

Project Aurelius

Project Overview:

Project Aurelius establishes and maintains the capability to increase the cost to the Russian leadership of sustained or increased intervention in the Syrian conflict by sensitising Russian public opinion to the opportunity costs of their government's intervention in the conflict.

1. Theory of Change:

Analysts have made a number of observations about the nature of the Russian leadership's propaganda efforts and foreign policy objectives.

Amongst these:

- **We know** economic conditions in Russia have been declining under Putin
- **We know** the Russian state seeking to distract attention from domestic issues by ramping up jingoistic sentiment
- **We know** the Kremlin's position is fragile. Whereas Russian audiences want to see their country projecting strength on the global stage, they do not want that to come at the cost of domestic prosperity or significant military cost.
- **We know** Russia's position in Syria is more costly and less successful than the Kremlin is admitting
- **We know** the Kremlin so tightly controls Russia's domestic media that public opinion remains unexposed to any depiction of events not in line with the government's wishes.
- **Therefore**, exposing Russians to the complicated reality their government faces in Syria is likely to complicate the government's present reliance on Syria as an "easy win" in terms of its wider domestic balancing act.

2. Methodology:

a. The basic mechanism to achieving Aurelius' theory of change revolves around leveraging the reality of Russian's Syria intervention as depicted in Syrian opposition media and presenting it to key Russian audiences, including mainstream news consumers.

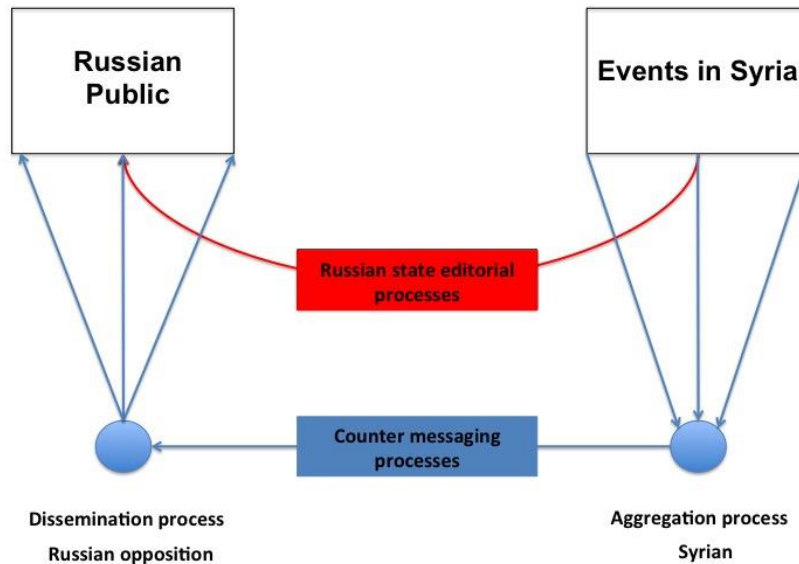
b. Assets: We have a number of assets already available to build this mechanism. These include:

- Access to opposition-made media products showing Syrian actuality that refutes Russian claims
- The ability to task Syrian opposition media activists to capture raw material that undermines Russian claims
- International communications specialists in Amman with the ability to establish and manage the effort
- Potential points of entry into Russian mainstream media:
 - o Russian activists based in Ukraine with access to foreign journalists and opinion influencers with media profiles
 - o Activists able to establish and run Russian social media pages

- Access to Russian opposition social media networks

3. Structures:

a. The structural overview is depicted in the diagram below



- b. The aggregation process involves a small team (possibly one person) in Amman compiling relevant - already published – products.
- c. The dissemination team is a collection of four Russian opposition activists with contacts with Russian opposition media, influential analysts, mainstream media and opposition networks.
- d. The dissemination team – headed by a lead activist – discusses product requirements with international specialists and decides weekly or daily needs based on Russian media environment
- e. Dissemination team draws up a distribution plan that aims to maximise negative impact on Russian narratives around the intervention in Syria

4. Operations:

- a. Aggregation Team
- Profile: a discreet presence in Amman. The team has no public-facing profile, as it has no public-facing function
 - Role: Monitoring multiple Syrian opposition media outlets, identifying products that undermine the Russian position, providing translations when necessary and sending on to the dissemination team
 - Membership:
 - International specialist as project director
 - Russian speaking aggregator and translator
- b. Dissemination team

- Profile: The dissemination team will be the primary and only public-facing element of the project. The team's public-facing profile will be that of a Russian anti-Kremlin activist collective. Individuals within the collective already have public profiles. The collective will not need a specific name or brand, but could stand up social media presences that have descriptive titles (e.g. "Syria Truth")
- Role: The team will analyse Russia state narratives around the Syrian intervention and request material from the aggregation team that undermines them. This material will then be socialised through social media networks, other activists and traditional journalists
- Membership:
 - Project manager: XXXX
 - Activist liaison: XXXX
 - Media/social media liaison: TBC
 - Fact checker/verification: XXXX

5. Financial administration

- a. A Syrian-run media activist group will be officially registered in Germany, where significant number of Syrian activists have taken up residence
- b. A Russian-run similar entity will be registered in Ukraine
- c. As a legal entity, the German registered organisation will be able to make payments to its Ukrainian counterpart. The payments will cover staff costs, running costs and necessary facilitation fees for traction with Russian media traction
- d. The initial funds will be paid into a Jordanian account. From there, they can either be paid directly to the German registered entity, or via a Syrian interlocutor, who ostensibly serves as a fundraiser, running crowd funding campaigns and eliciting donations from wealthy Syrians.

