

6. RUSSIA'S INFORMATION WARFARE AGAINST UKRAINE II: INFLUENCES ON THE ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE

Vladimir Sazonov and Igor Kopõtin

This chapter presents the findings from 24 interviews carried out by Vladimir Sazonov in Kyiv and Igor Kopõtin in Kyiv, Dnepropetrovsk, and Eastern Ukraine (also in conflict zone) during May and June 2015.

Vladimir Sazonov focused on civilians – media, political, and security experts, journalists and politicians, as well as advisors for the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine, and experts in strategic communication and information policy.

Igor Kopõtin interviewed mostly people with a military background – officers, volunteers, members of the Ukrainian army, the National University of Defence of Ukraine, and the Ministry of Defence – some of whom had participated in battles in the Donbass region (see Table 4 for more information).

Table 4. List of interviewees

Interviewee	Position	Date	Place	Interviewer
Alina Frolova	Advisor to Deputy Minister, Strategic Communication Specialist, Ministry of Defence of Ukraine/ Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine	26.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
<i>Dr. habil.</i> Mykhailo Minakov	Associate Professor, University of Kyiv-Mohyla; Editor-in-chief, Ideology and Politics Journal; President, Foundation for Good Politics; Director of Krytyka Institute	26.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
Anna Honcharyk	International Outreach Coordinator, Ukraine Crisis Centre	26.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
Dmytro Kuleba	Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine	27.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov

Interviewee	Position	Date	Place	Interviewer
Tetyana Lebedeva	Honorary Head, Independent Association of Broadcasters	27.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
Tatyana Popova	Deputy Minister, Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine	27.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
Oleksiy Melnyk	Director, Foreign Relations and International Security Programmes	28.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
Alya Shandra	Managing Editor, Translator, and Coordinator at Euromaidan Press	28.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
Vitalii Moroz	Head of New Media Department, Internews Ukraine	28.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
Dr. Iaroslav Kovalchuk	Head of Internal Policy Department, International Centre for Policy Studies	28.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
Anatolii Oktysiuk	Political Expert, International Centre for Policy Studies	29.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
Dr. Yevhen Fedchenko	Director, Mohyla School of Journalism, The National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy; Co-founder of stopfake.org	29.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
Sergey Vysotsky	Deputy of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine; Member of the People's Front parliamentary faction; Deputy Chairman of the Department of the Verkhovna Rada for freedom of speech and information policy	29.05.2015	Kyiv	V. Sazonov
Oleksandr Omelchuk	Former Chief of Staff of the former Governor of Donetsk Oblast Serhiy Taruta	25.06.2015	Kyiv	I. Kopŏtin
Anonymous	Officers of the National University of Defence of Ukraine (Національний університет оборони України імені Івана Черняхівського)	25.06.2015	Kyiv	I. Kopŏtin

Interviewee	Position	Date	Place	Interviewer
Anonymous	Officers at the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine	26.06.2015	Kyiv	I. Kopõtin
Anonymous	Volunteer corpus	26.06.2015	Kyiv	I. Kopõtin
Anonymous	Head of the 5 th Battalion of the Right Sector	27.06.2015	ATO	I. Kopõtin
Anonymous	Advisor, Armed Forces of Ukraine	28.06.2015	Dnepropetrovsk oblast, in field camp of Pokrovskoe	I. Kopõtin
Anonymous	Colonel, Armed Forces of Ukraine	30.06.2015	Kyiv	I. Kopõtin

The interviews revealed how Russia endeavoured to harm the morale of Ukrainian soldiers and officers by using any and all available methods and techniques during the course of Russia's information and psychological war against the Armed Forces of Ukraine and its volunteer battalions in 2014.

Russia's intention was to destabilise the situation at the front in the Donbass region using specific messages/images to misinform Ukrainian Armed Forces personnel, the local population in Eastern Ukraine, and Ukrainians in general, causing chaos and panic.

The interviews confirm that the modern hybrid war in Ukraine is characterised by a plurality of InfoOps and PsyOps features; the key role being played by the media. In 2014, the most important instrument of Russian information and psychological warfare was television, but the Internet also played a significant part.

Russian propaganda goals²⁰⁷

The main goal is to spread panic among Ukrainians, foster mistrust between the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian army, and to demoralise the soldiers and their commanders.

²⁰⁷ Based on interviews carried out by Sazonov and Kopõtin.

