

METHODS AND TOOLS OF RUSSIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS USED AGAINST UKRAINIAN ARMED FORCES: THE ASSESSMENTS OF UKRAINIAN EXPERTS

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Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the methods and techniques used by Russia in its information operations against the Ukrainian army in 2014 and 2015. Due to the great variety of these methods, special attention is paid to those that were the most influential and were used most often.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine which began in 2014 with the occupation of Crimea by Russian military forces shows how Ukraine's sovereignty was attacked using conventional warfare assets, but also by means of hybrid or non-linear warfare, notably information warfare assets.¹ The Kremlin's propaganda seeks to gain wider influence, spread of disinformation, and target all possible audiences on a massive scale (e.g. soldiers and officers, civil society, different religious and ethnic groups, governments, NGO-s, etc.). The scope of these operations is not limited to Ukraine but also extends to Western Europe as well.² In Ukraine, Russian propaganda aims

¹ See more **Rácz, A.** 2015. Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist. Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

² **Sazonov, V.** 2015. Mõningaid üldisemaid täheldusi Vene Föderatsiooni infosõjast Ukraina kriisi kontekstis. – Maailma Vaade 26. <<http://www.maailmavaade.ee/nr-26/moningaid-uldisemaid-taheldusi>> (accessed on 24.08.2016); **Sazonov, V.** 2016. Kremlin's infowar in the Baltics. – StopFake.org, 28.04.2016. <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/kremlin-s-infowar-in-the-baltics> and <http://uatoday.tv/society/kremlin-s-infowar-in-the-baltics-640083.html>> (accessed on 24.08.2016); **Сазонов, В.** 2016. Империя бьет по площадям. Некоторые замечания об информационной войне Кремля. – Информационное сопротивление, 09.05.2016. <<http://sprotyv.info/ru/news/kyev/imperiya-bet-po-ploshchadyam-nekotorye-zamechaniya-ob-informacionnoy-voyne-kremlya>> (accessed on 24.08.2016); **Сазонов, В.** 2016. Пропаганда без моральных устоев. Грязные приемы российских пропагандистов – Информационное сопротивление, 22.08.2016. <<http://sprotyv.info/ru/news/kyev/propaganda-bez-moralnyh-ustoev-gryaznye-priemy-rossiyskih-propagandistov>> (accessed

to disparage the Ukrainian government and to depict it as a corrupt, illegal, incapable and fascist junta.³ In addition to trying to diminish the morale of the Ukrainian army on the frontline and in the ATO⁴ region, Russian propaganda also attempts to influence the entire population of Ukraine by spreading contradictory information, misinformation and fake news to induce fear, panic and hatred among people.⁵

When did the Russian information war against Ukraine begin?

Even though the notion of “information war” entered the larger public consciousness mostly in relation to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict starting in 2013–2014, the Russian information operations against Ukraine actually started two decades earlier and have been ongoing since the beginning of 1990s. According to several Ukrainian media experts, Vitalii Moroz⁶, Tetyana Lebedeva⁷ and Nataliya Gumenyuk⁸ among them, the operations became visible in 2003–2004 as Russian propagandists advanced the idea of dividing Ukraine into two or three parts. Vitalii Moroz sees the events that were occurring in Russia at the same time – the oppression of the *NTV* news channel and the appearance of political technologists in the Russian media space – as being related.⁹

At the same time some of these same technologists were hired by the team of Yanukovych to work against the then President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko. According to Tetyana Lebedeva¹⁰ Russian information activities started to appear already during the presidency of Leonid Kuchma (1994–

on 24.08.2016); **Сазонов, В.** 2016. Основная цель путинского режима – воссоздание империи в границах СССР и заполучение Европы в сферу влияния. – Информационное сопротивление, 31.03.2016. <<http://sprotyv.info/ru/news/kyiv/uchenyy-osnovnaya-cel-putinskogo-rezhima-vossozdanie-imperii-v-granichah-sssr-i>> (accessed on 24.08.2016).

³ **Müür, K.; Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, P.** 2016. Russian Information Operations against the Ukrainian State and Defence Forces: April-December 2014 in Online News. – *Journal of Baltic Security*, Vol. 2, Issue 1. [Müür *et al.* 2016]

⁴ Anti-terrorist operation.

