Reality Rocked: Info Wars Heat Up Between U.S. and Russia

By Rachel Oswald, CQ Roll Call

The stories airing on Current Time, a new 24/7 TV channel headquartered in Washington and Prague, focus on topics Russian President Vladimir Putin would rather keep from his people. The profile of how Russia’s richest plutocrat evolved to become its biggest booster of democracy, for example. Or reports that exposed the finances of the Kremlin’s inner circle, and the fabulously expensive car of a bishop in the Russian Orthodox Church.

But perhaps more important than the channel’s dozens of reporters across Europe and Eurasia, or its smooth videography and flashy graphics, is the language its journalists speak: Russian.

Backers of the U.S.-taxpayer funded news channel, which is also available online, see it as one of the most credible efforts yet by Washington to mount an effective response to the torrent of propaganda and misinformation streaming from the Kremlin as part of its efforts to destabilize European democracies.

Half of Current Time’s 160 million web views this year have come from inside Russia itself, an audience size that is clearly getting under the skin of officials at the Kremlin, who have accused the network of being a money-laundering operation.

In light of President Donald Trump’s seeming indifference to Russia’s misinformation campaign ahead of key elections in France this spring and concerns about similar activity ahead of the German elections in September, impatient lawmakers including Sens. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H.; Benjamin
L. Cardin, D-Md.; and Rob Portman, R-Ohio, are pushing their own initiatives to counter Russian propaganda and so-called “fake news” overseas.

The problem: it’s been over 25 years since the United States last confronted such a murky but geopolitically consequential threat.

During the Cold War, the U.S. effectively rebutted USSR narratives through the United States Information Agency. But Congress eliminated the agency after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union and folded its mission into the State Department, which critics say is unsuited to the public jousting often required to smack down false Russian narratives.

Meantime, Moscow’s use of social media to spread false information and conspiracy theories has propelled propaganda with a heavier punch and longer reach than ever before.

New proposals in Congress aim to rebuild some of the old U.S. strategies to fight back. South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, for example, established a Countering Russian Influence Fund that Congress seeded with $100 million as part of the fiscal 2017 omnibus spending law. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee has advanced legislation for $250 million more to bolster it.

The question remains whether lawmakers will be able to ensure that directives to fund and prioritize a vigorous public diplomacy campaign promoting the benefits of liberal democracies are implemented, even as Trump’s own actions and statements raise doubts in Europe about the U.S. commitment to the post-World War II global order.

The current information war is fundamentally a defensive one for the United States, much to the frustration of lawmakers on both sides of the aisle who worry the country and its European allies remain vulnerable and exposed to Russian hackers, trolls and state propagandists akin to Moscow’s efforts in the 2016 presidential elections.

“The guy who plays offense always has the advantage. He sets the agenda and it’s up to the other guys to react, to respond,” says Jeffrey Gedmin, a former president and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. “There is a natural asymmetry there.”

The United States has largely shied away from the types of Soviet Union-era psychological tactics still employed by the Kremlin, but Washington recognizes it must up its information operations game.

“The urgency and the speed at which these techniques are evolving, they’re going from laboratory to field test to refinement rapidly,” Peter Doran, executive vice president of the Center for European Policy Analysis, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee in March. “Our responses are slow. Our messaging is clunky. And we’re combating a highly effective, well-funded effort that does not care about facts.”

Following last summer’s decision by British voters to exit the European Union and November’s election of Trump, which the U.S. intelligence community has concluded Moscow sought to influence, the fate of the United States-led democratic world order is at stake.

U.S. international broadcasting operations, which include Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America, are funded at roughly $750 million annually, compared to the $1.4 billion it’s estimated the Kremlin spends on its propaganda apparatus, which includes the television channel RT and Radio Sputnik.
Researchers say Russian disinformation campaigns are active today in Ukraine, the Baltic States and other countries. Russia is suspected of circulating anonymous emails around Lithuania in February falsely claiming German soldiers there with NATO had raped a Lithuanian teen. It bore a striking resemblance to a campaign in Germany last year traced to Russia that claimed asylum-seekers in Germany had raped a Russian-speaking teen. That story sparked thousands to participate in anti-immigrant protests before it was debunked.

If left unchallenged, such campaigns could weaken NATO efforts and create rifts between the U.S. and its allies around the world.

The Senate is moving forward with a bill that authorizes significant new funding to respond to Russian disinformation operations overseas.

