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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION DURING RUSSIA-WEST CONFRONTATION



The information space is the main field of confrontation between Russia and the West today. The aim of this confrontation is to win over the public to one's side. It is important not just to be right, but also to be convincing.

Many analysts compare the current situation with the Cold War, when the world was divided into two opposing camps that were striving to increase their space at each other's expense. Both superpowers were irreconcilable, pursued a policy of brinkmanship and dominated the information space in their spheres of interest. These were ideal conditions for confrontation.

However, the current situation is more complicated. The information, economic and political confrontation space is now shared. The interconnection is great and confrontation covers some areas of cooperation. There is no longer a duel between the two superpowers. There are many more main players in international processes. Allies and opponents are often opportunistic and the key international process is competition in strategic areas: the power industry, communications, and transport and arms supplies, to name a few. The current world can be compared to a football match, where emotions are running high at the end of the game and both teams allow themselves foul play.

It is hard to rationalize the current confrontation. On the one hand, there is no understanding of the character of the changes. It is enough to mention the Trump phenomenon, Brexit and the Arab Spring. The participants in the current confrontation do not believe in the possibility of a big war and engage in brinkmanship for this reason. They have different interpretations of historical perspective, being unaware of where exactly history is moving.

Finally, Russia and the West speak different languages and use different definitions for

the same notions. Not only diplomacy and political expertise but even the intelligence services fail to work properly in such conditions.

All this does not mean that the world is black and white again and that only we and our conflict exist in it. There are increasing signs of a polycentric world. The bloc discipline has considerably weakened both between Russia and its allies and within the West. Many EU countries expelled Russian diplomats but it is much more important to analyze what countries did not do this and why.

It is not only the governments of the leading Western countries that are taking part in this confrontation. There are also small states with experience of international provocation. Leading businesspeople, whose interests are damaged by political processes, are also players in the game. However, only George Soros likes publicity whereas the overwhelming majority is trying to avoid it.

Even if the Salisbury incident is a provocation by the secret services, its main goal is to produce a public effect and set public opinion against Russia. In response to this provocation, Moscow should intercept the communication initiative. Russia should base its policy on the football principle of a game with a ball but not with a player.

Russia took an antagonistic position on the Salisbury incident, which was expressed in mistrust and sarcasm and led to mutual recriminations. But those who staged this act of terror counted exactly on this reaction from Russia. Being shocked by the incident and convinced of Russia's involvement in Litvinenko's poisoning, London came to the conclusion that Moscow had again dared to take similar action. Emotions are getting in the way of common sense.

In these conditions, Moscow needs a special PR campaign. Empathy, sympathy, solidarity and indignation over the use of chemical weapons in Europe should be our key messages in this regard. Russia is also a victim of this incident because it is considered a suspect. A telephone conversation with Theresa May, an address to the British public through the local press and the laying of flowers by the UK Embassy could become practical steps in response to this crisis. The right communication can deprive our opponents of emotional arguments.

In general, Russia should broaden the range of metaphors used to describe international processes. Two metaphors are used most often – the Cold War duel and the allied bloc that routed Nazism. This is exactly why Russia's main recent initiatives have an aura of historicism: the idea of establishing a global anti-terrorist coalition, striving to act as allies with the US and France in Syria, and searching for a big deal with the US on European security and the Ukrainian crisis.

But, apparently, international relations no longer work this way. Obviously, modern politics – both domestic and international – is inextricably linked with mass culture, religion and the media. Although ours is a secular society, public discussions are imbued with biblical metaphors and key political processes can be described by one of these. It is enough to recall the conversion of Paul the Apostle, David's victory over Goliath, the return of the Prodigal Son or the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican.

Biblical metaphors are also becoming a foundation for creating secular myths. Take, for instance, Star Wars with its notion of the balance of power and a switch of bad and good guys to the other side. The same could happen with Russia. The correct communication could transform its current image of a violator and a country that is on the wrong side of



history into the image of a country that, like the Publican, turns out to be more righteous than the Pharisee who keeps talking about his holiness.

Finally, tough legalism no longer works. Interpretations of the UN Charter by Russia and the West are vastly different. In fact, these interpretations are at war with each other. But this is no longer chess where all moves are written down and the rules are clear. This is football, where there are more improvisation, command and team skills but at the same time, where a mistake by the referee – public opinion – is more likely. Sometimes a referee does not notice that your rival's team violated rules. Okay, we will continue playing because the end result is more important.

How should strategic communication be conducted in this situation? First, it is necessary to give up antagonism as the main principle. It is predictable, restricts maneuver and was more effective when bloc discipline was tougher and world borders were clearer. Secondly, it is essential to rely, not on legalism but on common sense, empathy and other emotions in order to win the hearts of the audience. Thirdly, it is necessary to be flexible and act preemptively – a delay in response leads to defeat.

It is difficult to compete in the common information space and there is a great temptation to return to the era of full control of information. However, Moscow's emotional response to the crash of the Polish president's aircraft, initiatives on Syria's chemical disarmament and introduction of peacemakers to Donbass show that constructive improvisation and "ball game" produces results even in what would seem a desperate situation.

Source: **Strategic communication during Russia-West confrontation**



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Work experience: Andrey is a director of the Laboratory of International Trends Analysis at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. He also is a Program Director of the Valdai Discussion Club, and editor-in-chief of the "Vneshnyaya Politika" (Foreign Policy) journal. He was a Visiting Professor and Research Fellow at Georgetown University, Johns Hopkins University, Guido Carli Free University of International Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Harvard University and Middlebury Institute for International Studies in Monterey. He is a member of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and a member of the Working Group on the Future of Russian-American Relations.

