

RUSSIA'S 21ST CENTURY INFORMATION WAR: WORKING TO UNDERMINE AND DESTABILIZE POPULATIONS

Timothy Thomas

For many months now Russia has engaged its domestic and international audiences in a massive information campaign. The goal of the campaign is to persuade and influence local and foreign populations that Russian territorial claims in Ukraine are based on legitimate responses to world events. This media offensive has used both old and new forms of persuasion to strategically communicate its goals. This article discusses the components of Russia's information war offensive to influence Western and domestic opinion. Russia is accomplishing this information war both at home and abroad through a number of methods that will be described in the paper.

These include the use of deception, deflection of responsibility, outright lies, and the creation of an alternative reality. There is no Russian equivalent for strategic communications, so a definition of information war from a Russian perspective is offered in its place.

NATO defines strategic communications in the following manner:

Strategic Communication is the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities—Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations, and Psychological Operations, as appropriate—in support of Alliance policies, operations, and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims.¹

Russia, on the other hand, does not appear to use the term strategic communications itself. In fact, it is difficult to find a term that properly fits Russia's information and propaganda campaigns being utilized in Ukraine and Europe. For that reason, analysts have developed their own terminology to describe Russian actions. One of the best recommendations was that of Lithuanian Professor Nerijus Maliukevicius, a political scientist at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University. He assessed the Russian use of contemporary media as 'information geopolitics'.²

.....
1 PO(2009)0141, NATO Strategic Communication Policy, 29 September 2009.

2 Agnia Grigas, 'Anatomy of Russia's Information Warfare in the Baltic States', Delfi.It (in English), 29 December 2014 online <http://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/foreign-affairs/anatomy-of-russias-information-warfare-in-the-baltic-states.d?id=66767990>

The term is useful in that it does define what appears to be the mission of Russia's propagandists—to use media to assist in the attainment of geopolitical goals. However, it is important not to impose a foreign term such as information geopolitics on Russia's information campaign. It is much better to find a Russian term that may more correctly reveal exactly what the Kremlin's propagandists are doing.

One Russian definition that approximates the purpose of information geopolitics is the Russian military's understanding of 'information war' (IW). The term was defined and discussed in detail in the Russian Ministry of Defence's (MOD) 2011 *Conceptual Views on the Activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in Information Space*. IW was defined as the ability to, among other things, undermine political, economic, and social systems; carry out mass psychological campaigns against the population of a State in order to destabilize society and the government; and force a State to make decisions in the interests of their opponents.³ The words 'undermine', 'destabilize', and 'force' stand in stark contrast to NATO's strategic communications concept of 'coordinated and appropriate use'. Due to its pure Russian domestic roots, the definition of IW will be used as the benchmark against which to consider Russian actions in the analysis below.

Based on the massive information campaign utilized to date, Russia's leaders appear to believe there is a real cognitive war underway in the ether and media for the hearts and minds of its citizens at home and abroad. They have focused their efforts on controlling the populace's access to information ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, a development many blame on Western information-psychological operations. Russia is accomplishing its IW activities abroad (in the Baltics, Scandinavia, Europe, and Ukraine) through a series of concepts and methods (described in detail below) that include the use of deception (Internet trolls), home-grown concepts (reflexive control, cognitive weapons), outright lies (there are no Russian forces in Ukraine), the creation of a new reality (through TV and virtual messaging), and responses to its own insecurity issues (reflected in their use of conspiracy theories, warnings about the impact of colour revolutions, and statements of being surrounded and victimized). There is little doubt that Russia's approach has had some success in undermining, destabilizing, and forcing public opinion to question the interpretation of facts on the ground, especially in the absence of information to counter such an all-out, integrated approach that can utilize fabricated truth. At home, Russia's IW effort is focused on repeating themes of historical sensitivity, such as border issues, Russian citizens living abroad (and desiring self-determination vis a vis their country of residence), countering supposed Nazism and fascism, and so on.

.....
 3 'Conceptual Views Regarding the Activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in Information Space', (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, 2011). Online https://ccdcoc.org/strategies/Russian_Federation_unofficial_translation.pdf

The Kremlin's primary propaganda objective, in the end, is to secure its hold on power. One key component of this strategy is to disorganize or paralyze Western society through the control and organization of media input. The plan is assisted by one of lauded strengths of Western democracy: the media's willingness to seek hard evidence and listen to both sides of an argument before coming to a conclusion. Russia views this as a weakness, and Russian IW specialists can take advantage of this by inserting fabricated or prejudicial information into Western analysis and blocking access to evidence, thereby affecting if not controlling international media output. This is more effective in the information age, when reporters are seeking quick answers and 'breaking news' to beat other media with lead story lines. They sometimes do not check sources as thoroughly as they should.

