

1. INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

Kristiina Müür, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Vladimir Sazonov



1.1. Research Goal

The research project *Russian Information Warfare against the Ukrainian State and Defence Forces: April-December 2014* was carried out by scholars from the Estonian National Defence College Centre for Applied Studies under the auspices of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. Our cooperation partners were the University of Tartu Institute of Social Studies and the Headquarters of the Estonian Defence Forces Strategic Communication Department. This was an interdisciplinary endeavour involving political, historical, military, and communication studies. The research was carried out March-July 2015.

The project focused on Russian information operations that took place soon after the annexation of Crimea by Russia – from 1 April to the end of 2014. This period includes the activities of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in Eastern Ukraine; Russian Federation campaigns in support of pro-Russian forces against the Ukrainian Defence Forces; and the so-called 'humanitarian convoys'. Research methods included the analysis of various media sources and conducting interviews with relevant experts in Ukraine. Media analysis was used to map the communicative strategies of the Russian information campaigns against the Ukrainian defence forces and the interviews provided the assessment of various experts as to their possible impact.

The main goal of the research was to provide further insight into the nature of Russian information warfare and, thus, input for NATO and Europe in general to improve the level of preparedness in countering the challenges of 21st century warfare.

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

The objective of this research was to identify how the Russian media portrays Ukrainian military and security structures, and the Kyiv government and their 'collaboration' with the West. The research group looked at how these

messages were disseminated in the media in an effort to construct attitudes and advocate behaviours parallel to political and military events on the ground in Ukraine. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How has the Russian Federation constructed images related to the performance of the Ukrainian armed forces (including volunteers³), army leadership, and the Ukrainian government?
2. How have Russian information operations portrayed the Western players (USA, NATO, and the EU) and their role in the on-going Ukraine crisis?

1.3. Methodology

The study combined standardised content analysis with interviews. Media analysis made it possible for researchers to examine both explicit and implicit messages from a variety of sources and compare the results across media channels. Content analysis also made it possible to quantitatively depict trends in using various keywords, labels, and other phenomena. During the course of two field trips to Ukraine (Kyiv and Eastern Ukraine) in May and June 2015, interviews were carried out with a number of political and military experts, officials and politicians, media representatives, as well as soldiers and officers of the Ukrainian defence forces who were actually involved in the conflict in the Donbass area.

The coding manual

The first aim of the project was to develop a methodology for the systematisation of the rich empirical Russian propaganda material into a coherent structure. The added value of the resulting coding manual is that it is not limited to analysing this case study alone, but could be a useful starting point for others doing similar research.

The coding manual can be roughly divided into two parts. The first part deals with the various characteristics of the news stories, such as main topics, sources used, geopolitical locations referred to, and both past and present events referred to in each of the stories. The second part of the manual deals with the meaning-making aspects of the propaganda material. A series of questions were posed about what kinds of attitudes (if applicable) the articles conveyed about the various groups being researched – the Ukrainian defence

³ Those voluntarily fighting in support of Ukrainian sovereignty.

forces (including volunteers), the army leadership and the Kyiv government; the USA/NATO, the EU, or the West in general.

The representation of these target groups in the media was scrutinised against the following labels and phenomena:

- parallels with Third Reich – fascists, Nazis, neo-Nazis, Banderivtsi⁴, etc.
- humiliation and belittlement of Ukrainian soldiers by, for example, calling them criminals, rapists, drug addicts, and cowards, and by claiming that there is an abundance of violence, chaos, etc within the Ukrainian armed forces
- execution squads, punitive units (*karateli*)
- genocide, fratricide, terrorists
- the Kyiv junta and its followers
- Russophobia – discrimination, nationalism, xenophobia
- Ukrainians as ‘false Russians’, little brothers, Ukraine as a failed state
- the West as fascist
- Ukrainians as puppets of the West
- Western provocations against Russia in Ukraine.

These criticisms are tools used in Russian information operations to achieve their objectives – to demonise, deter, and demoralise the adversary, i.e. Ukraine and the West.⁵

In addition to the preponderance of negative images, other possibilities were included in the coding manual. For example, a text might be conveying a positive image of the target group, either through a supportive statement by the author himself or by use of a supportive quotation. The articles might also take a justifying stance – not directly supportive, but nevertheless providing an explanation or an excuse for a certain behaviour or event. An important category was that of neutral-looking articles, which simply presented facts and events (true or untrue), but without explicit judgements. If an article conveyed a negative tone that did not fall under any of the above-mentioned

⁴ **Banderivtsi** – followers of Stepan Bandera (1909–1959), 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 more in Chapter 2.2.

⁵ Since the present study did not involve image-building concerning Russia itself, keywords/labels/phenomena that would help to analyse other objectives of information operations – e.g. the legitimization of Russian activities on Russian soil to the general public and the promotion of Russian political elites – was not assessed.

negative categories, it was coded as ‘other negative’. This analysis did not include an examination of the share of true and false stories presented in the messages.

Data sample

Three channels of online news were used for the media analysis – *Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP)*, *Regnum*, and *TV Zvezda*.⁶ Although not representative of the entire Russian media landscape, these three outlets were of particular interest.