6. Operational Management

- a. Daily contact will be between Amman-based aggregator/translator and the project manager in the Ukraine. This will be conducted via Wickr
- b. Senior staff will provide strategic direction either via Wickr or secure electronic means. Contact will be with the Ukraine based project manager.
- c. The Ukraine-based project manager will be the only
- d. Further details of cyber security procedures, which will include secure laptops registered anonymously via prepaid credit cards, VPN systems and encrypted email and voice communication.

6. Processes:

- a. The dissemination team will carry out a narrative analysis using Syria-related material in the Russian media. As well as informing operations, it will be possible to produce daily and/or weekly analysis of coverage and narratives.
- b. This analysis will be discussed every morning with the Amman-based aggregator. Points of vulnerability of the Russian-state narrative will be

discussed. The aggregator will then identify appropriate Syrian opposition media products, translate from Arabic to Russian where necessary and post to a closed Facebook page/YouTube group. The Ukraine-based project manager, will pick the products up from the social media group.

- c. The Ukraine-based dissemination team will pick up the products and seed them to appropriate Russian opposition social media channels, opinion shapers, and traditional media outlets – as appropriate.
- d. The dissemination team will also have the capacity to develop some basic media products, such as infographics and rough-cut video products
- e. Information is used to generate opinion from experts, which can then be legitimately discussed by mainstream media
- f. Journalists engaged and sometimes facilitated to cover material

7. Russian media contacts

a. Opposition/liberal press: The outlets that comprise this section of the media environment are fairly small and tend to be registered outside of Russia. The audience is best-considered “alternative” and “intellectual”. Messages most likely to resonate will focus on the moderate and non-ISIL credentials of the FSA. Also, Syrian population’s growing hostility to Russia and Russians will provide raw material for anti-Kremlin views. Although this section of the media/popular opinion is not highly influential in itself, messages featured in this group can be leveraged elsewhere.

- Tier 1
 - www.openrussian.org
 - www.kasparov.ru
 - www.grani.ru
- Tier 2: Online media accessible through direct approach

b. Moderate opposition press: Comprised of outlets that are considered opposition, but are registered in Russia and therefore subject to Kremlin pressure. Intellectuals make up the largest segment of the audience for this group. Although the audience is small, it is influential amongst opinion makers, particularly in other media.

- Tier 1
 - www.echo.msk.ru
 - www.tvrain.ru
 - www.novayagazeta.ru
- Tier 2
 - www.newtimes.ru
 - www.znak.com
 - www.fontanka.ru

c. Objective press: This group contains Russian ‘neutrals’; those who are not convinced by the Kremlin’s arguments, but not automatically hostile to them.

Appealing to this group requires proof and fact. Arguments should be based around impact on Russia's wider interests; for example, the risk of increasing domestic terrorism or economic isolation on living standards. This section of the media landscape is the most professional. It might not have high audience figures, but information carried by outlets is considered credible enough by others to be reused or quoted.

- Tier 1
 - www.rbc.ru
 - www.newsru.com
 - www.rosbalt.ru
 - www.kommersant.ru
 - www.profile.ru
 - www.meduza.io
- Tier 2
 - www.livejournal.com/magazine

d. Mostly pro-government media: The audience for this group tends to be "patriotic" Russians of the lower socio-economic demographic. Sentiments are pro-authoritarian, pro-Russian imperialism and anti-Western. This group is the most closely aligned with the Kremlin's Syria policy. This is the hardest group to reach, but the impact on the government would be the most profound. This group may support present policy on the basis of the information they have, but that is not a guarantee that they will continue to support the same policies if they were seen to impact their immediate interests.

- Tier 1
 - www.mk.ru
 - www.kp.ru
 - www.lenta.ru
- Tier 2
 - Out of scope and interest

e. Directly controlled pro-government media: Direct transmission of coverage requirements is not possible, however, the project will be able to exert indirect influence with the aim of securing coverage of related events. The 'chain effect' is a likely approach. Using this method, the project will be able to seed information in the non-mainstream liberal press, analysts and activists will respond and the this section of the press can be persuaded to cover the response, thereby indirectly drawing attention to the original news/revelation.