DECEPTION

Trolls

An Internet troll is a person who often chooses to remain anonymous, while posting statements that are designed to persuade or influence thinking or emotions through the use of half-truths or deceptive information. A troll's point of view is often open to interpretation and seldom relies on an abundance of facts or sound research. Russia has used Internet trolls for some time. In June 2014, Ukrainian journalist Maria Popova wrote about trolls creating Internet propaganda for the Kremlin. The propaganda was noteworthy for both the number of posts generated in order to make a psychological statement encouraging people to agree with a fabricated majority, as well as the range of topics discussed pointing out everything bad about the US and Europe and everything good in Russia. In July 2014, Latvian journalist Sarmīte Ēlerte published a lengthy article on the role of Russian trolls. The manipulation of public opinion in Europe was seen as a particular goal of the effort. As one study noted, 'the domestic policy administration of the Russian president controls the works of so-called trolls and bloggers', whose jobs include 'to publish and disseminate commissioned articles, to establish fake accounts on social networks so as to distribute commissioned information, as well as to disseminate spam and persecute opponents on the Internet'.⁴ Several journalists in other countries have also examined Russia's use of Internet trolls.

In the fall of 2014, *New York Times* investigative reporter Adrian Chen was looking into an organization, known as the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg, Russia. The organization purportedly had been posting propaganda supporting the Kremlin's

.....
 4 Sarmīte Ēlerte, 'Kremlja troļļi' (18 July 2014) (in Latvian) online in ir.lv <http://www.irlv.lv/2014/7/18/kremla-trolli>

point of view online using fake identities in order to create the illusion that Russian activities had the support of a massive following. People working there were referred to as ‘trolls’. As Chen noted, the word became popular in the 1990s as Internet users took on pseudonyms to harass individuals, groups, or their opinions. He found out that a troll farm in the Ural Mountains had been in existence since 2008.⁵

Chen discussed a meeting he had with one of the trolls, Ludmila Savchuk, who had since left the organization. In February she had made a clandestine video of the office and leaked it to a reporter for *Moi Raion*, a local paper. She offered a short yet telling description to Chen of several of the many topics she was to discuss at the Agency: disparaging comments about Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and Ukrainian Army atrocities; optimistic comments about the financial crisis in Russia; and suggestions that opposition leaders had set up the murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in March. Content was created for every popular social network, whether it be VKontakte, LiveJournal, Twitter, Instagram, or the comment section of Russian news outlets. Savchuk’s goal was to shut the organization down, since she believed that this information war was creating a dark atmosphere in Russia.⁶

On 18 August 2015, the Russian language online paper, *Kommersant*, discussed the outcome of a court case involving the same Ludmila Savchuk. She had filed a lawsuit in March or April claiming that she had not been paid. The court ruled in her favour, and she was owed one month of back pay. The main victory in the case, in the opinion of human rights activists, was ‘an officially obtained company dossier, the disclosure of its activities, and the admission of distress caused to Ms. Savchuk’.⁷ In effect, the article noted, trolls create a simulacrum of public opinion in favour of government policies and actions, which may be totally made up.⁸ The Kremlin denied any involvement with the Agency.

Reflexive control

Another deceptive method is the use of the theory of reflexive control (RC), which can be used against either human-mental or computer-based decision-making processors. The theory is similar to the US concept of perception management or the Chinese concept of a stratagem, except that it attempts to

5 Adrian Chen, ‘The Agency’, (7 June 2015) in the New York Times Magazine, 56-67. Online http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html?_r=0

6 Ibid.

7 No author or title provided, Kommersant Online, 18 August 2015. (in Russian) [КОММЕРСАНТЪ.РУ](http://kommersant.ru)

8 Ibid.

control more than managing a subject. The concept of RC has existed much longer than the Russian concept of IW and the NATO concept of Information Operations; in fact, it appeared in Soviet military literature 30 years ago. At that time, V. A. Lefebvre, who was working within the context and logic of a reflexive game, defined reflexive control as ‘a process by which one enemy transmits the reasons or bases for making decisions to another’.⁹ RC is defined as a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent information that is specially prepared to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action. It can involve the use of a false pretext to get a specific response from a third party and thereby elicit a justification for further planned actions.

