

Russian media as a conveyer ideology and a tool of hegemony

[Media](#)



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Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, news regarding Russia's economic and political state has been spread abroad to other countries through the work of the media. The ideas represented in the Russian media have been responsible for the perception that the acquisition of material goods is not only desirable but indispensable to life and normality. The influence of the media might be considered hegemony, which is represented by the control of one group (the media) over a larger population (the Russians). This control manifests itself in the perceptions of prosperity that are held by many Russians, largely because of the glamorization of Western culture as presented in the media.

Because of the influence that this perception has had over the lives of many Russians, it is often thought on the one hand that all Russians currently live their lives in abject poverty. Because many cannot currently afford the expensive things they see Westerners enjoying, they consider themselves as living at a low standard, and this perception is also passed on to the West. On the other hand, it is also believed in some circles that the pomp that can be seen in the major Russian cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg is an accurate measure of how all Russians live.

This too has stemmed from the above-mentioned media hegemony and the perception of material wealth that is passed on to the public as "normal." The media has, therefore, been responsible for bombarding consumers with such views that promote wealth and materialism as being indispensable to any successful economic society, and this has led to inaccurate perceptions of the Russian economic situation.

During the Soviet Union era, Communist ideology acted as a barrier to the entrance of Western ideas and views into the minds of the Russian public. However, with the fall of Communism and the deregulation of the media, an ideological hegemony began to arise. This hegemony has been fueled by the media. As a result, Western ideas of capitalism and materialism began to mingle freely with Russian socio-economic ideology.

This ideological change is evident in the attitude of Yegor Gaidar, Acting Prime Minister of Russia following the Soviet Union's collapse. He said, " Our main goal [is] the construction in our country of a stable and, at the same time, dynamic and prosperous Western-type society" (Diligensky & Chugrov, 2000, p. 14).

This opinion was made public to the Russians through the media. Gaidar continued to explain that the main difference between the Russian and the Western civilizations at the time was the development of a market economy and the right of citizens to own property. At such a crucial period of change, this ideology held by the leader also found its way into the minds of the Russians via the media. Because of this, more and more Russians began to strive for the material possessions characteristic of the typical Western society (Diligensky & Chugrov, 2000).

It is by the hegemonic efforts of the media that these and other ideas have been placed in the minds of the Russians. The effectiveness of the media in effecting this change in the Russian perception of Western civilization has been demonstrated in public opinion polls taken by Russian citizens. The citizens of the West are generally considered by Russians to have such

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enviable qualities as wealth, inviolable rights to property, high compensation for labor, and talent for entrepreneurship (Diligensky & Chugrov, 2000).

This can even more convincingly be attributed to the effect of the media as it has been noted by Russian thinkers that the order in which these qualities are valued by Russians does not represent the true hierarchy of value given to them by Westerners. Rather, it represents the extent to which these needs are perceived as unsatisfied within the lives of the Russians. The Russian media has played the role of portraying as indispensable those Western values that correspond with areas of Russian lack, and the media has made these values “ especially visible against the background of impoverishment and economic hardships in Russia” (2000, p. 19-20).

Because of the sheer visibility of the way Westerners live, which is made possible by the existence of the media in all its forms, Russians have perceived it as necessary to strive for these idealistic material values. In addition, their lack of material wealth has been perceived by those who look on as evidence that the Russians live in abject poverty.

The media’s hegemonic control over the minds and perceptions of Russians and Westerners alike is evident in other ways. The ideas put forth to Russians via the press (as well as via media access to programming originating in the West) have led to what has been termed the capitalist revolution. With the West as its model, Russia has evolved into a society that contains a “ business elite” (Lavelle, 2004).

Within this society, the rise of the business elite has led to wealthy and propertied class that has become very visible in both the Russian and Western media. These persons, who are often celebrated by the media, are seen in such personalities as business tycoon Andrei Melnichenko. He has been publicized as the person who has had a large hand in the transformation of the Moscow MDM Group into a corporation that grosses three billion dollars a year (BusinessWeek, 2002).

The media broadcasts the lifestyles of these extremely wealthy Russians who have a core of senior-level employees that also enjoy the fruits of capitalism. These persons live publicly in the very affluent and expensive areas—cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. These cities now boast very high costs and standards of living in a country that had been widely perceived as being filled with persons who live below the poverty line, and this is shown to the world through the media.

In fact, according to a worldwide cost of living survey, St. Petersburg ranks as having the 12th highest cost of living in the world. Moscow's reputation is even more astounding as it ranks as the world's most expensive city, (Mercer Consulting, 2006). Despite the general Western perception of Russia as having a struggling market economy, the media is now beginning to demonstrate that Russians have been able to afford the highest living standards and costs in the world.

Two major implications derive from the fact that the two major Russian cities have been ranked among the most expensive in the world. One is that the perceptions of this country generally engendered by the media are to some

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extent quite erroneous. Many Russians are as able to afford material goods as their Western counterparts, and poverty is not the general state of all the persons who reside in the former Soviet Union. In fact, according to business reports, Russia's general standard of living has been on the rise in recent years. This is demonstrated by the fact that its citizens have begun to feel a higher level of security in their economic situation (BusinessWeek, 2002).

While in the early 1990's inflation rates had been in triple digit numbers, by 2002 this had fallen to a mere 17 per cent. By that time too, the stock market index had risen by 27 per cent in the year, and Russians were being reported as "starting to trust Russia [because] money is coming back" (2002, p. 13). These views are now being over-represented in Western perceptions of Russia as a way of counteracting the previous media-created perception of the poverty of Russians.

However, the fact that Moscow and St. Petersburg fall among the most expensive cities hides the fact that once one leaves these highly publicized cities, one is bombarded by a stark decrease in standard of living. What is not represented now in the Western media is this exaggeration of the capitalist gap (between the very rich and the very poor). The media largely demonstrates to the Westerners the wealthy side of Russia—perhaps as a means of de-emphasizing the prevalent idea of Russians as suffering in abject poverty. The media's hegemonic influence urges Westerners to see the affluence of the large cities without giving a wider view of the whole country. This view would demonstrate the steep decline in living standards as one leaves these economic centers.

The media represents a body that to a large extent controls Russians' and Westerners' perceptions of how Russia's wealth compares to that of the rest of the world. This media hegemony carries out a two-fold deception, in which all Russians were once considered by Westerners as living in abject poverty, but that now is beginning to demonstrate all Russians as being wealthy. No balance appears to have been struck between the two views, as the media fails to present an accurately proportioned view of the situation.

The media also demonstrates its hegemony in its ability to coerce Russians into viewing the property of Westerners the true measure of economic success. This fact is widely considered as a reason for the biased view of the Russian situation: Russians have been found to grasp for these material things, and these possessions often hide their true areas of lack.

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