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RUSSIA REPORT 1

PUTIN'S INFORMATION WARFARE IN UKRAINE

SOVIET ORIGINS OF RUSSIA'S HYBRID WARFARE

ISW
INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY OF WAR

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Maria Snegovaya is a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University (Comparative Politics and Statistical Methods), and previously a consultant at the Institute for the Study of War. Her academic research focuses on the prerequisites for the emergence of populist autocracies in the post-Third Wave of Democracy order, and the radicalization of party systems. She also closely monitors domestic developments within Russia and Ukraine in the context of international security, and regularly travels to Russia and Ukraine. Ms. Snegovaya runs a biweekly column at Russian business daily "Vedomosti," and regularly contributes to U.S. publications, including The Washington Post's political science blog the Monkey Cage, The New Republic, and The American Interest. Maria's articles have been referenced by, among others, David Brooks (The New York Times), Andrew Sullivan (The Dish), Bloomberg, The Economist and The Telegraph, and she is regularly invited to give talks at U.S. think tanks, including the Carnegie Endowment and the Wilson Center. She has also appeared live on PBS Newshour and Voice of Russia. Ms. Snegovaya earned her B.A. in Economics with honors and Candidate degree from National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow and her M.A. and M.Phil. in Political Science from Columbia University.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia has been using an advanced form of hybrid warfare in Ukraine since early 2014 that relies heavily on an element of information warfare that the Russians call "reflexive control." Reflexive control causes a stronger adversary voluntarily to choose the actions most advantageous to Russian objectives by shaping the adversary's perceptions of the situation decisively. Moscow has used this technique skillfully to persuade the U.S. and its European allies to remain largely passive in the face of Russia's efforts to disrupt and dismantle Ukraine through military and non-military means. The West must become alert to the use of reflexive control techniques and find ways to counter them if it is to succeed in an era of hybrid war.

Reflexive control, and the Kremlin's information warfare generally, is not the result of any theoretical innovation. All of the underlying concepts and most of the techniques were developed by the Soviet Union decades ago. Russian strategic theory today remains relatively unimaginative and highly dependent on the body of Soviet work with which Russia's leaders are familiar. Russian information operations in Ukraine do not herald a new era of theoretical or doctrinal advances, although they aim, in part, to create precisely this impression. Russia's information warfare is thus a significant challenge to the West, but not a particularly novel or insuperable one.

It relies, above all, on Russia's ability to take advantage of pre-existing dispositions among its enemies to choose its preferred courses of action. The primary objective of the reflexive control techniques Moscow has employed in the Ukraine situation has been to persuade the West to do something its leaders mostly wanted to do in the first place, namely, remain on the sidelines as Russia dismantled Ukraine. These techniques would not have succeeded in the face of Western leaders determined to stop Russian aggression and punish or reverse Russian violations of international law.

The key elements of Russia's reflexive control techniques in Ukraine have been:

• Denial and deception operations to conceal or obfuscate the presence of Russian forces in Ukraine, including sending in "little green men" in uniforms without insignia;
• Concealing Moscow's goals and objectives in the conflict, which sows fear in some and allows others to persuade themselves that the Kremlin's aims are limited and ultimately acceptable;
• Retaining superficially plausible legality for Russia's actions by denying Moscow's involvement in the conflict, requiring the international community to recognize Russia as an interested power rather than a party to the conflict, and pointing to supposedly-equivalent Western actions such as the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo in the 1990s and the invasion of Iraq in 2003;
• Simultaneously threatening the West with military power in the form of overflights of NATO and non-NATO countries' airspace, threats of using Russia's nuclear weapons, and exaggerated claims of Russia's military prowess and success;
• The deployment of a vast and complex global effort to shape the narrative about the Ukraine conflict through formal and social media.

The results of these efforts have been mixed. Russia has kept the West from intervening materially in Ukraine, allowing itself the time to build and expand its own military involvement in the conflict. It has sowed discord within the NATO alliance and created tensions between potential adversaries about how to respond. It has not, however, fundamentally changed popular or elite attitudes about Russia's actions in Ukraine, nor has it created an information environment favorable to Moscow.

Above all, Russia has been unable so far to translate the strategic and grand strategic advantages of its hybrid warfare strategy into major and sustainable successes on the ground in Ukraine. It appears, moreover that Moscow may be reaching a point of diminishing returns in continuing a strategy that relies in part on its unexpectedness in Ukraine. Yet the same doctrine of reflexive control has succeeded in surprising the West in Syria. The West must thus awaken itself to this strategy and to adaptations of it.

RUSSIA REPORT 1

PUTIN'S INFORMATION WARFARE IN UKRAINE:
SOVIET ORIGINS OF RUSSIA'S HYBRID WARFARE

By Maria Snegovaya

INTRODUCTION

The Kremlin has been implementing a novel strategic approach in Ukraine since at least February 2014 that depends heavily on Russia's concept of "information warfare." Russian information war is not information warfare as the U.S. thinks about it. It is, rather, part of Russia's method of conducting hybrid warfare, which consists of a deliberate disinformation campaign supported by actions of the intelligence organs designed to confuse the enemy and achieve strategic advantage at minimal cost. The nature of hybrid operations makes it very difficult to detect or even determine ex post facto when they begin, since confusing the enemy and neutral observers is one of its core components. It has become clear, however, that Russia is actively using its information warfare techniques in support of a hybrid-warfare effort to achieve its current objectives, namely the federalization of Ukraine or Kyiv's concession of special legal status to the separatist-controlled regions of eastern Ukraine.

Russia's information warfare approach is designed to work within the limitations of the 21st century strategic environment and within Russia's budget constraints. It is essentially an approach born out of weakness that provides greater flexibility against adversaries with much greater aggregate economic and technological resources. The novelty of this approach should not be overestimated, however, as it is fundamentally based on older, well-developed and documented Soviet techniques. It appears different today partly because of the new characteristics of the global environment. It makes use in particular of Washington's neuralgic need to justify its foreign policy and military responses in highly legalistic ways.

Disinformation serves the obvious purpose of concealing Russia's actual objectives. It confuses the enemy. It allows Russia to deny that its forces are present in Ukraine because its combat operations are hidden under an active propaganda campaign. It also creates diplomatic cover for Russia's military and foreign policy activities, thereby preserving the Kremlin's freedom of action. The disinformation campaign also makes it more difficult for military analysts to estimate the actual size of Russia's military presence in the conflict zone. Active disinformation therefore provides Russia with more flexibility in choosing methods to exacerbate the conflict in Ukraine and broadens the spectrum of potential diplomatic solutions it can pursue.

