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THE INFORMATIONAL DIMENSION OF HYBRID WARFARE

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SUMMARY

Hybrid warfare aims to influence a target country's decision-making process, using both military and non-military tools. Western countries also use such methods, but the extent to which they have been employed in Ukraine, and the lengthy duration, is unusual. Rather than expecting the EU or NATO to negotiate or fight on its behalf, Kyiv must systematically build up its reserves of soft power, through a programme of inclusive nation-building.

Key words: Propaganda, hybrid warfare, special operations, Crimea, Donbas, European Union, nation-building

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Целью гибридной войны является воздействие на принятие решений в стране-цели путем использования как военных, так и невоенных методов. Западные страны тоже используют такие методы, но масштаб их применения в Украине, а также длительность такого применения является необычным. Вместо того, чтобы ожидать от ЕС или НАТО проведения переговоров или боевых действий от своего имени, Киеву необходимо постепенно и систематически строить свои резервы мягкой силы путем программы инклюзивного построения нации.

Ключевые слова: пропаганда, гибридная война, специальные операции, Крым, Донбасс, Европейский союз, построение нации.

This essay argues that violent protests led by foreign-sponsored proxy warriors cannot be defeated by military means alone. It reminds readers that 'hybrid warfare' is a civilian-dominated phenomenon. Planning, preparation and implementation of such warfare diverges from the Clausewitzian ideal that operational control should be left to professional soldiers. Rather, the success of offensive hybrid campaigns depends on civil-military coordination, with the leadership role vested in the civilian component. Combating the disruptive tactics used by practitioners of such warfare likewise requires a whole-of-government approach.

The essay distinguishes between 'propaganda', which it considers as the strategic use of mass media to reaffirm political biases in foreign populations, and 'information operations', which refers to the tactical role of media as an instrument of disinformation. It agrees with the observation by British scholar Hew Strachan that overemphasizing the 'newness' of any form of warfare – including hybrid warfare – is a mistake. Such an approach is 'astrategic' because it focuses too much on minor, easily interchangeable aspects of military operations and overlooks the larger framework within which these are conducted. This framework is predictable if studied objectively and can be countered. The essay concludes with a recommendation that Ukraine should prepare for a long informational campaign that concentrates on domestic nation-building and strengthening inclusive policies.

Less 'warfare' and more 'conflict'

The very term 'hybrid warfare' is a misnomer because it implies a false binary between conditions of armed hostilities and peace, and assumes that the aggressor (the one who breaches the peace) can be easily identified. In fact, since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, warfare itself has partially undergone a change. No longer do governments first declare that the condition of peace has passed, and then throw their armies into combat. Rather, agent provocateurs in the target country prompt an escalatory spiral through local disruptions, eventually giving the aggressor an excuse to intervene in a domestic power struggle. Thus did the Red Army invade Georgia in 1921, on the invitation of local Bolsheviks. A similar ruse was employed by Nazi Germany in 1939, when fictitious border attacks were cited to justify invading Poland. In all such cases, the attacking state needs to devote considerable time to studying the societal faultlines of the targeted country,

Since 2014, Western commentators have written about a so-called 'Gerasimov Doctrine'. Named after the chief of the Rus-

sian General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, the doctrine is perceived as a blueprint for hybrid warfare. It is important that neither Gerasimov nor any other Russian strategist has used the term 'hybrid warfare' except when referring to Western literature on the subject. In part, this is because the concept is not Russian in origin. Rather, it was developed in American military academies as a way of understanding conflicts that mainly featured informal (ie., non-state) systems of mobilization. These were 'hybrid' conflicts because they involved a mix of conventional military tactics and capabilities, terrorist and guerrilla attacks, urban rioting, and organized crime. It must be remembered that the first American writings on hybrid warfare appeared at a time of uncontested unipolarity in the international system. There was no peer competitor to the US military, and so the working definitions used to study hybrid warfare presupposed that only non-state actors would engage in it. This was an inaccurate perspective.

Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, states too have been quietly engaging in hybrid warfare even as non-state actors more openly challenged Western armies. One example would be Iranian support to Shia militias in Iraq, following the 2003 American overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime. An even more pertinent case would be multi-decadal Pakistani support for militants crossing into the Indian-administered portion of Kashmir. Such support has extended to allowing Pakistani civilians and regular servicemen (supposedly operating as private individuals or without orders) to enter Indian territory to carry out highly provocative attacks. When conceptualized theoretically, Pakistan has engaged in both paramilitary action (arming, funding and training indigenous Kashmiri rebels in India) as well as covert military operations (time-limited strikes directly carried out by military personnel and specially-trained mercenaries against clearly-defined targets to achieve a campaign objective – an example would be the covert incursion into India's Kargil region in the summer of 1999).

Such conflicts have blurred the boundary between war and peace – a common trait with Gerasimov's actual prediction – which was that future wars would be 'non-linear'. So, hybrid warfare as originally conceived of in the West has less relevance for today's security challenges. It has only superficial similarities with Russian assessments of how inter-state wars will occur in the future. According to a massive 2013 tome called *General Theory of War*, authored by Major General Alexander Vladimirov, vice-president of the Russian Collegium of Military Experts, such conflicts would have three distinct characteristics compared to earlier wars:

1) The fight will be of an ideational rather than a territorial nature
2) The objective will be to exert political, economic and cultural influence rather than destroy the enemy's armed forces
3) The nature of engagement will be contactless rather than featuring force-on-force combat (however, limited use of special operations forces and irregulars in enemy rear areas to hit weakly-guarded locations will still occur).

Soviet-era military doctrine emphasized the tactical use of disinformation, a view that carried through to the Russian armed forces after 1991. Masking offensive activities through deliberate falsehoods is an integral part of any combat deployment of Russian military personnel. Even Western militaries have resorted to manipulation of the free press – one example being Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Although there may have no organized effort to mislead American journalists about their own military's war plans, false information was still leaked out by officials (supposedly acting on their own initiative). *Newsweek* columnist Jonathan Alter later observed that '[u]sing the media to confuse the enemy is part of fighting a war'.

Yet, what Ukraine experienced in 2014 seemed of a different magnitude. The manner in which disinformation was used during the takeover of Crimea and the covert intervention in Donbas caught Western military analysts by surprise. Many American and European commentators later focused on the high-level denials by Moscow that 'little green men' operating in Crimea were Russian soldiers – denials which were proven by events to be wholly false. But even such dissimulation was similar to that practiced by the Bush administration in 2002-03, prior to the invasion of Iraq. In the years since, scholars have catalogued the administration's misleading claims about Iraqi links with Al Qaeda and development of Weapons of Mass Destruction. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems that lying to the media is hardly an exclusive specialty of Russian policymakers – other countries do it too.

So if officially-disseminated falsehoods are not 'new', why has the conflict in Ukraine now led Western governments to view the Russian media as a long-term security threat? The answer may be because it was not short-term deception tactics that had allowed Russia to take over Crimea and infiltrate forces into Donbas. Official lies about the identity of the 'little green men' have been given more weightage in hindsight than they should have. Both Ukraine and the West were focused on de-escalating the situation with Russia, a policy which presumed that a restoration of the *status quo ante* was desired by both sides. In fact, Moscow was clear all along that it would not waste a historic chance to regain Crimea, even if that meant conflict with Kyiv.

What allowed Russia to advance both overtly and covertly was the progressive hardening of Russian 'soft power'. For many years prior to its military foray, Russia had reshaped the informational climate in not just the territories now lying outside the Ukrainian government's control, but also in western Europe and North America. Taking advantage of the credibility deficit in which the Anglo-American media were stuck as a result of dubious reporting on Iraq, Russia in the mid 2000s set itself up as an alternate pole of opinion and news. In so doing, it played to a long-standing psychological need in Western and non-Western societies, for a 'critical' perspective on world affairs. Moscow combined both hard power and soft power to achieve a geopolitical objective. It thus invested in constructing what is commonly known as 'smart power', thereby limiting the response options of both Kyiv and Western capitals.

