

SPECIAL
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per

Concordiam

Journal of European Security and Defense Issues

COUNTERING RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA



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GEORGE C. MARSHALL EUROPEAN CENTER FOR SECURITY STUDIES

Welcome to this special edition of *per Concordiam*. In this issue we discuss some of the arguments and debates related to the highly charged and topical issue of Russia's strategic narrative and how it is disseminated. Propaganda, in numerous forms, creates a barrier to more constructive engagement and dialogue. This issue's contributors find that Russia's narrative is based on notions of encirclement by the West as part of a deliberate containment strategy that Russia feels duty bound to resist if it is to remain a great power. The West, for its part, acknowledges Russia's power status and its legitimate right to seek such status, but questions the means it uses to that end.

Propaganda constructs an artificial information reality and sows doubt by questioning the very existence of objective, reliable and credible facts. It can mobilize popular support against an external threat, as well as toward a positive goal. Propaganda thrives when notions of journalistic objectivity are sacrificed. The notion that there must be two sides to any given issue or event can undermine rational conclusions when one side relies on the power of implausible denials and direct lies. "You have your truth, and I have mine" is the mantra and motto of contemporary Russian information warfare.

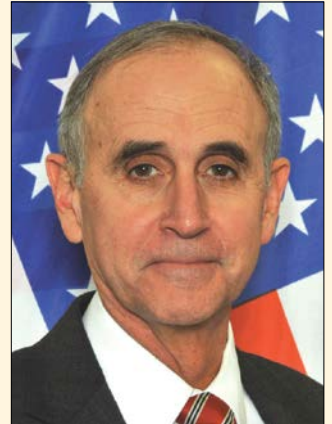
While it is interesting to "admire a problem," it is all too easy, especially when studying propaganda, to get lost in arguments and the rhetoric of "you started this," and "whoever started it, both sides do it." Such a regressive and circular outcome is not the purpose of this special edition. Rather, we seek to consider the modern Russian narrative in a contemporary context to address more constructive questions, such as: Why is Russia behaving this way? What does such behavior mean for security in Europe, Eurasia and the Trans-Atlantic space? Do Russian elites and society distinguish between the narrative advanced by some that the West is the enemy and the reality as felt in Europe — namely that Russia is a part of Europe, not apart from Europe? Most important, what can we do to balance this narrative so that Russia and its neighbors know there is a different "truth?"

The answers to such questions, and the process of raising and discussing them, are the necessary prerequisites for rebuilding trust and confidence between Russia and the West. Trust is necessary to collectively face a larger set of looming complex threats. Together, Europe, Russia and the United States can focus on immediate transnational threats such as ISIS, organized crime and radicalism, which no single state, no matter how powerful, can manage alone. There is a cooperative imperative we should grasp: Engagement, dialogue and partnership are the prerequisites for success, and mutual indispensability is the only sustainable security paradigm for the contemporary era.

We invite your comments and perspectives on this subject and will include your responses in our next two editions. The first will focus on cyber security and explore lessons from our cyber security studies program, and the second will address how efforts to counter transnational criminal organizations shape national decision-making. Please contact us at editor@perconcordiam.org

Sincerely,

Keith W. Dayton
Director



Keith W. Dayton

Director, George C. Marshall European
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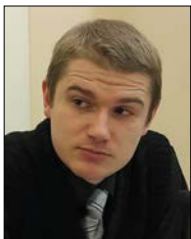
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**Special Edition:
Countering Russian
Propaganda**

Volume 7, 2016

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The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies is a German-American partnership founded in 1993. The center promotes dialogue and understanding between European, Eurasian, North American and other nations. The theme of its resident courses and outreach events: Most 21st century security challenges require international, interagency and interdisciplinary response and cooperation.

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Hundreds of ethnic Germans who left Russia demonstrate against violence in Villingen-Schwenningen in January 2016. The demonstration took place in connection with the alleged rape of a 13-year-old girl by a refugee, an event police said did not happen. State-controlled Russian media is using emotionally charged disinformation to try to splinter public opinion in the West. EPA

HYBRID CONFLICT 20 TARGETING THE WEST

Russian information operations seek strategic realignment in Europe

BY DR. GRAEME P. HERD, GEORGE C. MARSHALL EUROPEAN CENTER FOR SECURITY STUDIES



Activists block the entrance to the Ukrainian TV Channel "Inter" in Kyiv in February 2016, accusing the channel of distributing pro-Russian propaganda. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

“All the revolutions in history of humanity, beginning with Lucifer’s rebellion against God, have been designed by the United States in order to detract from the glory of Russia.”

~ Leon Aron,
remarks at the American
Enterprise Institute,
Washington, D.C.,
December 17, 2014.

An Emergencies Ministry member walks at the crash site of a Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine in July 2014. The plane was brought down by a Russian-made missile, killing all 295 passengers. REUTERS

T

he Russian state-owned Rossiya-1 television channel premiered the film *Miroportadok (World Order)* during prime time on Sunday, December 20, 2015.

It included extensive clips from interviews with Russian President Vladimir Putin and powerfully expressed, as Ivan Krastev said in *The New York Times* at the time, “the Kremlin’s present state of mind. It views the world as a place on the edge of collapse, chaotic and dangerous, where international institutions are ineffective, held hostage to the West’s ambitions and delusions. Nuclear weapons represent the sole guarantee of a country’s sovereignty, and sovereignty is demonstrated by a willingness and capacity to resist Washington’s hegemonic agenda.”

Since February 2014, Russia has annexed Crimea, destabilized eastern Ukraine, aggressively penetrated NATO airspace in the Baltics, undertaken submarine operations near vital undersea Internet communications cables in the Atlantic, launched Kalibr cruise missiles from the Caspian naval flotilla and a submarine in the eastern Mediterranean

against targets in Syria and almost come to blows with Turkey. And Putin reportedly boasted privately to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko: “If I wanted, Russian troops could not only be in Kyiv in two days, but Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw or Bucharest, too.”

The strategic agenda of the next 20 years will be dominated by defense, deterrence and dialogue with a recalcitrant, revanchist and chauvinist Russia. While analysts are able to map a disparity between Russia’s actions and words, the breadth and depth of Euro-Atlantic ignorance as to Putin’s motivations and intent are staggering. Kremlinologist Edward Lucas wrote in *European Voice*: “We do not know how Putin thinks. We do not know what information he gets. We do not know whose advice he takes, if anyone’s. We do not know what he really fears, or what he really wants.” And Gleb Pavlovsky, a former Putin advisor and architect of “Putinism,” noted: “The fact that the NATO countries do not understand how Putin will react is not an advantage for us, but an additional risk. When you do not know what threats to expect from your former partner who has suddenly decided to become your adversary, the normal reflex that arises is to play it safe.”



This article highlights the new ways and means by which Russia seeks to achieve its strategic goal of establishing a sphere of influence in its neighborhood and projecting its status as a “global player.” To that end, it identifies the tools and instruments Russia has at hand, including information operations, and suggests the propaganda effects of such a strategy on the domestic Russian population. It concludes by touching on the very real risks of miscalculation, escalation and a further deterioration in relations between Russia and the West.

EXPANDING HYBRID CONFLICT

Facilitating and enabling factors for an effective hybrid conflict were present in Crimea, but less so in the Donbass. First, Russia constantly asserted that the collapse of “legitimate executive authority” had taken place in Ukraine — with President Victor Yanukovich fleeing the country — and that the interim authorities in Kyiv were a far-right, neo-Nazi junta supported by the West. Second, Crimea boasted a majority ethnic Russian population with a common language, heritage and identity linked to Russian economic and information space, as well as supportive local elites. Lastly, there were pre-existing Russian military bases in Crimea, as well as proximate military forces based on Russian territory.

The tools and capabilities needed to act are threefold: Russian state-controlled media propaganda provided compelling, one-sided claims of Western hypocrisy, double standards and interference in the domestic affairs of Ukraine, which was said to have resulted in chaos and had the potential to spill over into Russia. Putin had the political will to act and was supported by compliant state institutions such as the Duma, or Russian parliament, the Constitutional Court, the Russian Orthodox Church and the media. Strategic directives from the Kremlin were translated into action by Russian military intelligence exercising operational control through local paramilitaries, the *samoobrona* (separatist self-defense force), on the ground supported covertly by Russian special forces (the so-called “polite little green men”).

In 2014, the means to establish this regional sphere of influence included exploiting gaps between government and society, hard and soft power, political and military commands, and war and peace in the states on Russia’s periphery. Hybrid war in Crimea moved from preparation to attack and then to consolidation phases, whereas in Donbass, we have witnessed preparation and attack phases, and in the Baltic states, Moldova and Georgia, the preparation phase only. This we could call Hybrid Conflict 1.0.

By 2016 we can argue that Russia’s hybrid toolbox and the scope and purpose of its goals is being expanded from seeking a regional sphere of influence in the former Soviet space to a much more ambitious and longer term project — the re-establishment of Russia as a key international player. The means to this end are becoming clearer: create and exploit rifts in the West, delegitimize NATO, weaken the European Union and divide the West. This constitutes Hybrid Conflict 2.0 and operates alongside Hybrid Conflict 1.0, but its scope, scale and objectives differ.

The wholesale, deliberate, targeted destabilization of the EU and NATO is designed to break European and trans-Atlantic solidarity by exploiting pre-existing vulnerabilities and seams

between state and society, as well as inter- and intra-societal fissures, and has the ultimate goal of severing relations among the states themselves. Unexpectedly for Russia, Hybrid Conflict 1.0 only served to unify the West; arguably Hybrid Conflict 2.0 would break that unity.

INSIDE RUSSIAN POLITICS

Why does Russia adopt this strategy? As political authority in Russia is now legitimized through charismatic-historical means, Putin needs to secure continuous “victories.” Charismatic leaders do not preside over defeats, and in the Russian media, Putin will never suffer such a fate. “Neoprop” is the contemporary equivalent of Soviet Agitprop. As Pavlovsky said, “In Russia there is neoprop — the machinery of stultifying television propaganda. It pumps up the population’s loyalty by keeping the mass consciousness in a state of hysteria. Russia’s people are being moved to the world of a sinister political serial, and that is where they live.” In his book, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, Peter Pomerantsev said he was told by a Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Network executive: “The news is the incense by which we bless Putin’s actions, make him the President.”

However, Putin is self-handicapped in that he is a highly popular charismatic-historical leader who oversees a failing economy. He is trapped by opinion polls and the need for popular support; instability increases if support falls because no *bezalternativnost*, or political alternative, to Putin exists. The notion of “No Putin, no Russia” highlights how elections are delegitimized as a means of transferring power and that Russia lacks autonomous, accountable and transparent institutions (media, law, political parties) to manage a post-Putin transition. Putin projects the notion that Russia is a restored “great power” and ties this strength to his own unique and indispensable ability as an effective manager to stand between order and chaos. However, inflation is running at 10-15 percent, real earnings have fallen 10 percent, the middle class is shrinking, and corruption is endemic. The state budget is dependent on high hydrocarbon prices, and Russia is unable to affect the price. The same clear strategic vulnerability that accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union is present in Putin’s Russia. Putin has chosen not to address the root causes of this strategic vulnerability because the network of his very wealthy, close associates who run Russia also manage and own Russian strategic economic sectors, the large state conglomerates that thrive in a rent extraction economy. To undertake structural economic reform, under the mantra of import substitution, would entail rebalancing the economy away from raw material extraction to manufacturing, agriculture, light industries and the service sector. It would mean regime leadership and political system change.