A recent example of a counteraction to RC would be the action taken by Estonia’s President Toomas Hendrik Ilves. He published an article on Russian views of RC on his Facebook page. Ilves apparently wanted to ensure that his electorate and military planners were aware of the concept and would be on the lookout for Russian attempts to draw them into a conflict through some pretext.

Even though the theory was developed long ago in Russia, it finds a variety of uses today. For example, Adrian Chen continued his discussions in St. Petersburg with Katarina Aistova, with whom he met after interviewing Savchuk. He found Aistova while looking through the Anonymous International leak.¹⁰ She admitted to being harassed by critics of the Internet Research Agency and agreed to an interview only if her brother could come with her for protection. The interview took place and both sides departed. A few days later a headline published by Russia’s *Federal News Agency* (purportedly a pro-Kremlin news site), read ‘*What Does a New York Times Journalist Have in Common with a Nazi from St. Petersburg?*’ The story detailed a meeting in St. Petersburg between Chen and a neo-Nazi, identified as Alexei Maximov, who had been introduced to Chen as Katarina’s brother, which apparently he was not. The article did not mention Katarina, but it noted that the meeting with Maximov was a request for the latter’s help in creating a provocation against Russia.¹¹ The setup was designed to control the Russian population’s decision-making process—a classic RC operation. There are other examples in the Russian press regarding the use of RC during network-centric warfare, when using information weapons, or when applying deterrence theory or 21st century tactics. RC can be used in many arenas.

9 Vladimir E. Lepsky, ‘Refleksivnoe upravlenie v polisubektnikh i mnogoagentnikh sistemakh (Reflexive Control in Multi-object and Multi-agent Systems)’, an article given to the author.

10 Anonymous International (in Russian, Shaltai Boltai, the equivalent of Humpty Dumpty) is a well-known hacker group in Russia that has claimed responsibility for a series of high-profile leaks.

11 Chen Op.Cit.

The above-mentioned Ministry of Defense definition of information war included this phrase: ‘forcing a State to make decisions in the interests of their opponents’.¹² This statement lines up well with the definition of RC, but few have noticed that RC is indeed a key component of IW. The Soviet and Russian Armed Forces have long studied the use of reflexive control theory, particularly at the tactical and operational levels, both for deception and disinformation purposes and to potentially control the enemy’s decision-making processes. The foremost reflexive control theorists in the military sector include V. V. Druzhinin, M. D. Ionov, D. S. Kontorov, S. Leonenko, and Major General N.I. Turko, a former instructor at the Russian Federation’s General Staff Academy, among several others.

Turko mentioned reflexive control as a method for achieving geopolitical superiority and as a means for arms control negotiations. With regard to RC’s geopolitical significance, some twenty years ago he and a colleague described a new containment theory under development that portrayed new means for coping with confrontation between new large-scale geopolitical groupings.¹³ It should thus come as no surprise that RC would be used in Ukraine.

Russia’s use of RC in Ukraine appears to be extensive. In 2013 an interesting article on the concept of RC appeared in *Military Thought*. It discussed several RC issues that appear to be in use in the Russian/Ukraine conflict today. Air force operational art and tactics specialist (LTJG, rtd) V. L. Makhnin noted that going from the appearance of cooperation to that of conflict can break the will of the adversary’s military and political leaders. This is known as strangling the enemy in a ‘friendly embrace’.¹⁴ One is reminded of the Putin-Poroshenko September 2014 Minsk truce, which was followed by a Russian military invasion of Ukraine, resulting in the seizure of an additional 200 square miles of territory. Was Poroshenko strangled in the ‘friendly embrace’? Not surprisingly, only hours after the February 2015 Minsk agreement separatist forces took Debaltseve. The same ‘friendly embrace’ repeated itself.

Makhnin stated that simulacrum,¹⁵ analogies, and other forms of influence are introduced into the reflexive process to control perceptions. For example, analogies can be used to discuss subjects that cannot be observed. In military art, analogy is a cognitive approach

12 ‘Conceptual Views on the Activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in Information Space’, (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2011)

13 See N. I. Turko and S. A. Modestov, ‘Refleksivnoe upravlenie razvitiem strategicheskikh sil gosudarstva kak mekhanizm sovremennoi geopolitiki (Reflexive Control in the Development of Strategic Forces of States as a Mechanism of Geopolitics)’, report at the conference on ‘Systems Analysis on the Threshold of the 21st Century: Theory and Practice’, Moscow, February 1996, p. 366.

14 V. L. Makhnin, ‘Reflexive Processes in Military Art: The Historico-Gnoseological Aspect’, *Military Thought* 2 (2013), 40.