Competing worldviews

For roughly a century, Russia has been romanticized as counter-pole to Western materialism. Leading intellectuals such as George Bernard Shaw viewed the country as the vanguard of 'a global spiritual resurrection' to replace the flaws of democracy and the excesses of capitalism. This mindset exists both within Russia (hence the semi-popular theory of a distinct and spiritually pure 'Eurasian' civilization) and within pockets of Western society. A variant of it also appears in China, which is creating a propaganda apparatus that dwarfs the Kremlin's but tends to be much less studied, due to its political effects mostly being felt among China's immediate neighbours. In such an informational environment, media audiences both globally and in eastern Europe specifically are not just able to choose between narratives, but between opposed realities. For those who reject Western arguments and terminology, loyalty to a preferred counter-narrative trumps any need to stay within the limits of facts.

Thus a survey of Russians found in 2015 that more people disbelieved their own government's claims about the presence of Russian soldiers in Crimea than accepted these claims. But even these sceptics felt it was necessary for Moscow to put out false information due to the adverse circumstances Russia faced. A widespread belief that the interests of Russia and the West are not convergent legitimizes lower-level deception and mitigates against the societal effects of letting 'truth' be known.

There is also no longer a single truth (as in the 1990s) but many, and television listeners, newspaper readers and internet surfers in different countries can pick the one that most appeals to them. Added to this is the fact that governments have become better at controlling the range of media narratives that their publics can readily access, thus ensuring that different versions of 'reality' can be narrated at home and abroad to different audiences.

Ukraine became a casualty in this splitting of perspectives between the West and the Russosphere. The country faces a dilemma similar to the Baltic republics Estonia and Latvia: with Russian-speakers exposed to Russian media broadcasts and feeling excluded from the political mainstream, a cycle of alienation is created. *Post hoc* Russian justifications for intervention in Crimea and Donbas mention that some elements of the 2013-14 Euro Maidan protest movement had used symbols linked to Nazism. Abortive efforts to change Ukrainian law in ways that would have marginalized Russian-speakers are also cited as justification for the interventions. By creating a political distance between image-conscious Western governments and Kyiv, Moscow ensures that Ukraine does not receive active foreign support for restoring its territorial integrity. Thus a military solution to the conflict will remain evasive until Ukrainian policymakers first address the deficit of 'soft power' both domestically and internationally. To date, there has been little discussion on this aspect of combating hybrid warfare. Isolated successes such as Susana Jamaladinova's (better known by her stage name Jamala) win at Eurovision 2016 for her song '1944' are a poor substitute for coherent policies. They are neutralized by counter-examples such as the banning of wheelchair-bound Julia Samoylova, the Russian contestant for Eurovision 2017 which was hosted by Kyiv. Even though the Ukrainian government cited a domestic law that banned unauthorized travel to Crimea (Samoylova had performed there after the Russian annexation), the unsavoury fallout among other Eurovision participants could not be avoided.

Like eastern members of the European Union, Ukraine defines nationalism more in ethnic than civic terms. Scholars have argued that the river Elbe divides Europe into two political cultures: to the east are traditional and conservative societies and to the west are liberal and assimilatory societies. Russia has projected itself as a bastion of conservative values, while the EU stands for multiculturalism. Any action, whether state-sanctioned or not, that alienates Ukraine's Russian-speakers does not make the country safer because it ultimately pushes the EU away from Ukraine. At a time when Kyiv has suffered trade losses due to tense relations with Moscow, it is vital to demonstrate a culture of political inclusiveness to attract EU investment to Ukraine. Otherwise, the best efforts to strengthen the economy will yield disappointing results. This has already been indicated by the lackluster pace of EU investment into Ukraine since 2014. Initial hopes that European companies will build up new markets in the country have faded. Instead, Ukrainian industry is seen as a possible low-cost competitor and the country's main attractiveness remains as a source of agro-products. The only way to change this situation is to strengthen efforts to combat corruption, increase transparency and most importantly, demonstrate that the risk of conflict escalation is diminishing. This would require reaching out to the populations of the non-government controlled territories.