In the context of steadily deteriorating socio-economic trends and given not just the absence but the impossibility of genuine economic reform, how else can the ideology of great-power restoration and Putin’s indispensability be maintained and the Russian population mobilized in support of the regime? Putin could stoke the fires of Russian nationalism, but

this would open Pandora's Box. Russian nationalism in the service of a Russian national state would entail the dismemberment of the Russian Federation. Putin's regime is already aware of the destabilizing dangers of nationalism and has had to constantly constrain nationalist actors in Novorossiia, the separatist-controlled region of eastern Ukraine. Given that 27 Russian regions have autonomous non-Russian ethnic political status — 32 percent of all constituencies covering 40 percent of Russian Federation territory — inciting unrestrained Russian nationalism would be inherently destabilizing and could spin out of control as pressures to secede from non-Russian ethnic entities would grow, both at the center and the periphery. Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus that depend on massive federal budgetary subsidies would revert to a low-intensity conflict zone.

Alternatively, Putin could eschew Russian ethnic nationalism for a broader more inclusive populist project. Further demonization of “fifth columnists,” “national traitors” and “foreign agents” to mobilize society in support of the regime is an option, but how effective will the self-declared “effective managers” that run the regime appear when such subversive activists still pose a threat after a 10-year crackdown? In reality, following the assassination of opposition activist Boris Nemtsov on February 27, 2015, the extra-parliamentary opposition is cowed, while the so-called parliamentary opposition supports the government and does not qualify as a suitable target to mobilize against. Rather, a variant populist project could target a part of the elite — false income declarations are a noose around everyone's neck — and accuse it of corruption, lack of patriotism and even sabotage. The benefits of 1930s-style kangaroo-court show trials are apparent: Society would understand that “we all suffer together,”

scapegoats can be identified and publicly punished, and the populace would be entertained by the circus, which distracts from the lack of bread.

However, destabilization of Russia's elite could lead to the regime unraveling. First, balance between clans could be lost if “warriors” turn on “traders,” or a second “Chekist war” breaks out. Putin would lose his ability to balance factions, the source of his autonomy and power, and could be held hostage by one clan. This is not in his interest. Second, where would the process end? How would it be calibrated and spillovers contained? The entire elite could be contaminated in the process. This approach is as toxic as the “Russia for the Russians” nationalism project.

ACTING BADLY ABROAD

Not only is Russia's domestic policy infected by a corrosive sense of drift, but it is also helpful to realize that after 16 years in power, Putin's foreign policy strategy cupboard is bare. A destabilization strategy can act as a placeholder and fill the foreign policy vacuum. When Putin came into office in 2000, he attempted to integrate Russia into a “Greater West,” but could not do so on his own terms so he abandoned the strategy. “Sovereign globalization” was successful between 2000 and 2012, but it, too, reached the end of its shelf life. By 2008, Putin switched to a strategy centered on building a “Greater Eurasia,” but his own economic and foreign policies sabotaged this effort. The notion that a non-western Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) bloc can be translated into an anti-Western bloc is a nonstarter — China determines its own major state relations and is at best a situational and transactional partner for Russia. Under the pressure of sanctions and countersanctions, EU solidarity has held. In 1939, Stalin



Lyudmila Savchuk worked as part of the Kremlin's information troops, or “trolls,” filling Internet pages with praise for Russian President Vladimir Putin while mocking his critics. Such trolling is central to Russia's media disinformation campaign.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

was able to find a Western partner and divide the West (as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact attests), but there is no clear weakest link to be peeled away in 2016.

At the end of 2015 and following the Syrian intervention, Putin appeared to be signaling to the West that the lessons of Yalta should be relearned. A great-power conference would bestow respect and allow Russia to be seen as leading, with its voice and veto in evidence, as global strategic issues are discussed. A “grand bargain” with the West would involve recognition of Russia’s sphere of influence, allow the buffer zone to be formalized and minimize direct borders with the West.

Rather than gaining respect, however, from his perspective, Putin has had insults and humiliation heaped upon him and his leadership. Personal, public and persistent criticisms of Putin have emanated from Western leaders and institutions in an unprecedented fashion. In January 2016, the presiding judge in a United Kingdom judicial investigation concluded that Putin himself “probably” had direct involvement in the murder of former KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006 through polonium-210 poisoning. Then, a United States Treasury official, backed by the White House press spokesperson, confirmed it was the position of the U.S. government that Putin is a criminal who runs a corrupt regime. It is clear that a negotiated grand bargain will not be forthcoming.

What are the means — the tools and instruments — Russia can use to achieve its strategic goals? Nontraditional international actors are available to destabilize Russia’s neighbors and the region. Command and control is organized through the presidential administration (Kremlin) *kurators*, or political advisors, and through them onto Russia’s security services, the FSB, GRU and SVR. Vladislav Surkov is considered to be one such kurator, responsible for Donbass, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russian media, particularly television and mainstream newspapers, give the appearance of variety, but according to Aleksei Venediktov, chief editor of the independent Russian radio station Ekho Moskvy, the unity of pro-Kremlin messaging betrays the government’s tight control. Government-controlled media outlets such as Russia Today and Sputnik, supported by “troll factories,” work alongside pro-Russian nongovernmental organizations, public intellectuals and personalities in Europe itself to provide and then amplify a narrative of Western dysfunctionality, and so influence policymakers, political elites and European youth. Andrew Wilson, professor in Ukrainian studies at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at University College London, writes that Russian propaganda can serve four functions: aim to distract and confuse Western audiences; in a “nudge propaganda” manner, “affect and strengthen opinions which already exist”; mobilize the Putin majority; and create a parallel alternative reality. And according to a 2016 paper by the Institute of Modern Russia, money is the most influential tool for obtaining local influence and shaping the attitudes of opinion makers.

Russia can mobilize a number of actors and resources for this effort. In its immediate neighborhood, protracted conflicts proliferate. These include Transnistria, Crimea, Donbass, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and North Cyprus. Proxy forces can be found in Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus. Russian compatriots and the influence of the Russian

Orthodox Church can support the concept of a *Russkiy Mir* (Russian world), as can Russian funded nongovernmental organizations. Within the post-Soviet *Russkiy Mir*, history, ethnicity, language and religion can all be politicized, and the rights and interests of 30 million ethnic Russians, 300 million Russian speakers — and even those who feel culturally close to Russia — can be defended from so-called external “aggression” and “provocation.” Iconic and symbolic Russian and Soviet historical sites such as graveyards, war memorials and monuments can all be leveraged for effect.

In Europe, Russia is able to fund and otherwise support anti-EU, anti-U.S. and anti-migrant parties by spotlighting issues that mobilize their members. These parties include: Jobbik and Fidesz (Hungary), UKIP and BNP (U.K.); Golden Dawn and Syriza (Greece); AfD and PEGIDA (Germany); ATAKA (Bulgaria); National Front (France); and in the European Parliament, the Europe of Nations and Freedom group, which has 25 percent of the vote and consists of 35 far right and anti-EU parties, 32 of which are pro-Russian.

With regard to Ukraine, the chief of staff of Ukraine’s intelligence service, Oleksandr Tkachuk, outlined for VICE News in February 2016 the characteristics of Russia’s 10-year destabilization plan in Ukraine. The plan involves “creating political instability, causing gradual disintegration of government structures, emphasizing grievances among the population, and disrupting all aspects of political, economic and social life.”

That same month, Finnish Prime Minister Juha Sipilä accused Russia of channeling migrants into Finland to destabilize it, echoing Norwegian protests from late 2015. Hans-Georg Maassen, the chief of Germany’s domestic security agency, was quoted in *Der Spiegel* saying that Russia was using KGB-style “old measures” of misinformation and destabilization against Germany, including increased intelligence activity, hacking of Bundestag computers and helping organize demonstrations by Russian-Germans over the Lisa case — a fabricated story of the rape of an ethnic Russian migrant in Berlin. The U.S. and European allies have accused Russia of breaching international humanitarian law in Syria by killing civilians through indiscriminate bombings with nonprecision weapons to “weaponize refugees,” an accusation leveled by then-French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius at the February 2016 Munich Security Conference.

The role of Russia’s media is to demonstrate that the Western liberal democratic model is dysfunctional by implying things such as Jews are fleeing Europe and ethnic Russian migrants are being raped in Berlin. European stock exchanges in London, Frankfurt and Warsaw are under cyber attack and can collapse, or critical national infrastructure such as nuclear power plants, energy and transport infrastructure can malfunction. The U.K. “Brexit” referendum in June 2016, the expected large-scale arrival of migrants and refugees through the spring and summer of 2016 and the stress this places on the Schengen and eurozones, and increasing anti-German and anti-EU feelings in Poland or anti-Polish feelings in Lithuania all demonstrate real difficulties that can be exploited. Russia can simply amplify existing tensions rather than instigating and fabricating new ones.

TARGETING THE WEST

Although a destabilization strategy might be a last resort, it meets Russian domestic and foreign policy legitimacy needs in that it helps maintain Putin's popularity at a time when economic reform is not on the table and all viable alternatives are exhausted. How is this so? For Russian domestic politics, destabilization of the West has benefits. It allows for a semi-mobilization of the Russian people against the West, while at the same time undercutting calls for reform, liberalization and democratization of politics in Russia. Essentially, Putin's state-controlled media can argue: "Things may be bad in Russia but they are worse in Europe;" "you may be poor but you are poor in a great country — greatness has a price, people must sacrifice."

In addition, managed chaos has its attractions as conflicts are a business. As Gleb Pavlovsky wrote in an October 2015 article for *The Moscow Times*, "We help to create crises that spin out of control and then escalate them further — all so that Russia's leaders can be the saviors who protect everyone from the worst outcome." Vested interests, not least Putin's own professional security service and inner circle, will increasingly exaggerate threats to optimize their share of resource allocation and access to extra-budgetary sources of money. Indeed, money laundering and other sources of illicit revenue will fund the destabilization effort, as this maintains the fiction that it would not be state directed.

In foreign policy terms, there is a logic at work: If Russia cannot strengthen itself, it can weaken the West — power is relative after all — and this very ability to destabilize demonstrates that there can be no security in Europe with Russia. Power is power and it should be respected. In addition, according to leading opposition politician and former Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, the Putin leadership "believes that everything in the world can be bought and sold. This is their main credo, this is why they believe that, sooner or later, they will be able to exert even stronger pressure on the West, which they think must agree with their understanding of life, must cancel the sanctions, and so on." "A bit more pressure and all will be well" is the governing logic. We can also assume that Russia believes it can calibrate the destabilization and maintain plausible deniability, as it has attempted to do in the Donbass. The "controlled instability" paradigm is well-practiced and is a well-developed lever of influence. Putin will calculate that after the presidential election in 2018 with a divided West on his doorstep, rapprochement with some Western countries will be possible and Russia will be able to secure finances and investments again.

RISK OF MISCALCULATION

The risks of escalation, crisis, and then conflict are much higher because miscalculation is inherent in the DNA of Hybrid Conflict 2.0. There are at least three potential sources of miscalculation: first, Russia's implementation; second, Western responses; and third, how this cycle combines to further destabilize the Russian elite, raising the ultimate prospect of regime implosion and federal disintegration.

In terms of Russia's implementation, the more command and control is exercised over autonomous actors (e.g., organized

crime groups), the greater the ability of Russia to direct and calibrate destabilizing attacks, but the less its ability to claim plausible deniability. The use of a Russian-supplied BUK anti-aircraft weapons system to down Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 over Donbass in July 2014 demonstrates that momentum and inertia are factors, because they degrade command and control over time. In addition, as many conflicts have demonstrated, when state services employ irregular proxy forces, these forces have their own priorities, agendas, mentalities and views of a preferred outcome. The interests of Russian security services and those of organized criminal groups or local warlords and corrupted businessmen may be compatible, but they are not necessarily shared and can diverge.

The Russian national security decision-makers who initiate and supervise implementation of such a strategy are well-versed in brinkmanship and scorn the notion of abdication. Russia's national security decision-making community is wedded to an end-of-the-world, "no surrender" mentality and has a vested interest in not finding accommodation — understood as capitulation and treason — with the West. This group is increasingly volatile, weakened and exhausted, with no alternative strategy to offer, and determined to strike out and throw the first punch to gain respect.

