

THE UKRAINIAN COUNTERMEASURES TO RUSSIA'S INFORMATION WAR IN 2014–2015

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Information security in Ukraine at the beginning of the conflict

Ukraine directed its attention to the information sphere only in 2014 when it was faced with a very hostile Russian information campaign combined with overt military aggression. It was then that Ukrainian experts and officials started discussions and analysis, and to publish their recommendations.¹ By the time Ukraine began addressing information security issues and launching countermeasures, the Russian information warfare was already well established.

In Ukraine, the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine and the Ministry of Information Policy deal with strategic communication, while the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine deals with information warfare issues. At the beginning of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, the Ukrainian state, as well as its army and media channels had neither the strategy nor the capabilities to cope with such tasks. Ukrainians were largely ill-prepared for information and psychological operation campaign being waged by Russia. For the society as a whole there was a lack of mediated information about the activities of the Ukrainian forces in the ATO region. For that reason, rumours and messages that were distributed by Russia got to easily dominate the information flow. The content put forward by Russia was also distributed via Ukrainian information channels. Panic stories were intensively circulated in the vicinity of the frontlines.

¹ **De Silva, R.** 2015. Ukraine's Information Security Head Discusses Russian Propaganda Tactics. – Defence IQ, January 6. <<http://www.defenceiq.com/defence-technology/articles/ukraine-s-information-security-head-discusses-russ/>> (accessed on 04.05.2016); **Гусаров, В.** 2014. Силы информационных операций России: каким должен быть ответ Украины? – Информационное сопротивление. 04.10.2014. <<http://sprtyv.info/ru/news/5931-sily-informacionnyh-operaciy-rossii-kakim-dolzen-byt-otvet-ukrainy>> (accessed on 07.11.2015).

Psychological defence capabilities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces

On 1 April 2013, the army instituted its ideological protocols for servicemen. The aim of the new discipline was to raise awareness of national defence policies, increase motivation, and deter the ideological influence of the enemy.²

Military schools and the military academy of Ukraine started to offer several degrees in the field of information studies. Today the Institute of Humanities of the National Defence University of Ukraine „Ivan Chernyakhovsky“ (NDUU) prepares military specialists in the field of information (2nd level of officer education), with further specialization opportunities in military sociology, law of armed conflict, and military pedagogy. The 1st level of professional training is carried out at several military schools in Lviv, Odessa (Navy) and Kharkiv (Air Force), and provides training for deputy commanders in a variety of study and instruction activities. The schools work in cooperation with the military department of the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv which provides military training for political science and psychology specialists for the army. Graduates of the NDUU (with the rank of a major) are posted as deputy commanders of regiments and brigades for study and instruction activities.³

Preparation in the field of information studies refers to a set of instructional measures designed to develop the attitude, morale, psychological qualities, and mindset of servicemen, as well as enhances their understanding of the overall military and political situation in order to complete their combat tasks.⁴

The brigades are serving in the ATO region. Almost all brigades in the ATO are staffed with NDUU graduates. The period of study is two years in peacetime, and 1.5 years in wartime (valid now). The combat experience in the ATO proved the need for officers with specialties in information and military psychology. Since 2015 military specialists have been tasked with protecting military personnel against the psychological operations of the enemy.⁵

² **С 1 апреля в армии вводится военно-идеологическая подготовка.** – UNIAN, 29.03.2013. <<http://army.unian.net/769570-s-1-aprelya-v-armii-vvoditsya-voenno-ideologicheskaya-podgotovka.html>> (accessed on 28.03.2016).

³ **Подготовка специалистов информационно-пропагандистского обеспечения Вооруженных Сил Украины** 2014. Учебное пособие [Study material], pages not numbered, owned by the author.

⁴ **Информационно-пропагандистское обеспечение войск** 2014. Study material, pages not numbered, owned by I. Kopŏtin.

⁵ Meeting with Ukrainian officers at the Institute of Humanities of the National Defence University of Ukraine „Ivan Chernyakhovsky“ on 25.06.2015.

