

# An Alternate Reality: How Russia's State TV Spins the Ukraine War

Leaked emails detail how Russia's biggest state broadcaster, working with the nation's security services, mined right-wing American news and Chinese media to craft a narrative that Moscow was winning.



RUSSIAN MINISTRY OF DEFENSE, AIRED ON RUSSIA 24



REAL AMERICA'S VOICE, AIRED ON RUSSIA 1



FOX NEWS, AIRED ON RUSSIA 1



GLOBAL TIMES, AIRED ON RUSSIA 1

By Paul Mozur, Adam Satariano and Aaron Krolik

The reporters spent the past year writing a series of stories about Russian censorship, surveillance and propaganda.

Dec. 15, 2022

As Russian tanks were stuck in the mud outside Kyiv earlier this year and the economic fallout of war with Ukraine took hold, one part of Russia's government hummed with precision: television propaganda.

Spinning together a counternarrative for tens of millions of viewers, Russian propagandists plucked clips from American cable news, right-wing social media and Chinese officials. They latched onto claims that Western embargoes of Russian oil would be self-defeating, that the United States was hiding secret bioweapon research labs in Ukraine and that China was a loyal ally against a fragmenting West.

Day by day, state media journalists sharpened those themes in emails. They sometimes broadcast battlefield videos and other information sent to them by the successor agency to the K.G.B. And they excerpted and translated footage from favorite pundits, like the Fox News host Tucker Carlson, whose remarks about the war were shown to millions of Russians.

“Be sure to take Tucker,” one Russian news producer wrote to a colleague. The email referred to a clip in which Mr. Carlson described the power of the Chinese-Russian partnership that had emerged under Mr. Biden — and how American economic policies targeting Russia could undermine the dollar’s status as a world-reserve currency.

The correspondence was one of thousands of email exchanges stored within a leaked database from Russia’s largest state-owned media company, the All-Russia State Television and Radio Company, known as V.G.T.R.K. The data was made publicly available online by DDoSecrets, a group that publishes hacked documents.

The New York Times created a search tool to identify material from the 750 gigabytes of files related to the buildup to the war and its earliest stages from January to March 2022, when the available documents ended. The Times verified the documents by confirming email addresses and people’s identities. In many instances, matters discussed in the emails led to content broadcast on the air.

The emails provide a rare glimpse into a propaganda machine that is perhaps Russia’s greatest wartime success. Even as the country faces battlefield losses, mounting casualties, economic isolation and international condemnation, state-run television channels have spun a version of the war in which Russia is winning, Ukraine is in shambles and Western alliances are fraying. Along with a fierce crackdown on dissent, the propaganda apparatus has helped President Vladimir V. Putin maintain domestic support for a war that many in the West had hoped would weaken his hold on power the longer it dragged on.

To create this narrative, producers at the state media company cherry-picked from conservative Western media outlets like Fox News and the Daily Caller, as well as obscure social media accounts on Telegram and YouTube, according to the records. Russian security agencies like the Federal Security Service, or F.S.B., the successor to the K.G.B., fed other information, creating an alternative version of events such as the bombing of the Ukrainian city of Mariupol.

In other instances, V.G.T.R.K. workers shared clips, sometimes from little-known American media, that appeared to show opposition to the war rising in the West or how sanctions were backfiring against the United States.

## How a Local News Clip in the U.S. Became Part of a Russian Broadcast

**On March 3, an ABC affiliate in Huntsville, Ala., ran a segment about rising gas prices.**

The clip showed how some in the area were pasting stickers on the pump with a photo of President Biden saying, “I did that.” It quoted a local gas station manager, who worried the stickers could cause trouble during corporate inspections.



**Two days later, the broadcast was featured in an email roundup of video clips from across the United States sent to V.G.T.R.K. journalists.**

The clip had picked up a modest 30,000 views on YouTube. It noted the sticker protest, which had appeared elsewhere in the United States, had “gained a second wind” as prices rose over the conflict in Ukraine.

Date : 3/5/2022 7:50:00 AM  
 From : "Отдел сбора международной информации"  
 To : "██████████" ██████████  
 Subject : Стикеры на заправках  
 Attachment : image001.png;

Ранее малопопулярный в США флэшмоб, с началом военных действий на Украине на фоне продолжающегося дорожать топлива, **обрёл второе дыхание**  
 Менеджер заправочной станции в Алабаме заявил, что ему приходится отдирать по 6 наклеек в день с Байденом и надписью «Это сделал я» со своих бензоколонок ежедневно  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvHQMiv4-ls>

**That same day, the clip appeared dubbed into Russian on Russian national news.**

The segment covered the ways discontent over inflation was rising in the United States. The reporter concludes: “Because of Ukraine, Biden can’t or doesn’t want to focus on domestic issues in the U.S.”



Other material showed an organization grappling with Russia’s growing isolation. V.G.T.R.K. employees tracked how their broadcasts were received overseas and talked about how to react when their channels were being blocked in neighboring European countries. They even discussed a response to Russia being dropped from the popular Eurovision singing competition, a major television event.



China was used to bolster Russian story lines, according to the records, with producers pulling from Chinese media for potential story ideas. In another instance, they discussed currying favor with a top Chinese propaganda official.

V.G.T.R.K. did not respond to requests for comment. A Fox News spokeswoman didn't provide a comment.

V.G.T.R.K. has roughly 3,500 employees and operates some of the country's most-watched channels, including Russia 1 and Russia 24, as well as a robust online operation. With national and regional networks, it reaches nearly the entire Russian population, from urban hubs to rural areas, and its dominance has grown as the government has restricted access to social media and independent news. The company receives about \$500 million a year from the Russian government, analysts estimated.