15 An image or representation of reality. See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/simulacrum>

that helps one develop concepts and a new way to achieve specific results. One is reminded of the Russian media's use of the fascist and Nazi analogy in reference to people fighting in Maidan Square against Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, an analogy drawn to elicit support from the Russian population. Russians well remember the Nazi onslaught in World War II, and so this analogy touches a raw nerve. Analogies can reflexively serve as a strong unifying force. Putin often uses analogies against the international community. He stated on several occasions that Russia's incursion into Crimea was little different from NATO's incursion into Kosovo. He forgot to add, of course, that Russia consumed Crimea while NATO left Kosovo. The most stunning use of a simulacrum was the image Russia used of a young boy hung on a cross—which was a virtual image and never really happened. Russian propagandists stated that the Ukrainians had put him there.

Andrei Malgin, writing in the *Moscow Times*, noted that, according to Putin's propaganda, Russia must save Crimea (and now Ukraine) from fascism and from the followers of Stepan Bandera¹⁶ (supporting this claim, Putin signed a law on 5 May introducing criminal liability for rehabilitating or glorifying Nazism or spreading false information about the Soviet Union's role in World War II).¹⁷ Thus, while not mentioning RC, he makes the same argument as Makhnin. Russians appeared convinced that Crimeans could no longer speak Russian based on statements from Kiev, even though there was only one Ukrainian-language school on the peninsula and all the rest were Russian. Putin, Malgin writes, has also fallen victim to the lies of TV, radio, and print media. Brainwashed Russian people now have in their heads 'a little national leader with the same hang-ups, fears, suppressed desires, and prejudices'.¹⁸ Hopefully, he notes, the difference between this propaganda and objective reality will become so great that it collapses under its own weight.

Russian Andrei Pugovkin, a member of Saint Petersburg's Union of Scientists, noted that one should 'not believe Russian state propaganda. They are lies. Exceptions only confirm the rule'.¹⁹ He warned against considering *Eko Moskvy*, TV channel RTVi, and *Euronews* as independent. The first is owned by Gazprom, the second is owned by the former head of the military channel *Zvezda* (who favours Putin), and the third has a fifth of its shares owned by Russia.²⁰

.....
 16 Andrei Malgin, 'Russia is Following in Nazi Germany's Footsteps', (13 March 2014), in The Moscow Times online <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/russia-is-following-in-nazi-germanys-footsteps/496059.html> Bandera (1909-1959) was a leader of the Ukrainian nationalist and independence movement. He is revered by the current Ukrainian nationalist movement and certain far-right organizations.

17 Moscow, RAPSİ, 25 August 2014.

18 Malgin

19 Konstantinas Ameliuskinas, 'Advice for Russians of Lithuania: Vladimir Putin To Use You as Meat of Cannons', (August 2014) in Vilnius Delfi, 27. Translated from Lithuanian.

20 Ibid.

Another RC tactic is to blame an opponent for actions that Russian forces are performing. For example, *The Moscow Times Online* has printed parts of a letter from Russian intellectuals requesting that Channel One TV acknowledge its ‘falsifications’ in its reporting on Ukraine. The authors of these TV accounts, the letter adds, are to be blamed for young Russian men, swayed by their reporting, traveling to Ukraine and dying for a trumped-up cause.²¹

Cognitive Weapons

There has been discussion by some in Russia of the concept of a ‘cognitive weapon’, which is defined as ‘the introduction into an enemy country’s intellectual environment of false scientific theories, paradigms, concepts, and strategies that influence its state administration in the direction of weakening significant national defense potentials’.²² It was noted in one article on the topic that information-psychological effects target society first, attempting to recode the mass consciousness to turn patriotism into collaborationism. After this, attention turns to elites and their decision-making at the national level. The goal is to weaken the state-administrative and defensive potential of a country. This specialized method is termed the cognitive weapon. Targets can include material objects, the financial-economic systems, and other areas of potential power.

DEFLECT/AVOID RESPONSIBILITY

Malaysia Airlines Flight 17

Immediately after MH17 was shot down, a recording was released of two Russian-backed separatists discussing the downing of what was thought to be another Ukrainian transport plane. Several had been shot down in recent weeks at the time. The immediate implication for everyone was that the separatists had mistakenly caused the catastrophe. This idea was later backed up with a photo of a Russian Buk air defence weapon departing the area and missing one of its missiles. But within hours of the crash, Russian TV began to offer conflicting views of what had happened, several of which contradicted one another. There were reports that a Ukrainian fighter had hit the plane or a surface-to-air-missile had done the damage. Later there were even photos offered as evidence in the case of the fighter jet, all of which turned out to be hoaxes. Sources in Russia had to quickly edit website versions of the fighter attacks, as the information provided was clearly wrong. There were also several ludicrous statements about the plane from Russia, such as that the plane was loaded with dead bodies and purposely flown overhead.