Target groups²⁰⁸

The Russian propaganda machine targets not only soldiers, but also their relatives and friends. The aim is to split families and other groups by taking advantage of and further exacerbating conflicts along the lines of ethnic, religious, sexual, linguistic, political, and regional identities. Identity plays an important role in influencing international relations, therefore it is not surprising that Russia exploits identity narratives to stir up conflict in Ukraine.

Most important channels²⁰⁹

The following channels are often used in Russian information operations to achieve its aims in the Ukrainian conflict:

1. Russian national television channels (e.g. *LifeNews*, *Россия1*, *Россия24*, *Первый канал*, *HTB*, *PEH TB*). Although they are banned in Ukraine, it is possible to watch them via satellite. The most popular TV channel among Ukrainian soldiers is *LifeNews*.
2. Ukrainian TV channels (*Inter*, *Hromadske TV*, and *Ukraina24*) that transmit messages that misinform damage soldiers' morale.
3. Internet resources including traditional online media (e.g. *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine*), social media sites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Odnoklassniki*, *Vkontakte (Vk.com)*, *LiveJournal (lifejournal.com)*, *Liveinternet (li.ru)*, *YouTube*, *RuTube*.
4. Ukraine's pro-Russian newspapers, such as the Kyiv-based *Vesti*.
5. The separatists' information channels, such as *Новости Донецкой Республики*²¹⁰ and *Центральное информационное агентство Новороссии (Novorus.info)*.
6. Russian radio channels that are freely transmitted in Ukrainian territory, e.g. *Radio Mayak*.
7. Mobile phone operators. The majority of mobile phone operators in Ukraine are under the direct or indirect control of Russian capital, e.g. *KyivStar* and *MTS (MTC)*.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Based on interviews carried out by Sazonov and Kopötin.

²⁰⁹ Based on interviews carried out by Sazonov and Kopötin.

²¹⁰ <<http://dnr-news.com/>>.

²¹¹ **Из России с любовью.** Кому принадлежат украинские операторы. 30.6.2015. – <<http://ukrainianiphone.com/2015/06/owners-of-ukrainian-operators/>> (29.06.2015).

8. Loudspeakers and media players used for targeting Ukrainian soldiers and influencing their morale.
9. Russian agents and spies – pro-Russian activists in Donbass who support Russian information operations against Ukraine.

The role of Russian TV in information operations against the Ukrainian armed forces²¹²

According to the interviews, TV channels addressed to foreign and Russian-speaking audiences (*such as RT [Russia Today], Первый Общественный, Россия 1, Россия 2, НТВ, and LifeNews*) broadcast relentless propaganda against the Ukrainian defence forces until 2014, when they were banned in Ukraine. However, although they are banned in Ukraine as cable TV, they can still be watched via satellite. Moreover, these channels continue to be highly relevant for the Donbass region and in Crimea.

After the Ukrainian TV channels were banned in the occupied territories, it was possible to get information from mainly Russian and local separatists' channels. Several propaganda-oriented channels that were founded as online news portals have now become influential TV channels, *LifeNews* in particular.²¹³

The role of Ukrainian TV in information operations against the Ukrainian Armed Forces

According to interviews with Ukrainian military personnel, some Ukrainian channels with pro-Russian tendencies such as *Inter* showed demoralised prisoners of war, reluctant mobilised reservists and poorly maintained facilities. The distribution of such content is detrimental to the reputation of the Ukrainian Army soldiers (reservists) and the confidence of their families. Ukrainian reservists and regular forces are particularly sensitive to Russian and pro-Russian separatist propaganda. Volunteer battalions are less sensitive and they are more motivated and more informed about Russian propaganda.²¹⁴

²¹² Based on interviews carried out by Sazonov and Kopõtin.

²¹³ Interview with Moroz, carried out by Sazonov.

²¹⁴ Based on interviews carried out by Kopõtin.

Control of TV and radio towers

According to officials and advisers of the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine and media experts interviewed, the control of TV and radio towers was an important method Russia used to support its information operations. When a group of separatist militants captured a city or town, one of the first steps taken was to occupy the local radio and TV towers. After that Ukrainian TV and radio channels were immediately turned off in that area and Russian channels were broadcast.²¹⁵

The role of the Internet²¹⁶

Our interviewees considered the Internet to be a highly influential propaganda tool. Social media (e.g. Facebook) is especially influential, but various portals, websites, and online media outlets also play a role. Dr. Yevhen Fedchenko said that a large number of websites and portals were created in 2014 and the Russian media began to refer to them regularly. These newly created portals and websites referenced prestigious Russian media outlets and agencies (e.g. *Итаp Tacc*²¹⁷, *PIA новости*²¹⁸, *Regnum*²¹⁹, *Телерадиокомпания TV Zvezda*²²⁰, *Комсомольская Правда*²²¹) in order to appear as having greater authority and reliability.²²²

