

RUSSIAN INFORMATION WAR AGAINST UKRAINIAN ARMED FORCES IN 2014–2015: THE UKRAINIAN POINT OF VIEW

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1. Introductory Notes

In this article we will provide an overview about the processes of Russian information warfare against Ukrainian defence forces in 2014 and 2015 and present the Ukrainian point of view.

At first it should be noted that Russia's information's operations¹ in Ukraine is only a part of bigger non-linear² war of Russia against Ukrainian

¹ See on Russian strategic communication – **Ginos, N. D.** 2010. The Securitization of Russian Strategic Communication. A Monograph. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College; On information operations see e.g., **U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Information Operations** 2014. Joint Publication 3–13, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff; **Darczewska, J.** 2014. The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: the Crimean operation, a case study.' – Point of View, No. 42 (May 2014), Warsaw: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia. [**Darczewska** 2014]

² Non-linear or hybrid war. The term hybrid war was first time used in his thesis by **Nemeth, W. J.** 2002. Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare, Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, June 2002, <http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/5865/02Jun_Nemeth.pdf?sequence=1> (accessed on 20 June 2016). A. Rácz remarks that “*Although the concept of hybrid warfare was not new, the way Russia implemented it was indeed a novelty.*” (**Rácz, A.** 2015. Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist. Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, p. 13). [**Rácz** 2015] Rácz explains the term hybrid war in following way: “*All in all, the term 'hybrid warfare' in Nemeth's work basically signified a society-specific way of warfare, which combined irregular and regular tactics with modern information measures*” (*ibid.*, p. 30). According to Jānis Bērziņš “*one of Putin's closest advisors, Vladislav Surkov (under the pseudonym of Nathan Dubovitsky), coined the term 'Non-Linear Warfare' in an article describing what would be the Fifth World War, the one where all fight against all. The idea is that traditional geo-political paradigms no longer hold*” (**Bērziņš, J.** 2015. Russian New Generation Warfare is not Hybrid Warfare. – The War in Ukraine: Lessons for Europe. Pabriks, A.; Kudors, A. (eds.). The Centre for East European Policy Studies, University of Latvia Press, Rīga, p. 42); **Jaeski, A.** 2015. Hybrid Warfare on the Rise: A New Dominant Military Strategy? – NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, Riga, 24th November 2015. <<http://www.stratcomcoe.org/article-deputy-director-aivar-jaeski-hybrid-warfare-rise-new-dominant-military-strategy>> (accessed on 30 July 2016).

state.³ András Rác pointed out that in non-linear war “*the regular military force is used mainly as a deterrent and not as a tool of open aggression*” in comparison to other types of war. András Rác accentuated what was new in year 2014 – “*highly effective, in many cases almost real-time coordination of the various means employed, including political, military, special operations and information measures*” that caught both the Ukrainian government and the Western countries off the guard in Crimea and Eastern part of Ukraine.⁴ As we know information operations are only an important part of non-linear war and as Ukrainian expert Yevhen Fedchenko⁵ pointed out that “*the information war as a part of hybrid war is very important because its influences are ongoing and it has a global impact as more and more countries are finding traces of Russian active measure on their territory*”.⁶

The role and importance of information warfare were also received special attention not only by Russian political *élite*, but also by Russian military authorities. For example, Russian Army General Valery Gerasimov⁷ already in early 2013 accented the importance of information warfare in post-modern high-tech epoch, especially in the military conflicts. He writes that “*information warfare opens wide asymmetric possibilities for decreasing the fighting potential of enemy*”.⁸ The new Russian military doctrine from the end of December 2014 states that in the modern war the information superiority

³ **Howard, C.; Puhkov, R.** (eds.) 2014. *Brothers Armed. Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*. Minneapolis: East View Press; **Pabriks, A. & Kudors, A.** (eds.) 2015. *The War in Ukraine: Lessons for Europe*. The Centre for East European Policy Studies. Rīga: University of Latvia Press.

⁴ **Rác** 2015, pp. 87–89.

