

# WHY DID RUSSIA ATTACK UKRAINE?

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Why Ukraine? Why did Russia start a war against Ukraine? Why does Russia need Ukraine? These questions are still fundamental to understanding the nature of the military conflict, which broke out in early 2014.

Russia's antagonism towards Ukrainian statehood is manifested in operations against Ukraine's security and military domains, and started in a latent fashion after Ukraine became independent in 1991. These aggression escalated over time and has been developed into Putin's hostile response to the EuroMaidan protest actions of November 2013 – February 2014. Russia's resistance to closer relations between Ukraine and the West is geostrategically explained by Zbigniew Brzezinski, who describes Ukraine an "*important space on the Eurasian chessboard*", the control over which is a prerequisite for Russia "*to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia*".<sup>1</sup>

Without a doubt, Ukraine's sovereignty would be a terrible shock for Russia's patriotically-minded politico-economical elite. As it means a major defeat of Moscow's historical strategy of exercising control over the geopolitical space around Russia's borders. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski<sup>2</sup>, the loss of Ukraine diminishes Russia's possibilities to exercise influence over the Black Sea region, where Crimea and Odessa have historically been critical strategic access points to the Black Sea and from there to the Mediterranean. Throughout the centuries, Ukraine and the Kyivan Rus have historically been an important part of the Russian nation-building narrative. Ukraine holds a special place in Russian national myths, and Kyiv has traditionally been regarded as the "mother of all Russian cities". Therefore, Ukraine does not play just a pivotal role in Russian geopolitical strategic thinking, but it also holds a symbolic value for Russian civilisation, which influence should not be underestimated. As Hugo Spaulding points out:

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<sup>1</sup> **Brzezinski, Zbigniew** 1997. *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostategic Imperatives*. New York: Basic Books 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

*Russia's strategic interest in controlling Ukrainian political affairs reflects Russian President Vladimir Putin's belief in the need to maintain a buffer between NATO, the European Union, and Russia. The collapse of former President Viktor Yanukovich's pro-Russian regime in February 2014 forced Putin to re-evaluate his strategy for controlling Ukraine, particularly as it became clear that Ukraine's new government was likely to be pro-Western and eager to join the EU and even NATO. Unable to rely on a proxy government any longer, Putin replaced his policy of economic coercion with one incorporating military coercion through successive operations.<sup>3</sup>*

Viktor Yanukovich, the former president of Ukraine, originally from the Russian-influenced Donbas region, who supported closer cooperation with Russia, was expected that he would allow Russia to achieve its strategic goals in the Black Sea region. Robert R. Leonhard, and Stephen P. Phillips, members of the Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies (ARIS) group, assess the goals of Yanukovich:

*Yanukovich sought to balance growing popularity for closer relations with the EU on the one hand with the very real pressure he felt from Moscow and his ethnic Russian constituency on the other hand. He sought to negotiate a more advantageous natural gas deal with Russia, and to that end he signed an agreement extending Russia's lease of Ukraine's Black Sea port facilities, including Sevastopol, in 2010. The deal split the nation's political spectrum into two camps – one championing closer ties to Moscow and the other touting nationalism and independence from Russian domination.<sup>4</sup>*

This split reflected trends in the Ukrainian society, as well as in the governing, political, economic, military and security spheres, which were targeted by Russian information and psychological operations.

After the fall of President Yanukovich on 22 February 2014, the Ukrainian government embarked on a more determined path towards integration with the West. In Moscow, the possibility of losing Ukraine from its geopolitical sphere of influence was seen as a catastrophic defeat in their dream to restore the glory of the Russian Empire, possibly worse than the collapse of the Soviet imperial system in 1991. In order to prevent

<sup>3</sup> **Spaulding, Hugo** 2015. Putin's next objectives in the Ukrainian. – Backgrounder, February 2015. Institute for the Study of War. <[www.understandingwar.org](http://www.understandingwar.org)> (accessed on 24.08.2016), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> **Leonhard, Robert R.; Phillips, Stephen P. and the Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies (ARIS) Team.** "Little Green Men": a primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013–2014. The United States Army Special Operations Command, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, p. 27. [**Leonhard, Phillips and ARIS Team**]