In terms of Western responses, the first challenge is analytical. "Implausible culpability" complements the notion of plausible deniability. It's in Russia's interest to exaggerate its influence and hint at its ability to organize or trigger crises and exacerbate and antagonize pre-existing tensions. This further confuses analysis and, therefore, undercuts a unified and calibrated response from the West.

At heart, there is a fundamental perception and misperception problem: The West thinks Russia lashes out from a position of weakness; Russia thinks it is strong and that failure to act defensively to prevent encroachments would itself constitute weakness, and that the West is poised to exploit vulnerabilities. What is the optimal balance among defense, deterrence and dialogue in such a context? When does research into Russian-backed organized-crime cyber attacks escalate into an offensive against these groups?

Russia's own elite is becoming more destabilized as it becomes increasingly apparent that, not only does Putin not have a clear strategy for addressing fundamental structural and systemic weaknesses within Russia, but that his policies, or lack of them, actually accelerate the malaise. When the perception of suicidal statecraft confronts the elite's well-developed instinct for self-preservation, what gives first? How many of the current elite lose and how much tension is acceptable? What follows afterward?

In 2017, the stabilization fund will be spent and siloviki clan competition for control over corrupt rents will be the only arbiter of power. How will it end? Nearly 100 years ago, conservative noble elites withdrew support for Czar Nicholas II. He fell, and the caretaker Kerensky government was overthrown by the Bolsheviks. Then, 25 years ago, the elite fought a war of "all against all," as the events of August 1991 and the October 1993 illustrated. A strategy to destabilize the West may well destabilize Russia's elites, initiate a mismanaged regime change and cause the disintegration of the Russian Federation. □

— E S T O N I A —
**CONFRONTS
PROPAGANDA**



**RUSSIA MANIPULATES
MEDIA IN PURSUIT OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE**

PERI CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

By Prof. Viljar Veebel

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The international community faces serious challenges arising from a new mode of information warfare that Russia has deployed during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014-2016. This ongoing “propaganda war” is the most recent and frightening example of information warfare. It reflects the wide array of nonmilitary tools used to exert pressure and influence the behavior of countries. When skillfully combined, disinformation, psychological pressure, and malicious attacks on large-scale information and communication systems can be even more dangerous than traditional weapons systems since they are extremely difficult to discover and combat.

This article examines Russian “propaganda machinery” and discusses Estonia’s experience in combating threats from Russian information warfare.

TOOLS OF MANIPULATION

Psychological warfare follows the same logic as traditional warfare. The actions of one party involved in a conflict create the need for actions by the other party to balance the situation. Preventive actions provoke counteractions, and each successive step can be more aggressive than the previous one. This leads to conflict escalation, even as the parties to the

conflict are convinced that they are focused only on self-defense and are acting pre-emptively.

As practiced today, psychological warfare involves certain best practices. Disinformation, media propaganda, threats and psychological techniques are used to deter or to destroy opponents.

Defending against such attacks requires an open and balanced model that is based on facts, reflects reality and is not prejudiced. The best antidote to information warfare is for the public to assess the situation rationally and individually, and to guarantee that communication is not

filtered or manipulated. Facts should take precedence, as should the assessment of alternative viewpoints. Knowledgeable and critical consumers of news do not expect simplified and exaggerated solutions. They expect a thorough analysis of all aspects of a story. But providing this model of careful journalism is resource-intensive.

When starting to lose while using a fact-based and open model in information warfare — as was the case for the Russian government during the Ukrainian conflict — a solution is often found in reconstructing or manipulating images of oneself and the enemy, allowing a government to retake the initiative with fewer resources. As a general rule, replacing an objective image in the media with a distorted or manipulated one is first justified by a practical need to retaliate, to mislead an adversary, or to help mobilize and motivate the “man in the street.”

This use of reconstructed information neither requires nor involves in-depth analysis of the facts nor the use of scientific methods, because it would no longer be credible by applying them. Instead, self-legitimizing “expert opinions,” presented by confident government officials or so-called opinion leaders, glorified with a fancy title, tend to prevail.

In the process, the essayists of propaganda departments gather wind under their wings, while factual news reporters are forced out of the media, labeled as boring skeptics, defeatists or even influence agents of the opponent. The disbelievers are equated with the enemy (“You’re either with us or against us!”), and a difference of opinion in one matter is considered a sign of disloyalty in all other matters. Anyone seeking comparative information from alternative sources will be seen as dangerous and negative. Once experts and academics have been tarred with the label of skeptic or opponent, they can be excluded from further debate.

The main objectives of a reconstructed information campaign are to:

- demonize the adversary
- deter and demoralize the adversary
- legitimize one’s own activities to the general public
- mobilize target populations
- promote one’s own political elites

The methods in this stage include mixing truth with lies so that the news consumer — while recognizing a familiar fact — also trusts the information that has been manipulated. As a general rule, quantitative information is not source-referenced and, in case of conflicting data, a more favorable version is presented. Later on, if a piece of information turns out to have been fabricated, it is suppressed. The main criterion for producing news and press releases is conformity to the correct ideology and terminology. One of the keys to popularity is clear, resolute and increasing confrontation with rival parties.



NEED FOR DEFENSE

Despite the cost, it is important to combat psychological attacks, for two reasons. First, as the scale and significance of information warfare grows in scope, it draws attention away from the objective circumstances of the conflict, including from self-criticism and potential solutions to the conflict. Second, distorted information initially intended to distract opponents takes on a life of its own, believed even by the initial source of the disinformation. Once falsehoods begin to circulate, it is difficult to limit their spread.

A makeshift memorial with signs reading “Propaganda kills!” and “Fight!” is seen near St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow in March 2015. It’s where Boris Nemtsov, a charismatic Russian opposition leader and critic of President Vladimir Putin, was gunned down in February 2015. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



A psychological war can be won — regardless of ideology — by using certain best practices, methods and patterns. Showing empathy for the opponent scores no points in this game and has no place in the history books. Interestingly, in the Ukrainian case, in light of public opinion polls on support to their respective governments and opposition to their adversaries, all three parties (Russia, Ukraine and the Western allies) have mostly reached their objectives. But should this standoff be considered evidence of tactical success and a sustainable strategy in the longer run?

RUSSIAN TACTICS

Russia has placed information war tactics at the center of its foreign policy. The Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation, published in 2000, describes national interests in the information sphere. The main objectives of the doctrine are as follows: to protect strategically important information, to protect against deleterious foreign information, and to inculcate in the people patriotism and Russian values. Indeed, the declaration refers to the importance of the “spiritual renewal of Russia,” “civic responsibility for the destiny of the

country” and “moral values of society and traditions of patriotism.”

Furthermore, the doctrine warns that “foreign special services use media operating within the Russian Federation to inflict damage to the nation’s security and to spread disinformation.” All of these statements reflect Russia’s deployment of its domestic media as a propaganda tool. The Kremlin focuses on creating an image of Western countries as “dangerous and aggressive” toward Russia.

Yet Russia’s propaganda efforts are also directed abroad. Russia has refused to join Europe’s

Convention on Cybercrime, which aims to increase cyber security and counteract cyber threats. The convention was signed in 2001, came into force in 2004, and is active in more than 40 countries. But Russia has declined to sign because it uses such techniques to further its political ambitions.

Recent history has seen several prominent examples of this. In 2007, when Estonia removed a memorial to Soviet soldiers, Russia responded aggressively, deploying a wide array of info war resources to damage its neighbor. Russian politicians arrived in Estonia to “rile things up” while Russian-language



Estonian Army chaplains perform a reburial service for the remains of Russian soldiers moved from the Tallinn city center to a military cemetery in July 2007. REUTERS

websites offered instructions on how to attack Estonian sites. On top of this, Russia's Federation Council called on its government to cut diplomatic relations with Estonia. The Estonian Embassy in Moscow was blockaded by Russian youth movements, and Russian officials called for boycotts of Estonian goods. Trade on the Russian-Estonian border ground to a halt as truck traffic at the main bridge into Estonia was blocked and the delivery of oil, coal and petroleum products was cut off. Cyber attacks accompanied the psychological onslaught.

The Russian-Ukrainian war has revealed just how damaging this new type of warfare can be. Russia uses a variety of channels to transmit its preferred content.

Recent research by Vladimir Sazonov has described the different channels used in Russian information operations to transmit messages that include misinformation: Russia-controlled TV channels (such as LifeNews, Russia 1, Russia 24, Channel 1, NTV and REN TV), as well as Ukrainian TV channels (like Inter and Ukraina 24) run by pro-Russia oligarchs or Russian news providers, occupy prominent positions in Ukraine and are key tools.

But the battle is moving to the Internet as well. The resources of the online media (Russian newspapers, but also Ukrainian newspapers like *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Ukraine*, the Ukrainian edition of a Russian-based newspaper), and Web pages (such as LiveJournal and Liveinternet), are instruments of disinformation. Massive Internet trolling on social media, the Russian radio (e.g., Radio Majak), separatists' information channels (such as Novorus.info), and even mobile phone operators (KyivStar and MTS) round out the Russian arsenal. During the Ukrainian-Russian war, Russia's strategy has focused not only on destroying the morale of Ukrainian soldiers, but also attacking their relatives by splitting families along the lines of ethnicity, religion, politics and region.

Russian information channels have relentlessly portrayed the Ukrainian Army as murderers, criminals and Nazi perpetrators, while ignoring the causes of the war or discussion of Russia's involvement. This image has been created methodically using aggressive and emotional rhetoric. Demonstrably false stories of crucified children and raped women were created and replicated to discredit the Ukrainian Army. By bombarding the Ukrainian population with this information — all of it skewed and some of it false — Russia hopes to undermine support for the government in Ukraine.

RESPONDING TO RUSSIA

What should the international community learn from Russia's information warfare techniques in Estonia in 2007 and Ukraine in 2014-2015? There are several key lessons:

- Over the past decade, disinformation has

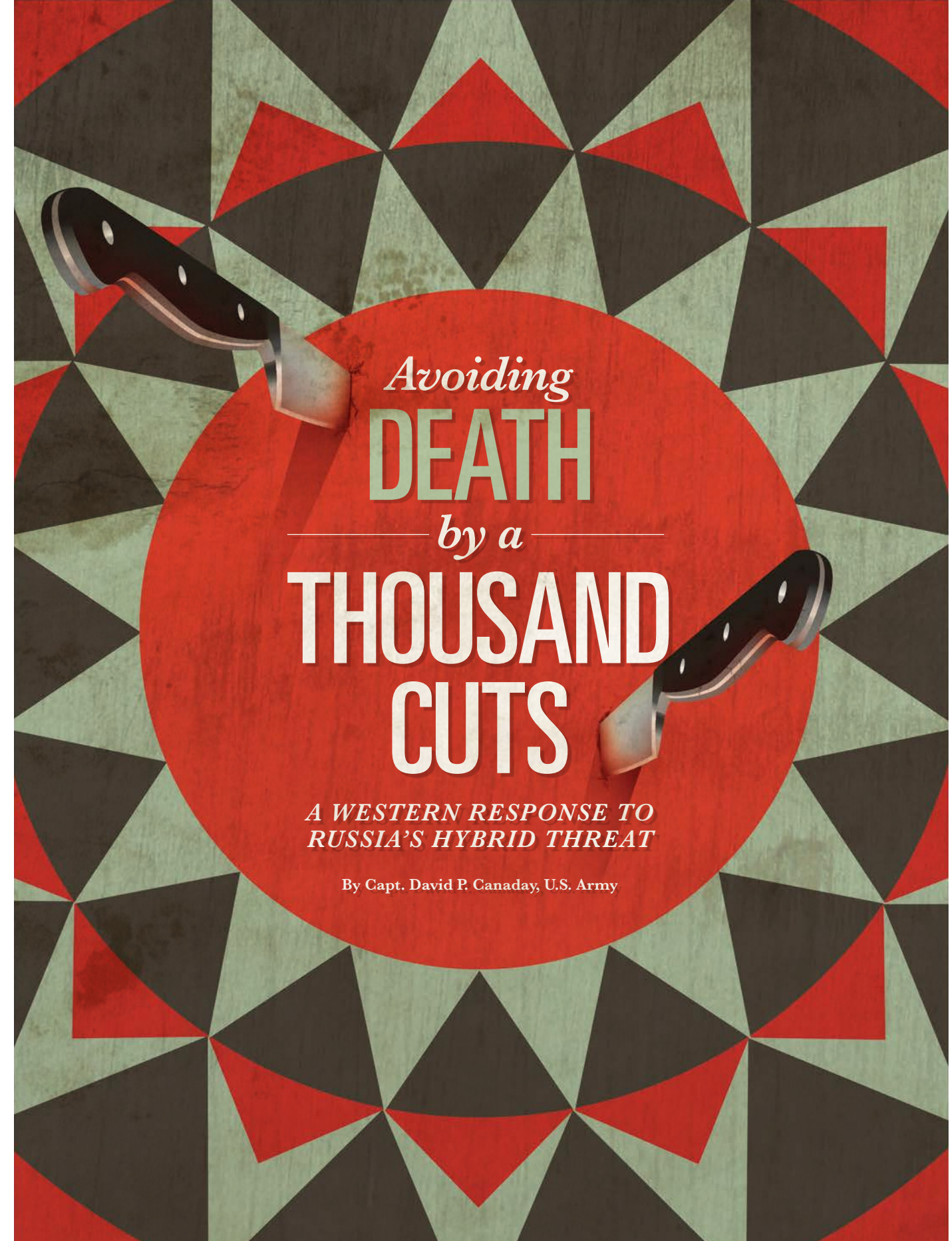
been a main tool of Russian propaganda during conflicts. The targets of Russian media are labeled "fascists" or "criminals," which is intended to discredit those countries in the eyes of the West and to convince the Russian people that their government's actions are just. In this light, providing balanced information to Russians is an important policy goal.