Taking a strategic view, not a tactical one

Those who are skeptical of assimilatory policies would do well to examine the information aspects of the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. At the level of daily media coverage, Tbilisi was faster than Moscow in reaching out to international journalists with its own version of events in the combat theatre. At the political level, Georgia received sympathy for being David to Russia's Goliath. But these short-term trends had no lasting effect. Once the initial furor died down, the West returned to a state of near-normalcy with Russia and left Georgia to fend for itself. How did this happen? The answer is that by claiming to protect its citizens in separatist enclaves of Georgia, Russian partly inverted the flow of sympathy and cast Georgia as the originator of hostilities. Most Western commentators agree that even though Russia's response was disproportionate, Georgia bore some share of responsibility for the conflict. Its initial attack on Abkhazia and South Ossetia was seen as provocative, even though Russo-Georgian relations had been deteriorating for several months previously. Whether in fact Georgia began the fighting, or whether it was trying to pre-empt a Russian move into the separatist territories, became irrelevant. The mere existence of Russian passport-holders on Georgian soil, and Tbilisi's use of military force in their vicinity, gave Moscow technical grounds for claiming that its intervention was driven by humanitarian instincts. The resulting war proved that when confronted with complex regional crises where vital Western interests are not at stake, Western policy discourse disapproves of any escalation, even if ostensibly mounted for self-defence.

Moreover, escalation dissuasion is not followed by attempts to objectively affix responsibility for a crisis. Since Russian experts are assumed to have a better understanding of politics in the post Soviet space than neutral scholars from outside the region, they are necessarily invited by Western media to share their perspectives during news broadcasts. Even if their statements are ideologically biased, professional journalism's emphasis on adhering to a 'scientific method' means that their views receive even-handed treatment along with those of Russia's foreign critics. Only in those instances where Russia acts directly against specific Western interests, does the Western media proactively seek to investigate dubious claims.

In this situation, Moscow's main strength is strategic patience. Its kinetic actions are the tail-end of a much longer process that can unfold over years. The Lithuanian scholar Agnia Grigas has divided this process into seven stages, showing how hard and soft power can be combined to form 'smart power':

1) Projection of soft power through organizations such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation

2) Advocacy for Russian compatriots who are marginalized in their countries of residence

3) Political mobilization of compatriots to strengthen their ties to the *Rodina* (homeland)

4) 'Passportization' of compatriots, sometimes in violation of local law

5) Information warfare or propaganda, which has (re) gained importance since 2000

6) Physical protection of compatriots in the face of threats to their persons and properties

7) Annexation of areas where Russia has both a vital interest and a supportive population.

Although Crimea remains the only case where all seven phases (as interpreted by Grigas) have been followed through, the conflict in Donbas features many of them. The critical transition is between stages 5 and 6, when the first 'little green men' appear within a community to protect it by seizing government buildings for a power transfer. Such an event can only occur when Moscow can plausibly claim, *post hoc*, to have acted on behalf of a threatened community. In the absence of any threat, the 'reimperialization' process described above cannot be followed through to the point where the use of armed force can be justified. On the other hand, most of the measures listed in stages 1 to 5 are used by other great powers as well, in order to project influence overseas. The exception is 'passportization' in countries where dual nationality is forbidden. Thus it would be difficult for any state targeted by hybrid warfare to directly

obstruct foreign soft power, except by preparing its own polity to resist future military cooptation.

The key seems to lie in exploiting the gap between 'soft' and 'hard' types of power, and thereby preventing the development of stages 6) and 7) as described above. Typically, soft power is inclusive rather than exclusive. It is meant to attract people from other cultures by offering them knowledge and perspectives which they cannot find in their own societies, but which can still be useful in developing those societies. During the Cold War, both the US and the Soviet Union claimed that their respective governance models were better for humanity as a whole. They did not suggest that capitalism was the best system for Americans only, or that socialism was uniquely suited for Soviets and no-one else. Nowadays, this has changed. Russia projects itself as an exclusive home for Russian-speakers and compatriots, and justifies the use of hard power (mainly military force but also economic incentives and threats) to 'protect' them. Its soft power appeals to a much smaller demographic base than the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. This exclusivity ought to be met with a more traditional (and inclusive) approach to soft power.