FROM RELATIVE MILITARY WEAKNESS TO HYBRID WAR

This more aggressive strain of Russian politics first appeared openly in February 2007, when Russian President Vladimir Putin gave his famous Munich Speech. In this speech, Putin asserted that Russia would no longer accept the U.S.-led, unipolar model of international relations and that Russia would implement its own independent foreign policy in pursuit of its geopolitical interests.[1] In the same month, Anatolyi Serdyukov became Russia's Minister of Defense and was tasked with fighting corruption and inefficiency in the armed forces. Serdyukov's appointment signaled a shift in Russia's offensive strategy that would ultimately incorporate information operations, but military reforms did not take place right away.

Full-fledged reform of the Russian military only started in 2008, when Russia's performance in the war with Georgia signaled the need for change. Despite Russia's success in evicting Georgia from South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russian forces suffered from outdated equipment and poor training when fighting the more technically advanced, Western-equipped Georgians. The Georgian war thus highlighted many of the shortcomings of the Russian military. By some estimates, Russian forces were responsible for the crashes of

three out of the four Russian aircraft downed in the conflict in part due to inadequate equipment.[2] Russian command-and-control structures lacked effective coordination. The military used Soviet-era mass-mobilization techniques that increased the number of Russian casualties. Russian forces often lacked necessary training because of the military's heavy reliance on conscripts. Technological deficiencies were also apparent, as Russian forces used Soviet-era weaponry that frequently broke down mid-conflict. While military officials had recognized many of these challenges in previous years, the war itself provided the impetus for reform, which began in 2008.[3]

The Kremlin examined its mistakes after the Georgian war. Looking at Russia's large-scale military operations in Chechnya and Georgia, as well as the responses of the West, the regime decided it had room for improvement.[4] In 2008, the administration raised military spending by almost a third and overhauled both the armed forces and defense industry in order to tackle Russia's post-Cold War military decay. The overall goal of the reform was to shrink the size of the army while making it more efficient and mobile. However, Serdyukov's reforms were not popular among Russian officers and he was replaced by Valery Gerasimov in November 2012. Gerasimov became the face of Russia's 'hybrid war' approach, which some assess to have been first applied in Ukraine in 2014.[5]

Russia's concept of hybrid warfare relies heavily on information warfare. Around the time Gerasimov replaced Serdyukov, Vyacheslav Volodin replaced Vladislav Surkov as the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration, a position that manages domestic opposition. The reshuffling at the top of both the Ministry of Defense and the Presidential Administration reflected the Kremlin's major rethinking of its future survival strategies. In Volodin's new administration political analysts worked to develop a response to anti-regime mobilization on the internet. The Kremlin's internet information campaigns, which target both the domestic Russian opposition and the West, lack innovation. In their initial stages, the campaigns were characterized by the meticulous mimicking of actions taken by the Kremlin's opponents. In its information warfare against the domestic opposition, the Kremlin extensively used this mirroring tactic on the "Runet" (the Russian web) with hashtags, trolls, hackers and direct denial of service (DDoS) attacks.[6]

The Kremlin uses the same mirroring approach in attacking the West. The publications of Alexander Bedritsky illustrate

this tactical dimension exceptionally well. Bedritsky serves as a director at the Russian Institute of Strategic Research (RISI), the Kremlin's think tank, which is headed by a former Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) officer. RISI directly consults with the Presidential Administration and was one of the most eloquent advocates of Ukrainian war. Bedritsky has written extensively on the use of information warfare against the West and even wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the issue. Moreover, most of his publications elaborate on the West's own information warfare tactics. Bedritsky's research could have been used in the Kremlin's information warfare campaigns. Nevertheless, Bedritsky's findings were far from innovative, as most of them paraphrase preexisting Soviet elaborations on information warfare.

MAIN PRINCIPLES OF INFORMATION WARFARE

Russia's modern information warfare adapts Soviet reflexive control to the contemporary geopolitical context. "Reflexive control" is defined as a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action," writes Timothy L. Thomas.[7] In other words, reflexive control is a method by which a controlling party can influence an opponent into unknowingly making bad decisions by interfering with its perceptions.[8] In the context of warfare, the actor that is most capable of predicting and mimicking the reasoning and actions of its opponent has the highest probability of success, as Thomas points out.[9] Vladimir Lefebvre, one of the premier Soviet scholars on reflexive control, wrote that "in making his decision the adversary uses information about the area of conflict, about his own troops and ours, about their ability to fight, etc. We can influence his channels of information and send messages, which shift the flow of information in a way favorable for us. The adversary uses the most contemporary method of optimization and finds the optimal decision. However, it will not be a true optimum, but a decision predetermined by us. In order to make our own effective decision, we should know how to deduce the adversary's decision based on information he believes is true. The unit modeling the adversary serves the purpose of simulating his decisions under different conditions and choosing the most effective informational influence."[10]

In his overview of Gerasimov's doctrine, Mark Galeotti provides a useful analysis of the Kremlin's hybrid war concept, which gives key insight into how the Kremlin itself conceptualizes information warfare.[11] First, as Galeotti points

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu (L) and armed forces Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov attend the 4th Moscow Conference on International Security (MCIS) in Moscow April 16, 2015. REUTERS/Sergei Karpukhin.

out, the Kremlin understands its position of military weakness vis-à-vis the U.S. and even a strengthening China and thus avoids direct confrontation.[12] According to Russia's military expert Pavel Felgengauer, the Kremlin has been planning for a global war around 2025-2030 and hence has been extensively redirecting its resources in preparation.[13] However, under its current resource constraints, the Russian military understands it would lose this full-fledged war. Hence, the Russian military compensates for its relative weakness with indirect, subtle strategies that aim to confuse the enemy about its goals. Confusing the enemy is key to Russia's information war concept. By this logic, the Kremlin will not acknowledge its presence in Ukraine unless it changes its strategic approach and, likely, its objectives there – as its secret nature is the main theoretical underpinning of this military art.

Russia also likely wages information warfare because it recognizes its position of relative financial weakness. Serdyukov's first reform turned out to be difficult and expensive and Gerasimov's

hybrid war, with its stress on disinformation strategies and non-military modes of warfare, represented a more cost-effective alternative. This may explain why Russia has shifted greater resources towards developing the asymmetric warfare capabilities of the Russian intelligence community, exemplified by tactics such as "spreading despair and disinformation, encouraging defections, and breaking or corrupting lines of command and communications."[14]

Second, another principle of Russia's new method of warfare is that, as Gerasimov wrote: the "war in general is not declared. It simply begins with already developed military forces. Mobilization and concentration is not part of the period after the onset of the state of war as was the case in 1914 but rather, unnoticed, proceeds long before that." [15] The case of Ukraine illustrated this point well. For example, the use of the "little green men," the masked soldiers in unmarked green army uniforms who first appeared during

Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, provided Russia with a military advantage in action. This deception gave the Russian military enough time to occupy and blockade most military bases in Crimea.