.....
21 Anna Dolgov, no title given, *The Moscow Times Online* (in English), 24 October 2014

22 S. S. Sulakshin, ‘Cognitive Weapons—A New Generation of Information Weapon’, *Journal of the Academy of Military Science*, No. 1 (2014), 57-65.

On 28 July 2015 Russia said it would veto a UN Security Council resolution that would set up a tribunal for prosecuting those responsible for the MH17 catastrophe. Russia stated that it had ‘serious questions regarding the degree to which it is full and correct’.²³ Many saw this move by Russia as an indication that the nation’s leaders are worried about what the commission might find and reveal about responsibility. On 12 August 2015 the *BBC Online* noted that fragments of a suspected Russian missile system were found at the crash site. Damage to the aircraft indicated that high-energy objects, consistent with a Buk-type missile, were involved, but the origin of those fragments has not yet been determined. The Joint Investigation Team set up long ago to investigate the incident is composed of representatives of the Netherlands, Ukraine, Belgium, Malaysia, and Australia.

Russian Soldiers in Ukraine

For the past year NATO satellite images, journalists on the scene, bloggers, and photo posts of items such as soldier gravesites have lent strong evidence to the belief that Russian forces are in Eastern Ukraine. Russia has denied all of these charges. These denials may be based on the way it has chosen to describe its forces there (men on vacation, soldiers there of their own free will, etc.), which provides a cover of sort for their presence. Or it may be that Russia will admit its presence at a time of its choosing, as it did with its forces in Crimea. In any case it is hard to deny their presence.

In the meantime the evidence works strongly against them. A 28 August 2014 NATO report released satellite imagery showing Russian combat forces inside Ukrainian territory.²⁴ Numerous Facebook pages provided by Russian soldiers serving in Ukraine showed not only vehicles and troop unit designations but also, through the correlation of specific geographic reference points in the photos, exactly where they were located. A March 2015 report indicated that sources of information regarding Russian presence include social media, reporters on the ground, Ukrainian media, satellite imagery, and information provided by the US or NATO.²⁵ Some of the reporting is precise. For example, in August 2015 Kiev reported that the 12th Special Command of Reserves of the Russian Armed Forces Southern Military District is supervising the first and second army corps in Ukraine.²⁶

.....
23 Interfax (in English), 28 July 2015.

24 SHAPE Public Affairs Office, ‘NATO Releases Satellite Imagery Showing Russian Combat Troops inside Ukraine’, online at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_112193.htm

25 Mark Urban, ‘How Many Russians are Fighting in Ukraine?’ (10 March 2015), in BBC News online at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31794523>.

26 As reported by Interfax (in English), 27 August 2015.

HIGH ANXIETY IN MOSCOW: FEAR OF SEVERAL THINGS FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC

Conspiracies

One of the interesting aspects of Russian foreign and domestic policy is that the leadership sees conspiracies everywhere, whether real or fabricated. Whenever there is failure, the Kremlin spokesmen blame the West and its 'hostile' policies. This siege mentality seems to be hidden deep in the psyche of the current Russian leadership and plays out in its propaganda to its domestic audience in particular. Russia maintains a historical sensitivity to any border issue and, along with Putin's sense of national humiliation (due to the dissolution of the USSR), these issues feed the leadership's sense of insecurity. Recently this fear of internal enemies has resulted in the expulsion of nongovernmental agencies of all types from Moscow. Russia does not see these groups as anything more than agents of foreign influence, which they desire to eliminate from the country. High anxiety extends to the population, where Internet laws that encourage self-censorship are in place, thereby causing people to be afraid to step out of line unintentionally. One high-ranking military figure went so far as to state that the attack on the World Trade Center in New York in September 2011 was a conspiracy developed by the West to enable US manoeuvring for resources in the Middle East. In fact, the general noted, the attack was staged and never actually took place, believing images from the Pentagon's ground cameras were simulacra.