KP is one of the most widely circulated newspapers in Russia and abroad, especially in the CIS.⁷ The paper targets not only the Russian media audience, but has many readers in Ukraine (especially Eastern Ukraine), Moldova, Belarus, and in other countries with large Russian diasporas, including the Baltic States. It is published altogether in 53 countries: 11 CIS countries and 42 countries in the rest of the world.⁸ The overall circulation of the *KP* Publishing House comprises 46.1 million copies/month; the kp.ru web portal is visited by more than 20 million people/month.⁹ Historically, during the Soviet Era, the ranks of ‘journalists’ working for *KP* were often filled with officials from the Russian intelligence services and the KGB. Even in the 1990s, *KP* had about a dozen foreign correspondents of which only one was not connected to the intelligence services.¹⁰

Regnum represents an information agency that focuses on events in the post-Soviet space or the so-called ‘near abroad’.¹¹ According to *LiveInternet.ru*, the monthly audience is more than 4.3 million people.¹² Vigen

⁶ See also **K. Müür, H. Mölder, V. Sazonov, P. Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt** 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, pp. 28–71.

⁷ CIS – the Commonwealth of Independent States (Содружество Независимых Государств).

⁸ <<http://advert.kp.ru/Files/20150901122913.pdf>>. However, the list of CIS countries also includes the Georgian breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, recognised as independent by Russia.

⁹ See <<http://www.kp.ru/about>>, see also <<http://www.chel.kp.ru/daily/24213.4/416227/>>; <http://mediaguide.ru/?p=house&house_id=04>.

¹⁰ **Earley, P.** 2009. *Seltsimees J: Vene meisterspioon külma sõja järgses Ameerikas paljastab oma rääkimata saladused*. Inglise keelest tõlkinud Lauri Liiders. Tartu: Tänapäev, p. 244. [Earley 2009]

¹¹ **Regnum – информационное агентство**. <<http://www.regnum.ru/information/about/>> (04.07.2015). [Regnum – информационное агентство]

¹² See more <<http://www.liveinternet.ru/stat/regnum.ru/>>.

Akopyan, former editor-in-chief of *Regnum*, has declared that the agency will oppose Russian investments in any country where political opinion is hostile to Russia or supports the rehabilitation of fascism.¹³ *Regnum* is also connected to the Russian government. For example, Modest Kolerov, *Regnum* co-founder and current editor-in-chief, worked in the Presidential Administration of Russia (2005–2007) and is one of the most prominent pro-Government ideologists in Russia.¹⁴

TV Zvezda is owned by the Russian Ministry of Defence and is therefore important in terms of reporting the military aspects of the crisis. The media analysis for this report concentrated only on the online news part of the channel.

In order to cover the research period from April-December 2014, each week was examined in the following way:

Table 1. Principles of data sampling

Channel	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thr	Fri	Sat
<i>Regnum</i>	X		X			
<i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i>		X		X		
<i>TV Zvezda</i>					X	X

Each day two relevant news stories – first and last – were analysed according to the coding manual. Altogether the data sample comprises 418 articles.

For certain coding manual categories, the results were divided into four phases according to different stages in the military events on the ground (for additional information see Chapter 4 and Appendix 1):

- I – Provoking the military conflict – April 2014.
- II – Escalation of the military conflict – May-June 2014.
- III – Direct intervention in the military conflict, changing the situation – July-September 2014.
- IV – Stirring up the military conflict – September-December 2014.

The breakdown of articles according to the phases and outlets was the following:

¹³ **Информагентство «Регнум» не станет рекламировать Эстонию даже за деньги.** – Baltija.eu. <<http://baltija.eu/news/read/25568>> (04.07.2015).

¹⁴ **Obshchaya Gazeta** 2015.

Table 2. Breakdown of the data sample according to phases of the military conflict in Ukraine (2014)

	<i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i> (number of articles)	<i>Regnum</i>	<i>TV Zvezda</i>
Phase I	10	9	15
Phase II	33	34	34
Phase III	34	35	36
Phase IV	51	70	57
Total	128	148	142

A supplementary analysis of social media was carried out on one public Facebook group – *Национально-Освободительное Движение* (the National Liberation Movement).¹⁵ The National Liberation Movement unites political forces that support ‘the territorial integrity of Russia’ and whose aim is to ‘re-establish the sovereignty lost in 1991’.¹⁶ Since the Ukraine crisis can to a large extent be seen as an existential quest for Russia to secure its sphere of influence (see Chapter 2.4), this group was chosen as representative of this particular line of Putin’s thinking. Due to the large volume of posts in the group, every 50th post was examined; the number of overall data units came to 165. The group was created at the beginning of May 2014, so the month of April is not included the data sample.

In addition to these three media outlets, we have analysed as case study the articles published in RIA Novosti from 1 April 2014 until 31 December 2015.

Interviews

Researchers Vladimir Sazonov and Igor Kopõtin made two field trips to Ukraine in May and June 2015 to carry out interviews with relevant media representatives, political and military experts, as well as soldiers and officers who were actually involved in the military conflict. The aim of the interviews was to get an overview of the strategies, effectiveness, and impact of Russian information operations in Ukraine. Altogether 24 interviews were carried out.

¹⁵ <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/306119699545500/>>.

¹⁶ <<http://rusnod.ru/index/o-dvizhenii/>>.