"Besides the political machine of what the Kremlin operates directly, V.G.T.R.K. is the second-most important part of propaganda in Russia," said Vasily Gatov, a Russian media researcher at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership and Policy.

The company, created in 1990 and now run by the Kremlin ally Oleg Dobrodeyev, sets the news agenda and shapes public opinion, Mr. Gatov said. About two-thirds of Russians count television as their main source of news, according to a recent survey. And V.G.T.R.K.'s influence extends to other media outlets, with its former Kremlin correspondent, Margarita Simonyan, now the top editor of RT, Russia's English-language news channel.

Collaboration between the Kremlin and state broadcasters dates back more than two decades, said Mr. Gatov, a former Russian journalist and an expert on state propaganda. Each day, the Kremlin provides a list of talking points for broadcasters. The closely guarded document, known as the "temnik," is delivered to senior officials at V.G.T.R.K. and other organizations, outlining issues the Kremlin wants covered, positively or negatively, along with views to endorse and people to criticize, said Mr. Gatov, who has seen copies.

The Kremlin's tight control of the media has increased since the invasion of Ukraine, but people's trust in what they are watching is falling the longer the war goes on and its violent realities become harder to hide, said Vera Tolz, a professor at the University of Manchester who has studied Russian media for the British Parliament and European Union. "There are cracks," she said.

In the early days of the war, what was not explicitly outlined in Kremlin orders was left to television producers to fill in.

The United States was a frequent target, according to the documents. Each day, emails circulated with long lists of news clips and viral posts that served as a palette to paint a darkening picture of the United States.

In early February, weeks before the invasion of Ukraine, producers flagged a clip of President Biden declining to answer questions about sending troops to Poland, bolstering the idea that America was eager for a fight. A New York Times story about Ukraine's aggressive information war against Russia was also recast as evidence of the country's dishonesty. Another, pulled from Britain's Daily Mail, showed Mr. Biden picking his teeth.

As the war dragged on, producers sought clips about the fallout in the United States. One came from a local news program in northern Alabama about stickers being placed on gas pumps that showed Mr. Biden saying, "I did that." Another video, showing a U.S. grocery store emptied of food, came from a viral Telegram post. It seemed to inspire a broadcast soon after titled, "Oil shock and empty shelves: Trump's grim prophecy is coming true."

In March, Denis Davydov, a V.G.T.R.K. reporter in Washington, flagged a seven-year-old YouTube post, gaining newfound popularity, that claimed that the United States and NATO had fueled Russia's hostility toward Ukraine.

"The Western viewer is looking for alternative information," Mr. Davydov wrote in an email. (He did not respond to a request for comment.)

As Russia became isolated, China's importance grew. V.G.T.R.K. reporters reworked reports from Chinese state media, conveying the image of a powerful country at Russia's side whose people backed a just war in Ukraine. One email that led to a broadcast identified a refrain said to be circulating on the Chinese internet: "By buying a Russian candy, you can turn it into a bullet against Nazism."

When the birthday of Shen Haixiong, a top Chinese propagandist, was coming up, V.G.T.R.K. leaders planned to ensure that a gift — an album containing reproductions of masterpieces by Russian artists — would get through China's lengthy Covid quarantine in time, according to one email.

V.G.T.R.K. used Chinese officials and state media to build support for a conspiracy theory that the United States maintained secret labs to build biological weapons in Ukraine. In March, producers broke down footage from Zhao Lijian, a spokesman for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, saying the U.S. research was "aimed at creating a mechanism for the covert spread of deadly pathogens."

To add an American voice to the biolab claims, producers discussed and then aired remarks by Roger Stone, a former Trump adviser, from the far-right television channel Real America's Voice.

Fox News and other conservative outlets were fixtures of internal news roundups, scripts and broadcasts. Producers circulated a clip of a Fox News commentator discussing Russia's "sanction-proof" economy and a Breitbart article about the effect on oil prices.

Mr. Carlson's broadcasts were passed around V.G.T.R.K., according to emails.

**"Anything less than hating Putin is treason."**

In one clip from early February, the Fox News host attributed American distrust for Russia to partisan anger about former President Trump.



V.G.T.R.K. watched how it was perceived abroad.

Reports tracked the foreign media coverage of a leading V.G.T.R.K. presenter, Dmitri Kiselyov, noting pickups by global newspapers and categorizing them as positive, negative or neutral. Mr. Kiselyov is a firebrand known for inflammatory statements — in May, he threatened Britain with nuclear annihilation — and his negative press mentions jumped in 2022, according to the reports. Outlets in Germany, Nigeria and Canada all had critical things to say. One quote, marked red for negative from the German magazine Stern, described the state of Russian television under “propagandists” like Mr. Kiselyov: “A poisonous mixture of lies, hatred and absurdity.”

Emails showed close ties between state media and Russia's security apparatus, which provided information that was quickly put on the air that gave a rosy picture of a war that was in reality deteriorating.

On Feb. 24, the day of the invasion, the F.S.B. sent emails to state media calling them "colleagues" and claiming that Ukrainian soldiers were abandoning their posts. Another message noted a supposed attack by Ukraine on a civilian cargo ship.

In March, the F.S.B. sent dossiers about two Ukrainian officers killed in combat, making unverifiable claims that they had killed civilians and were terrorists. In the email, the security service said not to attribute the information to the F.S.B., orders that were followed in the ensuing broadcast.

State media took cues from the F.S.B. and the Ministry of Defense about how to cover events that drew international outrage, according to the documents. After the March bombing of a theater in Mariupol, where civilians were believed to be seeking cover, the military sent an email to V.G.T.R.K. and other state media with the subject "Important!" It provided a video of a woman who said members of a Ukrainian nationalist group had blown up the theater, not the Russian military.

"Please use in stories," the note said.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Moscow's Propagandists Spin a Stumbling War