

# 'PRESS TOURS' TO OCCUPIED UKRAINIAN TERRITORIES

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Russia recruits foreign journalists for 'press tours' conducted in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

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The Kremlin's key objective is to reshape the Western public's anti-Russian attitudes and undermine support for Ukraine.

A significant setback for the Kremlin, resulting from its full-scale aggression against Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022, is Russia's isolation on the international stage. This has significantly limited its ability to propagate its views in the international arena, particularly in the Western information space. The almost overnight negative shift in Western public opinion towards Russia and the sanctions imposed on Russia's state media apparatus remains one of the Kremlin's greatest losses, which it is desperately trying to reverse. Especially since, in the Kremlin's view, reshaping the Western public's anti-Russian attitudes is a key factor in breaking support for Ukraine. One tool that Moscow has consistently used throughout the war to influence Western perceptions of the situation in Ukraine is the recruitment of foreign journalists for so-called "press tours" conducted in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

## JOURNALISM OR PROPAGANDA?

The primary role of these tours is to disseminate Kremlin narratives to the Western media through foreign journalists. These tours are presented to the participants as an independent and balanced opportunity to report on events in Ukraine. However, they have nothing to do with (free) journalism. The tours are conducted under the strict control of Russian authorities, and the resulting media materials are propaganda products based on Kremlin-fed talking points rather than an alternative journalistic perspective on events in Ukraine. Also worth noting is that the Russian state usually covers the expenses of these field trips in one way or another. In most cases, the travel and accommodation costs of journalists participating in the tours are reimbursed, but in many cases, the Kremlin also compensates participants financially for their "journalistic" contributions. While the media tours for foreign observers are sometimes organised through official Russian channels, such as the press services of the Ministry

of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, more often than not, various seemingly non-governmental aid funds and other organisations with ties to Russia take on the role of organiser. There are several reasons for this. On the one hand, it creates an additional illusion of the participants' freedom and independence. On the other hand, it provides a cover for the activities of Russian special services.

The core of participants in these tours consists of representatives of various Western fringe media outlets, often with a penchant for conspiracy theories, as well as various pseudo-journalist bloggers and social media activists. This is mainly because, due to its established aggressor image, it is very difficult for the Kremlin to sell its vision of the war in Ukraine to prominent Western media outlets. However, Moscow has developed a network of influence agents in the West over the decades, an essential part of which are various modern-day content creators.



Participants on a press tour with organiser Andrei Gromov (on the left).

Source: [www.oddr.info](http://www.oddr.info)

A prime example is the Centre for Geopolitical Expertise (Центр Геополитических Экспертиз), which operates under the guise of an international non-profit organisation. From the early days of the war, it actively brought together individuals hired in the West to communicate with the public. They delivered messages based on preset talking points regarding alleged crimes by Ukrainian authorities in Luhansk and Donbas. According to our information, the Centre has close ties to Russian special services, and Russian intelligence agencies have repeatedly used the Centre as a cover to get involved in organising press tours – to establish contact with potential participants, profile them and recruit them.

## WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THE PRESS TOURS?

While the tours have a marginal immediate impact on changing pro-Ukraine sentiments in Western public opinion, the Kremlin primarily uses this tool to disseminate false and distorted information in the Western and broader international information space. This helps blur the common understanding of the war in Ukraine and its causes.

**Moscow authorities create ‘independent’ witnesses out of Western media activists who have toured occupied Ukrainian territories. These witnesses can be effectively used to justify Russia’s activities in discussions on Ukraine within international organisations.**

Furthermore, the Moscow authorities create “independent” witnesses out of Western media activists who have toured occupied Ukrainian territories. These witnesses can be effectively used to justify Russia’s activities in discussions on Ukraine within international organisations. For example, using UN platforms, Russian authorities have repeatedly sought to convince the international community of Ukrainian war crimes and Russia’s role as a liberator, relying on statements from the very same Western journalists. This tactic is mainly targeted at countries in the “global South”, for whom Kremlin-aligned Western media activists are expected to illustrate conflicts in the Western community’s attitudes towards Ukraine. The aim is to influence these countries to adopt a more neutral stance on Ukraine and potentially even gain their direct support for Russia.

It is also important to consider Russia’s domestic propaganda, where any foreigner who nods in agreement with Kremlin talking points is a valuable tool for convincing the domestic audience of the authorities’ actions and maintaining the “fighting spirit” of Russians. Therefore, for many participants in the press tours, making appearances on Russian state propaganda television and radio shows, as well as various conference formats, is often a mandatory part of the package.

Probably believing that time is working in Russia’s favour as the conflict in Ukraine drags on, and that the West will sooner or later succumb to war fatigue, the Kremlin persists in laying the groundwork for this shift through press tours and other subversive activities.

## A SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE PRESS TOURS

Giannantonio Micalessin (Italy)	Il Giornale, La7 TV
Daniele Dell'Orco (Italy)	Il Giornale, La7 TV
Sonja van den Ende (Netherlands)	MR Online, Freesuriyah.eu
Miriam Mahmud (Netherlands)	Freesuriyah.eu
Thomas Röper (Germany)	Anti-Spiegel
Luciano Mastropietro (Italy)	Casa del Sole TV
Eleonora Fani (Italy)	Casa del Sole TV
Giorgio Bianchi (Italy)	La7 TV
John Mark Dougan (United States)	Badwolf.com
Robert Bridge (United States)	Strategic Culture Foundation, Geopol.pt
Claudio Beccalossi (Italy)	Il Giornale dei Veronesi
Luca Steinmann (Italy)	La7 TV
Dimitris Liatsos (Greece)	ieidiseis.gr
Slavica Milacic (Montenegro)	Modern Diplomacy
Igor Damianovic (Montenegro)	INS4
Darko Todorovski (North Macedonia)	Pogled, Antibellicat.com
Arnaud Develay (France)	Strategica.fr, 21st Century Wire
Eva Bartlett (Canada)	GlobalResearch, MR Online
Christoph Hörstel (Germany)	ParsToday, Kla.tv