⁵ See e.g. **Müür *et al.*** 2016.

⁶ Interview with **Vitalii Moroz** (Head of the New Media Department at Internews Ukraine), carried out by Sazonov.

⁷ Interview with **Tetyana Lebedeva**, carried out by Sazonov.

⁸ Interview with **Nataliya Gumenyuk** (Editor-in-chief in Hromadske TV), carried out by Sazonov.

⁹ Interview with **V. Moroz**, carried out by Sazonov.

¹⁰ Honorary Head of the Independent Association of Broadcasters in Ukraine.

2004), but it was the impact of the “first Maidan” – the Orange Revolution of 2004 – that made the Russian rulers uneasy about their ability to maintain influence over Ukraine.¹¹ At that time, the Russian information operations were not as massive, aggressive, or as influential and visible as they are now.

Dmytro Kuleba¹² considers the more aggressive wave of Russian information campaigns to have started approximately one year before the annexation of Crimea, in 2013.¹³ The takeover process indicated that there was a well-prepared plan and that Russia was militarily ready to conduct the operation in Crimea.¹⁴

However, Tymchuk, Karin, Mashovets and Gusarov from the “Information Resistance” group assert that the Russian information operations actually started already in the 1990s. They divide them into the following stages¹⁵:

1. 1990s–2013 – preparatory phase; probing of the information situation
2. Aug–Nov 2013 – establishment of an information foothold
3. Dec 2013–Feb 2014 – information aggression against Crimea, and disruptions in the Donbas area
4. March–June 2014 – the application of wide-ranging information pressure

Col. Vyacheslav Gusarov (ret), an Ukrainian expert on information security, posits that the active phase of the information war began in July 2013 after a speech by President Vladimir Putin celebrating 1025 years since the Christianisation of the Kievan Rus, where he explicitly stated that Russia will never abandon Ukraine, regardless of whether it is in Europe or in Eurasian Customs Union.¹⁶

In the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea during 2014, Russian information operations were used at all levels from the political level against the state of Ukraine, its structures, and politicians, up to the military level.

¹¹ Interview with **T. Lebedeva**, carried out by Sazonov.

¹² Ambassador-at Large at the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry.

¹³ Interview with **Dmytro Kuleba**, carried out by Sazonov. About annexation of Crimea see **Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Värk, R.** 2014. Krimmi liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad: I osa – Akadeemia, No. 12, pp. 2148–2161 [**Mölder, Sazonov, Värk** 2014]; **Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Värk, R.** 2015. Krimmi liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad: II osa. – Akadeemia, No. 1, pp. 1–28. [**Mölder, Sazonov, Värk** 2015]

¹⁴ **Müür et al.** 2016, p. 34.

¹⁵ **Тымчук, Д.; Карин, Ю.; Машовец, К.; Гусаров, В.** 2016. Вторжение в Украину: Хроника российской агрессии. Киев: Брайт Стар Паблицинг, p. 209–214.

¹⁶ Interview with **Vyacheslav Gusarov**, carried out by Sazonov and Müür.

In its information campaigns against the Ukrainian state and army, Russian propagandists make use of different myths, concepts and narratives that refer to contemporary Russian and Soviet history – e.g., the Second World War, Stepan Bandera and the *banderovitsi*¹⁷, Nazism and violence, genocide¹⁸, as well as Russophobia, Chauvinism etc. Additionally, they use the images of the “glorious” Soviet period, and are especially reverent of the reign of Joseph Stalin, who has again become popular among Russians since Vladimir Putin became the president of the Russian Federation.¹⁹

Narratives and metanarratives related to the Nazis and Fascism are successfully and massively used in the Russian information campaign against Ukraine. The Ukrainian armed forces and its volunteer units are often compared to executions squads (e.g., the *Einsatztruppen* of the Third Reich), Nazis, killers, terrorists, bandits, servants of the Kyiv junta. Ukraine is portrayed as a failed state, or a puppet of NATO and Western countries. Many Russian media outlets disseminate fake news stories about foreign soldiers and NATO troops in Ukraine²⁰, or allege that some of the NATO or European Union states actively assist the Kyiv junta and Ukrainian army, who are Nazi sympathizers and kill civilians.²¹ Another common narrative is the idea that there is a Western conspiracy against Russia, Russians and the Russian