Third, as Galeotti describes, nonmilitary modes of warfare will play a key role in achieving political and strategic goals, more important than even military weapons. Any direct military action will be supported by active use of disinformation and special-operations forces. In Bedritsky's words, "military operations will constitute only a small and not the most important part of the information operations."[16] The Kremlin will resort only to open use of military forces, under the pretext of peacekeeping, crisis regulation and "humanitarian convoys" at a certain stage, in order to achieve ultimate success in the conflict. As Galeotti points out, this is precisely the tactic Russia used in the annexation of Crimea, when little green men were "duly unmasked as Russian Special Forces and Naval Infantry only once the annexation was actually done."[17]

Concerning information warfare, Gerasimov stresses that the "information space opens wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy. In North Africa, we witnessed the use of technologies for influencing state structures and the population with the help of information networks. It is necessary to perfect activities in the information space, including the defense of our own objects." The emphasis here is on the aforementioned close coordination of military, intelligence, and information operations in this new means of warfare. Galeotti emphasizes that in eastern Ukraine, this approach manifested itself through FSB penetration of the Ukrainian security apparatus, encouragement of defections, and monitoring Kyiv's plans.

"The Interior Ministry has used its contacts with its Ukrainian counterparts to identify potential agents and sources, the military has been used to rattle sabers loudly on the border– and may be used more aggressively yet–while the GRU not only handled the flow of volunteers and materiel into the east but probably marshalled the Vostok Battalion, arguably the toughest unit in the Donbas. Meanwhile, Russian media and diplomatic sources have kept up an incessant campaign to characterize the 'Banderite' government in Kyiv as illegitimate and brutal, while even cyberspace is not immune, as 'patriotic hackers' attack Ukrainian banks and government websites."[18]

These examples illustrate the use of disinformation in the context of Russia's hybrid warfare.

Finally, Russia's information warfare operations, unlike combat operations, do not attempt to contain the conflict and pursue its resolution in its early stages. Instead, these information operations aim to prolong the conflict by supporting one of the warring parties in a way that gives Russia the ability to influence the conflict more decisively at a time of its choosing and even potentially pursue regime change.[19]

OLDIE BUT GOODIE

Despite the attention the topic has received among the Western audiences, Russia's "newly" launched information war is no different from the disinformation instruments that were widely used by the Soviets against the West in the second half of 20th century. [20]

Today's Russian military system is characterized by an aversion to innovation. Predominantly, the system is composed of former KGB officers with particular views and preferences, which block innovative ideas and contribute to the institutional inertia that typifies the regime as a whole. Gerasimov himself stresses the lack of extraordinary people of bright ideas in Russia's modern military. The lack of innovation is probably one major reason why most contemporary research on information warfare in Russia combines previous Soviet military disinformation tactics ("reflexive control") and analysis of whatever researchers perceive as the "American" information strategies that incorporate some elements of the contemporary information environment (e.g. the internet, information openness, and social networks).

The concept of reflexive control has actually been in place for much longer than the contemporary concepts of information warfare and information operations. It first appeared in Soviet military literature 30 years ago.[21] The Soviet and Russian governments employed it not only at the operational and tactical levels, but also at the strategic level in association with internal and external politics. Although the concept is somewhat alien to the U.S., some Russians consider Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) as a classic example of US use of reflexive control, since the U.S. "compelled the enemy to act according to a plan favorable to the US."[22] The Soviet and Russian Armed Forces have studied the use of reflexive control theory at the tactical and operational levels, both for maskirovka (deception) and disinformation purposes, and potentially to control the enemy's decision-making processes. Since the early 1960s, many Russian prominent intellectuals have emerged in the field of reflexive control theory.[23]

Hence, contemporary Russia's information warfare mixes previous Soviet military disinformation tactics and analysis of the "American" information strategies with some constituent elements of the contemporary information environment. In fact, one could argue that the very perception of this information warfare as "novel" constitutes Russia's success with its disinformation campaign and public relations strategy, which over-exaggerates Russia's actual capacities and inflates its image to the point of perceived invincibility.

More accurately, basic analysis reveals that all of the main principles and approaches the Russian government utilizes today were taken from Soviet toolkits. For example, contemporary analysts describe Russia's current campaign of obfuscation as the 4D approach: "dismiss- as Putin did for over a month with the obvious fact that Russian soldiers had occupied Crimea in the Russian 'news;' distort- as an actress did in playing the role of a pro-Russian Ukrainian; distract- as Russian media did with ludicrous theories about what happened to Malaysian Airlines Flight 17; dismay- as Russia's ambassador to Denmark did in March when he threatened to aim nuclear missiles at Danish warships if Denmark joined NATO's missile defense system."[24] All of these principles existed for decades in the Soviet military disinformation doctrine as part of RC. In 1996, Major General Turko, an instructor at Russia's General Staff Academy, asserted that RC constituted information warfare: "The most dangerous manifestation in the tendency to rely on military power relates more to the possible impact of the use of reflexive control by the opposing side through developments in the theory and practice of information war rather than to the direct use of the means of armed combat."[25] Other scholars emphasize that the theory of RC is similar to perception management, except that it attempts to control rather than manage a subject.[26] Bedritsky also stresses this point: the key is "not to destroy the enemy's morale or psyche, but to form such a perception of reality that would be in line with our military goals, in our interests."[27]

The paragraphs that follow describe the components of Soviet information warfare in their direct correspondence with the 4D approach: [28]

"Power pressure, which includes: the use of superior force, demonstrations of force, psychological attacks, ultimatums, threats of sanctions, intentional portrayal of the government as risky, combat reconnaissance, provocative maneuvers, weapons tests, denying enemy access to or isolating certain areas, increasing the alert status of forces, forming coalitions, officially declaring war, support for internal forces that destabilize the enemy's situation outside of the battlefield, limited strikes to put some forces out of action, exploiting and playing up victory, demonstrating a capacity for ruthlessness, and showing mercy toward an enemy ally that surrenders."[29]

This approach manifested itself in Ukraine by the use of Russian troops without insignia, supporting the Ukrainian separatists in the eastern regions of the country, and subtly introducing Russian military officers and specialists into rebel units. Some U.S. military officials estimate twelve thousand Russian soldiers, including "military advisers, weapons operators, and combat troops" are active in eastern Ukraine.[30] The constant presence of Russian troops at the Ukrainian border constitutes the same tactics of power pressure. According to ISW analyst Hugo Spaulding: Russian-backed separatists have phased offensive operations in tandem with diplomatic negotiations since September 2014, often escalating operations before and after ceasefire talks with Ukraine.[31] This pattern of escalation is yet another manifestation of the same power pressure strategy aimed at forcing concessions from the Ukrainian government. Russia's nuclear rhetoric and threats serve the same power pressure agenda. The argument may be made that Russia has been relatively effective in its power pressure strategies by dissuading the West from arming Ukraine: its threats of further escalation deter Western leaders from supplying Ukraine with lethal arms (i.e. the tactic of "dismay").