⁵ Director of the Mohyla School of Journalism in Kyiv and co-founder of the *StopFake.org*.

⁶ **Fedchenko, Y.** 2016. *Kremlin Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures by Other Means*. – *StopFake*, 21.03.2016, <<http://www.stopfake.org/en/kremlin-propaganda-soviet-active-measures-by-other-means/>> (accessed on 30.07.2016).

⁷ Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia.

⁸ **Герасимов, В.** 2013. *Ценность науки в Предвидении*. – *Военно-Промышленный курьер*, No. 8(476), 27 February 2013, pp. 2–3, <www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632> (accessed on 23.05.2016); see also **Müür, K.; Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, P.** 2016. *Russian Information Operations against the Ukrainian State and Defence Forces: April-December 2014 in Online News*. – *Journal of Baltic Security*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, pp. 32–33. [**Müür et al.** 2016]

is essential to achieve victory on the physical battlefield.⁹ Russia is paying special attention to information security and works in this sphere.¹⁰

This analysis¹¹ is based on interviews with different Ukrainian experts from different spheres – e.g., military (officers and retired officers from Ukrainian defence forces), political science (analytics from different institutions e.g., International Centre for Policy Studies), media research, officials from ministries and governmental organizations (e.g., Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine; Ministry of Defence; Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, President’s Administration of Ukraine; Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, Committee on National Security and Defence), different advisors, journalists, volunteers from NGO-s (e.g., Centre for Military and Political Studies, Information Resistance section) and, of course, partly based on available open access sources.¹²

2. Informational tools, methods and narratives, which Russia uses against Ukrainian Armed Forces

On the example of Ukrainian military conflict since late 2013 and early 2014 (events on Maidan and occupation of Crimea) we have seen that Russia’s information warfare machine and soft power is actively used by Kremlin as

⁹ **Российская Газета** 2014. Военная доктрина Российской Федерации, 30 December, <<http://www.rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>> (accessed on 03.05.2016); **Müür et al.** 2016, p. 32.

¹⁰ See e.g. **Shtepa, V.** 2016. Russia’s Draft Information Security Doctrine at Odds With Realities of Modern Information Environment. – The Jamestown Foundation, 15th July 2016, <http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45637&cHash=b4ddf217d48b5af96c4b86c52db172b5#.V52JQvI9672> (accessed on 30.07.2016); **Доктрина информационной безопасности Российской Федерации** (проект). – Совет Безопасности Российской Федерации, 29.07.2016, <<http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/6/135.html>> (accessed on 30.07.2016).

¹¹ Current article was written as smaller part of the project “*Information operations of Russian Federation 2014–2015 on examples of Ukraine crisis: Influences on Ukrainian Defence Forces*” (Estonian National Defence College, leader of the project Vladimir Sazonov).

¹² This research based on interviews carried out by V. Sazonov, I. Kopötin in May-June and October 2015 and in March 2016 in Kyiv and in ATO region, and also in Tartu and by K. Müür in Kyiv in March 2016. The interviews revealed how, during the course of Russia’s information and psychological war against the Armed Forces of Ukraine and volunteer battalions in 2014, Russia attempts to harm the morale of Ukrainian soldiers and officers by using all methods and techniques available. In current research is also partly used materials published in **Sazonov, V.; Mölder, H.; Müür K.** (eds.) 2016. Russian Information Warfare against the Ukrainian State and Defence Forces: April-December 2014. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016 (in press) [**Sazonov et al.** 2016]; see also **Müür et al.** 2016, pp. 28–71.

a tool of Russian non-linear warfare. No doubt, Russian information warfare functions quite well and uses all possibilities and resources that are available in arsenal of informational-psychological sphere. Kremlin's propaganda is working well, influentially, spreading (mis)information strongly and massively and tries to target all possible target audiences in Ukraine (e.g., soldiers and officers, civilian society, different religious and ethnic groups, different subcultures, government, NGO-s etc.), but in Western countries generally. In Ukraine it aims to disparage the Ukrainian government and demonstrate it as a corrupt, illegal, incapable and fascist and neo-Nazis, junta¹³ and also tries to harm of moral of Ukrainian army on frontline and in ATO, additionally tries to influence of population of whole Ukraine with spreading sometimes contradictory, fear-, panic- or hate-based misinformation and fakes.¹⁴ This is very generally and very briefly, what we can note on Russian information warfare in Ukraine.

