

# ვახტინის პროპაგანდასთან ბრძოლა ემიგრაციაში

FIGHTING PUTIN'S PROPAGANDA FROM EXILE

ეკატერინა კოტრიკაძე

ტელეარხ „დოჟდის“ საინფორმაციო სამსახურის უფროსი

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## რეზიუმე

ტელე-არხ „დოჟდის“ (TV Rain) ჟურნალისტი ეკატერინა კოტრიკაძე ესეში ყურადღებას ამახვილებს დამოუკიდებელი მედიის მნიშვნელობაზე კრემლის პროპაგანდის წინააღმდეგ ბრძოლაში. იგი ქრონოლოგიურად აღწერს იმ მოვლენებს, რა დროსაც პუტინს განსაკუთრებით უქმნიდა უხერხულობას თავისუფალი სიტყვა რუსეთში. თავად მოვლენები კი არ უკავშირდება მხოლოდ უკრაინაში სრულმასშტაბიანი ომის დაწყებას, არამედ იგი სათავეს 2013 წელს, მას შემდეგ იღებს, რაც უკრაინაში პრორუსული ძალები დამარცხდნენ და საზოგადოების მნიშვნელოვანმა ნაწილმა დასავლეთისკენ გადაადგა ნაბიჯი.

პუტინის საომარი არსენალის ერთ-ერთი მნიშვნელოვანი იარაღი პროპაგანდაა. კოტრიკაძე წერს, რომ ხელისუფლების მიერ კონტროლირებული მედია გაუგონარ ისტორიებს თხზავს იმის თაობაზე, თუ როგორ სასტიკად ექცევა უკრაინის „ფაშისტური რეჟიმი“ საკუთარ მოსახლეობას. ხოლო, რუსეთის თავისუფალი მედიის რიგი წევრები, მათ შორის უშუალოდ „დოჟდის“ ჟურნალისტები, კრემლის მითების მხილებას სისტემატურად ახდენენ. სწორედ ამის აღსაკვეთად, ასევე იმ ნარატივის გასაძლიერებლად, რომ უკრაინაში „ფაშისტური“ რეჟიმი თარეშობს და, სინამდვილეში, რუსეთი არა უკრაინასთან, არამედ NATO-სთან იბრძვის, რუსეთის სახელმწიფო სათათბიროში მიიღეს კანონი, რომელიც ჟურნალისტების სამართლებრივი დევნის საფუძველს იძლეოდა.

შედეგად, ჟურნალისტების მრავალრიცხოვანმა ჯგუფმა რუსეთი დატოვა. ავტორი ხაზს უსვამს იმას, რომ მიუხედავად ამისა, მათი საქმიანობა არ კარგავს მნიშვნელობას და რიგი მედია-პლატფორმები მსოფლიოს სხვადასხვა წერტილიდან მონაწილეობენ პუტინის პროპაგანდის წინააღმდეგ.

For many Russian journalists, myself included, March 1st was the day when everything ended: the job that we loved, the way of life we had grown used to, the very country as we knew it. The war in Ukraine was already in full swing, and the State Duma was preparing a law that would prohibit us from even uttering the word “war”, let alone citing the Ukrainian version of Russian army casualties and losses. The clear purpose of this new law was to forbid discussing the reasons Russia now found itself on the ground in a sovereign neighboring country. A couple of days later, the law would be adopted, and anyone violating the new rules would face up to 15 years in prison. The largest country in the world would slam shut the door on civilization. All the major media organizations were forced to flee, all of them.

On March 1, 2022, I went on air with my program – Kotrikadze of Foreign Affairs. As it turned out, this was the last time the show would be broadcast from Moscow. One of the hallmarks of the program is its op-eds. I deliver to camera rather long monologues, giving the foreign policy analysis, evaluating Russia's place in the world, and its relations with external partners. This time, while preparing for the broadcast, I sat down in front of my computer and realized that I could not write a single word. I sat endlessly staring at a blank page on the monitor. What should I tell viewers? How could I even begin to talk about Russia's place in the world when at that very moment it was bombing civilians? Russia, in the eyes of the intelligent inhabitants of planet Earth, had come to represent absolute evil.

Eventually, and with a colleague's help, I came up with the only possible topic circumstances would allow. I decided to talk about lies – and, in particular, the lie which had become state policy in Russia, the one that determined both its fate and the fate of Ukraine.

In 2014 Putin saw his worst nightmare come true. In Ukraine, a free people went out to the streets and declared its independence from Russia. Soon after that Moscow annexed the Crimean Peninsula. They lied to us about the presence of Russian soldiers there, or rather lied that there weren't any. Putin himself “joked” that soldiers spotted in Crimea, the famous “little green men”, had bought their uniforms at the corner shop. In time, it turned out, of course, that these “little green men” really were Russians special forces, a fact which the President confirmed without blinking an eye.

Soon after the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas started. According to the official version, Russia was not involved. The battle in Eastern Ukraine has continued without stop for the last eight years. But now it has become more intense and Putin has finally admitted that the Russian army is engaged in military activity. Before that, Russian officials were stubbornly repeating the mantra that there were no Russian boots on the ground.

These days the manual for bots, propagandists and pro-Kremlin politicians includes the obligatory accusation against the independent media in Russia: “Where have you been for the past 8 years? – meaning that this media was not concerned with the fate of ordinary people in Donbas. The official version was that civilians in Eastern Ukraine were suffering under attacks by Kyiv and hoping for Russian help. Looking back, it's amazing to see these accusations, considering that professional journalists remember how it all started. Donbas separatism, not without its own internal causes, was supported by Russia for years, even before Maidan. And when it broke out, it was Russia that became the sponsor, the inspiration and, as they like to say in the Kremlin, the master of the separatists. It was Russia – with its tragic experience of Chechnya, with constant statements about the inadmissibility of interference in sovereign affairs – that openly supported the civil war in word and deed on the territory of the closest among the ex-Soviet nations.

Meanwhile, Russian state TV was churning out reports of civil war and of militias who were selflessly and completely independently waging a liberation war against Kyiv and Ukrainian atrocities. The downing of the Malaysian Airlines Boeing in the summer of 2014 resulting in the murder of almost three hundred people, was the first serious signal to the world from Russia, the first warning shot, so to speak, to make the West shudder. The Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team held Russian authorities responsible for the actions of the separatists in Donbas – a heinous crime apparently committed by mistake (or so we understand from the reports of independent media and investigators), by militants without proper training and who thought they were targeting a Ukrainian military transport aircraft. The supposition is that the plane would not have been shot down without Moscow's go-ahead. But the Russian propaganda machine blamed Ukraine for the crash. That's what they always do: they offer you a million different versions, one crazier than the other. In this case, the conspiracy theorists were hard

at work suggesting that the crash was an attempt gone wrong to assassinate Putin, who allegedly flew at the same time along the same route, – or a plot hatched by the Americans. They make you confused and mixed-up, they make you conclude that “nothing is clear” and “everything is complicated”.

The lies have been raining down on us for the last 8 years. Ukraine has remained the main topic of Russian television all this time. Talk-show guests foam at the mouth, cursing “fascists”, insulting presidents and MPs, and all the changes in Ukraine brought about through elections. Finally, in 2021 – in spring and winter – after tens of thousands of Russian soldiers were found near the borders of a neighboring country – they began to lie about the threat posed by NATO and, in particular, the United States. In America, there was a new president, who at first did not want to think about Putin and Russia at all. To put it bluntly, in Washington, China was considered their main problem, and in the Kremlin, such an approach was considered an insult. “You underestimate us” – was Putin’s message.

On the last day of TV Rain’s broadcast, I realized that the only thing I could do, the only thing that made sense, was to try to tell the truth. And to do so until I could try no more.

The official story now is that soldiers of the Russian army are liberating a neighbor from Nazi tyranny. In Kyiv – they say – the Nazis are sitting, almost sleeping, under portraits of Hitler, embracing swastikas. Here is the answer of the press-secretary of President Putin, Dmitry Peskov to the question of what the Kremlin’s goals are: “Ideally, it’s necessary to liberate Ukraine, cleanse it from the Nazis. From pro-Nazi people and ideologies”. On February 21, three days before the start of the invasion, Vladimir Putin recognized the independence of the separatist republics of the Ukrainian Donbas (LNR and DNR). This was preceded by an hour-long lecture to Russian citizens to somehow justify the attack. There was an attempt to tell the whole history of Ukraine in a way that could prove that this state does not exist and has never existed, and that Ukraine is Russia’s younger brother, an appendage and that Ukrainians and Russians are one nation that needs to be reunited. According to Putin, Kyiv was seized by nationalist radicals in the 2014 coup, who then launched an openly anti-Russian policy. As a result, Russia needed to defend its interests and its future.