¹⁷ *Banderivtsi* – followers of Stepan Bandera (1909-1959). Stepan Bandera was leader of the Ukrainian nationalists, head of Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN, in Ukrainian *Організація Українських Націоналістів*). Bandera was also the leader of Ukrainian independence movement. See e.g., **Киев митингует против нацизма и бандеровщины**. – IA Regnum, 7.11.2015. <<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2007058.html>> (accessed on 24.08.2016).

¹⁸ See e.g. **Гришин, А.** 2014. Обыкновенный геноцид: «Высшее руководство Украины приказывало уничтожать русскоязычных». – Комсомольская Правда, 29 September. <<http://www.ufa.kp.ru/daily/26288.5/3166244/>> (accessed on 24.09.2016).

¹⁹ **Булин, Д.** 2011. Популярность Сталина в России стремительно растет. 27 апреля 2011 г. – BBC Russian, Русская служба. <http://www.bbc.com/russian/society/2011/04/110427_stalin_vciom_support.shtml> (accessed on 26 May 2016).

²⁰ See e.g. **Титов, С.** 2015. Рада впустила на Украину иностранные войска. – Комсомольская правда, 4.6.2015. <<http://www.crimea.kp.ru/daily/26390.4/3267570/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

²¹ See e.g. **Смирнов, В.** 2014. В Эстонии «поставят на ноги» бойцов украинской армии, бом бивших Донбасс. – Комсомольская правда, 22.9.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/online/news/1850795/>> (accessed on 12.02.2017).

World in general.²² Western politicians are depicted as cowardly two-faced people who promote the killing of civilians in Ukraine, especially children.²³

According to Russian propaganda the Ukrainian armed forces are in continual uprising due to the inhuman conditions in the army. For example, in an article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* it was claimed that the “*Moral condition of the Ukrainian army makes us worry more and more. But the moral condition of the authorities of the army brings laughter through tears.*”²⁴ The Russian media depicts a Ukrainian army that is ruled by violence, chaos, hunger and illnesses. Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers are often portrayed as criminals, drug addicts, alcoholics, robbers and cowards, who torture and kill civilians (especially women, children, and the elderly).²⁵ During the escalation of the conflict in Donbas, especially before the Ukrainian mobilisation effort, the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published regular stories about the mass exodus of hundreds and thousands of Ukrainian soldiers deserting from the Ukrainian army to join the Russian side.²⁶ The Russian propaganda machine continuously creates new terms, usually ones related to WWII²⁷ in order to supplement their information war and humiliate the Ukrainians.

²² See e.g. **Коц, А.; Стешин, Д.** 2014. Ополченец из Афганистана: Ливия, Сирия, Ирак... Вас, русских, окружают. – Комсомольская правда, 20.11.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26310.3/3188038>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

²³ See e.g. **Туханина, О.** 2014. Почему Запад вступает за Пусси Райот, а не за мертвых девочек из Луганска. – Комсомольская правда, 24.08.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26273.7/3150573>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

²⁴ **В украинской армии начались бунты.** – Комсомольская правда, 23.04.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26223/3106716>> (accessed on 22.03.2017).

²⁵ See e.g. **СМИ: Военные ВСУ спиваются целыми подразделениями.** – IA Regnum, 20.10.2015. <<https://regnum.ru/news/society/1994593.html>> (accessed on 24.08.2016); **Пьяные украинские солдаты неудачно штурмовали позиции ДНР – Басурин.** – IA Regnum, 20.10.2015. <<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1994847.html>> (accessed on 22.06.2016); **Баранец, В.** 2014. «Комсомолка» узнала имена фронтовиков, которых ограбили украинские солдаты. – Комсомольская правда, 26.9.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26287/3165405/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016); **Дэ, В.** 2014. Украинская армия открыла огонь по своим же солдатам. – Комсомольская правда, 17.10.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26296/3174231>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

²⁶ See e.g. **Стешин, Д.** 2014. Снова бои под Донецком: армия Украины перешла в отступление. – Комсомольская правда, 03.06.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26389/3267064/>> (accessed on 22.03.2017).