Russia's propagand machine uses very different methods and wide arsenal of tools in information warfare and it is not even possible list all of them in current short article. However, exemplarily we will mentioned only one of this methods – it is “data deluge method”¹⁵. This could be very influential method and a good example of using “data deluge method” in

¹³ **Демченко, В.** 2014. Войска хунты начали подготовку наступления на Луганск. – Комсомольская правда, 1 July, <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26249.5/3129999/>> (accessed on 02.05.2016).

¹⁴ See e.g. **Müür et al.** 2016; Dr. Yevhen Fedchenko (2015) quite well describes the Russian information warfare in general terms in following way: “*For the Kremlin, propaganda has become an integral part of information warfare. Throughout the past decade the Russian propaganda machine has been structured and effectively implemented, reaching a climax during the occupation of Crimea and the subsequent devastating war in Eastern Ukraine. It started in 2005 with the creation of Russia Today (subsequently RT) and every year more “media” outlets are added to this global network. Almost every week another propaganda outlet, Sputnik International, opens a new bureau somewhere in the world, hiring qualified local journalists and producing radio and multimedia content in almost 30 languages. According to their website, “Sputnik points the way to a multipolar world that respects every country’s national interests, culture, history and traditions”. This is just one of the many examples of media outlet double-speak. In reality, their aim is to influence global public opinion, distort reality and act as a mouthpiece for the Kremlin.*” – **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 15.05.2016).

¹⁵ Uku Arold writes about “data deluge method”: “*The briefing of Russian Ministry of Defense on crash of the airliner MH17. Shortly before that Russian TV channels produced a variety of different conspiracy theories about the plane incident, making the information from media extremely confusing.*” (**Arold, U.** 2015. Infosõja mõistatus. – Kaja. Kommunikatsiooni ja suhtekorralduse ajakiri, 18, p. 14).

information campaigns by Russia is the case of MH17.¹⁶ Even if we look very briefly in the period which followed the crash of MH 17 on 17th of July 2014, we can find in Russian mass-media (all Russian federal TV-s, on-line news, newspapers, radio channels etc.) huge number of misinformative messages, fakes, and lies about this catastrophe. For example, already few days after the crash of MH17, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*¹⁷ gave some laconic information about MH17 and catastrophe, but which consist lot of misinformation and even fakes. Since 23rd of July 2014 situation changed and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* started to produce quite specific image that Ukrainian armed forces are probably guilty of this catastrophe. In one article, which was published on 23rd of July, only 6 days after the crash of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* aimed to show that the most likely the culprit is a Ukrainian soldier Sergei Patchenko.¹⁸ Later *Komsomolskaya Pravda* has not mentioned him anymore and gave different versions. However, it was only a speculation, no serious facts were given to support it, but the narrative that Ukraine is guilty began to work.¹⁹ The narrative that Ukrainians shoot down MH 17 was also forcefully promoted in all Russian federal television channels, and also in online and social media. Russian mass-media blamed the Ukrainian army directly for shooting down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 and tried to convince that Ukrainian soldiers are responsible for this catastrophe.²⁰ Of course, Russia's information warfare uses "data deluge method" also in many other cases, trying to target people with and sometimes controversial information. The purpose is, of course, to disorientate the target audience.²¹

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁷ *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, established in 1925 in Soviet Union, is one of the oldest newspapers in Russia. The *Komsomolskaya Pravda* Publishing House does not only have online and print outlets, but also owns a radio channel.

¹⁸ **Александрова, О.** 2014. Солдата украинской армии затравили за фото на фоне «Бука». – Комсомольская правда, 23.07.2014, <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26259/3138276/>> (02.05.2016).