This way, a special kind of ‘ecosystem’ was created where members of the system refer to each other, thereby multiplying the number of messages, news, and other information. This was done in order to manufacture an information bubble and make it more difficult to gain access to more factual news sources. For example, when someone was searching for something specific in Google, then large volumes of references to certain types of messages and news would immediately appear. Trolls also played a significant role in trying to bring misinformation to the social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, public groups, websites) Ukrainian soldiers were using.²²³

²¹⁵ Interview with Popova, carried out by Sazonov.

²¹⁶ Based on interviews carried out Sazonov.

²¹⁷ <<http://tass.ru/en>>.

²¹⁸ <<http://ria.ru/>>.

²¹⁹ <<http://regnum.ru/>>.

²²⁰ <<http://tvzvezda.ru/>>.

²²¹ Based on interviews carried out by Sazonov.

²²² Based on interviews carried out by Sazonov.

²²³ Based on interviews carried out by Sazonov.

The trolls mainly spread the same ideas that were communicated by the other media channels, e.g. they claimed that the Ukrainian army was falling apart, the army was fleeing in defeat and fear, and the Ukrainian government or the military leadership had betrayed their soldiers.²²⁴

Media expert Tetyana Lebedeva said that during the first months of the conflict many local people fell into depression because of such panic-inducing and frightening information.²²⁵

a) The role of rumours and stories in social media

Panic stories were also distributed *en masse* on the frontlines. Local populations and Facebook messages played an important role in distributing such rumours and stories. As a result, Ukrainians were compelled to abandon a number of villages without a fight. Rumours or 'news' such as 'Enemy forces are approaching.' or 'Russian tanks are coming.' spread faster via Facebook than through the formal chain of command. Ukrainian soldiers were not aware that they were helping to distribute these rumours, especially when they returned home and told their friends about their frontline experiences, also a cause of dangerous information leakages.²²⁶

b) The role of YouTube and other video portals in information operations against the Ukrainian Armed Forces

YouTube was used to show video clips of broken or abandoned Ukrainian army equipment, dead Ukrainian military personnel, prisoners of war and their poor treatment, the submission of a separatist field commander, and other content to harm morale.²²⁷

The role of mobile phone operators in information operations against the Ukrainian Armed Forces

Panic and fear were spread via mobile phone operators as a part of the Russian psychological operations. The most widely used operator in the anti-terrorist operations (ATO) region is *KyivStar*, belonging to Russian businessmen. Information centres in so-called 'Novorossiia' would register the phone numbers of people who visited the ATO area. They began to send text messages with content such as: '*Soldier, go home if you want to live.*'

²²⁴ Interview with Fedchenko, carried out by Sazonov.

²²⁵ Interview with Lebedeva, carried out by Sazonov.

²²⁶ Based on interviews carried out by Kopõtin.

²²⁷ Based on interviews carried out by Kopõtin.

'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.'*²²⁸

The phone numbers of family members and friends are similarly used. Examples of messages that have been sent include: *'Your son is a prisoner of war.'* or *'Your husband is dead.'* Sometimes separatists called officers in the ATO area and tried to intimidate them. The network of separatist agents used the same scheme.²²⁹ For example, when the battles were under Debaltsevo (in July 2014 and later, in January-February 2015) this strategy of calling or sending SMS was actively used. During the intense phase of the battles, Ukrainian soldiers also received messages such as: *'Your commanders have fled.'* or *'The Ukrainian army will flee.'*²³⁰

Loudspeakers and reproducers²³¹

According to the officials of the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine and media experts, another effective way to get people quickly and effectively under control in the Donbass area is to use the loudspeakers that were actively used during the Second World War. Information transmitted through loudspeakers to Ukrainian soldiers on the front lines reduces their willingness to wage war and influences their morale. Loudspeakers accentuate the idea that members of the Ukrainian government and army commanders are traitors and liars who have sent Ukrainian troops to their death and left them there. And since the Russian military machine is so powerful, they all will die soon.²³²

The role of FSB, GRU, Russian saboteurs, spies, agents of influences and pro-Russian activists²³³

A widespread and effective network of Russian agents connected to the *GRU*²³⁴ and *FSB*²³⁵ was created in the Donbass region even before the

²²⁸ Based on interviews carried out by Kopötin

²²⁹ Based on interviews carried out by Kopötin.

²³⁰ Interview with Kuleba, carried out by Sazonov.