"Measures to present false information about the situation, which include: concealment that serves to display weakness when actually having strength, creation of mock installations that serve to show force in a weak place, abandoning one position to reinforce another, leaving dangerous objects at a given position (the Trojan Horse), concealing the true relationships between units or creating false ones, maintaining the secrecy of new weapons, weapons bluffing, changing a mode of operation, or deliberately losing critical documents. These measures can effectively disrupt enemy objectives. Conflict escalation or de-escalation, deliberate demonstration of a threatening chain of actions, striking an enemy base when the enemy is not there, acts of subversion and provocation, leaving a route open for an enemy to withdraw from encirclement, and forcing the enemy to take retaliatory actions involving an expenditure of forces, assets, and time are all tools the Kremlin can use to this end."[32]

Russian domestic and international media channels actively misrepresent events in Ukraine, calling the Ukrainians 'Banderites' (referring to Ukrainian pro-Nazi World War II independence movement leader Stepan Bandera), describing

them as the fascist junta, and claiming they committed atrocities that never happened, the most notorious being the alleged crucifixion of a boy in the city of Slovyansk.[33] Some pro-Kremlin journalists went so far as to allege that Ukrainian forces were mailing residents of separatist-held Donetsk the severed heads of their relatives.[34] All of these activities illustrate this approach (i.e. "distract" and "distort").

"Influencing the enemy's decision-making algorithm, which includes: systematically playing along with what the enemy perceives as routine plans, publishing a deliberately distorted doctrine, striking elements of the enemy's control system or key figures in it, transmitting false background data, lying in wait in order to provoke a response, and other actions to neutralize the enemy's operational thinking."[35]

Russia carries out reflexive control in Ukraine by obfuscating its objectives and repeatedly denying its military presence in the country, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. [36] The absence of a declaration of war against Ukraine in 2014 also allowed Russia to limit the enemy's decision-making time. Through the unexpected launch of combat operations Russia ensures that "the enemy, when working out what seems feasible and predictable, makes a hasty decision that changes the mode and character of its operation" (i.e. "dismiss").[37]

The current 4D approach thus comes straight from old Soviet toolkits. Russia's current practice of establishing a web of foreign-language news outlets and sympathetic think tanks in Western countries, two measures that the Soviet Union also widely used, further demonstrates the similarity between contemporary Russian and Soviet disinformation tactics. Moreover, the active use of secret services in these tactics comes from the same Soviet propaganda machine.[38] According to journalist Luke Harding, "In fact, the 'little green men' – undercover Russian soldiers who seized Crimea – come straight from the KGB playbook. Putin's actions in Ukraine follow a classic KGB doctrine known as 'active measures.' The phrase encompasses disinformation, propaganda, political repression and subversion. The goal, then as now, is to weaken the West, create divisions between NATO member states, and to undermine the U.S. in the eyes of the world, especially the developing world."[39] The parallels between Russian and Soviet propaganda sometimes are striking. For example, in May 2015, Russia's TV channels broadcasted a report entitled "Warsaw Pact. Declassified Pages," a 40 minute documentary alleging that the CIA plotted an armed coup under the cover of the

Prague Spring – a 1968 political liberalization movement in Czechoslovakia. The report largely repeated all of the Soviet propaganda arguments made in 1968-69 in order to destroy the Prague Spring movement and justify the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia. The documentary also included footage that came directly from the respective Soviet propaganda films.

While the very concept of information warfare is quite old, today's Russian theorists emphasize the influence of the 21st century changes on the new campaign. Such innovations mostly have to do with technologically improved coordination and integration capacity and the new opportunities provided by network, grid, and internet technologies. Bedritsky stresses the key networking aspect of contemporary information warfare, which provides fast, efficient coordination between the military and other elements of the campaign.[41] He also points out that rather than improving the efficiency of traditional military operations, the new information warfare campaign will attempt to destroy pieces of the enemy's critical infrastructure. Hence, informational means such as cyber-attacks can cause the failure of power-supply facilities, transportation paralyses, etc. In this way, information warfare can induce the target country's political and economic collapse. In case of the Ukrainian conflict, the most innovative approach is probably the widespread use of internet technologies – hackers, bots and trolls. [42] Russian trolls are individuals in online discussion forums who try to derail conversations, spam them with indecent comments, spread misinformation and steer online conversations with pro-Kremlin rhetoric. By contrast, Russian bots are people or, more often, programs that automatically send mass spamming with short, sometimes identical, messages.

Some analysts argue that the equation of today's propaganda to that of the Cold War ignores a central shift in Russia's behavior, however. Russian trolls may be crass and unconvincing, but they do gain visibility by occupying a lot of space on the web. As Alexei Levinson argues, "Russia's new propaganda is not now about selling a particular worldview, it is about trying to distort information flows and fuel nervousness among European audiences."[43] Still, the approach is not novel considering that Soviet disinformation also often aimed to confuse the enemy. The Soviet Union also used a primitive propaganda and, according to former KGB general Oleg Kalugin, the overall goal was not far from the objective pursued by Russia's modern internet disinformation campaign, namely "subversion: active measures to weaken the West, to drive wedges in the Western community alliances of all sorts, particularly NATO, to sow discord among allies, to

weaken the United States in the eyes of the people in Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and thus to prepare ground in case the war really occurs." [44]

Another difference often pointed out by observers is that unlike in Soviet era, "information troops" are now the primary driver of Russian military aggression. [45] Unlike in the Soviet war in Afghanistan, many Russians volunteered to fight in Eastern Ukraine because they watched state television not because the military directly mobilized them. Television remains the primary information source for 90% of Russians and, according to some analysts, it surpasses the military as the driving instrument of Russian aggression.[46] Finally, the aggression has also taken forms unprecedented for the late Soviet Union, where state media tended to emphasize the "peace-loving" nature of the USSR. Some contemporary state television hosts offer to "burn the hearts of gays" and "turn America into radioactive ash" and suggest that Russia could send tanks to Warsaw. Such statements would have been unusual in the Soviet period, when propaganda functioned in accordance with a more restrictive set of rules. [47] This particular aspect of modern Russian disinformation does in fact mark a shift from Soviet disinformation tactics. The escalation of contemporary Russian rhetorical aggression in state media is unprecedented and dangerous. First, this rhetorical aggression suggests that the Russian authorities approve of further escalation of conflicts like the war in Eastern Ukraine. Second, it raises the possibility that Russian state media aggression could escalate in uncontrollable ways.