Over the years the Ukrainian army has suffered a decline in morale. Russian agents have played their role in this, but it has also been a self-inflicted wound as the education system for military specialists in information warfare and other humanities has been modified several times, increasing its dysfunctionality. In volunteer units there are no information operations officers. The National Guard (the former internal forces) prepares its professional information warfare officers at the Kharkiv military school.⁶

Since 1993 there has been a volunteer chaplain service in the Ukrainian army. One of its tasks is the psychological protection of servicemen. Each Ukrainian military unit in the ATO has a chapel area, a bible, and 1-2 chaplains permanently embedded with every unit. As a rule, Greek Catholic or Kyiv Patriarch Orthodox priests work for the Ukrainian Armed Forces.⁷

The Ukrainian counterstrategy

The Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre

According to the management team of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre⁸ (UCMC), Russia had been effective in carrying out information and psychological operations, especially since the Ukrainian command structures did not provide adequate and timely information about events in the conflict area.⁹ To improve the situation, in 2014 the Ukrainian armed forces set out to re-establish effective media communication and to create a more balanced image of the army. The UCMC was established in March 2014. One of its tasks was to help the Ukrainian military-civilian authorities (army, police, etc.) strategically communicate with the civil society. Specialists and experts of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre worked for the Ministry of Defence and General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine as advisors.¹⁰

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Interview with the chaplain of the 8th Single Company Aratta of the Ukrainian Volunteers' Corps Right Sector on 08.10.2015; **Служба військових капеланів у воєнній організації української держави: необхідність, можливості та перспективи**. <<http://www.niss.gov.ua/content/articles/files/Kapelany-3aa20.pdf>> (accessed on 28.03.2016); **Департамент Патріаршої Курії Української Греко-Католицької Церкви у справах душпастирства силових структур України**. <<http://kapelanstvo.org.ua/>> (accessed on 28.03.2016); **Капелланы на фронте**. – Цензор.Нет, 24.12.2014. <http://censor.net.ua/resonance/316856/voennyi_kapellan_oleg_usatyuk_na_voyine_neveruyuschih_net_v_okope_pod_obstrelom_gradov_molyatsya_vse> (accessed on 28.03.2016).

⁸ <http://uacrisis.org/>

⁹ Meeting with employees of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre in Kyiv, 05.10.2015.

¹⁰ Український кризовий медіа центр (УКМЦ). <<http://uacrisis.org/ua/about>> (accessed on 25.03.2016). Interview with **Anna Honcharyk**, Head of the International Outreach of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center, carried out by Kopõtin.

The Centre for Military and Political Studies – Information Resistance section

The Ministry of Information Policy was established in Ukraine on 2 December 2014. In that same year several NGOs, e.g. *Information Resistance*¹¹ or *StopFake.org*¹², were also established and took up the fight against harmful disinformation and fake news that was being spread via Russian mass-media and social media.¹³ According to several sources, the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine was initially ineffective in its resistance against Russian propaganda, whereas the NGOs proved to be much more effective. As Col. Andrii Lysenko, spokesperson of the Anti-terrorist operation (ATO), pointed out:

After Ukraine started to bear the brunt of the Russian Federation's aggression, the question of informational counteractions arose. /.../ but at that time we did not have a President, because President Yanukovich had run away and the new President's pre-election campaign was just starting. So the President's duties were executed by the speaker of Verkhovna Rada, Mr. Oleksandr Turchynov. Since the Cabinet of ministers was also unprepared for such a contingency the group that took responsibility for the counter-measures was a non-governmental organization called Information Resistance. This organization included former ministers and military servicemen – such as Dmitry Tymchuk and Juri Karin. They were the first ones who were able to adequately respond to Russian propaganda.¹⁴

The Centre for Military and Political Studies and its Information Resistance section was created in 2014. Oleksiy Kopytko of the Information Resistance and Committee on National Security and Defence (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine) stated that the NGO Information Resistance had already started its fight against Russian information campaigns in Ukraine in 2014. The creation of the press-centre in the ATO and also the informational-analytical centre Red Bull came out of their initiative.¹⁵

So, in 2014, despite the lack of adequate information about the crisis and combat activity from the general staff of the armed forces, there were still

¹¹ **Информационное сопротивление.** <<http://sprotyv.info/ru>>.

¹² **Fedchenko, Y.** 2015. Debunking Lies and Stopping Fakes: Lessons from the Frontline. – POLICY PAPER 2015. <<http://www.globsec.org/upload/documents/policy-paper-1/13-fedchenko.pdf>> (accessed on 15.07.2015).

¹³ See about social media as weapon – **Nissen, T. E.** 2015. Sotsiaalmeedia kasutamise relvasüsteemina. Tänapäeva konfliktide omadused. Tallinn: Riigikaitse raamatukogu.

¹⁴ Interview with Col. **A. Lysenko**, carried out by Müür.