²⁷ See e.g. **Гришин, А.** 2014. Никогда мы не будем близнецами с фашистами. – Комсомольская правда, 9.12.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26317.5/3196304/>> (accessed on 22.03.2017).

This is accomplished through the usage of metaterms such as *Maidanjugend* (*майданюгендовец*), which is a derivative of *Hitlerjugend*.²⁸

In addition to mass media, Russia also makes use of various different institutions for its information campaigns. The Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church has played an important role in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.²⁹ Articles in which a priest tells a story of how the Ukrainian army is killing people, priests, and looting churches are common.³⁰ Sometimes the Ukrainian government is represented as being evil or it is equated with demons and Satan.³¹

Russian information aggression in Crimea

On 16 March 2014, Russia organized a fake referendum on the territory of Crimean Peninsula, which resulted in a “decision” to secede from Ukraine and join Russia. The respective application was approved on 18 March when President Vladimir Putin and leaders of Crimea signed the accession treaty and Crimea was pronounced to be an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation. The Sevastopol area was separated from the rest of Crimea and became a city of federal importance. Almost no other country has recognized the legality of the referendum or the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation, and the vast majority of the international community still regards Crimea to be part of Ukraine.³² In his 18 March 2014 speech, Vladimir Putin attempted to justify the annexation of Crimea by emphasizing the common past of Russia and Crimea:

Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy determined the overall basis of the culture,

²⁸ See e.g. **Людей заставляют врать, что их бомбили ополченцы 2014**. – Комсомольская правда, 4.09.2014. <<http://kompravda.edu/daily/26278.4/3155601/>> (accessed on 22.03.2017).

²⁹ **Riistan, A.** 2016. The Moscow Patriarchate and The conflict in Ukraine. – *Sõjateadlane. Estonian Journal of Military Studies*, Vol. 2, pp. 206–231.

³⁰ See e.g. **Новикова, А.** 2015. Украинские националисты планируют карательную акцию против священников. – Комсомольская правда, 14.10.2014, <http://kompravda.edu/daily/26294/3172487/> (accessed on 24.08.2016).

³¹ See e.g. **Варсегов, Н.** 2014. В души украинских правителей вселился дьявол. – Комсомольская правда, 17.09.2014. <<http://kompravda.edu/daily/26283/3161165/>> (accessed on 24.08.2016).

³² **Mölder, Sazonov, Värk** 2014; **Mölder, Sazonov, Värk** 2015.

*civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea. There is also Sevastopol – a legendary city with an outstanding history, a fortress that serves as the birthplace of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet.*³³

Nevertheless, the occupation of Crimea would not have been so quick and effective without the strong influence of pre-existing Russian propaganda. Oleksiy Kopytko describes the preparations for the takeover of Crimea in early 2014:

*/.../ all the non-governmental organizations, which were already based in Sevastopol, all of Sevastopol’s mass media, which were pro-Russian oriented, they were working in the Black Sea Fleet area. It was no secret that there were huge networks of resident spies cooperating with Russia and openly supporting the pro-Russian forces. All of these networks were working together. The Church also played a large role – I mean the Moscow Patriarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church.*³⁴

Jolanta Darczewska correctly noted that “*the Crimean operation has served as an occasion for Russia to demonstrate to the entire world the capabilities and the potential of information warfare.*”³⁵ Darczewska also stressed that:

*The information front was supported by diplomats, politicians, political analysts, experts, and representatives of the academic and cultural elites. This front, however, was many years in the making. At the time of the Ukrainian crisis (the Euromaidan), it was combined with ideological, political and socio-cultural sabotage, provocation and diplomatic activity. In short, multi-directional and complex measures were taken. Following the military occupation and incorporation of Crimea into Russia, the disinformation mechanisms were aimed at lending credibility to Moscow’s intentions and concealing the gaps in the argumentation for the military moves and annexation of Crimea itself.*³⁶

In addition to a continuous stream of propaganda from different media outlets in Crimea, there were also information and psychological campaigns taking place in the “real world” – e.g., by engaging local people through street

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Interview with **Oleksiy Kopytko**, carried out by Sazonov and Müür.