- In Estonia, the local public broadcasting opened a new Russian-language television channel called ETV+ in September 2015. The aim of the channel is to keep the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia informed about local and international issues (two one-hour programs per day and regular daily news in Russian) and to provide the audience entertainment (such as shows and films purchased by ETV+, such as the television and Web programs of Deutsche Welle in Russian).
- However, as Estonia's current experiences with integrating its Russian-speaking population into Estonian society have shown, there is a vast gap in the resources allotted. The financial resources directed to the Estonian Russian-language media have not been comparable to the resources with which Russia feeds its propaganda machine. In this regard, co-operation between European Union member states is necessary to optimize resources and share reliable information.

More generally, Europe needs to devote more money to creating balanced sources of information that are based on facts rather than prejudice. The EU's initiative from March and June 2015 to counter Russian media propaganda with "positive messages" serves as a first step. The initiative includes several activities, such as the establishment of the permanent EU communication unit EastStratCom Team, promotion of media freedom in EU Eastern Partnership countries and making communication materials available in Russian. □

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Avoiding
DEATH
by a
**THOUSAND
CUTS**

*A WESTERN RESPONSE TO
RUSSIA'S HYBRID THREAT*

By Capt. David P. Canaday, U.S. Army

PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

Hybrid war is a term that is sweeping the strategic security community worldwide. Much like the torture technique noted in this article's title, hybrid war has the ability to bleed its target through myriad attacks conducted below the perceived threshold of conflict. Assorted, seemingly inconsequential actions, when combined, can plunge an otherwise functioning nation into chaos. To many NATO nations living in Russia's shadow, the implications of this threat are deeply troubling.

As Russia's forceful intervention in Ukraine grinds on, the question that all other former Soviet countries in Russia's "near abroad" and NATO must answer is: "What are effective responses to Russia's version of hybrid warfare?" An examination of the aspects that have made it successful provides insight into deterrence and allows us to apply different techniques to disrupt future Russian hybrid threats. Analyzing how these tactics are deployed in neighboring countries to exploit seams between these governments and their ethnic Russian citizens — using Latvia as a case study — gives us a reference point to discuss how to respond.

DEFINING HYBRID WAR

The term hybrid warfare is often misused, so our first task is to define it. Fortunately, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has already done this in the latest U.S. National Military Strategy (NMS). The NMS describes hybrid warfare as the following:

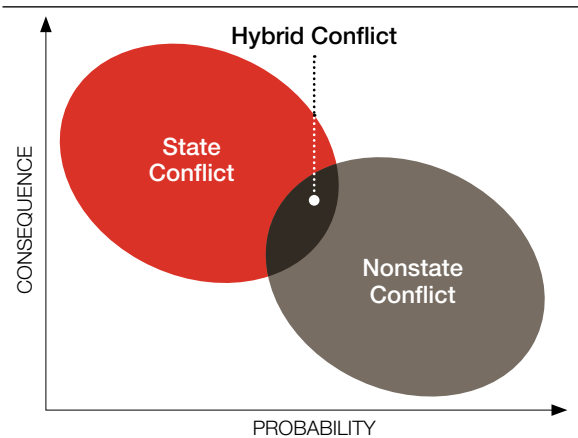
"... warfare that blends conventional and unconventional forces to create ambiguity, seize the initiative and paralyze the adversary. Hybrid war may include use of both traditional military systems and asymmetric systems. ... Such conflicts may consist of military forces assuming a non-state identity."

Hybrid war is an ambiguous concept and cannot be narrowly defined. The DOD understands hybrid war as a point on a linear progression of consequence and probability.

The Potomac Institute, which completed an analysis of Russian hybrid war in Ukraine, also addresses the subject and effectively describes the term using common language. Like the NMS, it characterizes hybrid war as a steadily increasing function of intensity and state responsibility. The Potomac Institute defines hybrid war as "incorporating a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder." Janis Berzins of the Latvian National Defense College's Security and Strategic Research Center likens it to mafia activity — something that exploits a country's weaknesses.

Gen. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff of the Russian Armed Forces, wrote in Russia's

CONTINUUM OF CONFLICT



- Employs large-scale military technologies across multiple domains to defeat the enemy. May include use of weapons of mass destruction, anti-access/area denial systems, global strike systems, undersea platforms, advanced cyber tools, and counterspace systems, among other capabilities.
- Blends conventional and irregular forces to create ambiguity, seize the initiative and paralyze the adversary. May include use of both traditional military and asymmetric systems.
- Employs small units and networks to undermine government and gain control over populations. May include use of IEDs, small arms, propaganda and terror.

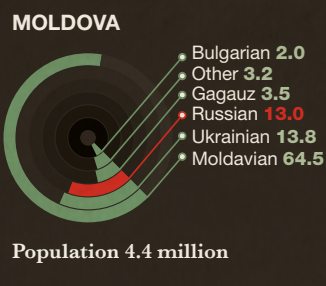
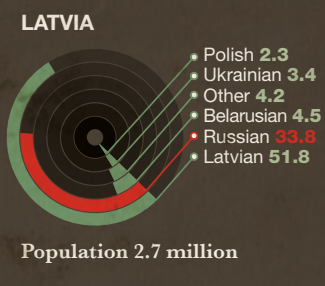
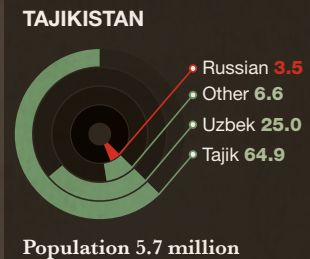
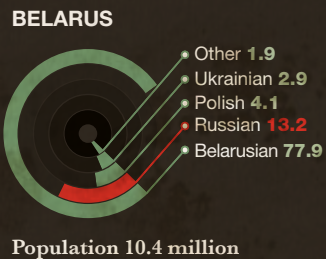
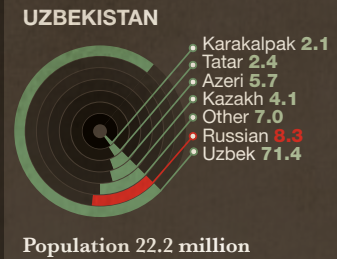
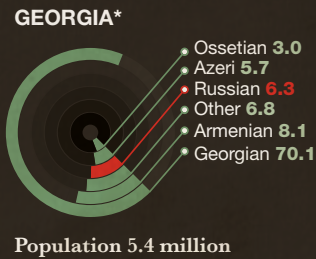
PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

Source: U.S. National Strategy, June 2015

Military-Industrial Courier that hybrid warfare consists of six stages that use military, economic and diplomatic mechanisms to pressure a nation or group to elicit desired reactions and responses.

- Stage 1 is "hidden emergence," when differences of opinion or policy conflicts begin to emerge.
- Stage 2 is "aggravation," when these differences transform into contradictions that are noticed by political and military leadership.
- Stage 3 is the "beginning of conflict," which features the deepening of contradictions and the start of open strategic deployment of military means.
- Stage 4 is "crisis," which consists of crisis reactions and a full range of actions (note that the ratio of military to nonmilitary actions is still only 4:1).
- Stage 5 transitions to "resolution" and features isolating and neutralizing military conflict. It is in this phase that leadership shifts to a more political and diplomatic relationship and when the search for conflict regulation begins.
- Stage 6 is the "establishment of peace" and post-conflict operations. At this point, gains from the action are consolidated, and the main goal segues into lowering tensions between the two countries.

Percentage
of
**ETHNIC
RUSSIANS**
in the
**FORMER
SOVIET
STATES**



* Ethnic percentages for Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan taken from the 1989 Soviet census — may not accurately reflect present-day conditions

Gerasimov’s depiction of hybrid war is notable for several reasons. First, it identifies the start of conflict at the point when two states have a difference of interests, a much lower threshold than Western definitions. Second, it abandons the linear concept of hybrid war for more of a parabolic progression. In other words, military and nonmilitary operations reach a critical tipping point, then begin to decline in severity and repetition as the strategic goals of the hybrid operations are accomplished. This difference in understanding is apparent as we examine the significant center of gravity that ethnic Russians represent within every neighboring country, and those nations’ often lackluster efforts in addressing this phenomenon.

As every small-unit leader knows, the most vulnerable place in any defensive position is at the “seams” between subordinate units. Russia chooses to launch its hybrid attacks along seams that exist within a targeted government or

country. These actions are usually successful because the more technical the coordination required to respond, the more likely the response will arrive too late to be effective. Russian strategy capitalizes on seams in a country’s defense, such as the seam between ethnic Russians and the governments of the states in which they live. By applying pressure along these seams, Russia is able to enact a kind of reflexive control described by Berzins as “making your opponent do what you want without the opponent realizing it.”

CITIZENSHIP AND PROPAGANDA

To realize the advantage offered by a seam between these ethnic Russians and their governments, one need look no further than Russia’s military doctrine, which states that the use of Russian military force is justified to “ensure the protection of its citizens located beyond the borders of the



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

Russian Federation.” Russia used this doctrine as an excuse to conduct military operations in Georgia and Ukraine, while destroying significant portions of those countries’ militaries and embroiling them in unresolved border conflicts that hinder attaining NATO or European Union membership.

In both Georgia and Ukraine, Russia’s hybrid war began by exploiting seams created by breakaway ethnic groups. Breakaway republics in Georgia and ethnic Russians in Ukraine felt isolated by their countries’ policies. For example, a June 2014 Russia Today poll showed that a significant percent of the Crimean population felt that life would be better in the Russian Federation. Also, eastern Ukraine and western Ukraine were polar opposites in their opinions of the EU, Russia and NATO, as indicated by a March 2014 Gallup poll. Such disconnect left ethnic Russian Ukrainians feeling isolated.

