

Media in the information war

The example of Alexei Navalny

by Robert Seidel

The Navalny affair cannot be understood in isolation from NATO's increasing preparations for war against Russia.

In many Western media, the name *Alexei Navalny* stands as an icon of resistance against an authoritarian Russian government. However, the professional media campaign around him is also part of a systematic and long-term PR campaign, which can now be seen for what it is: a kind of intellectual mobilization against a supposed bellicose adversary.¹ However, if you scrape just a little deeper and try to find out who Navalny really is, then the varnish quickly rubs off: he is a highly colourful personality with dubious political contacts, who can flit back and forth between Germany and Russia as freely as a bird.² It was therefore no surprise to learn, in early February, that a recent film contribution by him was shot not in Russia but in the German Black Forest, and directed by Western "specialists".³ Many "mainstream media"⁴ within the transatlantic sphere of influence, including the German-speaking newspapers *Die Zeit*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, did not seem at all bothered by these obvious contradictions.

Ready-made reports, photos and news

One-side reports, pre-packaged interviews and professional photo series have been circulated almost simultaneously by renowned news agencies. It is incredible to see with what regularity and in what prominent places these news pieces have appeared. The campaign intensified in January. Navalny's doings featured repeatedly on the front pages. Some media companies boosted the campaign with editorial contributions.

Preparing for war

NATO's deployment towards Russia's national borders since 2008 – slightly delayed between 2016 and 2020 – is now continuing apace. Bridges and roads in various European countries have been adapted to enable the transport of

troops.⁵ Legal restrictions have been lifted. Maneuvers are gaining momentum and edging ever closer to the Russian border.⁶ US nuclear weapons in Italy and Germany are soon to be modernized.⁷ Meanwhile, disarmament talks have been blocked by the US and are now only continuing pro forma. The new US administration comprises mainly hardliners. The name *Victoria Nuland* is representative of the confrontational course against Russia. As for the European Union, it hardly deviates from this US line.

Europe as battleground

One can easily guess which countries would serve as a future battleground. Certainly not North American soil. Senior German officers are already preparing for a situation in which Germany, as a hub for troops and materiel, could become a "target of enemy activity", and taking appropriate measures.⁸

PR campaign against Russia

The Navalny case can thus easily be seen to be part of a systematic, long-term PR campaign to prepare for war against Russia. This involves inciting and nurturing negative sentiment towards Russia and the Russian government. The massive journalistic effort devoted to the Navalny affair is thus not surprising.

Spreading negative associations

Media watchers point to a persistent negative slant in reporting on Russia, even in cases where the news itself is positive. Any journalist worth his or her salt knows how to arouse feelings and associations in order to achieve effect and to please (see *Claas Relotius* in *Der Spiegel*).⁹

Photos as part of PR work

The selection of photos also gives insight into the journalistic efforts of the transatlantic alliance: photos can show one side or another. But which ones are chosen for publication and how they are edited is not up to chance. If we take a good look at the pictures of Navalny that have appeared recently in the mainstream media, we

can see that they are not random photos, but professional shots.

If, on the other hand, a “normal” photo of Russia is published, then you can be sure that the text will be negative; or, vice versa, if the text is positive, then a negative picture will have been selected to accompany it.

Demonizing Russia

Day by day, the media churns out negative news about Russia, in all fields. The goal is to imprint an image on people’s subconscious. So what about all the positive news that goes unreported? The media is playing its role in the mental preparation for war. More specifically, it is getting public opinion ready by “demonizing the enemy”. Unfortunately, this negative image of Russia is being widely promoted.¹⁰ And depending on political need, this picture of the enemy can be stirred up or kept on a low flame. When emotions run high, political decisions can be implemented that would otherwise be totally unthinkable.

Some media are failing

The fact that large swathes of mainstream media are so fully towing the political line can be ascribed not just to the huge increase in marketing pressure and poor working conditions for journalists, but also to a decline in moral standards. The priority is no longer on searching for facts, but on forming opinions – along the lines that “anything goes” – which can later be used to justify certain actions. Whether in the individual case this stems from an exaggerated striving for recognition (see Claas Relotius), existential concerns or financial incentives is an open question.

Uncovering lies through competition

There is nonetheless cause for hope, thanks to recent, increased competition by a large number

of young, committed and independent online portals. Many of these relentlessly expose the big and small lies and the intentions behind them. It is thus hardly surprising that the very existence of these portals is increasingly being threatened by accusations that they violate “the rules of journalism”, and by the attempt to impose strict models of thought – in itself a blatant violation of basic human rights.¹¹

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ On PR campaigns, see for example: Becker, Jörg/ Beham, Mira. *Operation Balkan. Werbung für Krieg und Tod*. 2006 and Andreas Elter. *Die Kriegsverkäufer*. 2005. And on PR in general: the classic by Edward L. Bernays. *Propaganda*. (First published 1928, available in bookshops).

² <https://www.infosperber.ch/medien/medienkritik/journalistische-recherchen-sind-zeitlich-aufwendig/> 21.2.2021

³ <https://www.nachdenkseiten.de/?p=69226> 27.1.2021
<https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Nawalny-unter-hohem-Polizeischutz-in-Luxusresidenz-im-Schwarzwald-4929027.html> 15.10.2020
<https://www.anti-spiegel.ru/2021/neue-details-von-navalnys-film-ueber-putins-palast-zeigen-er-ist-made-in-usa/> 31.1.2021

⁴ See Krüger, Uwe. *Mainstream. Warum wir den Medien nicht mehr trauen*. 2016. idem. *Meinungsmacht*. 2013

⁵ See on Germany and NATO deployment: <https://www.luftpost-kl.de/>

⁶ <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/infrastruktur-ist-die-achillesferse-der-nato-15292734.html> 17.11.2017
<https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Die-riskante-Roadshow-der-US-Armee-rollt-article19489381.html> 6.1.2017

⁷ <https://www.voltairenet.org/article211839.html> 11.12.2020

⁸ See <https://www.german-foreign-policy.com/news/detail/8518/> 9.2.2021

⁹ See <https://taz.de/Relotius-Skandal-beim-Spiegel/!5595360/> 28.5.2019

¹⁰ See Hofbauer, Hannes. *Feindbild Russland*. 2016

¹¹ See <https://multipolar-magazin.de/artikel/neue-zensurbehörde.22.2.2021>