²³¹ Based on interviews carried out by Sazonov.

²³² Interview with Popova, carried out by Sazonov.

²³³ Based on interviews carried out by Sazonov and Kopötin.

²³⁴ Main Intelligence Directorate (Главное разведывательное управление).

²³⁵ The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (= FSB, Федеральная служба безопасности Российской Федерации).

outbreak of the military conflict. They began to spread information to create panic, fear and hatred. The psychological influencing of people was carried out in a highly methodological and systemic manner. With the support of local agents, the Russian information operations in Donbass area had begun already many years before the actual conflict broke out in Donbass. Local Communist functionaries and pro-Russian activists played an important role in that. Based on its network of agents, separatists monitor the distribution of newspapers in the ATO region.²³⁶

When the intensive phase of the conflict began, Eastern Ukraine had already become susceptible to Russian propaganda, and groups of saboteurs and spies were brought there. This was done actively and vigorously at an earlier stage, particularly during the war. Russia had sent its spies and groups of saboteurs to the Donbass region with approximately thirty to forty people in each group. They were professional and experienced intelligence officers (saboteurs, spies), who were sent to Eastern Ukraine to destabilise the situation and carry out information operations, as well as military tactical tasks.²³⁷

What did such operations look like? One example among several how the operation was carried out in 2014 in Eastern Ukraine took the following form. Saboteurs, spies (Russian (диверсанты)), and intelligence officers arrived in a certain location and were accompanied by trained journalists (usually two). One journalist specialised in military issues and the second dealt with civilian issues. They began to fabricate certain 'necessary' situations and then made a video that was immediately uploaded to *YouTube* or other social media.²³⁸

These 'reports' were shown on television both in Russia and Ukraine. *LifeNews* in particular indulged in forwarding them, as well as Russian channels such as *NTV* and others. Typical images/messages included the Donbass people rebelling against the Ukrainian fascists and execution squads; the Kyiv junta has ordered troops to kill Russians, torture civilians in Donbass, etc. This operation was coordinated by a group leader who was a professional saboteur, and spies with significant experience in military operations who received instructions from an FSB coordinator. The leader of this group had at least two important numbers in his mobile phone. One was the number of the *FSB* coordinator, who was responsible for the region and local agents. Both the *FSB* coordinator and the group leader coordinated their work and tried to recruit local people. Many of the local groups of the so-called mili-

²³⁶ Interview with Vysotsky, carried out by Sazonov.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

tants were ready to help and were just waiting for instructions from the coordinator. The other number was that of the local Communist Party leader. Essentially, almost all the Communist functionaries were recruited in Eastern Ukraine.²³⁹

Aggressive and emotional rhetoric

The image of the Ukrainian army, as put forward by Russian information operations, portrays Ukrainian soldiers as murderers, criminals, and Nazis. These images are created methodically, using very aggressive and emotional rhetoric.²⁴⁰ Stories of crucified children and women who have been raped and killed were created and replicated in order to discredit the Ukrainian army personnel and volunteers. These narratives were disseminated in the media with such frequency that the action could be considered information overload specifically meant to reduce the enemy's ability to think critically. Such steps are taken with one aim – to decrease immunity against propaganda.²⁴¹

There was a significant mass dissemination of information, in order to confuse militants. CPT Uku Arold highlights this very effective and important Russian propaganda method – information overload – in regard to the MH17 aircraft incident.²⁴² This method is also being used in other cases.

Most widely used narratives

1. Narratives of World War II

The interviews confirmed that the most common historical narrative in Russian information warfare is that of World War II and narratives related to the crimes of Nazis, fascism, and Stepan Bandera. However, Dmytro Kuleba said:

*... in this also lies their [the Russians] weakness because the whole narrative is based largely on Stepan Bandera. They do not have anyone like Bandera. They can think of someone, but they do not have such a strong candidate as Bandera regarding symbolism and from semiotics part.*²⁴³

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ Interview with Kuleba, carried out by Sazonov.

²⁴¹ Interview with Fedchenko, carried out by Sazonov.

²⁴² **Arold, U.** 2015. Infosõja mõistatus. – Kaja. Kommunikatsiooni ja suhtekorralduse ajakiri, Vol. 18, p. 14. [Arold 2015]

²⁴³ Interview with Kuleba, carried out by Sazonov.