APPLICATION OF RUSSIA'S INFORMATION WARFARE

Russia's political and military officials have repeatedly denied the existence of Russian military operations in Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict. In January 2015, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov responded to an accusation that Russian troops were in Ukraine by stating, "I say every time: if you allege this so confidently, present the facts. But nobody can present the facts, or doesn't want to. So before demanding from us that we stop doing something, please present proof that we have done it." [48] Meanwhile, the facts are out in the open. [49] So why is Russia so actively denying its presence in Ukraine?

In his book about Soviet disinformation, a former Soviet intelligence officer and high-ranking defector, Ion Mihai, points out that a typical KGB campaign always involved the denial of its direct involvement. He writes that a three-pronged disinformation campaign precisely follows "the [three] KGB

rules for minimizing a national disaster: deny direct involvement in it, minimize the damage, and when the truth comes out, insist that the enemy was at fault." [50] From this perspective, Russia's actions in Ukraine meticulously follow this KGB toolkit, and do not necessarily target any specific objectives.

However, Russia's denials may indeed have a particular goal in mind. Since one main point of hybrid warfare in Russian doctrine is to avoid communicating one's actual goals, understanding Russia's strategy in Ukraine is a difficult task. Initially, Russia's invasion in Ukraine aimed to take control of several Russian-speaking regions to create a southeastern 'belt' that would link Crimea and Transnistria, but over the past 18 months, Russia's goals in Ukraine appear to have undergone a substantive evolution. Most analysts agree that at the moment, Russia's objectives include preventing Ukraine's accession to NATO and the EU, along with securing some degree of control over Ukrainian policy-making. Russia attempts to achieve the latter by demanding the federalization of Ukraine, or at least granting some special status to the separatist-controlled regions in Donetsk and Luhansk in the Ukrainian Constitution. It should be mentioned that this understanding represents only an assessment, because Russia is deliberately trying to obscure its goals to remain flexible, to preserve options, and to confuse its adversaries. But keeping this understanding in mind, Russia's application of these goals can be sub-divided into diplomatic and military approaches.

Diplomatic Applications

On the strategic level, the Russian government uses informational cover and consistent denial of its forces' presence in Ukraine to complicate the monitoring of Russia's actions and alter the enemy's calculus. For instance, despite numerous estimates, the exact number of the Russian military troops present in eastern Ukraine is still unknown, which complicates the Ukrainian military's analysis of the situation.

Not knowing Russia's true goals, the opponent is put in a position where he must guess them, which often gives Russian advantage. For example, with its true goals concealed, Russia can threaten the enemy to provoke a costly response. In Ukraine, the strategy provides Russia with a wider set of strategic goals to choose from. If one approach fails, such as, presumably, Russia's initial intent to create a Ukrainian land bridge between Transnistria and Crimea – the enemy will not necessarily perceive it as a failure, ensuring Russia's image of superiority.

Such an approach also facilitates the Russian exit from Ukraine in case Russia decides that its military engagement is no longer required or desirable. If Russian troops are not officially in Ukraine, it is relatively easy to withdraw from the country without significant cost. Some analysts point out that by consistently denying its presence in Ukraine, Russia mitigated the hard and soft power response of the international community, which might have led to disastrous consequences. Acknowledging Russia's presence in Ukraine might have forced international institutions to introduce a more severe punishment and might even have led to a full-scale war. [51] Instead, a consistent denial of Russia's military presence allows for more flexibility in resolving the Ukrainian crisis. According to some analysts, Western leaders prefer such situation too: "Western leaders may not admit it, but they want Putin to keep lying about the absence of Russian troops from the war. Once he stops doing that, a point of no return will be passed and the conflict will escalate until Russia, as the stronger side, wins a decisive military victory - or until the West drops its reservations and sends in troops, too. Both these scenarios would be disastrous for Ukraine".[52]

The approach may also help Russia claim legal justifications for its actions. Sam Charap, from IISS, points out that "paradoxically, Moscow could well be lying about its behavior in Ukraine not because it wants to destroy the international system but because it wants to preserve it; hypocrisy, after all, is the homage vice pays to virtue. As the legal successor of the Soviet Union, Russia was one of the system's architects. It is a veto-wielding permanent member of its central decision-making body, the UN Security Council. The Kremlin sees itself as behaving much like Washington, which devises clever legal arguments for what are considered in Moscow major instances of rule-breaking; the invasion of Iraq, say, or the recognition of Kosovo. Many in the Kremlin would say great powers can and do break the rules - but they must cloak their violations in rhetoric to prevent others following suit." [53] This point makes particular sense under the earlier consideration namely that the Kremlin often attempts to mimic the precedents set by the U.S. Under such a framework, Russia mimicked Kosovo's precedent of unilateral secession, which was later recognized by the United Nations, in the annexation of Crimea.[54] Thus, despite the role of Russia's military in overthrowing the Crimean government prior to its declaration of unilateral succession from Ukraine, the Kosovo precedent gave Russia pseudo-legal grounds to justify its annexation of the peninsula. Unlike Crimea, there was no legal precedent that could be construed as relevant to its combat operations in Donetsk and Luhansk, which Russia seeks to use as instruments of political influence within Ukraine rather than annex. The absence of a precedent like Kosovo for its operation in eastern Ukraine likely explains why Russia has denied its presence in Donetsk and Luhansk instead of attempting to justify it.

Putin has an affinity for juridism or the use of formal documents to justify his actions, as Fiona Hill and Cliff Gaddy argue in their book on the Russian leader.[55] From a purely legal perspective, Russia's actions in Ukraine do not cross the threshold of international conflict despite ample evidence demonstrating Russia's military involvement in the country. Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine also fail to meet the law of belligerent occupation, which applies only when the following circumstances prevail: 1) that the existing government structures have been rendered incapable of exercising their normal authority; and 2) that the occupying power is in a position to carry out the normal functions of government over the affected area. To prove that Russia is occupying eastern Ukraine "it must be proved that the State wields overall control over the group, not only by equipping and financing the group, but also by coordinating or helping in the general planning of its military activity."[56]

So far, the documented degree of Russian involvement in Ukraine is insufficient to meet the overall control test. Although the evidence is enough to prove Russia finances and equips the pro-Russian separatists, it is insufficient to meet the requirements of organizing, coordinating and/or helping in planning military activities. In sum, from a purely legal perspective, the conflict between the Ukrainian government and the pro-Russian separatists is an internal conflict, not an international one.[57] That, in turn, tremendously benefits Russia, which is formally able to present itself as an outside observer, rather than a party in the conflict. This strategy provides Russia with enhanced influence in international organizations, as illustrated by the February 2015 "Minsk II" ceasefire agreement. Russia, as one of the signatories of "Minsk II" (and not one of the belligerents), does not formally have any obligations to fulfill the agreement, while Ukraine shoulders a major burden of responsibilities.

