

Nov 04, 2016 by [Mitchell Polman](#)

We Need a Public Diplomacy Strategy for Russia ^[1]

Since September 11th much of our nation's public diplomacy efforts have been focused, appropriately enough, on the Middle East and the Islamic world. However, while much energy and attention has gone to improve understanding of America and its policies in those regions another important sphere has been neglected. The Russian government is now clearly conducting a concerted effort to indoctrinate its people, particularly its young people, in anti-Americanism. America is hardly the Kremlin's only target. Indeed, the list is a long one -- Georgia, Ukraine, Estonia, Britain, etc. Its recent forays in the Arctic have actually sparked the Canadians to seriously consider bolstering their defense spending.

This situation wasn't created overnight. On Christmas Day 2002 the Russian government announced that it was shutting down the Peace Corps program and branded the Peace Corps a "spying organization". The Bush administration did not say a word in protest. When the program was opened in 1992 it was hailed as the start of a new relationship between Russia and the U.S. In fact, until President Putin began comparing the U.S. to Nazi Germany hostile acts on the part of Russia towards the United States were generally ignored by the Bush administration. Recently a new national textbook for history was released for public comment and it was filled with anti-American invective and lies. It drew fire from the Russian educational establishment, but nobody in the administration felt compelled to comment. Kremlin supported "youth groups" such as Nashi have turned America bashing into a sport and not a word is heard from Washington. The situation has gotten so out of control that the Russian columnist Gregory Bovt wrote about a middle class friend of his who saw an anti-American plot behind the rise in the popularity of beer in Russia. His friend told him that beer is high in female hormones and that America is turning Russian into a nation of beer drinkers in order to make Russian men sterile. Bovt's full essay is available here . Admittedly, this may be an extreme an isolated example although one can't help but wonder what less educated Russians may be thinking.

Perhaps the administration thinks pushing back will only make things worse, but it's hard to see how failing to try to control the situation will lead to an improvement. Right now there are some reasons for hope. A recent survey by the Center for Strategic and International Studies conducted by the Levada Center studied the political opinions of Russian youth. Only 67% of the young people surveyed had ever heard of Nashi, 24% said they had heard of Nashi and were uninterested in joining, only 8% wanted to join, and 1% belonged. Only 14% of the young people surveyed said that they disliked both the American people and President Bush. The respondents were asked how they would feel if an NGO that worked to combat police abuse accepted U.S. government funding. Forty percent said that they would approve of that. This demonstrates that a sizable percentage of Russian youth are certainly receptive to views of the world that may not match the Kremlin's. The full survey is available here .

It is time for Washington to get off its collective duff and start pushing back. Clearly our current

policies of promoting exchange and funding democratization programs are not enough. We should not be allowing the Kremlin to define America and its values to its people. We should have a vigorous campaign in place to combat the lies and false assumptions that pervade Kremlin propaganda efforts. We should be going over the heads of the Russian people and insisting on our right to get our point of view across. We should enlist other countries in this effort as well and make it into an international campaign to combat Kremlin lies and distortions.

Far too many Russians believe that the United States is out to weaken and destroy Russia. That is, of course, nonsense. A weak Russia run by nuclear armed criminal rackets is in fact America's worst nightmare. A strong Russia that is economically prosperous with an effective government that works to take the interest of all of its citizens into account is very much in the American interest. Our policies towards Russia are designed with that in mind, but we do precious little to convince the Russian public that that is the case. It's time for that to change.