As far as Ukraine is concerned, the priority objective of measures to defeat hybrid warfare must be to prevent the deterioration of societal dialogues to the point where violence between citizen groups breaks out. This would prevent Russia from claiming that it has to offer more overt 'protection' to Russian compatriots in the country. Meanwhile, the process of combating Moscow's information warfare can be launched concurrently, highlighting integrationist measures being pursued by Kyiv in order to negate the effects of stages 1 to 5.

Introducing a culture of open debate

Propaganda can be fought with counter-propaganda, but when the primary audience is one's own population, the messaging process needs to be consistent with facts. Much depends on whether the audience is genuinely receptive to debate, or if large portions of it merely want entertainment dressed up as 'news'. In the latter case, educational efforts to promote individualistic and critical enquiry are needed. Otherwise, any messages will be either accepted or rejected based on a collectivist 'group-think'. They will fail to actually transform opinions.

In this regard, it is helpful to cite Vykintas Pugačiauskas, a Lithuanian journalist who wrote an excellent essay in the 2015 inaugural issue of the *Journal on Baltic Security*. His argument runs as follows (we, the authors of the current article, have expanded on some points where necessary): Many in the West embrace an intellectual tradition of self-criticism. Their willingness to question the status quo extends to relying on Russian propaganda to learn about wrongs carried out by their own governments. Such reliance is partly driven by revulsion at inherent biases of the Western media. Even so, due to the individualistic nature of Western society, the detractors still apply critical thinking processes to arrive at value judgments biased against their own governments.

Pugačiauskas points out that in contrast, audiences in the traditional Soviet/Russian sphere of influence are not predisposed to critical engagement with media reporting. Either they flatly reject all information received from media sources, or accept it with a lack of independent thought. This is a legacy of totalitarianism. In societies such as the Baltic states, where opinions are polarized between those seeking closer ties with Russia and those wishing to distance themselves from it, the lack of reflection is harmful. It exacerbates the societal cleavages which Moscow's so-called 'Karaganov Doctrine' thrives on. The doctrine was propounded in 1992 and marked the start of the Kremlin's efforts to leverage ties with ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers in eastern Europe in order to exert a claim to their political identity. According to its precepts, compatriots are a potential foreign policy asset provided they reside abroad without integrating into their host societies. During the 2000s, this paradoxical approach was sustainable because high hydrocarbon prices allowed Moscow to appear as the gatekeeper of regional prosperity. Compatriots were happy to rebuild their connections to the homeland in the hope of obtaining privileged access to business opportunities. With the 2008-10 recession and financial crisis however, two changes occurred. First, societal divisions between non-Russian native speakers and Russian-speakers came to the fore while leaving the latter at a disadvantage due to their smaller numbers. Second, Russian media programming in eastern Europe grew more pervasive, because national networks could not provide content of similar quality and west European programmes were too expensive. Thus, at a time when its diaspora was getting more marginalized, Russia's psychological influence over them was increasing. This coincidence played an important role in enhancing the power of Russia's early stage hybrid warfare against Ukraine, until events in Kyiv during 2013-14 led Moscow to take a more overt stance.

Pugačiauskas suggests that the dichotomous nature of the east European media climate (blind trust versus reflexive suspicion) creates a 'winner-takes-all' mindset. Avoiding polarization requires that post Soviet states reject the yes/no mentality that decades of totalitarian rule have etched into their political consciousness. Instead, they should strive to emulate Western journalistic practices of balanced argument and representative reporting. Skeptics would argue that such practices if applied to Ukraine would facilitate the spread of Russian disinformation, which has to be countered by a top-down policy of censorship and message control. However, they would miss the point that even the Western media carefully sifts through claims made by a hostile foreign actor when reporting on national security issues. Objectivity does not equate with lack of patriotism. It is only when Western news channels are covering distant conflicts that do not resonate with domestic audiences, that their editorial staffs neglect to fully investigate the accuracy of opposing claims. Unfortunately, for much of Europe, fighting in Donbas is a peripheral issue. But for Ukrainians themselves, it is real and immediate. There is no danger that adoption of Western standards of journalistic professionalism would harm Ukrainian national morale. Rather it would create additional credibility for Kyiv, by demonstrating that it is prepared to counter falsehoods with facts.

