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Russian Media's Homage to Catalonia



The referendum in Catalonia and the harsh actions of police against the protestors have put the Kremlin in an awkward position. On the one hand, this is an excellent occasion to once again accuse the West of all the usual deadly sins, to herald the decline of European democracy, and to show TV audiences in Russia that their own country's suppression of peaceful protestors is relatively light touch and proportionate compared to the brutality of the Spanish police. On the other hand, the Kremlin is well aware that it would be unreasonable to directly support Catalonia at the official level: Russia, a formally federated state, in fact severely restricts the rights of the regions, and is ready to use force in the event of any possible separatist movement within its territorial borders (two wars in Chechnya would be the prime example of that).

Additionally, the West had every reason to assume that Moscow played a hand in the Catalan referendum. Therefore, official Russian support of the Catalans would only be confirming what many had already

suspected. It would only serve to validate those who had been warning against Russian interference from the outset. That is certainly not what the Kremlin is after.

To recap: the Spanish newspaper El País launched an investigation which found the Kremlin was stirring up the situation ahead of the Catalan referendum, which the Spanish courts had deemed illegal. Reporters from El País asserted that Russia was using for this purpose the same methods that were used to manipulate public opinion during the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States.

Ben Nimmo, a research fellow at the Atlantic Council and an expert on information security, then [checked](#) the findings of the Spanish newspaper and confirmed most of them. At the same time, he noted that unlike the pro-Kremlin resources and Internet trolls covering central themes for Russia (Ukraine, Syria, Russia-NATO relations), the approach to Catalonia was not universal: The Spanish RT service in this case was more professional (though it featured one-sided materials in which only the opinion of those who advocated the independence of Catalonia were expressed). The other mouthpiece of the Kremlin, Sputnik, was less so. The hero of Sputnik's reporting was Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks, who suddenly turned into a Spain expert right before the referendum and zealously criticized the Spanish government in multiple posts on his Twitter feed. Moreover pro-Kremlin bots were spotted in the promotion of his posts (Assange's statements were circulated widely in Russian-language media as well).

Officially, the Kremlin supported the central government in Madrid. The official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Maria Zakharova [stated](#) that Russia in its relations with Spain proceeds from the unconditional principle of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of this country. A similar opinion [was expressed](#) by presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov, adding that "Russian authorities do not accept when someone assesses the working methods of the law enforcement agencies of the Russian Federation" (so, next time protests in Moscow or St. Petersburg would be dispersed and protestors arrested, Peskov or someone else close to the president will invariably play this card in response to Western criticism).

At the same time, it is important to understand that in the formation of the attitude of Russians to this or any other major event, a key role is played not by the officially voiced position, but by the one that is constructed by the mass media. Therefore, in the case of events in Spain, no one should be surprised that the pro-Kremlin information resources targeted at the internal audience were sending messages often contradicting their government's official position. "We say one thing - we mean the other" - a known formula, but the Russian government, having the control of television and an impressive proportion of print and online media, can use them to voice something, that for a variety of reasons, its own officials cannot voice.

In addition to obvious sympathies for Catalans who wish to secede from Spain, several repetitive positions are clearly discernible among the pro-Kremlin Russian media.

We warned them or the West is to blame for everything

The most often propagated idea in the pro-Kremlin media, from October 1 to 3, was the "Parade of sovereignty" as the logical consequence of Western policy of last decades. The mantra "The West is to blame for everything" is sold well in Russia and serves as a kind of vaccination that the authorities use to rally people around themselves and prevent the appearance of a desire to change the political course that Putin represents. The events in Catalonia became another reason to unleash anti-Western sentiments.

Pro-Kremlin media stressed that the West itself created the preconditions for separatist movements, and Russia has long warned about what it can lead to. Chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs Leonid Slutsky [said](#): "What is happening in Catalonia is partly a consequence of Western policy in the former Yugoslavia. It was in Kosovo that Pandora's box was opened". In most cases, it was the recognition of Kosovo that was portrayed as the "beginning of the end," but there were also more extravagant versions. A political observer of the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper [informed](#) readers that it all began with the collapse of the USSR, Yugoslavia and the reunification of Germany.