And House Foreign Affairs Chairman Ed Royce, a California Republican, is at the center of a small but influential group of lawmakers trying to better defend against Russian efforts to attack public trust in democratic institutions at home and abroad. The group includes Graham, head of the Appropriations subcommittee with responsibility for international broadcasting programs, and Cardin, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The U.S. government, they argue, lacks a common strategic and operational framework from which it can employ all of the different tools at its disposal to shape and push back its own narrative to counter Russian propaganda.

But any congressional efforts to turn that around will be undermined if Trump continues to demonize the press at home as “the enemy of the American people.”

“This exceptional assault on the media coming from the chief executive of our country, frankly, plays very nicely into the strategy that Putin has employed throughout the region,” said Sen. Christopher S. Murphy, D-Conn., at an April hearing of the Foreign Relations Committee.
Mental Miasma
Following last fall’s election interference, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu told Parliament the Kremlin was doubling-down on its investment in information warfare capabilities.

The U.S. intelligence community has no doubt Russia plans to follow through. A January report from the Director of National Intelligence examining Russia’s efforts to influence the 2016 election concluded that Moscow is intent on repeating and building on its tactics ahead of upcoming elections in Europe and the United States.

Unlike the United States’ freewheeling, competitive, independently-funded news market, the majority of Russian media outlets exist to serve the interests of the Kremlin.

Russian media has been “weaponized” and functions as a “finely tuned, vertically integrated communications system with a lot of talent,” says Sarah Oates, a University of Maryland professor who studies political communication and democratization.

And that weapon can be a powerful one. Research shows the difficulty of debunking the lies and distortions that Russia spreads.

“If you look at what’s coming out of the Kremlin, it’s really almost beyond a false narrative. It’s more of a strategy to establish that there is really no such thing as an empirical fact,” says John Lansing, CEO and director of the Broadcasting Board of Governors. “Facts are really what is being challenged around the world.”

A 2016 report by the RAND Corporation found that repeated exposure to information, even if it isn’t accurate, increased people’s willingness to believe it.

Perhaps more troubling, RAND found that efforts to rebut incorrect information can reinforce it.

The better strategy, experts believe, is to try to generally discredit the Kremlin and to get out accurate information.

“I don’t think we are in a world beyond facts,” Bruce Wharton, acting undersecretary of State for public diplomacy and public affairs, said in remarks at Stanford University in March.

“What we are facing now is intense competition at all levels,” Wharton said. “Facts compete with pseudo facts on substance, on speed, and for audiences’ attention.”

What the United States can and should do, argue experts and veterans of U.S. international broadcasting, is strengthen support for journalism in Eastern European and Eurasian nations that are vulnerable to Russian disinformation.

What’s the Message?
“You can’t have propaganda or political messaging without a sense of what we want to propagate and we haven’t come to a sense of what we want that message to look like in the 21st century,” says Eric Brown, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.

Brown contends the United States must first analyze its strategic interests, which he says should include a Europe free from undue Russian influence. That isn’t easy given the severe political polarization in the United States.

“We seem to have forgotten what it’s all about,” says Martha Bayles, author of “Through a Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America’s Image Abroad.”
“Because it sounds to the left like propaganda, to the right, it doesn’t sound hard-edged enough,” Bayles says. “We are just all over the place in agreeing on basic things.”

Back in the days of the United States Information Agency, the U.S. was more effective in combating Soviet propaganda.

USIA published in up to 30 languages and, as part of its speakers program, sent abroad several hundred U.S. intellectuals and academics who expressed their own opinions, sometimes challenging official U.S. policy.

“The result from the audiences was unalloyed admiration for the courage of the U.S. in showcasing free and open discussion,” wrote former public diplomacy officers Patricia Kushlis and Patricia Lee Sharpe in 2006 for the Foreign Service Journal.

But U.S. funding for counter-propaganda programs in the former Soviet Union dropped sharply after the end of the Cold War.

Some in Congress want to increase funding for surrogate independent journalism abroad. Others want Washington to first figure out a strategic plan for responding to not only Russian disinformation but also propaganda campaigns from China and online terrorist recruitment by the likes of Islamic State.

For fiscal 2018, the Trump administration is proposing a Broadcasting Board budget of $685 million, a nearly 13 percent cut from current levels as part of its broader push to reduce foreign aid and diplomacy spending by roughly one-third.

