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## “2014”: Putin’s Lies and Russia’s New “Doublethink”

by Evgeniya Bakalova

“WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, AND IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH”. The slogan from George Orwell’s “1984” dystopia appears to capture the state of Russia’s 2014 official discourse quite accurately. This has not gone unnoticed by public and academic spectators in and outside Russia: while Bild magazine is counting Putin’s lies in his recent ARD interview<sup>1</sup>, a Zeit article declares Russia itself to be a post-modern “lie”<sup>2</sup>.

In Orwell’s novel “doublethink” designates the power of “holding two contradictory beliefs”, “to tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them”. This state of mind does not come about just like that. In the novel it’s a product of intensive brainwashing, intimidation, and active training – all employed in order to reduce the “cognitive dissonance”, or mental discomfort, produced by holding conflicting attitudes and beliefs<sup>3</sup>. According to Leon Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory (1957), individuals confronted with psychologically inconsistent information, ideas or behaviors, will always try to make them more consistent: either by changing their behavior, or by changing their opinions in order to restore cognitive harmony.

About a year ago Carnegie’s Lilia Shevtsova suggested that the Russian regime was “decimating the Festinger principle” by widening cognitive dissonances instead of reducing them<sup>4</sup>. Some earlier studies concluded that the Russian elite with its long doublethink tradition inherited from the Soviet past was immune to cognitive dissonances altogether. Sociologist Alexey Levinson from polling agency Levada provided a thoughtful analysis of Russia’s “new doublethink”. In a nutshell: The regime prefers to talk to its “Western partners” in the universal language of democracy, human rights and freedom, while rejecting these very norms at home as rules dictated by the hostile Western hegemon. On the one hand, this is primitive hypocrisy, on the other hand – it’s a complicated cognitive combination, which, according to the expert, “mutilates the very soul of the people”<sup>5</sup>.

### Is Russia “Immune” to Cognitive Dissonance?

With such a troubling diagnosis at hand it might be worth taking an analytical dive into social psychology in order to try and analyze what exactly is wrong with Putin’s Russia. But first, let us briefly summarize what political

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## TAGS

scientists have to say about cognitive dissonance.

Hypocrisy, lies and "cheap talk" are not new to political science or international relations. Rationalist approaches see governments' strategic use of insincere rhetoric as a natural occurrence in the overall hypocritical context of world politics. Sociological institutionalists view hypocrisy as an inherent problem of all political institutions, which results from the contradictory aims of upholding legitimacy, while ensuring effectiveness. A shimmer of hope in the dark cynical world of politics painted by rationalists is provided by constructivist studies. Here it is argued that hypocrisy and political rhetoric might be used for short-term gains, but are self-defeating and ultimately "irrational" in the long-run. Moreover, within socialization research the concept of cognitive dissonance plays a central role in the so-called "spiral model" of human rights change, where it is treated as one of the mechanisms, pushing abusive authoritarian states from tactical "window-dressing" to actual compliance with human rights norms.

However, socialization research in general appears to have either over-estimated or misinterpreted the implications of Festinger's theory. According to a later study of Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) the probability of individuals changing their cognitive attitudes is reversely correlated with the pressure imposed on them to do so. This means that the utterance of counter-attitudinal beliefs or, put simply – lies, does not automatically produce mental discomfort. In the case of induced compliance (strong material or social pressure) cognitive dissonance theory doesn't apply – precisely because individuals possess an external justification for their actions. It is naïve to think that Kremlin's propaganda mouthpieces or ideological talking-heads, enthusiastically bashing the West while flipping through catalogues of elite villas in Southern France, would miraculously awaken from their delusional dream. They have their own reasons and justifications for manufacturing and spreading contradictory messages and even outright nonsense (some seen as ridiculous even by Kremlin officials). These justifications include material benefits, anticipatory obedience, conformism and simple fear in various proportions and in every imaginable combination. This is not to suggest that there are no convinced ideologists, who passionately despise the "decadent West" and truly believe in Russia's special path. They do exist and their voices are getting louder (although there is no consensus amongst them as to where that special path may lead or how to pursue it). But this piece is not about them.

More recent studies in the field of social psychology have revealed other limitations to Festinger's theory. It has been demonstrated, that attitudinal change *ceteris paribus* affects explicit, but not implicit attitudes held by individuals. It is no secret, that universal notions of "democracy" or "liberal reforms" possess the same basic meanings, but acquire different connotations in different contexts. Within the Russian post-Soviet context these have been largely associated with "state bankruptcy", "predatory privatization", international humiliation and a drunk and weak president as a cherry on top of the overall traumatic experience of the nineties. Moreover,

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regardless of personal and subjective experiences, the discursive linkages between "NGOs" and "foreign agents" or even "spies", "liberals/Westerners" and "the fifth column", "popular revolution" and "regime change" the Russian authorities and the state-controlled media have been carefully constructing throughout Russia's post-Soviet history have taken root in the minds of the people and are now being taken full advantage of.