Russia offered a respite from such feelings by providing Russian passports that entitle the bearer to the benefits of Russian citizenship. As Vincent Artman noted in his article “Annexation by Passport,” by making Russian passports available to all who asked, Russia was able to create a significant enclave of Russian citizens inside the Abkhaz and South Ossetian regions of Georgia. In the case of Abkhazia, about 80 percent of citizens received Russian passports, according to then-Abkhaz Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Shamba. This provided ample justification, from the Russian perspective, for military intervention when Georgia attacked the breakaway republics in response to escalated provocations. Artman notes that Russia also handed out thousands of passports in Crimea and eastern Ukraine and, by doing so, not only contested Ukraine’s sovereignty, but also set the conditions for annexation.



AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Pro-Russian activists wave flags of the Russian-backed rebels in eastern Ukraine during a gathering of Latvia's large ethnic Russian minority in Riga, marking an anniversary of the end of World War II.

In both cases, Russia painted a positive impression of what life would be like under the Russian Federation compared to Georgia or Ukraine. This juxtaposition, along with an increased desire by both Georgia and Ukraine to pursue NATO and EU membership, did nothing but fuel anti-state sentiments in these regions and increase the desire of ethnic Russians to join the Russian Federation. Once that stage was set, the fate of Crimea and Georgia's breakaway republics was the same — swift Russian military intervention and annexation as soon as the seam between people and government had been fully exploited.

Russia's use of this strategy places any state with a population of ethnic Russians at risk of Russian meddling. Of all the former Soviet Republics, none has been more concerned with Russia's new hybrid war strategy than the Baltic states. Of those, Latvia has the highest concentrations of ethnic Russians.

A LATVIAN CASE STUDY

According to *The World Factbook*, ethnic Russians account for 26 percent of Latvia's population, which leads to complicated politics between the state and local governments and the ethnic Russian minority. Often, city mayors and other local leaders, representing the interests of ethnic Russians, act contrary to the policies of the Latvian president and government leadership. Igors Votolins, leader of the Movement of European Russians in Latvia, a group that

aims to unite pro-European Russians, noted in an interview that Latvia is the weakest link in NATO's chain because of its pro-Putin contingent of ethnic Russians. Of the 575,195 Russians listed in the latest Latvian population census, only 356,482 are Latvian citizens, which leaves 172,372 noncitizens (30 percent) and 46,228 people in "transition" (8 percent), all remaining without the right to vote or serve in the military. This led Andrew Higgins to note in *The New York Times* that some Russian analysts are suggesting that such ethnic Russians could provide the leverage needed to force the revision of borders in places like the Baltic states.

All these factors combine to create an uneasy and sometimes hostile relationship between Russia and other former Soviet republics. According to Mike Collier of *BNE IntelliNews*, Russian-language media dominates the landscape, broadcasting information in Russian all day, compared to the hours

broadcast by their Latvian counterparts. And *IHS Janes Defense Weekly* observes that Russia spends over \$300 million annually on state-run news agency Russia Today, greatly outpacing its competitors. Since Latvian news agencies cannot compete with Russia's massive broadcasting budget, its Russian population remains psychologically isolated from the country it lives in. This divide can lead to ethnic tensions and potential isolation. Given the proper catalyst, civil unrest on a large scale could result.

The Latgale region of Latvia hosts a large cohort of ethnic Russians and Latgalians — separate ethnic groups with their own languages — and is the logical location for any Russian intervention. The Latgale region remains loyal to Latvia. Despite Russian efforts to exacerbate differences between the Latgalians and Latvia, the majority believe that the benefits of living as noncitizens in European Latvia far outweigh living as Russians under Russian authority. Therefore, the immediate threat of Russian intervention could be considered low to medium.

However, as long as this population remains isolated and relegated to noncitizen status, the potential for Russian intervention will remain. In August 2015, *BNE IntelliNews* noted that unemployment in the Latgale region of Latvia remained the highest in the country at 18.4 percent, even as the rest of the country dropped to 8.5 percent. This kind of disparity in opportunity means that until citizenship and economic issues can be

resolved, or at the very least improved, the door to Latvia remains wide open to Russian influence.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION RESOURCES

One technique that can be used to head off a potential hybrid war scenario in Latvia is to offer a convincing counternarrative to that being peddled by Russian news media. One resource is the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence (StratCom COE) in Riga. A newly founded NATO center of excellence, StratCom COE is establishing itself in NATO as the subject matter expert on strategic communications and is seeking proposals from NATO members on how best to utilize the center, via training or advising.

As of March 2015, the main focus of the StratCom COE was combatting use of social media by the Islamic State. But in January 2016, a new paper on Internet trolling as a hybrid tool in Latvia was published, the first publication that deals specifically with Latvia. While this constitutes progress, much more needs to be done. Since my time in Latvia in 2015, the center has not shown much enthusiasm for pursuing a program to counter Russian disinformation in the Baltic countries, nor for providing suggestions for effective information operations in the Latgale area. If Baltic States want to produce more ideas for countering Russian propaganda, they need to be more vocal in requesting use of the StratCom COE for that purpose. Only then can they leverage the intellectual power at this center for messaging ideas and goals.

The EU has a similar resource, East StratCom Team, which is working toward countering the Russian information campaign and is helping highlight and disprove much Russian propaganda. It produces a weekly breakdown of all the disinformation directed at European audiences. This resource is a good start and should be expanded to actively counter the Russian propaganda machine.

REFORM EFFORTS

The best way to thwart potential hybrid war threats is to connect ethnic Russians to their countries of residence. Latvia's citizenship requirements are strict. Those desiring citizenship must pass tests on the Latvian language, history and constitution. Some view these requirements as discriminatory against ethnic Russians who do not speak Latvian. While such nationalism on the part of Latvia is certainly understandable, given its historic relationship with Russia, in this case, it is doing Latvia more harm than good by isolating ethnic Russians. Regardless of the true difficulty of these tests, perception of discrimination and isolation is all the Russian Federation needs to conduct effective and convincing information operations.

Recently, Latvia has made positive changes in its citizenship laws; noncitizens who have a child in Latvia can now elect for their children to receive Latvian citizenship, according to Saema News. More than 90 percent of ethnic Russian parents in Latvia are now choosing citizenship

for their children. This act, and the large-scale response to it, is significant as ethnic Russians, who could have remained isolated from the Latvian government, become more invested in a Latvia that is independent of Russian intervention.

In addition to re-evaluating citizenship, the Latvian government can also identify small-scale, easily implemented projects to invest in either business or infrastructure in the Latgale region. A brief visit to Daugavpils was all it took to notice that roads, buses and other infrastructure badly needed improvement. I observed a project repairing an orphanage, aided by the U.S. Army National Guard. The positive emotion garnered by this project serves as an example of how goodwill can be built at low cost to the government. Even something as simple as road repairs would be a sign of real government investment that would demonstrate to the Latgale area that it was important to the Latvian government.

The recent European Reassurance Initiative has created the conditions to identify areas where improvements can be made. Each Security Cooperation Office has the ability to identify Humanitarian Civic Assistance programs that will complement existing U.S. DOD and State Department missions inside a country. These projects can be anything that serves the basic economic and social needs of the people. They can even involve host nation military and paramilitary elements to enhance relationships in the region, provided they are not paid directly to these groups. Such actions, while a monetary investment in the short-term, will be more effective in stopping Russian anti-Latvian narratives than the cleverest messaging or the hardest-hitting sound bites.

CONCLUSION

When the Russian Federation applies hybrid warfare in its near abroad to create wedges between a state and its people, the Russian diaspora in these countries becomes a source of potential tension. It is a continual pressure point that can be easily targeted and exploited by Russian propaganda. Even if the worst case scenario — a Russian invasion — does not happen, the potential for meddling is a constant. Ethnic Russian populations will always be seen as pawns by Russian military strategists because they provide not only a justification for Russian action, but also in many cases a fifth column of support for Russian policies and agendas.

As Russia enjoys success and learns from setbacks while implementing hybrid warfare strategies, it will use similar tactics to control its near abroad. The best defense for Russia's neighbors must be more than simply reacting to Russian propaganda and accusations; it must be to proactively target the needs of the ethnic Russian's who are often isolated from their governments. Integrating ethnic Russians is a problem that all states with significant Russian populations will have to solve before they can move past the threat of Russian intervention and on to a more peaceful and productive future. □



The Pro-Russian **DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN** *in the Czech Republic and Slovakia*

Types of media spreading pro-Russian propaganda, their characteristics and frequently used narratives

————— By **Ivana Smoleňová**, Prague Security Studies Institute —————

“Today, nobody questions the fact that Putin has waged an information propaganda war in our country,” says Juraj Smatana, a Slovak political and anti-corruption activist, referring to a new phenomenon — a pro-Kremlin propaganda campaign in the Czech and Slovak languages spread by media. Although both countries have relatively small Russian minorities and only a handful of Russian-language media outlets, the pro-Russia disinformation campaigns appear to be spreading.

In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, pro-Russian disinformation campaigns originate from multiple sources. Their pro-Kremlin messages are amplified through extensive social media activity, and the organization of public events and gatherings. These disinformation activities feature frequently used narratives and show high-level similarity of arguments and messages.

The goal of the pro-Russian campaign is to shift public opinion against democratic institutions and depict a world in which the United States intends to exert global

leadership, every Western-leaning politician is corrupt, media outlets not of their persuasion are biased, and the future is bleak, hopeless and full of conflict. In this world, Russia emerges as both the savior and moral authority, the guarantor of political stability and peace.

Despite the similarities and strong rhetoric, pro-Russian sources have no formal links to Russia. Their motives, origins and organizational and financial structures remain unknown in most cases. To date, efforts by investigative journalists and activists have found no direct proof of Russian involvement.

The lack of transparency is one of their strongest assets, as any accusation of ulterior motives is depicted as an attempt to suppress “alternative opinions” and any challenger is branded “America’s propaganda puppet.” The most important role of new pro-Kremlin media, and especially their social media channels, is that they facilitate vivid platforms where like-minded criticism and discontent can be shared, spread and amplified.

SECRET RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN

In Europe, Russia approaches the manipulation of media and information on a country-by-country basis, creating separate strategies for different regions and countries, while taking advantage of local infighting and weaknesses. As Ben Nimmo pointed out in a paper for the Central European Policy Institute, the Russian propaganda network is sophisticated, utilizing a network of officials, journalists, sympathetic commentators and Internet trolls to deliver its messages. It is also built on the lack of transparency, where the public is unaware that various spokespeople, in fact, work for the Kremlin, Peter Pomerantsev explained in an interview with Radio Free Europe.

Such is the case in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where pro-Russian disinformation messages originate from multiple sources that are often supported by, and interconnected through, pro-Russian public personalities. For example, Radka Zemanová-Kopecská is a founder of the pro-Russian nongovernmental organization Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, which organized a public discussion in the Czech parliament and a demonstration at Prague Castle. In addition, Zemanová-Kopecská writes articles for Czech pro-Russian websites, Russian-language platforms, is active on social media and contributes to online discussions in response to articles. Another example is the former Slovakian Prime Minister Ján Čarnogurský, director of the Slovak-Russian Society, who is frequently cited and interviewed by pro-Russian media outlets, such as the Slovak magazine *Zem & Vek* and Czech magazine *Vědomí*. In addition, he writes articles for various websites and has spoken at pro-Russian public discussions.

The frequent and most visible disseminators of the pro-Russian disinformation campaign include numerous pro-Russian websites, informal groups and communities on social media, several printed periodicals, radio broadcasts and nongovernmental organizations. In addition, these media sources amplify their discourses through extensive social media activity and the organization of public events and gatherings. Examples include a protest that was recently initiated by the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, public discussions regularly organized by *Zem & Vek* magazine and anti-NATO demonstrations supported by the Slovak-Russian Association.

Discussions regarding the pro-Russian disinformation campaign accelerated in February 2015 when Juraj Smatana published his “List of 42 websites that intentionally or unintentionally help to spread Russian propaganda in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.” The list continues to grow as more and more like-minded websites are discovered.