That stands in contrast to recent actions in the Senate, where Graham this year has convened three hearings of his Appropriations subcommittee on the need to increase support for “soft power” in Eastern Europe. His Countering Russian Influence Fund aims to strengthen democratic institutions and support civil society groups in Europe and Eurasia.

New legislation from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee clarifies that the funding is also to be used to counter Russian propaganda including supporting independent Russian-language media and local investigative journalism.
Countering Propaganda
During the Cold War, Radio Liberty was broadcast into the Soviet Union while its sister station, Radio Free Europe, was broadcast at Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe. These American-financed independent “surrogate radios” ran programming in Russian as well as other local languages.

“I don’t think we can underestimate the role that the broadcasting had in preparing Eastern Europe for a nonviolent transition,” Royce says.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the new national governments that rose in its place established media outlets in their own national languages but failed to set up news services for their minority Russian-speaking populations. Moscow seized on that information vacuum, filling it with its own state television and radio programming.

Russia’s 2014 military annexation of the Crimean Peninsula alarmed countries along Russia’s border. Estonia, whose ethnic Russian population makes up one-quarter of the small Baltic nation, launched a Russian-language channel in 2015.

The United States also is reviving its focus on Russian-speaking populations, primarily through Current Time, which is led by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in cooperation with Voice of America. The international broadcasters produce content that runs on the current affairs network, which began airing two years ago and transitioned to a 24/7 format last October.

Lansing is an enthusiastic booster of the news channel, noting the network is “growing faster than everything I’ve seen.”

With a relatively small budget of $15 million, Current Time’s television broadcasts are available in 13 countries. Some 40 million (and growing) monthly unique viewers around the world watch its free digital live-stream.

While the Kremlin won’t allow Current Time TV on its airwaves, Russian audiences are clearly thirsty for its coverage, with online views from inside Russia totaling about 80 million so far this year.

U.S. taxpayer funds keep the network running, and it clearly has an international mission and agenda, differentiating Current Time from U.S. mainstream media. But network executives say they strive to uphold traditional journalistic standards.

“We prefer to think of ourselves as an independent journalistic organization that determines its own agenda,” says Daisy Sindelar, director of the Current Time Russian Digital Network.

Current Time produces a variety of news products including a new fact-checking site, Polygraph.info, a weekly news-wrap of events in the Baltics, and a biweekly documentary series called “Unknown Russia” that spotlights the lives of ordinary Russians.

Going forward, Current Time wants to expand its broadcasts into places like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Belarus, with hopes of eventually becoming a news resource for all 270 million of the world’s Russian-speaking peoples.

In addition to funding journalism through surrogates like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Washington supports efforts through grantee organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy to foster robust, professional and independent journalism in Central Europe, the Baltics, the Balkans, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. In fiscal 2016, NED spent $18 million on programming in Europe.
“What we try to do is promote good practices, promote responsible independent journalism, help that voice be louder and instead of trying to shout down what the alternative message is . . . ensure the integrity of what the counter-narrative is,” says Joanna Rohozinska, senior program officer for Europe at the congressionally funded National Endowment for Democracy.

**Different Approaches**

While the Senate wants to throw money at the counter-Russian disinformation campaign, the House isn’t so sure.

Royce, for instance, has long championed a consolidation of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty with Radio Free Asia and the Middle East Broadcasting Network on the grounds they are all surrogate media outlets, providing local coverage.

Last year, Royce inserted language in the annual defense policy law that sought to do away with the part-time, bipartisan, nine-member Broadcasting Board of Governors and place full control of international news operations in the hands of the organization’s CEO, who is now empowered to make key personnel and budget decisions. In a signing statement to the law, President Barack Obama kept the board in place, though it now serves in an advisory capacity.

Some newspaper editorial boards like The Washington Post’s reacted with alarm at the possibility Trump could nominate someone from Breitbart or another “alt-right” news outlet to lead the BBG.

But Lansing says thus far there have been no administration efforts to interfere with the editorial policy of international broadcasting operations including at Voice of America, whose federal charter directs it to provide “a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thoughts and institutions.”
“There has not been a single instance at all of anybody in the administration attempting to affect the editorial decision-making of any of the entities at the BBG,” Lansing says, adding the focus is on implementing Trump’s executive order directing all federal agencies to look for ways to slim down.