Colour revolutions

There is little doubt that the Russian leadership sees the potential for so-called 'colour revolutions' to develop, and the leadership is instituting specific policies to help counter such events from ever evolving²⁷. A 24 June 2015 report noted that the General Staff Military Academy has been tasked with 'devising methodological schemes in this delicate sphere' in order to prevent them.²⁸ This involves devising asymmetrical operations, conducted to neutralise enemy advantages while subjecting him to damage using minimal expenditures, and other measures to strengthen Russia's political system. The effort involves the integrated effort of specialists from several of the largest civilian educational institutions in the country. The goal is to prevent a repeat of events that transpired in 1991 (demise of the Soviet Union) and 1993 (constitutional crisis). Counters include blocking

.....
 27 A colour revolution is a non-violent means of protest that on occasion has a label attached to it, such as the rose revolution in Georgia and the orange revolution in Ukraine.

28 Anton Mardasov, 'A "Color Counterrevolution" Has Been Entrusted to the General Staff', Svobodnaya Pressa, 24 June 2015.

Internet activity and combating ‘the formation of a revolutionary-romantic stereotype within society’.²⁹ Military figures such as retired Colonel General Leonid Ivashov note that colour revolutions ‘are plotted according to rules associated with the art-of-war and, therefore, have to be combated by corresponding means’.³⁰ Blaming the West for colour revolutions (yet another conspiracy theory from a Russian), Ivashov noted the following:

It is generally accepted that “color revolutions’ are organized by Western countries’ special services, whose agenda includes organizing coups d’état and operations for destroying states. Moreover, these operations for subverting objectionable ruling regimes’ potential are of a tested and scientifically-rehearsed nature. And the complex of measures that the Americans call “soft power” results in achieving the same kind of effect as if the state had been subjected to attacks and according to all the rules of classic warfare.³¹

Several publications have carried articles on the need to be on the watch for colour revolutions. In 2014, for example, *Military Thought* carried an article on the political engineering of colour revolution and how to keep them in check.³² The article discussed four scenarios, which were named the classic orange colour strategy; the elite-led conspiracy; the march on Rome (Mussolini style); and the revolution in tow (elites exploit the outcome of riots). One factor leading to a colour revolution which needs special monitoring is value reversals among young people in regard to ethical, socio-economic, political, and religious and psychological factors.³³

DEVELOPING A NEW REALITY

It Began in Ukraine

The Kremlin’s focus on information is based on the belief that the West is continually trying (and able, according to many Russians) to change the thinking of Russia’s own citizens. As a result, the Kremlin’s propaganda effort is of vital importance to the Kremlin in an age where its citizens can access other ways of thinking online. The creation of a ‘virtual or new reality’ is thus of extreme

.....
29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 An N. Belsky and O. V. Klimenko, ‘Political Engineering of Color Revolutions: Ways to Keep Them in Check’, *Military Thought*, No. 9 2014, pp. 3-11.

importance to maintain the loyalty of citizens. Russia's view of reality is what now matters. Dmitry Kiselev, one of Russia's most vociferous proponents of Russian propaganda on TV, once stated that 'objectivity is a myth that is being imposed on us'.³⁴ Russia seems to be doing all it can to create a new reality for its citizens.

Moscow made it seem that everyone involved with the Maidan protest was a fascist or neo-Nazi (of whom there were few), and these images began to replace objective reality. The Kremlin's spin doctors were able to recreate in the minds of many Russian citizens some of the horrors associated with specific groups in Ukraine during the Second World War. The cast of characters who supported this campaign included spin doctors on TV, among whom Kiselev topped the list, and key government officials, from deputy ministers to the President himself.

The line of thought was continually offensive, blaming Ukraine for the carnage in Maidan, requesting action from Ukraine to stop the conflict, calling names (fascists, Nazis, Banderas, etc.), and utilizing age-old propaganda lines of reasoning. The familiar 'cocktail of patriotism, chauvinism, imperialism' included sporting the orange-and-black ribbons of St. George, which are most closely associated with the Soviet victory over the Nazis and favoured by Russian nationalists. The creation of such ultra-nationalists with Soviet imperial ambitions helped create the neo-Soviet man as 'the latest Putin avatar'.³⁵ Peter Pomeranzev, Britain's expert on Russian propaganda, notes that Putin's ideologies are a unique 'fusion of despotism and postmodernism, in which no truth is certain'.³⁶

Money

To help create Russia's new reality, spending on TV broadcasting has increased dramatically to shape foreign audience opinions. On 3 July 2015 the Russian Duma approved a \$121 million increase in funding for Channel One and VGTRK, two of the main TV companies in Russia.³⁷ The company's main audiences are Russians abroad and the domestic population. International broadcast company RT and the TASS news agency had received budget increases of \$95.5 million and \$17 Million, respectively.³⁸ The goal of the increased funding is to better offset a perceived information war that is being conducted against Russia.