Over the last two years, a number of questionable print periodicals began appearing. These included: *Vědomí*, founded by the website AC24.cz (that also appeared on the aforementioned list) in 2014; *Zem & Vek*, which began publishing in 2013; and radio stations such as Slovak Slobodný Vysielač (Free Transmitter), founded in January 2013. While spreading information benefiting Russia, their articles are frequently based on conspiracy theories and a mixture of facts, half-truths and outright lies.

DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, DIFFERENT PROPAGANDA

According to Russian activist Elena Glushko, the information war entered a new era in 2013, when new types of media — claiming no allegiance to Russia — were added to Russia’s information war toolbox. In each country, different types of media outlets are being invented with content created locally. Therefore, it can be presumed that pro-Kremlin media in the Czech Republic and Slovakia will be somewhat different from pro-Kremlin media in other European countries.

Four Czech and Slovak media outlets (three of which claim no connection or direct link to Russia, but appeared on Smatana’s list) were analyzed to



..... Common CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRO-KREMLIN MEDIA & WEBSITES

Claim no allegiance to the Kremlin

Send very similar messages and use similar arguments

Are strongly anti-Western, most frequently targeting the U.S., Ukraine and the West in general

To a lesser extent, are pro-Kremlin and pro-Putin

Heavily use conspiracy theories, combining facts and half-truths

Have negative undertones, usually depicting moral, economic, political and social degradation, and predict a bleak future, including the collapse or clash of civilizations

Frequently use loaded language and emotionally charged words, stories and pictures

Are interconnected and supported by various public personalities that give the campaign credibility and public visibility

Predate 2014, but their rhetoric and activities hardened and intensified with the crises in Ukraine

determine narratives and compare the similarity between arguments used by various disseminators of pro-Russian messages. The May 2015 issues of *Žem & Věk* and *Vědomí*, and April and May 2015 postings to the Czech-language news portal Aeronet were evaluated. To compare these media with no formal links to the Kremlin with Kremlin-controlled media, the reference group included May 2015 Web postings to the Czech branch of international media outlet Sputnik News, founded by the government of the Russian Federation in 2014.

In all four cases, the arguments and narratives employed by the authors were similar, if not identical, though outlets with no links to the Kremlin were more straightforward in delivering their anti-Western messages, and often use conspiracy theories, provocative language and emotionally charged words and pictures. Czech Sputnik News, however, used a more informative and descriptive journalistic style, often citing experts or official sources.

The analysis found these common themes:

THE UNITED STATES

- Wants to dominate the world and aims to control every nation
- Is constantly sowing the seeds of conflict globally and is behind all “color” revolutions
- Is in decline, and its global hegemony is collapsing
- Failed at its interventions (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya), making the U.S. responsible for global terrorism

NATO & THE EU

- Are instigators of aggression
- Are alien powers and are disadvantageous to the Czech and Slovak republics
- Are about to collapse

UKRAINE

- Is not democratic, but ruled by fascists and Bandera’s followers
- Has a government and president that are U.S. puppets

MEDIA & POLITICIANS

- Are manipulative and biased
- Are controlled by business elites
- Are using propaganda to manipulate public opinion

RUSSIA

- Is not perfect, but is less aggressive than the West
- Is only responding to Western aggression

THE FUTURE

- Will be full of conflicts
- Lies in the alliance of China and Russia, which will bring an end to American terror

Most of these common characteristics apply to similar pro-Kremlin websites and social media that have recently emerged in the region. Yet, the new pro-Russian platforms are also characterized by a high level of opacity — their motives, origins and organizational and financial structures are, in most cases, unknown.

The most important role of new pro-Kremlin media — especially the social media channels — is to facilitate platforms where similar criticism and discontent can be shared and, to Russia’s benefit, spread and amplified. Their success is built on existing and growing public distrust toward Czech and Slovak mainstream media and politicians, plagued by corruption scandals, oligarchs and arrogant public figures.

Finally, the goal of pro-Russian disinformation is to shift public opinion against the West and Western institutions, in line with the “divide and conquer” strategy that the Kremlin pursues throughout Europe, creating a fictitious world in which the U.S. intends to overrun the globe and Russia emerges as a savior and guarantor of stability and peace.

PRO-RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

Russian information warfare theory derives directly from *spetspropaganda*, or special propaganda, first taught as a subject at the Russian Military Institute of Foreign Languages in 1942. It was removed from the curriculum in the 1990s and reinstated in 2000. In a 2014 report for the Institute of Modern Russia, Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss refer to Russia’s assault on media and its disinformation activities as the weaponization of information, conducted alongside the weaponization of money and culture.

The pro-Russian discourse has already entered Czech and Slovak mainstream media. Its appearance correlates with the Ukrainian crises; however, many outlets were founded before 2014, suggesting that the system might have been years in the making.

In 2013, the *Juvenilná Justícia*, or Juvenile Justice campaign, an effort to protect children from violence, was described by the Slovak pro-Russian website Stop Auto-Genocide as a “multinational system that brutally steals and unjustifiably takes children away from normal and healthy families. Using physical violence, the state social authority abducts children from their homes or kindergartens.”

The campaign started with a 32-minute-long YouTube video that accused France, Germany and Nordic countries of “the most brutal tyranny in human history.” The video appeared to be of Russian origin, using the Cyrillic alphabet and referring to Russian sources. The story, coupled with a petition against this fabricated child abuse, soon spread to other websites and finally reached the mainstream media in May 2013 when the Slovak TV station Markíza reported on it.

A year later, protests in Prague and elsewhere against



Flags fly in front of the headquarters of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Prague, Czech Republic. The U.S.-funded station provides an alternative news source to government-controlled media in many countries. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Czech President Milos Zeman, a strong supporter of Czech-Russian relations, resulted in a similar campaign. Pro-Russian Czech websites falsely accused the U.S. Embassy in Prague of organizing the demonstrations. The story was then picked up

by some more respected media, which prompted the respective foreign ministries to actually inquire about the embassy's involvement. Both the U.S. Embassy and the protest's organizer, Martin Prikryl, repeatedly refuted these false claims.

The media assault goes beyond the Internet. Czech Television (CT), a public television broadcaster, recently warned about an increased number of complaints regarding its foreign news coverage. "This new phenomenon is placing pressure on our foreign affairs department," Michal Kubal, head of CT's foreign news editorial department, observed in April 2015. "It appears that somebody is purposefully trying to search for errors made by CT that fall in line with Russian propaganda — you don't have to trust the Kremlin, just don't trust anybody."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are some things that European countries can do to weaken Russian propaganda efforts:

- Map the impact on public opinion. To properly assess the effect of pro-Russian campaigns, it is necessary to study changes of sentiment through regular opinion polls, surveys and studies directed

at sectors and democratic institutions that are most frequently targeted.

- Deconstruct and expose the pro-Russian campaign. To properly understand and publicly expose the system, more effort should be invested in researching its various aspects, especially uncovering its structures, personalities and backgrounds.
- Educate civilians. Initiatives that seek to expose propaganda techniques, such as a new school textbook by the Slovak nongovernmental organization Human Right Institute, should be supported. In addition, a public campaign should be introduced showing how disinformation and propaganda operate, and how methods to deliver such information to the broader public can be developed.
- Rebut and explain frequently used arguments. Complaints such as "the West also uses propaganda" or "the world is collapsing" should be quickly rebutted and discredited.
- Give "information security" the status of an academic science. Czech, Slovak and other European institutions of higher education, think tanks and government facilities should develop analytical capabilities and support research on how information, the Internet and propaganda can be used to achieve foreign policy goals. □

This is a condensed version of a paper published by the Prague Security Studies Institute in June 2015.

Russkiy Mir

HOW THE KREMLIN EMPLOYS NARRATIVES TO DESTABILIZE THE BALTIC STATES

By Capt. Brian P. Cotter, U.S. Army



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

The Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula grabbed headlines in March 2014, just a short time after Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was ousted from power. Protests began in November 2013 when Yanukovich backed out of an economic pact with the European Union at the behest of Russian President Vladimir Putin and signed a separate deal that more closely aligned Ukraine with Russia. The overthrow of Yanukovich, a Kremlin ally, and the events that followed — beginning with the annexation of Crimea and the violent birth of self-declared, pro-Russian autonomous republics in Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine — illustrated the stark divide between ethnic Ukrainians in the country’s west and those in the east who identified more strongly as Russian.

Since the seizure of Crimea, Russia has remained active in eastern Ukraine, where its military involvement has been both covert and, in spite of repeated denials, overt, as attested to by U.S. Army Europe Commander Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, in March 2015, when he estimated Russia had around 12,000 troops operating in Ukraine. While Russia’s support to the Ukrainian rebels has predominantly been in armaments and provisions, the implementation of its own, state-controlled Russian-language media has been used to great effect in the battle for public opinion throughout the wider Russian-speaking world. Putin has leveraged the fact that most Russian-language media available throughout the world is broadcast or rebroadcast directly from Russia, where the Kremlin maintains a tight grip on the media. This has created a series of exclusive narratives, carefully crafted to influence specific population groups, including those beyond the borders of Russia and eastern Ukraine.

Russia’s divisive media campaign and the efficacy of its narratives on targeted groups has exposed an alarming fault line along the eastern seams of Euro-Atlantic institutions. While Ukraine has generated headlines, in northeastern Europe, the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia — members of NATO and home to significant Russian minorities — represent a strategic vulnerability to the Euro-Atlantic order. One Russian political analyst, Andrei Piontkovsky, observed that Putin’s ultimate desired end state is “the maximum extension of the Russian World, the destruction of NATO, and the discrediting and humiliation of the U.S. as the guarantor of the security of the West.” Large ethnic Russian populations in the Baltic region present an opportunity for the Kremlin to cultivate pro-Russian fervor and discredit the West by leveraging carefully conceived narratives to influence and potentially destabilize these three NATO members — and the alliance as a whole — from within.

The Gerasimov Doctrine

In August 2008, Russia engaged in a brief conflict with the Republic of Georgia over the status of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Although Russia ultimately prevailed, the war “revealed large-scale Russian military operational failures,” Russia expert Jim Nichol noted. This triggered a period of self-evaluation that resulted in two developments: a

renewed push to modernize and reform Russia’s conventional military forces and a re-evaluation of how Russia would wage wars in the future, Nichol said in his Congressional Research Service paper, “Russian Military Reform and Defense Policy.”

Enter Gen. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff of the Russian Armed Forces. In 2013, he published an article in the relatively obscure Russian periodical *The Military-Industrial Courier* that introduced a new approach to waging war, a strategy that has come to be known as hybrid warfare. The shift to a hybrid, nonlinear warfighting strategy represents at least a tacit acknowledgement that Russia’s conventional forces suffered a capabilities gap and that alternative methods of circumventing an enemy’s conventional superiority were necessary. In his article — translated and published by Robert Coalson of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty — Gerasimov recognized that the exploitation of the information sphere could allow Russia to overcome its limited conventional capabilities.

The Gerasimov Doctrine emphasizes that “the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.” Coupled with the careful employment of small-scale military operations and the influencing of multiple political, economic, social and cyber levers, dominance of information can dramatically alter the battlefield without ever creating the impression that there is a battlefield in the first place.

The *Russkiy Mir*

The current state of Russian geo-political thought approximates similar ideologies in modern history. Throughout the early- and mid-20th century, the concept of pan-Arabism permeated the greater Middle East. The movement sprung from the belief that people belonged together as a community, bound by linguistic, cultural and religious ties. No longer under domination by the Ottoman Turks, many Arabs believed their future was inexorably tied to one another; a unified pan-Arab world would fill the void left as Ottoman rule faded into history. Early incarnations of pan-Arabism were ultimately “short-lived as political considerations overrode ideological consistency,” Christian Porth noted in *Al-Jazeera*, but the notion that a people bound by a common culture, language, religion or ethnicity can and should gravitate toward one another is neither unique nor extinct.