It's not that the Russian regime is immune to cognitive dissonance (which would have indeed been quite disturbing in a "collective schizoprenia" kind of way) – over the years it has been working extremely hard to minimize its effects.

### Arguing with Putin?

Indeed, there is nothing wrong about calling a blatant lie – a lie. This has been explicated by the embarrassing exposure of fake satellite pictures presented on Russia's First Channel to prove that it was a Ukrainian jet which downed passenger plane MH17 in Eastern Ukraine. Or by Putin's own admission that there had indeed been Russian armed forces in Crimea after multiple assurances that the "little green men" uniform without insignia was purchased by self-defense militia in a local store.

Yet propaganda is unfortunately more sophisticated than that. It doesn't only operate with ridiculous, poorly photoshopped fakes (which it in no way shies away from), but profits from intricate combinations of truths, half-truths and lies. More worryingly, it makes exceptional use of diverging attitudes and perceptions towards seemingly evident truths and professes in the instrumentalization of logical fallacies. One of those, the well-known "whataboutism" is once again on the rise (as demonstrated by the striking use of the Kosovo precedent, which for years had been masochistically paraded as an example of the United States' and Europe's hypocrisy only to be recently invoked as a legal justification for Russia's own actions in Crimea). So, what next?

First, material and social pressure are very unlikely to induce actual attitudinal or behavioral change. Calls for the external isolation of Russia are good for internal audiences in the West, but if anything they alienate the Russian public, providing the authorities with indefinite proof of Western hostility towards the country. Dialogue is not a gift to be rewarded for good behavior and taken away as punishment for bad behavior. Under the current circumstances it's a necessity. Not for the sake of convincing or persuading Mr. Putin, who has drawn his own conclusions from the various exogenous and endogenous "traumas" of the past (Kosovo, Iraq, the "color revolutions" in the neighborhood, the "Arab spring" and the 2011/2012 protests at home, etc.), which have also largely determined his personal animosity towards the US and the EU. But for the sake of the people, who are being violently pulled from post-ideological vacuum into a new quasi-ideological brew of "hooray-patriotism" and anti-Westernism.

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However, here lies the second (greater) challenge. The moral and normative "truths" that have appeared consensual during the last two decades are not self-evident anymore – now less than ever. The public discourse and the society itself are undergoing a rapid transformation. The endpoint is uncertain, but the general direction is disturbingly clear. If previously the narrative was that of democratization, modernization and Europeanization "at Russia's own speed" and "on Russia's own terms", now it is one of relativation of European values and norms altogether. The fact that this narrative lacks a teleological core and resembles an excuse for the absence of an ideology, rather than a consistent ideology, does not prevent it from being the dominant one. And it doesn't make it any less dangerous. The combined mythological West does not enjoy the moral superiority it once did and the quality of the "better argument" will not be decided by the intensity of appeals to "the right side of history" or by harsher tones. The anti-Western aspirations which were formerly only activated during national emergencies, such as elections, or outside shocks seem to resonate well within the society. By dismissing the fears, frustrations and disappointments Putin has every now and then, first shamefully and then narcissistically, been exposing to willing and unwilling audiences at home and abroad as quirks of a single person, no matter how almighty that person appears, one is missing out on the big picture of public perceptions. These perceptions have been forming long before Putin took the reins, although state propaganda, which thrived during his rule, has indeed played a crucial part in manipulating them. And they are not likely to change overnight – with Putin or without.

Like it or not (I know, I certainly don't), Russia IS existing in a different discursive (not to mention social, political, economic and surely geopolitical) reality. Not talking to each other at all, or talking to each other through squeezed teeth in the old mentoring or accusatory tones will not bring us anywhere, but will further deepen mutual irritations.

Apparently, we will have to start learning to talk to each other anew.


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Gawronski, B., Strack, F. (2004) On the Propositional Nature of Cognitive Consistency: Dissonance Changes Explicit, But Not Implicit Attitudes, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(4), 535-542.

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Wähle den Monat



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1. <http://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/wladimir-putin/fakten-check-zum-putin-video-38601996.bild.html>
2. <http://www.zeit.de/2014/41/russland-wladimir-putin-politik-luege/komplettansicht>
3. Yes, I am aware of the fact, that Orwell's "1984" (1948) was written a decade before Festinger's "A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance" (1957) and that the concept was never mentioned in the novel.
4. <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=54539>
5. <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/65985.html>

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