34 See, for example, <http://www.vocativ.com/world/russia/sputnik-russian-propaganda/>

35 Matthew Kaminski, 'Putin's Neo-Soviet Men', *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 March 2014, p. A17.

36 Ibid.

37 No author provided, 'State Dum Passes Amendments to 2015 Budget', *Interfax* (in English), 3 July 2015.

38 No author or title provided, *Vedomosti Online*, 8 April 2015.

Self-Determination

A key method used by Putin to justify present-day land grabs and invoke a new reality is the concept of self-determination. Putin promises to protect Russians residing outside its borders and assist them if necessary when fighting the reality created about them. This includes provoking ethnic Russian enclaves to mobilize and complain about their treatment, in some cases aided by the introduction of Russian agents who stir up trouble. In some cases the use of psychological pressure, such as issuing ultimatums, is undertaken. With Russia's backing, these citizens appear to serve as a self-developed catalyst for Russian intervention if necessary or if the opportunity (as with Crimea) appears. Putin and his forces are thus developing a new reality abroad of their own making, one that he is able to exploit.

Propaganda's Methodology for Instituting IW

One article that offered a methodology for how Russian propaganda was carried out was by Vladimir Ryzhkov. Writing in *Moscow Times* on 25 March 2014, Ryzhkov, a State Duma deputy from 1993 to 2007 and now a political analyst, described in detail a conversation he had with a former KGB officer. The officer, who served in Afghanistan from the 1980s, outlined his experience with the Soviet principles of an information campaign. It appears that all of these principles could be applied to the current crisis in Ukraine.

Ryzhkov outlined how independent information is losing out to mass propaganda in Russia, where the main objective in regard to Ukraine was to mobilize the population in support of an expansionist campaign. The methods are as follows:

- It is necessary to convince the general population that the government is acting correctly and that the enemy is guilty of fomenting the crisis (Maidan protesters are to blame, the new government is linked to fascists, extremists, the US, and the West in general, who are the aggressors).
- The Kremlin created myths about the terrible persecutions of the Russian-speaking population (the spin doctors created a virtual reality that appeared to find the right balance between truth and fiction).
- The enemy must be demonized (Right Sector leader Dmitry Yarosh was used for this, as well as the presentation of the moderate forces as neo-Nazis, and the exposure of negative background information about Ukraine's new leaders).
- The authorities disguise aggressive actions as humanitarian (the need to protect defenceless Russians).

- The Kremlin attributes its methods to the enemy (the US is trying to take over Ukraine, so we must defend our ancestral territories)
- Authorities must be presented as legal and legitimate (Crimeans have a right to self-determination, which was denied to residents of Chechnya and Kosovo)
- War propaganda depends on a totalitarian approach (Russia cracked down on *Dozhd TV* and *Lenta.ru*)³⁹

Other Russian Voices

Michael Khodarkovsky, who grew up in the Soviet Union but now teaches history in the US, offered a critique on the Putin regime's propaganda style. He noted that any lack of loyalty to the regime will be punishable in some form, such as was witnessed earlier with the erasure of dissidents from history. Today, for example, the works of Antony Beever and John Keegan, two well-known Western military writers, have reportedly been removed from the bookshelves of libraries in Sverdlovsk Oblast due to their 'mistaken' understanding of events in World War II. It is no mistake, Khodarkovsky adds, that Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky has vocally protested against a host of individuals and groups, to include regime critics, Russian liberals, gays, and some modern artists and writers. He has falsified history at will, noting that 'history is a matter of interpretation and mass propaganda'.⁴⁰ Through a different interpretation of history that is supported by a nation's leaders, a new reality can easily be created, as has been the case in Russia.

Another critic of Russian propaganda is Andre Illarionov, At one time he served as Putin's economic advisor. He noted in a speech to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in May 2014 that the Kremlin propaganda machine had described the situation in Ukraine as the Fourth World War. He noted that the Russian Defence Ministry stated that the military operation to occupy and annex Crimea actually started on 20 February 2014, four days before then President Yanukovich ran from the Ukraine: the reality the Kremlin had created, however, was that Crimea began only after Yanukovich had departed Kiev.

Illarionov suggested that the information campaign has three distinct goals: put Ukraine under Putin's control or destroy it as a sovereign state; unite the largest divided nation of the world, Russians (ethnic Russians, Russian-speaking people, compatriots and their off-spring who ever lived on Soviet territory or

.....
39 Vladimir Ryzhkov, 'The Kremlin's War Propaganda', (25 March 2014), in The Moscow Times online at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/the-kremlins-war-propaganda/496779.html>

40 Michael Khodarkovsky, 'Putin Creates a Fantasyland', in The Wall Street Journal, 19 August 2015.

territory of the Russian empire); and break up the Western Alliance. Illarionov goes on to note that an important part of Russia's counterstrategy to Western complaints over Crimea is information, disinformation, and propaganda warfare.