³⁵ **Darczewska, J.** 2014. The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: the Crimean operation, a case study. – Point of View, No. 42 (May 2014). Warsaw: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, p. 5. [**Darczewska** 2014]

³⁶ **Darczewska** 2014, p. 5.

interviews; “surveys”, “referendum rallies” and pro-Russian gatherings, as well as mass dissemination of posters, brochures, flyers, leaflets and SMS messages³⁷. It is important to note that the panic inducing text messages were made possible by the fact that the majority of the Ukrainian mobile network operators such as *KyivStar*, are controlled by Russian investors. Russian and pro-Russian media outlets were united in their purpose, which was to gain influence over the local populace by inculcating it with Putin’s ideology, and by spreading mistrust, panic and hatred against the Kyiv government.

Russian information aggression in the Donbas area

Russian information warfare has relied on the following methods and tools in the ongoing Donbas conflict:

a) Pro-Russian political parties

The role of pro-Russian political parties in the destabilization of situation in Ukraine, especially Crimea and Donbas, was significant. Kopytko points out that there were several active pro-Russian political parties in Ukraine seeking closer ties with Moscow.³⁸ The head of the Ukrainian President’s press service and Press Officer of the Information-Analytical Centre of the National Security and Defence Committee Col. Lysenko mentioned that some Ukrainian pro-Russian politicians were used by Russia in their information war against Ukraine, and moreover there were politicians who controlled their own mass media outlets who openly supported Russia.³⁹

b) Russian and separatist mass media

According to many of the interviewees, the Russian TV channels that were geared towards foreign and Russian-speaking audiences, such as *RT* (former *Russia Today*), *Pervyy Kanal*, *Rossiya 1*, *Rossiya 2*, *NTV*, *LifeNews* as well as others, were instrumental in disseminating massive amounts of propaganda against the Ukrainian armed forces until they were banned in Ukraine in 2014. Despite being banned on Ukrainian cable television, they are still watched by a wide audience via satellite or the Internet. Moreover, these channels continue to be highly relevant in the Donbas area and in Crimea.

³⁷ Interview with Col. **Andrii Lysenko**, carried out by Müür.

³⁸ Interview with **O. Kopytko**, carried out by Sazonov.

³⁹ Interview with **A. Lysenko**, carried out by Müür.

After the Ukrainian TV channels were banned in the occupied territories, it was very difficult for people living in Crimea and Donbas to get information from any sources other than the local separatists' channels and the Russian media. Several recent propaganda-oriented channels, especially *LifeNews*⁴⁰, got their start as online news portals, but now have become influential TV channels.⁴¹

Col. Lysenko pointed out that in the occupied territories roughly 90% is Russian propaganda.⁴² It is not only the Ukrainian channels that are banned in the occupied territories, there are also many websites that are prohibited as well. The so-called DNR and LNR both have ministries of propaganda.⁴³ According to Vitalii Moroz, when the conflict started the most popular Russian TV channel among Ukrainian soldiers was *LifeNews*.⁴⁴

The role of the separatist mass media in the Russian information war against Ukraine was significant. The pro-Russian separatist's information channels such as *Novosti Donetskoy Narodnoy Respubliki*⁴⁵, and the TV channels *Lugansk24* and *Tsentralnoe informatsionnoe agentstvo Novorossii* (Novorus.info) spread fear and panic among Ukrainians, by reporting huge numbers of losses of the Ukrainian army and showing Ukrainian prisoners of war on *Youtube*.⁴⁶ The aim was to sow panic and mistrust among mobilized soldiers against the leaders of the Ukrainian army. The parading of the Ukrainian prisoners of war in Donetsk in January 2015 was also broadcast with the same purpose in mind.⁴⁷ Kopytko describes situation in the conflict area in Donbas the following way:

⁴⁰ <http://lifenews.ru>

⁴¹ Interview with V. Moroz, carried out by Sazonov.

⁴² Interview with A. Lysenko, carried out by Müür.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Interview with V. Moroz, carried out by Sazonov in 2015.