¹⁵ Interview with **O. Kopytko**, carried out by Sazonov and Müür.

information leaks to journalists, the most popular of them being Dmytro Tymchuk. It was Tymchuk who established the information website Sprotyv.info¹⁶. Due to the self-imposed isolation of the Ukrainian armed forces, his news items were much in demand. The analyses he provided can be considered to be countermeasures.

The Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre focuses on improving the image of the armed forces, communicating war developments and reforms to internal audience. The most complicated work occurred in Illovaysk (from May to September 2014, i.e. from the beginning of the conflict until the Minsk-1 agreements), and during the combat activity in Debaltseve (December 2014–February 2015).¹⁷

At that time the media had no information on the changes in the command structure of the armed forces, so a briefing with questions and answers – known as the 1st communication plan – was compiled for them. To communicate these developments, several well-known Ukrainian media channels were used. Afterwards, the percentage of negative information about the armed forces dropped considerably, from 62% to 20%. Here the nature of the ownership of the Ukrainian media channels should be mentioned as all of the media channels are privately owned by an oligarch.¹⁸

Also, using embedded journalists in the Ukrainian army has proved to be an efficient means of making the Ukrainian side of the story more widely known.¹⁹

Information operations in “Case of Konstantinovka”

The Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre has started to ground itself on the principle „the truth, and now“, meaning that true information should be spread without a delay. An example is the case of Konstantinovka located in the rear area of combat activities, where on 16 March 2015 an MT-LB multipurpose armoured vehicle killed a child of 8. The incident was extensively covered

¹⁶ **Информационное Сопротивление**. <<http://sprotyv.info/ru/o-nas>> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

¹⁷ Interview with **A. Honcharyk**, Head of the International Outreach of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center, carried out by Kopötin.

¹⁸ Interview with **Nataliya Gumenyuk**, Head of Hromadske.TV International, carried out by Sazonov and Kopötin.

¹⁹ **Як воюють мобілізовані журналісти**. – BBC Україна, 28.07.2015. <http://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/society/2015/07/150728_journalist3_ko> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

by Russian and pro-Russian media channels. A huge crowd arrived at the scene demanding to know the location of the culprits. They began throwing rocks at the Ukrainian military vehicles passing by. The riots that started in the village were seen as a riot against Ukraine.²⁰

A year later the incident was still a very sensitive subject, and Donetsk separatists tried to foment unrest by saying that the anti-separatist battalion “Lviv” from the Western Ukraine would be deployed against the pro-DNR people in Konstantinovka. This was yet another attempt at creating antagonism between West and East, augmenting anti-Ukrainian hysteria, and inciting violence and bloodshed between Ukrainian servicemen and civilians in Konstantinovka.²¹

In order to prevent the situation from getting out of control, the Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre launched an information operation immediately after the incident on 16 March 2015. A media release was made in Kyiv and broadcast on different Ukrainian media channels. Several Ukrainian news companies filed special reports and gave updates every hour. Unlike the case of Debaltseve, Ukrainian authorities did not attempt to hide the real state of affairs. It was immediately reported that both the driver of the vehicle, and another team member were arrested and their battalion commander was fired. A criminal case was initiated against the suspects. Moreover because of that incident, armoured equipment had to be transported on trailers to the ATO.²²

²⁰ **В Константиновке украинская бронемашинa сбила женщину с двумя детьми.** – Украинская Правда, 16.03.2015. <<http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2015/03/16/7061675/>> (accessed on 25.03.2016); **В Константиновке бронемашинa военных задавила восьмилетнюю девочку.** – Комсомольская Правда в Украине, 16.03.2015. <<http://kp.ua/incidents/494621-v-konstantynovke-bronemashyna-voennykh-zadavylya-vosmyletnuiui-devochku>> (accessed on 25.03.2016); **Винокуров, Андрей** 2016. Константиновка в «особом статусе». В Константиновке Донецкой области начались волнения. – Газета.ru, 17.03.2016. <http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/03/16_a_6601801.shtml> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

²¹ **Басурин: Киев перебросил в Константиновку батальон «Львов» для «зачистки» населения.** – DNR-News.com, 15.03.2015. <<http://dnr-news.com/dnr/30830-basurin-kiev-perebrosil-v-konstantinovku-batalon-lvov-dlya-zachistki-naseleniya.html>> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

²² **Генштаб о ДТП в Константиновке: отстранен командир батальона, 2 солдат арестовано.** – Inforesist. <<https://inforesist.org/genshtab-o-dtp-v-konstantinovke-otstranen-komandir-batalona-4-soldat-arestovano/>> (accessed on 25.03.2016); **Резонансное ДТП в Константиновке, спецтема.** – Inforesist, <<https://inforesist.org/tag/dtp-v-konstantinovke/>> (accessed on 25.03.2016); Interview with **A. Honcharyk**, Head of the International Outreach of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center, carried out by Kopŏtin.