Twenty-first century Russians, like the Arabs in the first half of the previous century, are emerging from a period of empire, a period during which, for better or worse, the so-called *Russkiy Mir*, the Russian world or community, grew considerably. *Russkiy Mir* implies that national borders are viewed as secondary to ethno-linguistic ties; at its core, it describes Russia not as a country, but as a people. In his article for *The Daily Caller*, Ukrainian human rights activist Volodymyr Volkov explains it this way:

In [the] Russian language this term is used as “*Russkiy*” world. This is significant because the name of [the]

country is “Rossiya”; thus, Russians, by citizenship, are called “Rossiyane,” while Russians by ethnicity are called “Russkiye.” The concept of the “Russkiy mir,” or the Russian world, is an ethnic-centered concept.

Today, the notion of the Russkiy Mir has been revived by Putin in developing his policies toward countries of the former Soviet Union, many of which host sizable Russian-speaking minorities. In a July 2014 speech to the Russian parliament, Putin remarked: “When I speak of Russians and Russian-speaking citizens, I am referring to those people who consider themselves part of the broad Russian community. They may not necessarily be ethnic Russians, but they consider themselves Russian people.” Further supporting this thought, Max Fisher notes, in an article for the online news outlet Vox, that the ethno-linguistic boundaries of the Russkiy Mir conveniently align with the Kremlin’s perceived geo-political sphere of influence.

Russia, NATO and the Baltics

Prominent among the narratives the Kremlin has built within its version of the Russkiy Mir is the assailing of Western institutions, the most conspicuous of which has been NATO. Indeed, in a late 2014 revision to its military doctrine, Moscow labeled NATO as Russia’s primary threat. NATO and its eastward expansion have long been a key source of Russian discontent, and it has now manifested itself as one of the central narratives in its information campaign, though NATO categorically denies the Kremlin’s contention that, in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse, alliance leaders promised there would be no eastward expansion.

Regardless of whether it’s justified or not, Joshua Shiffrin of Texas A&M University told the *Los Angeles Times*, Putin genuinely feels that Russia has been done wrong by the West. Putin’s convictions create a volatile friction point when considering the Baltic states, the former Soviet republics-turned-NATO members nestled along Russia’s northwestern border. Though Article 5 of NATO’s charter guarantees mutual, collective defense, rendering it unlikely that Russia would ever conduct any overtly hostile acts against a member state, particularly of the first-strike variety, to Putin, the Baltics still embody a perceived Western encroachment on Russia’s traditional sphere of influence.

Russian State Media

Freedom of the press in Russia has been gradually rolled back since Putin became president on New Year’s Eve 1999. In April 2001, the Kremlin took over NTV, taking “Russia’s only independent national television network off the air after months of denying it planned to do any such thing,” noted Steven Baker and Susan Glasser in *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin’s Russia and the End of Revolution*. “NTV had proven to be a choice target, the most potent political instrument in the country not already in state hands.” Thus began the assault on independent media in Russia.

The pattern has only continued and worsened. Mass

media, which is largely state-owned or state-controlled, is the primary vehicle through which Russia disseminates its messaging. Former CNN contributor Jill Dougherty said in *The Atlantic* that “as a former KGB officer and head of the KGB’s successor agency, the FSB, Putin knows the value of information.” She concludes that “for him, it’s a simple transactional equation: Whoever owns the media controls what it says.” This is predicated on control of the television networks. In fact, data from the Levada Center, an independent Russian research organization, indicate that 90 percent of Russians are television news watchers.

Not surprisingly, the government in Moscow now controls the majority of television and print media in the country. Freedom House, an independent human rights watchdog organization, evaluated Russia’s press status as “not free” in 2014, citing a “vast, state-owned media empire” and the consolidation of several national media outlets into one large, state-run organization, Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today):

The state owns, either directly or through proxies, all five of the major national television networks, as well as national radio networks, important national newspapers, and national news agencies. ... The state also controls more than 60 percent of the country’s estimated 45,000 regional and local newspapers and periodicals. State-run television is the main news source for most Russians and generally serves as a propaganda tool of the government.

Coupled with continued harassment of journalists and the use of intimidation or violence against reporters delving into sensitive topics, the overall climate — and forecast — of media freedom in Putin’s Russia is grim.

The reduction of free and independent media in Russia has allowed the Kremlin to dictate and disseminate its own narrative. This permits Putin to maintain an advantage over political opponents and emerge from crises unscathed by domestic and international public opinion. Indeed, Levada Center polling shows Putin’s approval ratings soared after the start of the crisis in Ukraine and standoff with the West, reaching 87 percent by July 2015, even as the Russian ruble faltered under the weight of sanctions and falling oil prices.

Downplaying the effects of sanctions on the economy, the Russian media routinely points a finger at the EU, NATO and the U.S., drumming up support for the Kremlin as it nobly defends the *Otechestvo*, or fatherland, against an alleged coordinated Western conspiracy to stymie the re-emergence of a powerful Russia. Any Western accusation against Russian actions is quickly met with a response from the state-controlled media, calling into question even easily proven empirical data and simply writing off anything anti-Russian as farcical and based on dubious information sourced from Western conspirators.

The goal is to discredit Russia’s enemies through disinformation, described by Michael Weiss and Peter Pomerantsev in an article for online journal *The Interpreter* as “Soviet-era ‘whataboutism’ and Chekist ‘active measures’ updated with



News program directors at the Russian-language First Baltic Channel supervise a broadcast in Riga, Latvia, in January 2015. In response to Kremlin propaganda over Ukraine, the Baltic states are stepping up their own Russian-language broadcasts. REUTERS



Engineers work in the control room of the new Russian language TV channel ETV+ in Tallinn, Estonia, in September 2015. The channel was established to improve the quality of Russian-language information in Estonia. REUTERS

a wisened-up, postmodern smirk that insists everything is a sham.” They further elaborate on how “the Kremlin exploits the idea of freedom of information to inject disinformation into society. The effect is not to persuade or earn credibility, but to sow confusion via conspiracy theories and proliferate falsehoods.”

Essentially, the Kremlin policy is to discredit everyone and everything and, in so doing, create a climate of doubt in which it is nearly impossible to believe anything at all. Weiss and Pomerantsev remark how “the Kremlin successfully erodes the integrity of investigative and political journalism, producing a lack of faith in traditional media.” By accusing Western media — or even the last vestiges of independent media within Russia — of acting in the very manner in which the Kremlin-controlled media behaves, then no one can be trusted. This has proven effective, especially among native Russian speakers. In Estonia, for example, numbers show that in the event of conflicting reports, only 6 percent of the ethnic Russian population “would side with Estonian media accounts,” according to a study by Estonian Public Broadcasting.

Complicating matters is that a significant portion of the Russian-speaking Baltic population receive their international and regional news through the Russian media, according to a paper from the Latvian Centre for East European Policy Studies. Indeed, a report by Jill Dougherty for Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center confirms that “in countries that were once part of the Soviet Union, where many ethnic Russians reside and the Russian language is still spoken, Russian state media penetration has been effective.” Additionally, The Associated Press noted in 2014 that though much of Russian-language media consumed in the Baltics is produced from within Russia itself, even the First Baltic Channel (PBK), a Riga, Latvia-based Russian-language

channel with an estimated 4 million viewers across the region, has come under suspicion of being yet another Kremlin mouthpiece. In fact, the Lithuanian State Security Department described PBK as “one of Russia’s instruments of influence and implementation of informational and ideological policy goals” in a 2014 Baltic News Service report.

Moscow has exploited its nearly exclusive control over Russian-language information, investing heavily in its state-run media apparatus, including a 2015 budget of “15.38 billion rubles (\$245 million) for its Russia Today television channel and 6.48 billion rubles (\$103 million) for Rossiya Segodnya, the state news agency that includes Sputnik News,” the *Guardian* said. By saturating a market already devoid of moderate independent Russian-language media outlets with Kremlin-orchestrated information, Putin is able to expand the reach of his message throughout the Russkiy Mir with virtual impunity.

The *Guardian* further suggests that it is in the Baltic arm of the Russkiy Mir, along NATO’s Russian-speaking fringe, that the populations are particularly susceptible to exploitation by the Kremlin information campaign:

Concerns about the aims of expanding Kremlin-backed media outlets are especially palpable in Russia’s EU member neighbours, the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which all have significant Russian-speaking minorities. ... In such a sensitive political climate, there are concerns that Kremlin media outlets could spark tensions between ethnic Russians and national majorities.

This area, where attitudes are being molded to view the West as anything from suspicious to hostile, represents a significant vulnerability to the national governments in the Baltic states as well as NATO.

The Russian Minority in the Baltics

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia each boast a sizable Russian minority. Russians account for roughly a quarter of the populations of Estonia and Latvia and 5.8 percent of Lithuania's. The percentage of people who speak the Russian language in these countries is even higher.

Complicating matters is the history of the Baltics from 1939 until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The 1939 nonaggression pact, the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, between Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany, partitioned Europe and would later be used to justify the Soviet annexation of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. As Orlando Figes notes in his book, *Revolutionary Russia: 1891-1991: A History*, after World War II, "in the Baltic lands and west Ukraine, there were mass deportations of the population — the start of a broad campaign of what today would be called ethnic cleansing — to make room for mainly Russian but also east Ukrainian immigrants."

Thus, when the Soviet Union collapsed, there were significant Russian populations remaining in the Baltics. In Estonia and Latvia, laws were introduced after independence in 1991 that effectively rendered their Russian populations as stateless, euphemistically referring to them as "noncitizens." While they have made it possible for these people to naturalize, Estonia and Latvia, in their respective citizenship or naturalization acts, require Russians to prove proficiency in the Estonian or Latvian languages and to pass exams in civics and national history. In Latvia, where, according to an August 2014 article in *The New York Times*, "many of these Russian speakers have been in limbo, as noncitizens squeezed out of political life, largely unable to vote, hold office or even serve in the fire brigade," the language requirement extends beyond a mere citizenship requirement, permeating many sectors of everyday life. In Estonia, by law, the requirements are similar. On the other hand, in Lithuania, all people living within its borders received citizenship on independence.

Ultimately, divisions continue to exist between the Baltic majorities and ethnic Russian minorities. So the climate is ripe for Russian exploitation and an opportunity to weaken the strength of the state and, consequently, impact NATO unity from within. Indeed, U.S. Air Force Gen. Philip Breedlove, the top military commander in NATO, noted that at the onset of the crisis in Ukraine, the Russians executed perhaps "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare."

A Hybrid Assault

Building upon the Russkiy Mir narrative, the Kremlin has favored a multilayered approach to its information campaign in the Baltics: Delegitimize NATO and its affiliates — rebranding its own concerns about the alliance as a threat to order and peace in Europe — and assail Baltic membership in the organization, suggesting they are unwitting pawns in a conspiratorial anti-Russian plot. The intent, by design, is to drive a wedge between those in the region who seek greater Western integration and those, who as members of the wider Russkiy Mir, consider Western attitudes and actions toward

Russia as adversarial to them as well.

Andrei Baikov, a Russian commentator at *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* newspaper sums up Russian attitudes this way: "NATO and European peace are incompatible." Other sources have been less subtle in describing the perceived threat from the Euro-Atlantic alliance, such as the radio network Voice of Russia (recently rebranded as Sputnik News and, as mentioned previously, owned and operated by the state-owned Russia Today conglomerate), which proclaimed it was a U.S.-led, NATO-sponsored coup that led to the toppling of the Yanukovich regime in Ukraine.

The notion of the U.S. as the overlord of NATO is another recurring theme. Headlines such as "The USA Wants to Dismember Russia," in *Moskovskaya Pravda*, indicate how the Kremlin seeks to portray the U.S. One article published in *Krasnaya Zvezda*, or Red Star, an official publication of the Russian Defense Ministry, stated that NATO's eastward expansion was fueled by a genuine anti-Russian campaign within the alliance, that the Baltic states were forced into the alliance and that NATO considers the Russian Federation as a "new evil empire that, along with the extremist IS [Islamic State], should be removed from history." This essentially sums up the Kremlin message as it relates to NATO: The alliance seeks to surround, destabilize and ultimately destroy Russia.