⁴⁵ <http://dnr-news.com/>

⁴⁶ Е. г. **Пленные укропы под Иловайском**, 30.08.2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uM4t295e4k>> (25.03.2016); **Пленные укропы**. Донецк, 22 января 2015 года. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9BWcS9sPwM&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3Dq9BWcS9sPwM&has_verified=1> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

⁴⁷ **В Донецке прошел «парад» пленных**. – Комсомольская Правда, 24.08.2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-EzdyyHQRA>> (accessed on 25.03.2016); **Захарченко устроил „марш пленных киборгов“: пусть просят прощения у жителей Донецка**. – МК.EU, 22 января 2015. <<http://www.mk.ru/social/2015/01/22/zakharchenko-ustroil-marsh-plennykh-kiborgov-pust-prosyat-proshheniya-u-zhiteley-donecka.html>> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

*There is a first line of defence with the armed forces, and then there is a second line of defence with the National Guard. This is approximately 50 km from front line. Now all this territory is covered by the broadcasts of separatist radio and TV channels of Donetsk. There simply is not a comparable volume of Ukrainian TV channels. Our armed forces are under the total influence of hostile propaganda.*⁴⁸

In some cases, it is in Russia's interest to inflict greater casualties in order to ensure the success of their information and psychological operations. For example, the *FSB* was suspected of organizing a mortar attack on trams in the centre of Donetsk. Journalists from Russian TV channels were already close to the scene and ready to react. As soon as the intelligence-diversionary group opened fire on the civilians, the journalists would immediately report on the casualties. At first the news would be broadcast by Russian TV channels (including *RT* in English language), and then it would be offered for free to Western media channels, as is the standard practice.⁴⁹

c) Ukrainian pro-Russian mass media

There are also Ukrainian TV channels (e.g. *Inter*, *channel 17*, *channel 112* and *Ukraina24*) that transmit messages with misleading content or content that is damaging to the morale of soldiers.⁵⁰ Officers from the Information Department of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine see the problem with Ukrainian newspapers and television channels to lie in their ownership by pro-Russian oligarchs. They consider *Vesti*, which is a free mass-circulated Russian-language newspaper to be the most provocative among them. Since this newspaper extensively distributes panic stories, it has a strong influence on the relatives of soldiers.⁵¹ O. Kopytko describes *Vesti*:

*Before they were putting out high quality Russian propaganda; nothing about execution squads (караме́ли); nothing about fascists /.../ Objective journalism with high standards, but still showing that the government (of Ukraine) is a bunch of idiots.*⁵²

⁴⁸ Interview with **O. Kopytko**, carried out by Sazonov.

⁴⁹ Interview with **Anna Honcharyk**, Head of the International Outreach of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center, carried out by Sazonov.

⁵⁰ Interview with **Yuriy Butusov**, carried out by Müür.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Interview with **O. Kopytko**, carried out by Sazonov.

d) Fake websites

Russians and pro-Russian separatists have created a great number of fake homepages and portals. For example, they have created several fake websites for the Ukrainian press centre of the ATO. Regarding safe Internet and social media use in the armed forces, the group most at risk is younger soldiers who may often underestimate the risks, or might still maintain the habits of civilian life. Another issue is that there is no legal framework in Ukraine to regulate cyber space activities.⁵³

e) Rumours and fake stories

The Russian side spreads panic and rumours using social networks such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Odnoklassniki* and *Vkontakte*, but also makes use of local people. Rumours or fake news such as “The enemy forces are approaching”, or “Russian tanks are coming” etc. can be spread via social media much more quickly than through a formal hierarchy. Some Ukrainian soldiers are not aware that they help to distribute these rumours, although this is exactly what they do when they return home and tell their friends about their experiences on the frontline. This is also a source of dangerous information leaks. Since social media does not have any filters, it is a great way of spreading fake news and disinformation. Rumours are also spread from one person to another on the streets, markets etc. in different cities and villages. For example, in each apartment building there is a head of the house, or a head of the entrance – usually an old lady. By passing information along in this manner, within one hour, a rumour can spread through an entire town.⁵⁴