In addition, the Information Operations Division officers of the Ukrainian Defence Ministry believe that the main focus of Russian propaganda is on historical and cultural aspects through territorial claims and ethnic myths, for example, 'eto – naše' (this belongs to us) or 'Ukrainians are part of the Russian people', are cultivated. The main target group is of course civilian, but Russia information operations aim to influence Ukrainian soldiers through them as well.²⁴⁴

2. Narratives of separatists as heroes

Russia is continuously creating images of the so-called martyrs of Novorossiia about separatist fighters such as Igor Girkin (Strelkov) and others who are 'fighting against fascism in Ukraine' or the 'Kyiv junta'. This image was created already in spring 2014.²⁴⁵

3. Narratives of fear and panic as tools

Russia actively attempts to bring about panic and fear within the Ukrainian army by broadcasting information laden with strong emotions, threats, and intimidation. Many websites were established to generate such information, e.g. 'on Zaporozhye route Russian tanks were seen, that have already crossed the border city of Chernigov and in three hours will arrive in Kyiv' or 'a large number of bombers are moving toward Kyiv'.²⁴⁶

Oleksiy Melnyk, Director of the Foreign Relations & International Security Programmes, described how Russia was trying to undermine the morale of Ukrainians with regard to mobilisation:

*Another strong message is to create panic about mobilisation and other issues related to manning the army. The aim of such messages is to undermine people's morale. Not averse to such facts as the abuse of military demonstration, bloodied, mutilated corpses aimed to undermine people's morale and affect both the soldiers and their relatives. For example, a parade took place in Donetsk where prisoners were humiliated by showing them. It was again a strong signal to Ukrainian soldiers to indicate what kind of shame is ahead for them. The shots repeatedly caught by camera with Ukrainian soldiers beaten and shot.*²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ Interview carried out by Kopõtin.

²⁴⁵ Interview with Melnyk, carried out by Sazonov.

²⁴⁶ Interview with Lebedeva, carried out by Sazonov.

²⁴⁷ Interview with Melnyk, carried out by Sazonov.

Conclusions

Compiled by Vladimir Sazonov

The interviews show that Russian information and psychological operations in 2014 were successful. However, it is difficult to measure the extent of their devastating influence in Ukraine.

Several aspects argue for the effectiveness of Russian information activities in Ukraine in 2014 – the use of innovative aspects of modern information activities and high-scale exploitation of the opportunities provided by television, social media etc. In addition, Russia has a long propaganda tradition into which it has always invested a great deal of time, money, and human resources.

Russians used a wide variety of methods, techniques, and approaches in their information activities. Information and psychological operations were carried out in parallel with military operations, often integrated to support each other. For example, at the start of one of the larger military offensives conducted by Ukraine, fierce fighting fronts were set up at Ilovaysk, Debaltsevo, Mariupol, and the Donetsk Airport. Information activities were also employed to respond to preparations for the further mobilisation of the Ukrainian army. In addition to Russian media and trolls, the FSB and the GRU, their agents active in Eastern Ukraine, and a myriad of recruited separatist activists also played an active role in information campaigns.

Information and psychological warfare takes place at all levels. Local people are interviewed in the street; ‘surveys’ are conducted; referendum rallies, meetings, and gatherings are organised; posters, brochures, flyers, and leaflets are distributed; SMSes are sent. It is important to note that the majority of Ukrainian mobile telephone operators are controlled by Russian capital – i. e. *KyivStar*.

The interviews revealed that Russian information activities are situational in nature, and make use of a wide variety of information tools. Each case is approached individually. If a narrative is not effective enough, then it is immediately revised or replaced by another narrative or idea that is expected to produce better results.

The Russian propaganda machine is quite flexible and quickly adapts to new situations. Although many propaganda operations are spontaneous, they are clearly derived from an existing strategic plan. The biological term ‘mimicry’ describes the nature of Russian propaganda well; it is like a chameleon that constantly changes and adapts. This makes it difficult to fight.

However, the system also has its weaknesses. Since many campaigns are hastily and spontaneously produced, sometimes even serious mistakes occur.

The results obtained from the interviews coincide with the results of our media analysis. Although the starting point of our research was the exploration of Russia's use of historical narratives, the results of our media analysis and interviews show a more diverse picture.

The share of direct references to past events, especially to WWII, the Nazis and Nazi atrocities, depend on the specific media outlet. These associations may be frequently employed or almost not at all. In the latter case, Russian information campaigns actively make use of other types of narratives and strategies in order to convey a negative image of Ukraine. Although identity-related arguments are an influential tool, not all Russian communicative strategies are related to identity. For example, emotional manipulation (e.g. messages such as 'your son is dying', 'your father has been killed', 'the boy was crucified', etc.) is also common and effective.