The logic of such statements remains a mystery, given the objective reasons for the collapse of the USSR and Yugoslavia, the suppression of rudiments of separatist sentiments in Russian regions. It is quite clearly

specious to draw direct parallels between Spain and, for example, the USSR (here everything is different: history, the logic of the functioning of the system, legal justification, etc.) But such publications are not about logic; their main goal is to play on emotions, exposing the "other" (the West) as the cause of all ills.

In the case of Catalonia, the pro-Kremlin media did not avoid conspiracy theories, according to which the fragmentation of European countries is a controlled process. For example, propaganda newspaper Vzglyad [released an article](#) with the headline "Spain will be sacrificed for the building of a united Europe", in which it is reported that Catalan separatism is, in fact, beneficial to the European Union, which allegedly is facing much skepticism over eurointegration, and "the authorities, even in spite of their own globalization beliefs, are compelled to reckon with public opinion". According to the author, under these conditions the European Union has only one way to achieve its goal (further integration) - that is, "to play on the contradiction between the interests of states and the interests of autonomies." Make a bid for the collapse of national states - to build the "Europe of Regions". Another conspiracy theory was [presented](#) by the director of the International Institute of the Newest States, Alexei Martynov. According to him the events in Catalonia resemble the revolution in Ukraine and were orchestrated by a foreign power. Struggling to name the precise culprit, a number of outlets have agreed that there is conspiracy in those events anyway.

The good old tale of double standards

For the last three and a half years, almost no political talk show on Russian television goes without a few mentions of Ukraine. Therefore, it is not surprising that the events in Barcelona were widely used once again to tell Russians about the "horrors" of the Ukrainian revolution, the "double standards" of the West and "Russia the savior".

Maxim Shingarkin, a deputy of the State Duma of the 6th convocation, [used](#) riots in Barcelona to justify the occupation of Crimea: "Three days of the Catalan referendum are sending us to 2014 and clearly demonstrate what would have happened in Crimea in the absence of "polite people," a reference to Russian troops without military insignia who effectively held the Crimean referendum at gunpoint. Especially popular were the accusations of the West's double standards - "Yanukovych was not allowed (*to put down the protests*), and the Spaniards were." Among other things, the Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Committee on Foreign Affairs Andrei Klimov [focused on this](#): "They, as far as I remember, urged Yanukovych to refrain from using force. They forced him to take the Berkut off Maidan, remove police and withdraw troops from the city. Here we see everything exactly the opposite: the arrival of troops, the national guard, the use of force".

Clearly they would have used any similar event in the same manner, only to tell the Russians once again about the "injustices" of Ukraine.

Highlighting the violence

Russian television met with cold silence the brutality that Russian police officers used during the dispersals and detentions of participants of recent anti-government rallies in Russia. There were neither detailed reports, nor many hours of live-feed from the streets, nor pictures of victims or detainees. Clearly, Spain is different. In this case, state run media could not get enough footage of police violence, effectively going into maximum emotive mode. Throughout the entire length of "Vremiya Pokazet" they broadcasted footage and videos of injured people, clashes between police and protesters on the big screen in the studio, occasionally interrupted by short interview clips from the scene. Already on the 4th minute of air time, the audience was shown a Catalan woman crying out to the international community and calling the Spanish state a "monster". This level of emotional intensity was carried out throughout the entire show. Other TV channels did not lag behind, highlighting the brutality of national guards, who were "beating everybody up".

In general, it cannot be said that this time the main pro-Kremlin channels were engaged in obvious disinformation. Clearly, police brutality was underway and that is of course reprehensible. But the events in Catalonia were depicted in a biased manner to cause as much intense emotions as possible. And a minimum of context was provided. This story clearly helps to reinvigorate and repackage the main Kremlin messages of the "bad West", "fascists in Ukraine" and Russia that "warned the West and was right about it".

None of this is new or unpredictable. That's why the story that is most surprising is not about the causes of the

Catalan crisis, the crisis of democracy, the West and Ukraine, but an article about the [consequences of the referendum for Russia](#): “This gives Russia an opportunity to play the unconditional chaos in Europe that will follow the collapse of the Spanish model. For it will drastically change the way the world sees Crimea, South Ossetia Abkhazia, Transnistria, the situation in the Donbas and the Russian-speaking population in Latvia”. What remains unclear is whether the “honest” journalist meant that as a coincidental consequence, or a desired end game.

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