For example, in Kharkiv (the second-largest city in Ukraine) in 2014 and 2015 rumours to the effect that, e.g., “as long as we do not resist, Russia will occupy us peacefully and all will be fine” – were spread via public transport. Certain groups were tasked with spreading these rumours – e.g., a pair of people would enter a tram and then start an emotional discussion about the Russian invasion.⁵⁵ As a result of the rumours, instead of assisting Ukrainian soldiers, some local people would resist and tell the soldiers to go back home.⁵⁶

On the other hand some Ukrainian soldiers were suspicious of the locals, and fearful that, for example, food products that local people gave them were

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Interview with **O. Kopytko**, carried out by Sazonov.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Interview with **officers from Department of Information Operation** (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine), carried out by Kopötin.

poisoned.⁵⁷ This was another way in which, Russian agents and pro-Russian separatists very skilfully used local people.

f) Loudspeakers in the Donbas region

According to media experts, as well as several officials of the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine, another effective way of bringing people in the Donbas area quickly and efficiently under control was through the use of loudspeakers. This method was actively used already during the Second World War. Information that is transmitted through loudspeakers to Ukrainian soldiers on the front line reduces their willingness to wage war and influences their morale. The messages from the loudspeakers allege that the members of Ukrainian government and the commanders of the armed forces are traitors and liars who have sent Ukrainian troops to their death and will abandon them. And since the Russian military machine is so powerful, they are all doomed.⁵⁸

g) Mobile network operators

During the psychological operations and information campaigns, panic and fear were spread among Ukrainian people via mobile network operators. The most widely used operator in the ATO (anti-terrorist operations) region is *KyivStar*, the controlling shares of which belong to Russian businessmen.⁵⁹ Phone numbers of people who visited the ATO area were registered at information centres that were previously established in the so-called Novorossiia. Visitors soon began to receive text messages with following content: e.g. “Soldier, go home if you want to live”, “Welcome to the territory of Donetsk People’s Republic”, “Your generals are cowards and liars”, “Your commanders have escaped, because they know that the war is already lost”, “You are alone and nobody will help you”.⁶⁰

The phone numbers of family members and friends are used in a similar way – examples of messages include: “Your son is a prisoner of war” or “Your husband is dead”. Sometimes separatists make calls to the officers

⁵⁷ Interview with „Oleksandr“, carried out by Kopõtin.

⁵⁸ Interview with T. Popova (Deputy Minister, Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine), carried out by Sazonov.

⁵⁹ Из России с любовью. Кому принадлежат украинские операторы, 30.6.2015. <<http://ukrainianiphone.com/2015/06/owners-of-ukrainian-operators/>> (accessed on 29.06.2015).

⁶⁰ Based on interviews carried out by Kopõtin.

working in the ATO area and try to intimidate them. The networks of separatist agents use the same tactics.⁶¹

For example, when the battles were under way in Debaltsevo (in July 2014 and later, in January – February 2015) this tactic of calling or sending SMSes was used quite actively but was not limited to this area. During intense fighting, Ukrainian soldiers also received messages such as “Your commanders have fled” or “The Ukrainian army will flee”, and “Your generals are cowards”.⁶² Other examples of disruptive text messages include: “Give up!” “You are betrayed!” “If you give up, nothing will happen to you”, “Come to our side – there will be peace and everything will be fine!”, “You are execution squads and you will bear responsibility – run away! “; „Tomorrow we will start to attack“.⁶³

h) Conflicts between regular armed forces and volunteers

Russian and pro-Russian activists, agents of influence, propagandists, trolls etc. seek to create conflicts and rifts between the Ukrainian regular armed forces and volunteers. For example, Russia tries to show that the mobilized regular forces do not want to fight, and it is for that reason the separatists have been able to cultivate better relations with them rather than with the volunteers.⁶⁴

i) The GRU, FSB and Russian agents of influence

Another influential Russian tool is the widespread and effective network of Russian agents presently working in Ukraine (especially in Donbas area and Crimea). The agents are connected to the *FSB*⁶⁵, and have experience in creating networks in Crimea and in the Donbas region as they were at work there well before the outbreak of the military conflict. These networks attempt to create panic, fear and hatred. The psychological influencing of people is carried out in a highly methodological and systemic manner. With the assistance and support of local agents, the Russian information operations in the Donbas area were actually established many years before the actual conflict broke out. It is important to note that local Communist functionaries

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Interview with **D. Kuleba**, carried out by Sazonov.

⁶³ Interview with **O. Kopytko**, carried out by Sazonov.

⁶⁴ Interview with **O. Kopytko**, carried out by Sazonov.

⁶⁵ The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) (Федеральная служба безопасности Российской Федерации).

and pro-Russian activists played an important role in helping to establish these local networks of agents.⁶⁶

When the intensive phase of the conflict began in Donbas, the area had already become susceptible to Russia's propaganda as many groups of saboteurs, pro-Russian activists and Russian spies had previously laid the groundwork there. Their work was vigorously supplemented during the war as Russia sent more spies and groups of "diversants" to the Donbas region. These groups consisted of approximately 30-40 people per group. They were professional and experienced intelligence officers (saboteurs, spies), who were sent to Eastern Ukraine to destabilize the situation and carry out information operations, as well as perform tactical military tasks.⁶⁷

The following example describes how the operation was carried out in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Saboteurs, spies (Russian "diversants") and intelligence officers arrived in a certain location accompanied by trained journalists (usually two). One journalist would be a specialist in the military field, and the second would deal with civilian issues. They would quickly fabricate certain "desperate" situations and then make a video that would immediately be uploaded to YouTube or other social media outlets.⁶⁸

The footage would then be shown on both Russian and Ukrainian television. Typical imagery included the Donbas people rebelling against the Ukrainian "fascists" and "execution squads", the "Kyiv junta" ordering their troops to kill Russians, and torture civilians in Donbas, and etc. These reports would be coordinated by a group leader who was a professional saboteur or spy with significant experience in military operations and was acting on instructions from an FSB coordinator. The leader of the group would have at least two important numbers in his mobile phone. The first would be the number of the FSB coordinator, who was responsible for the regional and local agents. Both the FSB coordinator and the group leader would coordinate their efforts and work to recruit local people. Many of the local groups of militants were standing by, ready to act and waiting for the instructions from the coordinator. Essentially, almost all the functionaries were recruited from Eastern Ukraine.⁶⁹

Col. Lysenko also mentioned another group of pro-Russian agents called agents-migrants (*агенты-переселенцы*) – people who had left the occupied

⁶⁶ Interview with **Sergey Vysotsky**, carried out by Sazonov.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

territories (Crimea, Donbas) and told lies of the brutality of the Ukrainian soldiers.⁷⁰

j) Weaknesses of Ukrainian strategic communication

The disconnect between the Ukrainian army and the society was masterfully exploited by the Russian propaganda machine. The weak communication between the army and the society via the media as well as mistakes that took place during the mobilization provided fertile ground for the spread of rumours and so-called video “reports” with the content that was harmful to the army. For example, the Ukrainian TV channel *Hromadske TV*⁷¹ reported that in Kharkiv, in June 2015, the militia (local police) had detained many people during “document” checks and then invited them to join the armed forces. This resulted in large protests in Kharkiv, where the pro-Russian population is quite sizable.⁷² The “failure” of mobilization in Western Ukraine was shown via *Youtube*.⁷³ Negative reports of compulsory mobilization were also transmitted by Russian media channels.⁷⁴ In general Russia and the pro-Russian separatists masterfully sensationalized the problems of the Ukrainian army.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Interview with **A. Lysenko**, carried out by Müür.

⁷¹ Ukrainian TV channel.

⁷² **Анна Соколова про мобілізацію у Харкові**. – Hromadske.TV, 26.06.2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AejHyGvRsd0>> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

⁷³ **Новые хитрости военкоматов в ходе мобилизации**. – www.slovoidilo.ua. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZrK_6SwVd4> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

⁷⁴ See e.g. **На улицах Украины проходит шестая волна насильственной мобилизации**. – Polirussia.news, 06.07.2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSUzKH_PfZc> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

⁷⁵ Interview with **officers from Department of Information Operation** (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine), carried out by Kopötin.