

Nov 04, 2016 by **Nicholas J. Cull**

Russia Today: Views from My Hotel Room ^[1]

When awake with jet lag in a hotel far from home, the traveler naturally turns to the TV remote. So it was for me in Moscow this week, when a few absent minded clicks brought me face to face with Russia Today (RT)– the English language news channel and flagship for contemporary Russian public diplomacy. The channel did not come highly recommended. It had raised eyebrows with recent magazine advertisements adorned with a portrait of Stalin holding a quill and that caption: “Stalin wrote romantic poetry” and the tag line “Proud to be different”. (Type Russia Today Stalin into Google Images and the picture pops up; for German comment on this story and the idea of the equivalent figure in German history being so used see <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,518259,00.html>) This was not promising but I found myself watching with mounting fascination.

Visually the channel is very impressive. It has top notch production values and sports the best looking presenters of any international news channel, if only because its relative youth as a channel means young presenters and an attractive sense of energy. Its content was similarly striking. It was watch-able and engaging albeit with the unmistakable tone of advocacy for the state position rather than the balanced journalism typical of Deutsche Welle, CNN International, or the BBC World Service. Two days into my watching, it seemed to me that one would be more likely to see a story exploring a domestic problem on China's CCTV 9 than on RT.

There were frequent mentions of bias in the western media and their distorted coverage of the Georgia story, but that was to be expected. I was rather drawn to fascinating coverage of the U.S. election, which consisted of a roving reporter collecting gripes from voters in New York and Miami about the inevitability of voter fraud, malign influence of campaign contributions, lack of attention to the concerns of ordinary people, and general failure of elections to change anything. Neither the almost-religious optimism of the Obama campaign nor dogged patriotism of the McCain camp were anywhere to be seen. It was a radically different view than that of the American channels, though it undoubtedly reflected a certain element of opinion. Some of the stories were perhaps not dissimilar to election “color” stories on any European channel: a feature of election themed pet chews and Halloween masks, and on the coffee shops whose sale of partisan coffee cups has accurately predicted the last three elections, which showed a clear lead for Obama. A massive turnout on 4 November will challenge the RT version of the American election; a string of lawsuits will not.

My last day in Moscow brought a surprise. RT led with news that a BBC investigation had revealed that there were indeed Georgian atrocities in South Ossetia- a tank had fired directly into a block of flats. Suddenly the wicked foreign media was a valued purveyor of truth whose word was bearing out what Russia had argued all along. The story ended with “revelations” from Russian intelligence that Georgia had also intended to invade Abkhazia. An animated map showed arrows moving around the Black Sea like an American training film from World War Two. I suspect it will be a while before that part of the story is independently confirmed. As if to thank the British for their investigative effort, there was a positive story of impending

British naval action in Somalia to deal with the threat of piracy and allow the free flow of the consumer goods necessary to prevent the pirates from “stealing Christmas.” The same newscast spoke honestly about one of the problems of contemporary Russia – corruption, and cited statistics from an international NGO source, Transparency International, to illustrate the scale of the problem. The context was President Medvedev's initiative to combat the problem, but it was presented as a problem nonetheless.

Russia Today was certainly more interesting than I had expected and promises to be a fascinating window on Russia's view of the world and on Russia itself. I'll certainly look in again from time to time.