Russia's legal status as an influential outside observer rather than a belligerent enables it to pursue a variety of possible exit strategies and peace settlements. The current "hybrid peace" that has replaced the earlier "hybrid war" allows Russia to shift from combat operations to non-military modes of war such as economic coercion in order to continue pursuing institutional change in Ukraine. Again, under the Minsk accords, Russia, as one of the signatories rather than a warring party, formally bears no responsibility for the settlement. [58]

Some analysts believe that such information warfare strategy allowed Russia to successfully "undermine Western enthusiasm for direct involvement, at least until the tragic blunder of the downing of Malaysian Air flight 17."[59] It is likely that Russia's current hype over the NATO nuclear threat serves the same purpose – to portray the government's actions as unpredictable, and to use informational power to deter the enemy from conflict escalation.

Military Applications

On the tactical level, information warfare allows Russia to achieve surprise in the time or manner of an attack. Russia thereby gains time and efficiency against the enemy's ground forces. Since, officially, the war in Ukraine is not declared, and the separatists conduct high-intensity operations in short bursts that limit the amount of time that the United States has to respond before the situation goes quiet, the enemy is usually taken by surprise and/or presented with an erroneous or incomplete image of the situation. This factor has helped Russia's successful operation in Crimea with very few casualties. The problem with that approach, though, is that as the West understands Russia's tactics better, the advantage of novelty in Russia's approach to Crimea is less likely to benefit its next adventure.

Informational cover provides more flexibility and efficiency to the military, improves speed of maneuverability and the speed of battlefield responses. For example, the initial denial by the Russian chief commanders of the presence of the Russian soldiers in Crimea allowed Russia to gain time to take over strategic positions in Crimea. Since the start of the Crimean campaign President Vladimir Putin repeatedly denied that the men in green were part of Russian Armed Forces, insisting they were groups of local militia who had obtained their weapons from Ukrainians and even suggesting that they may have acquired their Russian-looking uniforms from local shops. [60] Only on April 17, 2015 did he finally publicly acknowledge that Russian Special Forces were involved in the events of Crimea. [61]

The informational cover also offers the military more autonomy – which is in line with the new realities of combat, when the greater precision and autonomy of the troops is in more demand than ever before in Russian history. "Spetsnaz, like the VDV Airborne troops of the Naval Infantry marines, represent an 'army within an army' able to operate professionally, decisively, covertly, if need be, and outside Russia's borders." [62]

Further development of such tactics could allow Russia to reduce the numbers of troops and the amount of equipment used in operations, according to Bedritsky, in the vein of many other military reforms in history.[63] Consequently, Russia will also be able to manage defense expenditures, while limiting the enemy's capacity to counter compact, dispersed units (in particular, these units render the use of heavy weapons and weapons of mass destruction inefficient). It will also permit Russia to avoid clashes with heavily armed, but less mobile parts of the enemy and quickly neutralize or eliminate these units' command structures, paralyzing resistance.

IS RUSSIA 'WINNING' ITS INFORMATION WAR?

The military and strategic objectives of Russia's information campaign include confusion, obfuscation and constraining U.S. decision-making. Russia's assessed goals (federalization of Ukraine, or special status of Donetsk and Luhansk separatist-controlled regions) represent a substantive change from its previous objectives because of the failure of previous efforts. If anything, at this point the success of Russia's information warfare seems limited.

A Russian information campaign is most effective at the early stages of a combat operation, when it provides cover for rapid military actions. Galeotti, in his comparative overview of Russia's actions in Crimea and the Luhansk and Donetsk regions of eastern Ukraine, points out that the element of uncertainty present in the annexation of Crimea injected doubt into both Kyiv and NATO's calculations.[64] He also notes that "deliberate maskirovka or deception operations" presented the Russia and pro-Russian factions in Crimea the opportunity to assume strategic positions on the peninsula.[65] However, Russia has lost this opportunity in its operations in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. Russian troops were unable to penetrate these regions as promptly as in Crimea due both to the lack of military resources (the best forces were kept in Crimea) and to Russia's overestimation of the support it would receive in eastern Ukraine. Galeotti also points out that the political disorder in Kyiv, which helped Russia in the Crimean operation, now plays against it, since the Ukrainian government is not capable of making the concessions Russia demands due the existential threat it would face from its domestic opponents.[66]

At the later stages of a combat operation, it is more difficult to assess the efficacy of a Russian information campaign. Once the initial effects of unpredictability and confusion wear off, the credibility of the side applying disinformation

Russia's President Vladimir Putin (front) addresses the audience during a rally and a concert called "We are together" to support the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea to Russia, with Crimea's Prime Minister Sergei Aksyonov and parliamentary speaker Vladimir Konstantinov (L) seen in the background, at the Red Square in central Moscow, March 18, 2014. The words in the background read, "Crimea is in my heart!" REUTERS/Maxim Shemeto.

starts to decline dramatically. As a report by NATO StratCom Center of Excellence points out, the evolution of the crisis in Ukraine beyond Crimea demonstrated that "disinformation campaigns erode over time as more and more evidence is revealed to negate lies and falsifications, hidden information is discovered, anecdotal mistakes are made by the less wary (the cases of Russian soldiers' photos on social media were a recent illustration of how "best kept secrets" can become known to the world in extremely short periods of time)."[67] At the moment, the evidence regarding the presence of Russian forces in Ukraine has become overwhelming.

However, one could argue that Russia's information campaign did achieve partial success by obfuscating its goals in Ukraine. As stressed above, Russia's denial of its military presence in Ukraine did provide it with a larger toolkit to shape the outcomes of the crisis. While the Kremlin's information campaign serves as cover for its military operation in Ukraine, on the diplomatic level it expands the spectrum of Russian exit strategies from the conflict as well as peace settlements. First,

Russia has managed to avoid a larger confrontation with the West despite having committed severe violations of international law. Second, since the conflict in Ukraine still lacks recognition as an international conflict, Russia is not acknowledged as a belligerent in the Minsk ceasefire agreements, and so the burden of fulfilling the agreement largely lies on the Ukrainian government. At the moment, Russia is succeeding somewhat in imposing its will on Ukraine, exemplified by the Ukrainian parliament's initial backing of Constitutional amendments to ensure special status of the separatist-held territory of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.[68]

The Limits of the Russian Information Campaign

However, Russia's propaganda campaign has not been particularly successful writ large. RT and other Russian propaganda channels insist that the Western audience craves alternative information sources.[69] In his book, Lukas Alpert explained how RT reached out to disaffected citizens in Europe and North America from both the political left and right by combining "clever use of the internet, conspiracy theories and a willingness to confront issues ignored by traditional media."[70] However, at least in the U.S.,

RT was particularly successful in gaining popularity prior to the military escalation in Ukraine. Afterwards, its reputation suffered a major blow due its biased coverage of the conflict, which did not go unnoticed by the audience.