the European integration of Ukraine and to keep at least the strategically important parts of the country under its control, in February and March of 2014 Russia occupied and annexed Crimea.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously Russia implemented various measures to destabilise the predominantly Russian-speaking and Russian-influenced areas of Eastern Ukrainian, including the Donbas, by using tools of asymmetric warfare – e.g. information and psychological operations, economic measures, cyber warfare, and psychological warfare on all levels. Since the outbreak of the crisis, the Russian Federation has not taken any initiative towards resolving the crisis or mediating peace between the Ukrainian government and rebellious Peoples Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. Russia's passive involvement in the OSCE-led Minsk negotiations indicates that Moscow is not interested in peace, and rather intends to use the current crisis in advancing its strategic interests as an alternative power to the West. By destabilising Eastern Ukraine and undermining the peace process, Russia also avoids taking any responsibility for the security and well-being of the mostly Russian-speaking populace living in the conflict area.

It should be noted that Russia's information's operations<sup>6</sup> against Ukraine are only one part of a greater non-linear<sup>7</sup> war being waged by Russia against

<sup>5</sup> Concerning the annexation of Crimea see **Mölder, Holger; Sazonov, Vladimir; Värk, René** 2014. Krimmi liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad: I osa. – Akadeemia, No. 12, pp. 2148–2161; **Mölder, Holger; Sazonov, Vladimir; Värk, René** 2015. Krimmi liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad: II osa. – Akadeemia, No. 1, pp. 1–28.

<sup>6</sup> **Darczewska, Jolanta** 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; see more **Sazonov, Vladimir; Mölder, Holger; Müür, Kristiina** (eds.) 2016. Russian Information Warfare against the Ukrainian State and Defence Forces: April-December 2014. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.

<sup>7</sup> Non-linear or hybrid war. The term hybrid war was first time used in his thesis by **Nemeth, William J.** 2002. Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare. Thesis. Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, June 2002. <[http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/5865/02Jun\\_Nemeth.pdf?sequence=1](http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/5865/02Jun_Nemeth.pdf?sequence=1)> (accessed on 20 June 2016). A. Rácz remarks that „Although the concept of hybrid warfare was not new, the way Russia implemented it was indeed a novelty“ (**Rácz, A.** 2015. Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist. Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, p. 13.). A. Rácz explains the term hybrid war in following way: „All in all, the term 'hybrid warfare' in Nemeth's work basically signified a society-specific way of warfare, which combined irregular and regular tactics with modern information measures“ (*ibid.*, 30). According to Jānis Bērziņš “one of Putin's closest advisors, Vladislav Surkov (under the pseudonym of Nathan Dubovitsky), coined the term 'Non-Linear Warfare' in an article describing what would be the Fifth World War, the one where all fight against all. The idea is that traditional geo-political paradigms no longer hold” (**Bērziņš, Jānis** 2015. Russian New Generation Warfare is not Hybrid Warfare. – The War in Ukraine: Lessons for Europe. Pabriks, A.; Kudors, A. (eds.). The Centre for East European Policy Studies, Rīga: University of Latvia Press, p. 42).

the Ukrainian state.<sup>8</sup> Information operations form an important part of non-linear war strategies performed by Russia. Dr. Yevhen Fedchenko<sup>9</sup> has pointed out that

*As a component of hybrid war, information war is especially alarming because its influence is spreading, and it is having more of a global impact as an increasing number of countries are finding traces of Russian active measures occurring in their territory.*<sup>10</sup>

The increasing role of information warfare in Russia's military strategy has received special attention not only amongst the Russian political *élite*, but also among Russian military authorities. The current Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, and first Deputy Defence Minister Army General Valery Gerasimov<sup>11</sup>, in early 2013 emphasized the importance of information warfare in the postmodern high-tech era, especially in relation to military conflicts. Gerasimov writes that "*information warfare opens a wide array of asymmetric possibilities for decreasing the fighting potential of the enemy*".<sup>12</sup> The research of the ARIS team explains the Gerasimov model in following way:

*Modern war, Gerasimov argued, focuses on intelligence and domination of the information space. Information technologies have reduced the "spatial, temporal, and information gap between army and government." Objectives are achieved in a remote contact less war; strategic, operational, and tactical levels, as well as offensive and defensive actions, have become less distinguishable. Asymmetric action against enemy forces is more commonplace.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> **Howard, C.; Puhkov, R.** (eds.) 2014. *Brothers Armed. Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*. Minneapolis: East View Press; **Pabriks, A.; Kudors, A.** (eds.) 2015. *The War in Ukraine: Lessons for Europe*. The Centre for East European Policy Studies. Rīga: University of Latvia Press.