Ukraine's restrictions against Russian TV channels

One important, but also debatable, step towards diminishing the influence of Russian propaganda via TV came via stopping the transmission of Russian TV channels in Ukraine and increasing the broadcasts of local Ukrainian channels.²³ On 5 February 2015 the Verkhovna Rada imposed a decree restricting the distribution of movies and TV series about the Russian armed forces, which are released after 1991, due to them being a threat to Ukraine's national security.²⁴ In Crimea and the Donbas region, it was very difficult to get information from sources other than the Russian media and local separatists' channels, after Ukrainian TV channels had been banned in the occupied territories. New propaganda-oriented channels that started out as online news portals, such as *LifeNews*²⁵, were also founded during that time, and have now become influential TV channels.²⁶ However the ban against these Russian channels does not seem to be total and incidents have been reported of Russian media channels still being available in places.

In addition to Russian propaganda channels, there is also the issue of some Ukrainian channels having a pro-Russian orientation, for example *Channel 17*.²⁷

Flyers and leaflets as counter-measures in the ATO region

Due to the limited reach of Ukrainian media channels in the ATO region, the Ministry of Information Policy also resorted to distributing different leaflets and print material in the region to spread pro-government views in the region. Below you can see examples of leaflets depicting pro-Russian separatist political and military leaders as terrorists and criminals.

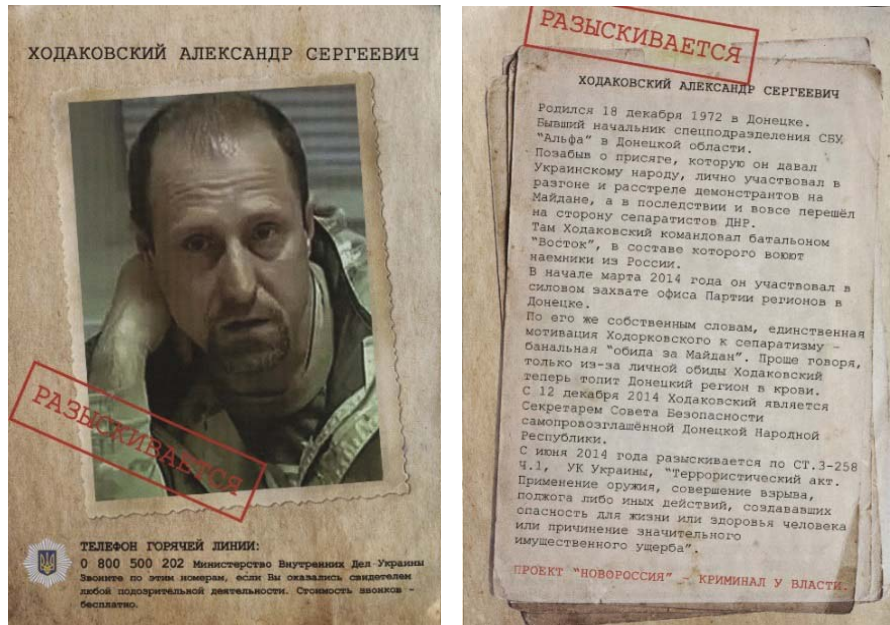
²³ **Mashable: Ukraine is banning films and TV shows that glorify Russia's military.** – Kyiv Post, 02 April 2015. <<http://www.kyivpost.com/content/lifestyle/mashable-ukraine-is-banning-films-and-tv-shows-that-glorify-russias-military-385189.html>> (accessed on 30.06.2015).

²⁴ **Mashable: Ukraine is banning films and TV shows that glorify Russia's military** 2015.

²⁵ <http://lifenews.ru>.

²⁶ Interview with **V. Moroz**, carried out by Sazonov.

²⁷ Interview with **Y. Butusov**, carried out by Müür.



Picture 1. "Wanted Alexander Hodakovskiy. Project 'Novorossiya' – a criminal in power".



Picture 2. "Wanted Igor Plotnitskiy. Project 'Novorossiya' – a criminal in power"