Outside of Russia, where the citizens are largely deprived of alternative information sources, the Kremlin failed to impose its viewpoint on both the population of government-controlled Ukraine and the wider world in ways that seriously shifted perceptions. Surveys expose limitations of Russia's propaganda machinery within Ukraine. In April 2014, Gallup polls found that only 2 percent of Ukrainian respondents named Russian federal broadcasters among their three most important sources of information. Such low figures demonstrated the success of an order imposed in March 2014, which banned these channels on Ukrainian cable networks. In fact, the Russian news channels that enjoyed a weekly reach of almost 19 percent in Ukraine in 2012, now are reduced to around 9 percent. In addition, most Ukrainians are skeptical about the objectivity of Russian news reporting: just 30 percent of adults (excluding Crimea) said they trusted Russia's television channel, Pervyy Kanal, 'a great deal' or 'somewhat.' Likewise, cross-border information flow failed to generate a majority of support for Russia's behavior towards Ukraine in any region besides Crimea. Russia's role in the crisis was perceived as 'mostly positive' by only 35 percent of respondents in the East and 28% in the South of Ukraine. In the Center, West and North, less than 3 percent of respondents considered Russia's role to have been 'mostly positive'.[71]

If Russia's strategists hoped to use their TV campaign for 'soft power' they failed to do so. Most Ukrainians do not want what the Russian government wants, as demonstrated by their consistent aversion to the idea of federalization. Analysts even point out that in Ukraine, Russian propaganda localized dissent rather than making it massively attractive. However, one cannot ignore the possibility that destabilization might well be one of Russia's goals.[72]

Similar failures are present in Western countries as well, where, for example, RT, following the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, was unable to sustain a good reputation. An increasing number of analysts point out that RT's power to shape the narrative in the West is overstated. According to Kevin Rothrock, project editor of RuNet Echo: "People cite the fact that RT is able to slip in some misinformation when a story breaks. Then it's proved wrong and Russia is embarrassed and vilified once again…The whole campaign is just to stay relevant and keep Western media pumping out the anti-Russia stuff. Then they can cherry-pick from all the rage and sell it back to the domestic news audience, where they have a media monopoly. But in the open market of journalism, in the West, Russian propaganda is worthless."[73]

Again, the situation is reminiscent of the KGB tactic of dramatically overstating the success of their disinformation campaigns in order to boost personal promotions or remunerations. [74] A recent closure of a New York-based Russian think tank, headed by Andronik Migranian, illustrates Russia's at least partial acknowledgement of its failure to effectively shape U.S. public opinion.

The situation might be slightly different in Western Europe, especially in Germany, where Russia's propaganda effectively targets European anti-U.S. sentiment and Germany's post-WWII guilt complex towards Russia. A number of leading German media, for example, have helped spread many of the Kremlin myths in one form or another. The case is either that Germans are supersensitive to anything related to nationalism (the post-war syndrome of the Second World War) or a result of the 'close connections' between the German media and the Russian authorities. The fact remains that a number of German (though not only) media on their own [initiative], under the influence of the propaganda, retranslate messages that fully reflect the Russian policy on Ukraine.[75]

In 2014, an investigative report by the newspaper Welt am Sonntag revealed how a shady network of Russia supporters had shaped public discourse in Germany. Even dialogue forums with Russia, co-sponsored by the German government, were full of friends of Mr. Putin, even on the German side.[76] And yet, when in 2014 companies like Siemens, E.ON, gas companies and machinery companies - traditional lobbyists of pro-Russian policies in Germany - tried to lobby against anti-Russian sanctions, they were completely ignored by the German government.

Gemma Pörzgen, a German journalist who has published extensively on Russia's media campaign, argues that in Germany, Russia's propaganda is mostly unsuccessful. In Germany, RT Deutsch only broadcasts on the internet, and does not have access to main TV channels (with occasional minor exceptions), offering a professionally weak "trash TV" without substantive audience outreach. German hosts and journalists working on RT Deutsch are not recognizable in Germany, unlike the US version of RT, which has featured well-known figures like Larry King and Julian Assange. Press coverage about the program has been very critical from the very beginning and has created a very negative image of the program. It is hard for RT Deutsch to find serious interview-partners as politicians, scientists or spokes-persons. RT Deutsch has about 107,000 followers on Facebook and 7,500 followers on Twitter, far less than the English page of RT, which has about 3 million followers on Facebook.[77]

According to Pörzgen, many of RT Deutsch publications are perceived as purely propagandist, and hardly improve Russia's image in Germany.

Another tool of Moscow's information campaign – Sputnik Deutschland News Agency, previously known as Voice of Russia (~5,500 Twitter followers and 108,500 Facebook followers), provides higher quality news, but is hardly known in Germany since it only broadcasts at a local level with negligible reach. It failed to get access to radio frequency waves, and only constitutes a part of some regional digital radio programs. A third element of the Kremlin information campaign, "Russia Beyond the Headlines," which is now being distributed as a PR-supplement to the economic daily "Handelsblatt," does not enjoy large outreach either. The more influential German daily "Süddeutsche Zeitung", which previously distributed the same PR-supplement, produced by "Rossiyskaya Gazeta" in Moscow, with a different title "Russia Today", stopped the supplement in the wake of the Ukraine crisis.[78]

Overall, the current degree of effectiveness of Russia's propaganda in Germany is hard to estimate, but it can hardly be called successful. According to a June 2015 Pew Survey, fewer than three-in-ten Germans (27 percent) hold a favorable view of Russia. Although this assessment has improved 8 points since last year, it was still down from a recent high of 50 percent in 2010.[79] Opinions of Putin and Russia's actions in Ukraine (including the of downing flight MH17 by pro-Russian separatists) are also at their lowest levels for the last decade.

