as a weapon in the Kremlin's playbook. Lithuania's warnings and exhortations were prescient indeed! The Ukraine crisis has focused the West's attention on Russia's intentions and methods, particularly its use of propaganda to project power. But, as Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss argue in their comprehensive report *The Menace of Unreality*, "propaganda" may be too generous a term for describing Russian disinformation. They note that the goal is no longer waging a war with information, but rather a war on information.

Russia's aim is not so much to create a competing reality as to attack the very notion of objective reality.

As Ambassador here since early 2013, I have listened as Lithuanians raised the alarm against escalating Russian disinformation and have observed policymakers' actions to combat it firsthand. The disinformation campaign has been multifaceted. Pro-Russian internet trolls contribute hundreds of comments daily to Lithuanian media stories, questioning whether Lithuania is really a European country and trying to poison relations between Lithuania and the West. For example, when Norwegian child protection authorities removed a Lithuanian child from his home in Norway for neglect in 2014, these trolls and their allies in the blogosphere created the hysterical (and widely accepted) rumor that the Norwegian government has a plan for stealing Lithuanian children. Russian-language news channels have aired documentaries questioning Lithuanian independence. Pro-Russian revisionists even openly question the Lithuanian origins of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania! In the world of disinformation, the computer screen has not entirely supplanted the printing press. On the evening of December 9, each member of the European Parliament received in his or her official mailbox an English copy of the book *Red Dalia*. Written by a Lithuanian journalist, the book presents a highly critical biography of President Dalia Grybauskaite, describing her as a political opportunist with deep ties to the Soviet past. *The New York Observer* ran an article jovially characterizing the incident: "President of Lithuania Gets Punk'd After Calling Russia a Terrorist State."

There is much to learn from the Lithuanian experience—lessons that show us the many challenges of addressing Russia's war on information. Disinformation enters Lithuania through strategic trolling of message boards, blogs, Tweets, and a variety of Russian-language television programs and finds considerable resonance among Lithuanian minorities. A December 2014 study conducted by the Lithuanian Radio and Television Commission found that among ethnic Lithuanians (who make up 84 percent of the population), 13 percent receive daily news from Russian television, two percent regularly listen to Russian radio daily, and three percent visit Russian internet news portals. But the figures jump dramatically among non-ethnic Lithuanians (Russians, Poles, and others) to 61, 27, and 23 percent respectively. To illustrate the divisiveness of disinformation, when asked who was most to blame for the crisis in Ukraine, only 16 percent of non-ethnic Lithuanians pointed the finger at Russia, choosing instead to blame the United States, NATO, and the Ukrainian government. In contrast, 55 percent of ethnic Lithuanians put the primary blame on Russia.

Many have suggested that the best strategy is to provide quality, objective Russian-language information. But this is costly. Currently, government-supported Lithuanian Radio and Television (LRT) produces a weekly Russian-language news show. In February, LRT announced plans to begin producing a new Russian-language program dedicated to directly debunking the Kremlin's falsehoods, and for the past year it has been rebroadcasting programs from Ukrainian Channel 5 and Radio Free Europe in Prague. This year LRT hopes to finalize an agreement to rebroadcast German state broadcaster Deutsche Welle's Russian-language programming. These moves recognize a deeper problem. Lithuanians don't necessarily watch Russian-language programming because they crave a daily dose of

spin; they watch because the overall programming packages in which the news is embedded are well-made and entertaining. Thus, the mere presence of Russian-language news alternatives isn't enough. Viewers cannot be given a choice between dessert and a bowl of vegetables. There is a need to create a programmatic alternative to Russian disinformation that Russian-speaking viewers will find attractive and compelling.

The third lesson from Lithuania is the importance of vibrant journalism. Pomerantsev and Weiss emphasize the need to build an engaging, trustworthy press worldwide. A recent poll showed that public trust in the Lithuanian media is at a six-year high, but the media have little financial means to conduct the in-depth investigative journalism necessary to deepen that trust and present themselves as the country's true arbiters of objectivity. Sadly, as esteem for journalism has increased, the strength of journalism as an institution has waned. Lithuania has only one remaining major national daily newspaper, editorial staffs are smaller than ever, and the growth of internet usage has encouraged reporters to focus on the speed of reporting rather than on its quality.

Fourth, Lithuanians' Soviet experience and Russian language ability can be a powerful tool in the fight against disinformation. Many policymakers have keen insights into the culture of post-Soviet space and are able to leverage this knowledge. Lithuania used its rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union to underscore the Eastern Partnership's importance. The Vilnius Summit, held in November 2013, was to feature the signing of the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement. The rest is history. Lithuanians recognize that while Russian disinformation has an impact domestically, its impact in the Eastern Partnership region is of equal if not greater concern. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has funded programs in which Lithuanian implementers work in Ukraine to help journalists there produce quality, factual reports in Russian. Each winter Lithuania hosts the Snow Meeting, a signature informal event bringing together government leaders and academics to discuss pressing geopolitical issues. At this year's Snow Meeting, the government organized a supplementary conference with Russian intellectuals—using the platform as a bridge between East and West.

A fifth and final lesson from the Lithuanian experience is the need to constantly monitor content while simultaneously protecting free speech. A preferred strategy of the Radio and Television Commission of Lithuania has been to dole out temporary broadcasting bans of three months to channels that in its view incited violence or aired blatant disinformation. In the long term, content restrictions are not an effective means of combatting disinformation. In fact, they run the risk of feeding the existing Russian narrative that Lithuania wants to keep the truth out. Lithuanians understand this. When President Grybauskaite proposed a law that would require 90 percent of television broadcasts be in an EU official language, the parliament voted it down, with some Members of Parliament citing human rights concerns. A new anti-propaganda law that will levy hefty fines against broadcasters spreading disinformation is expected to pass parliament this spring. In March, the Lithuanian government organized a journalism conference to coincide with the country's 25th anniversary of restored independence. It featured a lengthy discussion on whether the preservation and promotion of free speech necessarily includes the need to tolerate blatant media lies. Lithuanian policymakers have

also joined with Danish, Estonian, and British colleagues to call on the European Union to raise awareness, assert facts, provide alternatives, and require accountability regarding Russian disinformation.

It is in our interest to support Lithuania and other countries grappling with Russian disinformation. But how? As an embassy, we consistently post information on social media demonstrating our support for Lithuania's successful integration into the West and its leadership on key issues. We support capacity building for Lithuanian journalists. Last year, we sent two Russian-speaking journalists to an anti-propaganda journalism Tech Camp in Prague and four Russian-speaking journalists on a pan-Baltic investigative journalism tour of the United States. In February, the embassy sent four Russian-speaking journalists to the US NATO Baltic States Russian-Language Tour: Countering the Russian Narrative. The embassy exchanges tactics and best practices with officials specializing in strategic communications, and we engage with reputable Russian language media whenever possible. Lithuanian policymakers urge us to do more. "It is important for the United States to return to Europe with public diplomacy programs," Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius pleaded during a recent trip to Washington.

Memorials mark the locations where the TV tower defenders died in 1991. Streets now bear their names, and their deeds are commemorated each year. There is a tendency in some countries to dismiss Lithuanian concerns about a more assertive, revanchist Russia as hyperbolic and symptomatic of outdated thinking. But it is worth remembering that Lithuania's Bloody Sunday is not a page of a dusty history book; it happened less than a quarter century ago. It is worth remembering as well why tens of thousands protested and 14 died defending their basic human rights and freedoms, including the right to access uncensored information. Today the political technologist's pen can be as great a threat as the soldier's sword. And in case we forget, the Lithuanians will be there to remind us.