To date (May 2014) Illarionov believed that a significant part of the Russian population, part of the Ukrainian population, and some of the population of other, usually post-Soviet, countries had already fallen victim to the Kremlin's propaganda war. In Illarionov's opinion, Russia's unlimited use of such methods cannot be countered by Western propaganda, since freedom of information and speech must be preserved in Western nations at any cost.⁴¹

CONCLUSIONS

One of the first conclusions to be drawn is that along with Russia's version of strategic communications (called IW here) comes a combination of propaganda, deception, and an intent to destabilize adversary societies. In this respect, strategic communications or the equivalent Russian term differ markedly from Western communications. RC, lies, surrogates, and simulacrums, among other methods, are imbedded in the messaging and stand in stark contrast to the West's desire to find 'appropriate uses' for strategic communications. Russia uses its techniques to alter the landscape of objectivity and transform it into a new reality of its own making, one often quite unintelligible to an uninformed outsider. Russia uses this methodology against foreign and domestic audiences. Domestically it has worked well, but less so internationally, after some early spectacular successes. A 5 August 2015 Pew Research Center survey found that 26 countries had an unfavourable opinion of Russia, while 10 had a favourable rating, with most (6) of the latter found in Africa, the others being Vietnam, India, China, and South Korea.⁴²

Second, Russian IW is a strategic weapon that the Kremlin believes it must wield to soothe its fear of conspiracies and colour revolutions, and thereby protect its interests and power base. Persuasion and influence are needed to control hearts and minds, since, to the leadership, adversaries and threats are everywhere and are to be blamed for the majority of Russia's troubles. Conspiracies are used to explain internal shortcomings and colour revolutions incite fears in the leadership that a new ideology could take root in the population. Some Russian citizens, on the other hand, sense the tension that the Kremlin has created between Putin's Crimean acquisition

.....
41 Andrei Illarionov, 'Fourth World War' Speech given to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly Committee on Economics and Security in Vilnius 31 May 2014, (last accessed on 26 August 2015) online at <http://aillarionov.livejournal.com/696630.html>

42 Bruce Stokes, 'Russia, Putin held in Low Regard Around the World', (5 August 2015) in Pew Research Center online at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/08/05/russia-putin-held-in-low-regard-around-the-world/>

and the imposition of sanctions and economic hardships. Everyone feels economic hardships to a degree. Russia was wrong in taking Crimea and now it must deal with the consequences of its moves. Meanwhile the Kremlin continues to blame others for the decisions it made. Relying on warnings of conspiracies and colour revolutions indicates a strong sense of insecurity among those in power and their desire to hang on to control.

Finally, it is clear that Russia's propagandists are well equipped with a host of methods to continue to persuade and influence in the digital age. The budget was raised to enable propagandists to work with faster, more modern equipment at a better level of digital clarity and to spread their messages more easily abroad. Old techniques of manipulation were found to work well when integrated with information-age technology. Well financed and manipulated imagery that serves Moscow's interests results in the mobilization of Russian minorities abroad, further motivating them to seek self-determination and make demands of the governments where they reside. If demands are not met, a casus belli is presented to the Kremlin to assist and free the oppressed—and maybe take territory while they are at it.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Timothy Thomas is a Senior Analyst at the US Army's Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

GUIDANCE NOTES FOR SUBMITTING FUTURE ARTICLES

Please, submit articles for the next journal by July 1, 2016.

More information about the submission process and publishing principles is available here: <http://stratcomcoe.org/academic-journal-defence-strategic-communications>

In 2016 we are specifically interested in the following topics:

1. Future trends in social media
2. North Korea's messaging and propaganda
3. Collective influence techniques
4. Social influence
5. Use of Public Diplomacy
6. Potential fracture lines in Western audiences.
7. Use of the *Maskirovka* method
8. Terrorist propaganda in Africa
9. Russia's communication efforts concerning the Arctic
10. Russia's missile communication strategies
11. Early warning signals of a hybrid warfare scenario
12. Communication of Western values towards different audiences in NATO's eastern periphery
13. Communication efforts during [Joint] exercises
14. Recruitment and radicalisation of youth
15. Countering terrorism - use of narratives
16. StratCom in cyberspace
17. Terrorist use of cyberspace

ISSN 2500-9478

Defence Strategic Communications
NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence