

OVERWATCH PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Featuring *Natalia Bugayova* and *George Barros*

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The Kremlin is trying to pull countries around the world into its information space. Kremlin-linked media outlets signed more than 50 cooperation agreements with counterparts around the world in the last five years. Russia uses its information space to expand its influence, mask the Kremlin's aggression, and spread disinformation that undermines the U.S. and the West. In this episode, ISW's Russia Team Lead Nataliya Bugayova and Russia researcher George Barros discuss their recent publication on the Kremlin's effort to expand Russia's global media presence.

Maseh Zarif:

This is Overwatch. A podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif and I'm your host for this episode. Our Russia research lead here at ISW, Nataliya Bugayova, and a researcher on the Russia portfolio, George Barros, recently published an assessment of the media deals being signed by the Russians in different countries around the world. They join us to explain what's behind this Kremlin push and how it affects the information environment.

Nataliya Bugayova:

Today we'll talk about the Kremlin's effort to expand its global information space, one of the priorities of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Specifically, we'll talk about the new ways in which the Kremlin is growing its media influence worldwide. The Kremlin has been trying to grow its media outreach globally for years. However, around 2015, the Kremlin launched a distinct line of effort to form partnerships between local media outlets around the world and the Kremlin-linked outlets, such as RT and Sputnik. In our research, we have found that the Russian media, and in some cases the Russian government itself, signed at least 50 such cooperation agreements in the last five years. You can find the list in our recent publication and also view them on the map. In 2019 alone, there were over 15 such agreements signed, so the effort has been accelerating. This reflects the growing importance of information operations to Russia through which the Kremlin supports a number of its global campaigns, conceals its aggressive actions and spreads disinformation.

George Barros:

These media cooperation agreements mostly focus on content sharing between Russian and foreign media, as well as Russian training for foreign journalists. Russian outlets have already conducted such trainings. Sputnik even launched a special school for young journalists. Some are more formal government agreements between Russia's Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, and its counterparts around the world. The Kremlin is also trying to cultivate its international organizations. For example, Sputnik convinced the BRICS group to support Russia's initiative to create a unified fact-checking platform to counter the dissemination of false information, last November.

Nataliya Bugayova:

There are a couple of goals Russia's likely trying to pursue with these local partnerships. First, the Kremlin likely wants to have a more resilient and lasting global information network. That's why it seeks to link its own media with foreign outlets, and also institutionalize information partnerships with other governments. This is also why Russia is prioritizing including journalism education in these cooperation packages. Russia seeks not just to shape content, but also to shape journalist's methods, so that Russian ways continue even if its specific outlets get expelled. Secondly, Russia is trying to raise brand awareness of its outlets and get rid of distinction between independent-western media and the Kremlin-controlled outlets, by placing Russian content next to content from

western newswires such as Reuters. We also observe that Russia's efforts to sign these media deals are always linked to Russia's campaigns to expand its presence in specific countries or regions.

For example, when the Kremlin was pushing to expand its influence in Africa, through investment and security cooperation and diplomacy. Russian media outlets were also signing deals with a number of African media in countries like Eritrea, and DRC, and the Republic of Congo. Vladimir Putin even hosted a special panel with African media leaders at the October, Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi. Finally, this effort is also likely tied to larger changes in the Kremlin's thinking about its information campaigns. The Kremlin was revising its information security doctrine around the time when this push started. The new document identifies among the key challenges, international efforts to block the activity of Russian media, and the growing bias toward Russian media globally. It also states that the development of independent Russian information policies, one of the top goals for the Kremlin. So Russia might have decided that it needs a more resilient information web, that has local ties and global coalitions.

George Barros:

Russia's campaign to expand its global media presence has not been without its fair share of setbacks and challenges. Russia's operations in this line of effort have been the most successful in the non-western world. Russia has not managed to successfully expand its influence in media cooperation in the western world, and this is evidenced in that Russia was only able to secure a handful of such partnerships with western outlets. Lithuania deported Sputnik's chief editor in Lithuania in May 2019. Lithuanian authorities claimed that he was a national security threat. Latvia shutdown nine Kremlin-linked television channels in November 2019. Estonian law enforcement forced Russia to shut down its Sputnik office in Estonia, in January 2020. A Slovakian media outlet revoked its partnership agreement with Sputnik in 2016, one day after it was signed due to pushback from the public. These examples demonstrate that national governments frequently have the tools that they need to counter Kremlin information operations at the domestic level, if they have the political will to act. There are also some indications that Russian media experiences pushback even beyond Europe. A Bolivian television operator terminated RT broadcasting in 2019, for example.

Nataliya Bugayova:

Despite these setbacks, the Kremlin will continue to prioritize its information operations. Vladimir Putin has a growing need to invest in shaping perceptions about Russia, the west, and his own regime, as he's facing growing pressures. You can find the full list of these deals in our most recent publication, *The Kremlin's Expanding Media Conglomerate*, and *The Associated Map*.

Maseh Zarif:

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Overwatch*. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones, visit www.understandingwar.org to learn more about ISW's work and to sign up for a mailing list.

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