A report will be issued this month on restructuring options. Lansing declined to say whether it will include a recommendation to consolidate the grantee surrogate networks.

For now, Royce is withholding legislation calling for further changes to international broadcasting operations until he sees what reorganization decisions the administration comes out with. He also is hesitant to call for more money for international broadcasting despite the severity of the threat of Russian propaganda.

“It’s not so much what we’re spending, it’s the fact that we have the dysfunction and ineffectiveness in disseminating information and therefore we’re not attracting audiences,” he says.

Royce is also not happy with Senate efforts to expand the activities of the State Department’s Global Engagement Center, which has gone through multiple incarnations after first being conceived a decade ago as a means of pushing back against terrorist online recruitment. The center’s earlier efforts in this area are widely seen as a total failure.

Sens. Portman and Murphy included language in the most recent defense policy law that expands the mission of the GEC to include countering state-based propaganda. Congress has authorized nearly $20 million in annual funding for fiscal 2017 and 2018 for the agency and has authorized the Pentagon to transfer an additional $60 million each year. But implementation of that expanded mission has been bogged down by the change in administrations, according to House and Senate staffers.

**Social Media Constraints**

A big hope for the GEC is that it can be at the forefront of U.S. government efforts to improve understanding of how social media networks are used to influence public opinion. Wharton, the undersecretary for public diplomacy, has promoted the possibility of using network analysis tools in the same ways companies create consumer profiles, saying they “can provide a clearer view for engaging target audiences.”

But legal and privacy questions have created roadblocks. A corporation gathering our personal information to market products is one thing; but the public can view the same activities by the government as intrusive surveillance.

U.S. government researchers are likely still feeling burned from the public furor that developed over 2014 news reports that the Pentagon’s research department, known as DARPA, was studying how information spreads across Twitter. The research involved studying the Twitter usage habits of activists involved with the Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring movements as well as the influence of pop culture celebrities. The DARPA program ended in 2015 and was not renewed, according to Time magazine.

Government lawyers now generally advise against such types of social media research, even though the privacy laws remain murky.

Proponents of giving U.S. government researchers a freer hand to study social media use argue it’s necessary to crafting effective messaging campaigns to respond to Russian propaganda as it could clarify things like what types of language, conversation style, video and images have the most traction with specific Web demographic groups who are simultaneously being targeted by Russian-backed influence campaigns.
“There’s a lot that we should be able to do in a very white-hat kind of way, things that we are doing in the private sector now that we can’t because we are governed by a set of rules and practices that weren’t built for this area,” Ory Rinat, the digital lead for Trump transition efforts at the State Department, said at an event last month at George Washington University. “We need to have a conversation around modernizing the frameworks we’re working in, such as the Privacy Act.”

Sitting alongside him, Rinat’s predecessor in the Obama administration agreed.

“How can we possibly expect to go to battle in an information landscape when people who are our adversaries have access to whatever tools they need,” said Tom Cochran, who formerly led the State Department’s Bureau of International Information Programs. “Without the right tools and the right technology how can we implement any digital strategy?”

Rand Waltzman for years ran the DARPA social media program. He has since left government and is deeply skeptical that Congress and federal agencies recognize the true digital information threat they are up against.

Waltzman attributes this in part to conflicting legal advice agency lawyers give government researchers about what they are allowed to study where human behavior is concerned.

“A lot of the problem stems from interpretations from existing laws,” says Waltzman, now with the RAND Corporation. He wants the Trump administration to order a legal assessment that would issue a unified opinion that applies to all federal agencies on what types of social media research is allowed.

Don’t Reinvent the Wheel
Royce recalls that during a visit to East Germany in the 1980s, he was greatly impressed to see how people planned their days around being home in time to hear American radio broadcasts.

“It was giving them information, just truthful information in real time about what was actually happening in East Germany and in Eastern Europe and it was also discussing issues that were not being discussed in their media like political pluralism and tolerance,” he says. “You could tell that it was moving the country away from their commitment to the totalitarian system that they had been raised with.”

Bayles says the heart of any successful U.S. public diplomacy strategy must be about engaging local audiences on topics they care about. “It’s really not rocket science and people are trying to turn it into rocket science because they think there’s money in it,” she says.

Adds Cochran: “We have to recognize that at the heart of public diplomacy lies people and there is nothing more powerful than connecting on a human emotional level, one-on-one with an individual to share ideas and maybe even disagree.”