In general, the effect of Russia's international media outreach is currently less than it should be, considering the funds the Kremlin has devoted to it. Although it is hard to calculate RT's global audience, many experts agree that the numbers are surprisingly low, given the amount of effort RT has put into using the internet to reach out to a younger, more tech-savvy audience. According to a Nielsen study, the weekly audience of RT more than doubled in seven major U.S. cities to 2.8 million viewers.[80] According to a survey by Ipsos EMS in 2015 RT has become the fastest-growing international TV channels in Western and Central Europe. In 21 European countries RT weekly audience increased by 24% (985,000 people).[81] However skeptics argue that "the station often boasts of its availability (85 million households in the U.S.) rather than its viewership figures, which are difficult for ratings monitoring organizations like Nielsen to track due to the relatively small audiences

for international news channels. One way to measure RT's relative reach is to look at its popularity on social media: RT's official Twitter account has 815,000 followers, compared to 8 million followers of BBC World News and the 14.9 million CNN's 14.9m followers. On Facebook the station fairs slightly better but still loses out to competitors by a huge margin. RT has around 2.2 million fans on Facebook, compared to the 8.7 million and 16 million fans of BBC World News and CNN.[82] The most successful period of RT has likely passed. Its audience has drastically shrunk following the Ukrainian crisis and unfavorable view of Russia spreading around the world.[83]

CONCLUSION

The information war and the war in Ukraine are by no means over; Russia is re-accumulating forces to strike again. Hence, it will keep learning, and is likely to come up with more sophisticated informational tactics.

Russia will attempt to continue informational warfare in the future, albeit through potentially more subtle means, even though the strategy failed to meet some of its goals. Among other approaches, it will keep using its Security Service very actively to influence Western decision-making. Instead of using Andronik Migranyan, who has never been respected in the U.S. policy-making circles, a more subtle cooptation of Western think-tanks will continue.[84] In the future, a continued de-escalation in Ukraine and Western conflict fatigue might benefit the Russian side as well by providing more fuel for its disinformation.

In seeking to improve, Russia would have to centralize its information techniques and increase its coordination among different propaganda centers. One of the biggest reasons for the limitations of Russia's disinformation campaign is the campaign's extremely decentralized tactics– multiple pro-Kremlin agencies are responsible for generating poor-quality English, German, and Finnish-speaking internet trolls. The multiple excuses of various pro-Kremlin companies attempting to fabricate evidence of downing the Malaysian Airlines Flight17 to blame Ukraine is the most illustrative example of such coordination failures. The disinformation campaign failed to establish a unified alternative hypothesis for how the plane crashed. At least two alternative theories were put forth by the Russian government: 1) that a Ukrainian Su-25 fired an air-to-air missile at MH17 and 2) that a Buk fired from ATO-monitored terrain shot down the airliner.[85] Former separatist leader Igor Girkin ("Strelkov") even

suggested that the plane was flying with dead people aboard before it crashed. [86] Along with that, multiple poorly faked pieces of evidence were generated by numerous pro-Kremlin agencies, culminating with a pro-Kremlin broadcasts on a major TV channel showing a poorly doctored photo of an Su-25-firedmissile, which was immediately discredited on the web. If anything, the abundance of poor-quality fakes impeded Russia's goal and convinced the Western public that Russian-backed militants downed the plane. The Kremlin will probably re-analyze these failures in order to come up with a more unified approach to disinformation in the future. Indeed, it is ironic that Russia failed so badly in the very network coordination issue Bedritsky emphasized so strongly as one particular innovation of the new century of information warfare.

Overall, the above analysis suggests that the novelty of Russia's information warfare is overestimated. Most of the allegedly 'new' approaches come from the Soviet toolkit, and if anything, they are implemented with poorer quality and decreased efficiency. For the U.S., NATO, and Ukrainian forces dealing with Russia's use of information warfare, this means that addressing the problem requires calling to mind approaches used by the West in addressing the Soviet disinformation campaigns during the Cold War.

Fundamentally, the goal of hybrid warfare is to take advantage of the domestic weaknesses of other countries. Russia's disinformation works only where it finds prolific ground; not as much due to its own efficiency, but due to the failures and internal problems of Ukraine and Western countries, such as cooptation of policy-makers, anti-U.S. sentiment, corruption, frustration with capitalism, failure to implement reforms and achieve transparency. A European Union diplomat in a private conversation recently suggested that while in countries like Czech Republic the influence of RT or Sputnik is insignificant per se, the real danger comes from the "useful idiots": people supporting left ideologies, unhappy about the EU integration and the U.S.'s international role, or nostalgic about Communism who often become susceptible to Russia's propaganda. Likewise, a German journalist Gemma Pörzgen suggests that Russian propaganda is much more effective in influencing a broader public through certain opinion-makers, anti-Ukrainian books and a concerted anti-media campaign.

Hybrid warfare relies for success on taking advantage of the vulnerabilities of a stronger adversary. Russian information warfare, particularly the doctrine of reflexive control, is a critical component of Russia's hybrid warfare. It plays on the reluctance of Western leaders and peoples to involve themselves in conflict by surrounding the conflict with confusion and controversy. Like a good judo move, it works best when it helps push the adversary in a direction in which he wanted to go in the first place. In the case of Ukraine, the West prefers inaction, and Russia's information operations have provided support to the policy of inaction. They have been successful in this regard: the West has largely refrained from meaningful intervention despite Russia's multiple violations of international laws, its support for the first major mechanized war on the European continent since 1945, and the steady destruction of a Ukrainian state that had been seeking to join the European Union and NATO.

But this reflexive control strategy was aimed at preventing the West from intervening in Ukraine rather than at accomplishing objectives within Ukraine itself. It bought Putin plenty of time and space in which to operate in Ukraine, but he could not convert that opportunity into success because of failures on the ground. Miscalculations regarding the degree of active support the separatists would receive and the benefits of inducing disruption and paralysis in Kyiv have led to a difficult stalemate rather than the rapid success Putin initially sought. But the protraction of the conflict in the current state generally reduces the effectiveness of Russian information operations that were not designed for a long fight in this case. Putin has a wide variety of options—the nature of this form of hybrid warfare is to preserve and expand options—for abandoning the conflict or recalibrating or even fundamentally changing his approach. Most importantly, he retains the initiative while his opponents continue to flail in reactive confusion.

Recognizing the limitations of Russia's hybrid warfare is as important as recognizing its strengths, however. Its success depends heavily on certain conditions holding in the minds of the adversary. Were the West determined to resist Russia's destruction of the Ukrainian state, the dissimulation and confusion Putin has spread would have much less effect. The hybrid strategy will always pose significant challenges to the West, and it must be much more alert to the indicators of Russian attempts at reflexive control. But the West is not helpless in the face of such a strategy either. It can and must, in fact, develop a theory and doctrine of its own to counter it.

Layout by Casey Jaquez

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