The war for hearts and minds is more important than the physical war

Perhaps the most important point for Ukraine is to remember that its Western partners, both Trump's America and the EU's leading member states, are keeping their options open on how to deal with Russia. Talk about providing Ukraine with offensive weapons is being fiercely resisted in some European quarters, which see current events in Donbas as mainly a Russo-Ukrainian fight or even a domestic affair which the EU should not get drawn into. Thus, after having to some extent prompted the deterioration of relations between Moscow and Kyiv, as scholars such as Elias Götz and Geoffrey Pridham have separately noted, the EU is now quietly nuancing its support for Kyiv. In the event of a unilateral escalation of hostilities by the Ukrainian side, the West would probably see an excuse to cut and run instead of endorsing the need to restore territorial integrity. To keep its European partners on-side, Ukraine needs to focus on winning the battle for hearts and minds in Donbas and Crimea. Fortunately, this can be done in ways that do not involve physical control over territory. As the success of Russia's own information warfare in the years prior to Euromaidan demonstrates, a long timeframe is needed, together with resourcefulness at connecting with audiences.

Ukraine has made a start by investing in television broadcasts to the temporarily occupied and non-government controlled territories. However, due to technical limitations of the equipment being used, the TV tower in separatist-controlled Donetsk (the second highest in Ukraine) still overrides much of the content being transmitted. Kyiv's solution has been to ban several Russian channels and social media sites, but this will not make much difference in territories outside government control. There is also the incidental point (more of an irritant than a serious obstruction) that some Western NGOs such as Human Rights Watch have criticized Ukraine for restricting freedom of expression. Similarly, Hungary has seized upon the issue of school curricula being taught in Ukrainian to protest at the apparent marginalization of Ukraine's Hungarian minority. Budapest has indicated that it will complicate Ukraine's accession to the EU if such measures are followed through. Thus, even the simplest of domestic nation-building initiatives are meeting resistance, from groups other than the separatists and Russia.

To reach audiences who are either hostile or indifferent, Ukrainian media must provide not just news on current affairs but also entertainment broadcasts of high quality in the preferred local languages, whatever these may be. Doing so will be a significant challenge due to lack of funding. Russia has presently allocated the equivalent of $1.2 billion for its government-controlled media industry, while Ukraine has allocated a paltry $76 million. Even if one were to overlook the need for comprehensive economic reforms and political outreach to the territories that lie outside government control, the fact remains that Kyiv has yet to reduce its dependence on the West for financial support. Hopes expressed in some quarters that the US or EU may be persuaded to put together a Marshall Plan-type aid package which could economically revitalize Donbas are not ever likely to be realized. Instead, Ukraine has to find its own way of winning over the population, starting with communicating with them on-air.

This essay has argued that the heavy investments that Russia has made in shaping international discourse on Ukraine, do not point towards a successful military option for Kyiv. To come anywhere close to regaining its territories in Donbas, the Ukrainian government needs to take a long-term perspective. It needs to focus on distinguishing itself from Russia in the informational sphere rather than emphasizing the closeness of its own political culture with that of the wider post Soviet space. With the EU remaining economically aloof, notwithstanding rhetorical statements of support, the US retreating into isolationism, and China keen on keeping Washington distracted from Southeast Asia by avoiding criticism of Russia, there is little alternative. To recognize that even if the seeds of hybrid warfare come from abroad, its disruptive effects can only take root in favourable soil, is not politically easy. Making that soil infertile to foreign machinations requires gaining mastery over narrative shaping. It requires a strategic approach rather than a tactical one, where the media is only instrumentalized as a conduit for disinformation. In the final analysis, it requires rebuilding an inclusive polity.

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