<sup>9</sup> Director of the Mohyla School of Journalism in Kyiv and co-founder of the *StopFake.org*.

<sup>10</sup> **Fedchenko, Yevhen** 2016. *Kremlin Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures by Other Means*. – *Sõjateadlane, Estonian Journal of Military Studies*, Vol. 2, pp. 141–169.

<sup>11</sup> Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia.

<sup>12</sup> **Герасимов, В.** 2013. *Ценность науки в Предвидении*. – *Военно-Промышленный курьер*, No. 8 (476), 27 February. <[www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632](http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632)> (accessed on 23.11.2016), pp. 2–3; see also **Müür, Kristiina; Mölder, Holger; Sazonov, Vladimir; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Pille** 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, 2016, pp. 32–33. [**Müür et al.** 2016]

<sup>13</sup> **Leonhard, Phillips and ARIS Team**, p. 18.

In the West various experts have only recently started to discuss about Russia's new hybrid warfare doctrine and often quote from Gerasimov's 2013 article, referring to it as ground breaking concept? Roger N. McDermott disagrees with the majority of experts that the doctrine is something truly new or innovative:

*The policy differences between Moscow and NATO have long been known and explicitly contained in Russia's public security documents. However, since the onset of the Ukraine crisis, analysts and Western governments have largely sought to understand Russia's political-military leadership and its motives, as well as how Russia conducts war, through their own historical, cultural, psychological and institutional prism, and thus essentially mirror imaged an interpretation of Moscow's actions. It may well mark a modern example of blue assessing red, and seeing a reflection of blue. Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the current chasm that divides Russia and NATO is the mythical interpretation that Moscow has devised a lethal and new hybrid warfare doctrine. If this is, in fact, in error, then NATO and its governments eventually will have to correct it.<sup>14</sup>*

Nevertheless, the new Russian military doctrine from the end of December 2014 states that information superiority is essential to achieving victory on the physical battlefield in a modern war.<sup>15</sup> Without a doubt, Russia devotes special attention to information security and has put a great deal of work into this sphere. Only recently (2016), Russia prepared a draft version of "Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation".<sup>16</sup> Vadim Shtepa points out that:

*In general, this draft document is rife with doctrinal contradictions. For example, it recognizes that "information technologies have a global cross-border nature." But at the same time, the main task of the Doctrine is*

<sup>14</sup> **McDermott, R.** 2016. Does Russia Have a Gerasimov Doctrine? – Parameters 46(1) Spring 2016. <[https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/Parameters/issues/Spring\\_2016/12\\_McDermott.pdf](https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/Parameters/issues/Spring_2016/12_McDermott.pdf)> (accessed: 12 March 2017), p. 105.

<sup>15</sup> **Российская Газета** 2014. Военная доктрина Российской Федерации, 30 December. <<http://www.rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>> (accessed on 03.05.2016); **Müür et al.** 2016, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., **Shtepa, Vadim** 2016. Russia's Draft Information Security Doctrine at Odds With Realities of Modern Information Environment. The Jamestown Foundation, 15<sup>th</sup> July 2016. <[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=45637&chash=b4ddf217d48b5af96c4b86c52db172b5#.V52JQv19672](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45637&chash=b4ddf217d48b5af96c4b86c52db172b5#.V52JQv19672)> (accessed on 30.07.2016) [**Shtepa** 2016]; **Доктрина информационной безопасности Российской Федерации (проект)** 2016. – Российская газета. <<https://rg.ru/2016/12/06/doktrina-infobezobasnost-site-dok.html>> (accessed on 25.03.2017).

*formulated as follows: “to ensure the sovereignty of the Russian Federation in the information space” – in other words, this is an attempt to set state boundaries within the cross-border information space. The goal of this document is explicitly defined in military terms: to ensure “the stable and smooth functioning of the national information infrastructure [...] in peacetime, during the direct threat of aggression, and in wartime.”<sup>17</sup>*

The intensified attention that Russia gives to developing its concepts of information warfare confirms that they still consider it to be an important tool for supplementing their military strategies. The crisis in Ukraine appears to have been a testing ground for information warfare methods, and the lessons learned from it could be further applied to other areas that Russia considers strategically important.

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<sup>17</sup> Shtepa 2016.