Impact on NATO

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea and its subsequent support to separatists in eastern Ukraine, the West imposed sanctions that have contributed to a downturn of the Russian economy and largely isolated it on the international stage. However, a number of NATO allies were hesitant to become involved militarily in Ukraine — a country to which the alliance has no formal obligations — at the risk of provoking Russia, which was among Europe's primary suppliers of energy and still possessed formidable military assets. Disagreement within the alliance on how to confront Russian revanchism has led some to postulate that Russian aggression, particularly that which employs hybrid tactics, could threaten the cohesion of NATO. The fear is that the employment of hybrid tactics may not be enough to build the consensus necessary to invoke Article 5, especially considering the lack of popular support in many key NATO members. A recent Pew Research poll found that the public in many key NATO states would be reluctant to provide military aid to a fellow NATO member in need, prompting Vox columnist Max Fisher to remark: "If it were up to German voters — and to at least some extent, it is — NATO would effectively surrender the Baltics to Russia in a conflict."

Yet it remains doubtful that Putin would ever fully succeed in dislodging the Baltic region from NATO and re-establishing Russian hegemony. Even if NATO were unable to mobilize collectively, there would likely be a unilateral response from the U.S., which has publicly declared its commitment to defend its Baltic allies. However, the Kremlin can use softer, hybrid techniques to influence conditions within the region, such as investment in pro-Russian political parties in the Baltic

states and, of course, a robust information campaign. In wielding its narratives to build pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments, Moscow can weaken NATO institutionally and relegate the Baltic states to pariah members without risking potentially harmful provocations.

Conclusion

Baltic residents who speak Russian at home are most susceptible to the Kremlin's narratives. Countering Russian disinformation will be critical in the battle for public opinion in the Baltic states as Russia poses as both a protector of ethnic Russians and a counterweight to NATO. Failure to respond to the Russian information campaign leaves those sizable Russian minorities open for exploitation by the Kremlin.

Responding to Russia cannot be a NATO-exclusive endeavor. Twenty-two NATO members are also members of the EU, including Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Considering the economic impacts of Russian meddling in the Baltic states — also recent additions to the eurozone — it is in the interest of the EU to contribute to sustained stability in the region.

The Baltic states recently discussed the formation of a Baltic-based Russian-language news outlet to be broadcast throughout the region. The EU would benefit from supporting such an initiative. While financial backing would almost certainly be pounced upon by Russian media as indicative of Western propaganda, the establishment of Russian-language public service broadcasting (PSB), defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as “broadcasting made, financed and controlled by the public, for the public,” would provide a reliable alternative information source. The Kremlin would likely attack any source that runs counter to its own narrative, Nadia Beard writes in the *The Calvert Journal*, but the fact that PSBs are “neither commercial nor state-owned” and are “free from political interference and pressure from commercial forces” would lend credence to their reports while serving to discredit claims that the network is simply a NATO or EU mouthpiece. EU support would be necessary in the application of available tax breaks and assistance in securing the network's widest possible dissemination without interference or disruption by third parties. A transparent Russian-language news source widely available throughout the Baltic states would be critical to addressing the exclusivity of the Kremlin's narrative.

Combating Russian propaganda cannot be limited to the establishment of one television station, however. The recently established Meduza, a Riga-based online news source, is one example of an independent Russian-language news outlet that can be a useful tool against Russian disinformation. However, these news organizations are fledgling and struggle to compete with Russia-based competitors. While Western institutions would be unwise to try to unduly influence these news outlets, providing independent Russian-language networks with unfettered access to NATO, the EU and their respective decision-makers will lend them greater credibility. Additionally, this will give NATO and the EU a platform from which to convey a message counter to the Russian narrative without forfeiting

THE ETHNIC RUSSIAN MINORITY IN THE BALTICS



Source: Stratfor, 2014

that which the Kremlin seeks to exploit: freedom of the press.

Additionally, the Baltic states, particularly Latvia and Estonia, should consider greater inclusion of their Russian-speaking minorities and wider acceptance of the Russian language. With laws in place that essentially force ethnic Russians to become more Latvian or more Estonian to fully participate in the political process, these states have put their Russian populace in the precarious position of having to choose between culture and citizenship. If they hope to compete against Russian influence, it may be time to accept the Russian minority as an integral part of their respective states. Ultimately, failure to accommodate the Russian minorities only pushes them closer to Putin and further under the sway of the Kremlin's media machine.

In conclusion, in March 2014 Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevičius remarked, fittingly on Twitter: “Russia Today's propaganda machine is no less destructive than military marching in Crimea.” Russia Today, one weapon in Vladimir Putin's vast information arsenal, is indicative of the entire Russian media campaign — widely available and unencumbered by the burdens of journalistic integrity. The broad reach of the Kremlin's information blitz and its use of harmful, divisive narratives could have a dramatic impact on the future of European security and economic stability. □

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's

RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN UKRAINE



PER CONCORDIA ILLUSTRATION

KYIV LACKS THE TOOLS
TO FIGHT PHANTOMS
CONJURED UP BY MOSCOW

By Roman Shutov, program director of Telekritika, Kyiv

For Ukrainians, the war in eastern Ukraine has become an everyday reality. Only two years ago, though, no one in the country believed war was possible — and certainly no one expected that propaganda would be one of its main weapons.

Since Ukraine's independence in 1991, little attention had been paid to building a system that would ensure the security of information — security that

and residents of the Donbass were frightened by Russian propaganda and believed that “fascists” were coming to kill them. Something had to be done to limit the onslaught of propaganda.

STAYING DEMOCRATIC

Many societies have had to bridge the dichotomy between security and democratic values. This quandary arose for the United States and the West after 2001. Ukraine has faced a similar

By December 2015, the list of banned channels included 25 names.

The next step was to limit the share of Russian films on Ukrainian television channels; on some days, these could constitute up to 87 percent of content. As these films (especially those produced recently) often had elements of Kremlin propaganda, Ukrainian experts considered them another weapon in the ongoing information war. In March 2015, a law was issued prohibiting television



would actively counter false propaganda. State security services ignored even the most basic anti-Ukrainian messages.

As a result, when the new government faced aggressive propaganda, it appeared completely incapable of acting. State functions related to information security were divided among at least seven agencies and ministries. They lacked proper coordination, their functions were often duplicated, and some important tasks were not implemented at all. There was no state unit responsible for monitoring the situation in the field or identifying threats, which made simple decision-making impossible. Furthermore, there were no clear mechanisms for implementing such decisions.

During that time, Crimea was lost,

dilemma in its search for solutions to its propaganda-related problems.

The first solution was the easiest: Limit the broadcasting of Russian television. Quite popular among Ukrainian audiences, it became a constant and aggressive source of lies and hatred, combined with a glorification of Stalinism and other attributes incompatible with democracy.

When Kyiv responded, Russian media accused it of violating freedom of speech. But that was not the case: Ukrainian authorities referred properly to national and international norms, and the legitimacy of this decision provoked no genuine doubts. Five Russian channels were initially banned in March 2014, and the state media regulator then began to tightly monitor the content of Russian channels.

broadcasts of Russian films that either had been created after January 1, 2014, or glorified the Soviet regime or Russian militarism. This decision also caused protests in Moscow, but Ukrainians and the European community understood the need for these measures.

All of these limitations only concerned broadcasting via air or cable — Ukrainians still have access to Russian television and films through satellite and the Internet. Nevertheless, the effect of the measure has been evident. Telekritika, the Ukrainian

Ukrainian activists hold symbolic ears near the Dutch Embassy in Kyiv, Ukraine, in February 2016. The activists warn the Netherlands to disregard anti-Ukrainian propaganda ahead of a referendum on an association agreement of the EU, which took place in April 2016. The slogans read, “Don’t listen to Russian propaganda.” EPA

website that reviews media content and trends, reported that before the war, 22.7 percent of Ukraine's population watched news on Russian television, but the figure decreased to 12 percent by June 2015. The share of Russian-made films on Ukrainian television decreased by almost three-quarters.

Another important decision occurred in October 2015, when Ukraine's parliament adopted a law obligating broadcasters to report on their owners and beneficiaries. In Ukraine, the "oligarchization" of media

MINISTRY OF INEFFECTIVENESS

The decision to establish a Ministry of Information Policy in December 2014 met strong resistance inside Ukraine and confusion abroad. Both national and foreign analysts considered it to be an instrument of state censorship. These fears have not been realized. The new agency has been too weak to apply pressure or any other influence on media, and its real impact and purpose remain obscure.

The ministry didn't push for changes in legislation that required significant corrections to improve information security. The Ukraine Information Security Concept, recently drafted, is a rather doubtful achievement; the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has sharply criticized it, while domestic experts have proved that the document cannot be the basis of further policy in the field. The ministry has also launched some patriotic communication campaigns, including online and outdoor campaigns titled "Crimea is

Ukraine" and "Defending Ukraine," but they are not enough to "ensure informational sovereignty."

PHANTOMS SPREAD

At the same time, the situation remains extremely dangerous. Despite the bans and restrictions, Ukrainians still have access to Russian television channels and films. Meanwhile, the Kremlin uses social networks to disseminate phony and manipulative messages, and a number of influential Ukrainian media affiliated with pro-Russian business interests transmit "softer" propaganda.

This propaganda has been quite effective. According to Telekritika and KIIS polling, 42 percent of people in Ukraine's south are convinced that the events on the Maidan were a violent

seizure of power, and 28 percent believe that Ukraine is at war with its own population in the east.

Meanwhile, the propaganda has evolved. Increasingly, it aims not only to spread Russian myths (for example, false stories about Kyiv Nazis and crucified boys), but also to seed instability and hatred within Ukrainian society. For example, 60 percent of Ukrainians admit they have a negative attitude toward internally displaced people, but only one-third have had any actual contact with them. It is likely that such prejudice is conditioned by negative discussions in the media. Efforts have been detected to destabilize other interethnic and interreligious relations in Ukraine as well.

The government appears helpless in a situation like this. It seems unable to produce a single national narrative that could oppose Russian myths, and even if it could, the government has no tools with which to spread it. Moreover, there are doubts whether the government has a clear understanding of what's going on in society — which is to be expected, given that monitoring and analysis are still absent.

Consequently, at the moment, nothing is being done to overcome the stereotypes and fears cultivated by propaganda, to prevent hate speech in the media or to remove the growing barriers between different social groups. The government and the president have communicated little with the public about the conflict, and the vacuum is filled by suggestions, fear and propaganda.

Only nongovernmental organizations are actively trying to combat propaganda in Ukraine; they aim to monitor trends, reveal fake messages and develop recommendations. Sometimes they gain support from Western donors and governments, but because they are not coordinated, they largely produce a cacophony with little impact. Instead, emotions and fears continue to rule the game, ensuring favorable conditions for phantoms to continue spreading. □

The author is a contributor to the Atlantic Council's Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center's Ukraine Alert publication. This article was previously published in February 2016.



Protesters in front of the Security Service of Ukraine building demand a ban on Ukrainian newspapers they say contain Russian propaganda. The sign behind them reads: "Vesti, thank you for supporting Russian propaganda." EPA

and its nontransparent ownership made it a strong tool to manipulate public opinion, and a particularly dangerous one when key media connected with pro-Russian business interests to promote Russian propaganda.

But no single media outlet has been particularly inconvenienced because of its pro-Russian orientation. Even the most obvious agents of Kremlin propaganda continue operating, though one journalist has been arrested for conducting anti-mobilization agitation. The government's position has been opposed by some right-wing media and politicians demanding firmer actions to restore security, but the government says it will undertake no action that could be viewed as a violation of freedom of speech.



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