## These are all lies

If there were any doubts about this, it is enough to know that in 2019 Ukrainian nationalist parties and radical organizations nominated a single candidate for the presidency. He received a miserable 1.6 % of the vote. Volodymyr Zelensky, the man who won the election with 74% of the votes, is Jewish. A coalition of nationalist parties in the parliamentary elections in Ukraine took less than 3%, i.e. below the 5% electoral threshold to qualify for seats. Before TV Rain was closed, I spoke on air with the director of the Russian Holocaust Foundation, Alla Gerber. She almost cried: there is no connection between fascism, Nazism, genocide – all these words are being used by Russian propaganda – and the political course of Ukraine, said Gerber.

At the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, more than 150 scholars from institutions around the world devoted to genocide and holocaust studies published an open letter in which they strongly rejected “the Russian government’s cynical abuse of the term genocide, the memory of World War II and the Holocaust, and equating the Ukrainian state with the Nazi regime to justify unprovoked aggression.”

The invasion was not supported by the facts but then facts are Putin’s enemies. He hates journalists – people like us. Therefore, back in August 2021, TV Rain was recognized as a foreign agent, and in March 2022 it was destroyed in Russia. Before our channel was shut down at the start of the war, we

averaged on YouTube alone 25 million viewers daily. This suggests that millions of Russians at least doubt the official version of events and, it is safe to say, want no part in the crimes against humanity being committed right now, in front of our eyes, by the Russian Federation.

In July of 2014, Channel One, Russia’s main TV channel ran a story about a “crucified boy” in the town of Slovyansk in the Donbas. A woman named Galina Pishnyak told a reporter in great detail how Ukrainian soldiers killed a small child because he was a son of a pro-Russian rebel. Investigative journalists from Novaya Gazeta and TV Rain who visited Slovyansk found no evidence to back up these allegations, nor did they find any audio or video footage of the incident. Long story short, it was a fake and one which was to become a symbol of Russian lies during that war. A more recent example: the state Russia 24 TV channel broadcast a video of what the anchor described as Ukrainians in uniform using a mannequin to stage a murder, they could blame on Russian soldiers in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha. It later turned out that the incident was filmed at a Russian television set near St. Petersburg. Nadezhda Kolobaeva, a Russian director, posted on Facebook: “Guys, this is our footage, we are shooting a movie!”

So, while we think of journalism as reporting news, it has become part of our job to expose fakes, to ask questions, to record interviews, to show what reality looks like.

We relaunched TV Rain in July 2022 from Latvia. And of course, there was a fear among my colleagues that we would not be able to reconnect with our audience. That after leaving we are no longer of interest to those who remain in Russia. That we can no longer feel the air in Russia. But we got back on air. We work in the same way as we worked before departure. And our audience is now larger than it was before the war. In September – 14 million unique viewers in Russia, and this is more than 65% of the entire Dozhd’s audience. The audience is growing.

Perhaps that is the reason why the Ministry of Justice of Russia recognized the founder of TV Rain Natalya Sindeeva, it’s Editor-in-Chief Tikhon Dzyadko and myself as foreign agents. This attempt to call us enemies of the people, to accuse us of working for a foreign state (in our case, for Ukraine – by the way, let them prove that we received at least a penny from Ukraine) – well, an attempt to label us is extremely insulting. None of us is an enemy of the people, none of us is a foreign agent.

This is insulting and vile, since the main task of the authorities is to mold us into those with whom it is dangerous to deal with, who are dangerous to watch and listen to. I suggest there will be a separate punishment for contacting us invented by Russian authorities. They are trying to show that we – “unreliable elements” – are toxic. Because in the view of Vladimir Putin, liberal journalists are like a fifth column, carriers of that very Western thinking, which frightens him incredibly, because it implies a change of power. And it doesn’t matter where we are. As it turned out, distances in the 21st century do not interfere with journalism.

The list of Russian media organizations in exile (worth paying attention to):

- Meduza meduza.io
- Novaya gazeta Europe novayagazeta.eu
- Republic republic.ru
- Insider theins.ru
- Vazhnie Istorii stories.media
- Holod magazine holod.media
- Echo of Moscow echofm.online
- Doxa doxa.team
- Sota sota.vision
- Verstka verstka.media