

EUROPE

RT Brings Its Russian Perspective to France

By ELIAN PELTIER DEC. 19, 2017

PARIS — Minutes after it began broadcasting on Monday night, the new television channel RT France took aim at the country and its president, Emmanuel Macron.

“President Assad accuses France of supporting terrorism,” the scroll at the bottom of the screen stated.

France and the United States are part of a coalition committed to removing Syria’s president, Bashar al-Assad, and Mr. Assad has accused France of merely prolonging Syria’s civil war, which has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives since 2011.

It was a classic rhetorical gambit by RT, the Russian public broadcaster formerly known as Russia Today, which is ultimately financed by the Kremlin. Detractors say that RT is part of a disinformation campaign that peddles exaggerations and untruths to undermine confidence in Western institutions and destabilize democracy itself.

“Ideally for the Russian authorities, the main goal remains to increase the public’s distrust toward their political elite and their media, in order to end up

paralyzing the decision making process,” said Julien Nocetti, a research fellow who specializes in Russia at the French Institute for International Relations.

Others said the launch of the channel could bring fresh air to a crowded yet homogeneous media landscape.

“RT France is going to reach a very limited audience and its repercussions will be minimal, but a contradictory voice never hurts,” said Thierry Vedel, a researcher on media pluralism and democracy at Sciences Po. He added that France’s four main news channels shared a similar agenda, making it unusual for them to provide innovative coverage.

“A new vision is always interesting, until it becomes dangerous,” he said.

A prerecorded interview of President Emmanuel Macron that aired on public television channel France 2 on Sunday night drew much criticism on social media for its soft questions and its obedient tone. On Twitter, a Paris correspondent for the Reuters agency called it “deferential journalism at its worst,” echoing a widespread feeling here that the mainstream media have been too complacent toward Mr. Macron, a young and media-savvy president whom critics call the “president of the rich” and who has openly argued that a powerful presidency is needed to revive French greatness.

“A day after the interview of the French head of state by the French state television, TV Macron has no lesson to give to TV Putin,” a prominent media critic, Daniel Schneidermann, wrote in a reference to the France 2 interview.

In response to increased wariness about their network, RT executives emphasized the need for an alternative take on international news.

With its slogan “Dare to question,” the channel will push viewers to think outside of what RT’s station manager and editor in chief, Xenia Fedorova, called the “information bubble of the mainstream media.”

“There’s always another side of the story, but there is a lack of that alternative point of view here,” Ms. Fedorova said in a phone interview, pointing out to the lack of coverage about Russia’s involvement in the Syrian war as an example.

The launch of the French channel has come under high scrutiny from national authorities.

At a joint news conference with Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin, in May, President Emmanuel Macron of France dubbed the network and internet news agency Sputnik as "organs of influence and deceitful propaganda," and accused their journalists of spreading "defamatory untruths."

Earlier this year, a United States intelligence report said the Kremlin-funded network used the internet and social media to conduct "strategic messaging for the Russian government."

"We will be constantly monitoring it," Olivier Schrameck, the head of France's broadcasting regulatory body, the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel, told journalists last month about RT's French channel, adding that it would react quickly in the event of any "anomaly."

Russia Today was founded in 2005 and launched RT US in 2010. It now has six channels that broadcast in English, Spanish and Arabic. The network says it reaches 700 million people in over 100 countries.

The French channel will operate with a budget of 20 millions euros and an expected staff of 50 journalists for a total of 150 employees both for the channel and the existing French website by the end of 2018. Around 50 journalists are already working in spacious, new offices that include a newsroom and two studios in Western Paris, close to the offices of the BBC and the French channel Canal+.

For its first day on air, the channel covered two years of Russian intervention in Syria and the increasing isolation of the U.S. after its veto at the U.N., among other topics. It broadcast a French subtitled version of RT's documentary "North Korea: The happiest people on earth," and aired an interview with the American filmmaker Oliver Stone about his documentary on Mr. Putin.

The channel invited former French presidential candidate and euroskeptic politician Nicolas Dupont-Aignan — who gathered less than five percent of the vote in the first round of the election this year. The channel provided little in the way of

on-the-ground reporting, except for street interviews that asked people in France what they thought of RT's launch in their country.

Most of the interviewees had never heard about RT. Media experts said they expected the channel to attract a limited audience for its first months on air: The channel only broadcasts on Free, France's fourth largest television operator. A second operator will host the channel by the end of February, while the two others, SFR and Orange, are still in negotiations with the network

Executives of RT want to tap into a growing audience in France, where it launched a website in 2015 that last year grew faster than any of RT's six foreign-language sites, a spokesman for the network said in March.

For its nightly newscasts, the channel's executives have hired Stéphanie de Muru, a former top host from BFM TV, France's leading news channel. Another notable hire was Jacques Sapir, an economist and editorialist who writes for the Kremlin-backed Sputnik news agency.

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