¹⁹ **Комсомольская правда: Малайзийский Боинг был сбит в небе над Донбассом украинским летчиком.** – Радио Эхо Москвы, 23.12.2014, <<http://echo.msk.ru/news/1460870-echo/comments.html>> (accessed on 11.05.2016).

²⁰ See e. g. **Варсегов, Н.** 2014. Украинские пушки бьют по месту катастрофы «Боинга», чтобы не дать работать голландским специалистам. – Комсомольская правда, 10.11.2014, <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26305.5/3183895/>> (accessed on 08.05.2016); **Полосатов, С.** 2014. Появился фотоснимок, на котором украинский истребитель атакует малайзийский «Боинг». – Комсомольская правда, 24.11.2014, <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26307/3186146/>> (accessed on 06.05.2016).

²¹ Interview with **Dmytro Kuleba**, carried out by Sazonov on 27th of May 2015; see also **Sazonov et al.** 2016.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Russian information operations against Ukraine are not of new origin. Ukrainian media expert Vitalii Moroz²², and Tetyana Lebedeva²³ point to the years 2003–2004, when Russian propagandists began to create the idea of dividing Ukraine into two or three parts. Nataliya Gumenyuk²⁴, pointed out that “*really serious situation began in 2003 when different political technologists began to tell story about three different types of Ukraine*”.²⁵

Vitalii Moroz associates it with the events in Russia at the same time – oppression of the NTV news channel and the appearance of political technologists in the Russian media space.²⁶ Some of these technologists were simultaneously hired by the team of Yanukovych to work against the Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko.²⁷ According to Tetyana Lebedeva, Russian information activities started to creep in already during the presidency of Leonid Kuchma, but the impact of the “first Maidan” – the Orange Revolution of 2004 – made the Russian rulers uneasy to maintain their influence over Ukraine.²⁸ Back then, the Russian information operations were not as massive, aggressive, influential and visible as they are now. Ukrainian expert Dmytro Kuleba²⁹, considers a more aggressive wave of Russian information campaigns to have started approximately one year before the annexation of Crimea, in 2013.³⁰ The overtake-process indicates that this was a well-prepared action and Russia was militarily ready to conduct the operation in Crimea.³¹

²² Interview with **Vitalii Moroz** (Head of the New Media Department at Internews Ukraine), carried out by Sazonov.

²³ Interview with **Tetyana Lebedeva** (Honorary Head of the Independent Association of Broadcasters), carried out by Sazonov.

²⁴ Editor-in-chief in Hromadske TV.

²⁵ Interview with **N. Gumenyuk**, carried out by Sazonov and Kopõtin.

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

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Interview with **T. Lebedeva**, carried out by Sazonov.

²⁹ Ambassador-at Large at the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry.

³⁰ Interview with **D. Kuleba**, carried out by Sazonov; About annexation of Crimea see **Mõlder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Vãrk, R.** 2014. Krimmi liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad: I osa – Akadeemia, No. 12, pp. 2148–2161; **Mõlder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Vãrk, R.** 2014. Krimmi liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad: II osa. – Akadeemia, No. 1, pp. 1–28.

³¹ **Müür et al.** 2016, p. 34.

LTCol. ret. Dmitry Tymchuk³², LTCol ret. Juri Karin, Col. Konstantin Mashovets and Col. ret. Vyacheslav Gusarov from NGO *Information Resistance* showed in their book about Russian aggression in Ukraine that Russian information activity began already in the beginning 1990s. The first phase from the beginning of 1990s till 2013 was a “preparatory phase” (*подготовительная фаза*) and “informational sounding (exploring) of situation” (*информационное зондирование ситуации*).³³ Tymchuk, Karin, Mashovets and Gusarov pointed out that since August until November 2013 there was a phase of “creation of informational lodgement (*place d’armes*)” in Ukraine (*создание информационного плацдарма*). It was followed by the next phase from December 2013 until February 2014, “phase of informational aggression” in Crimea (*фаза информационной агрессии в Крыму*) and “rocking the situation on Donbass” (*раскачивание ситуации на Донбассе*). The next phase began in March and ended in June 2014 – it was phase of “wide pressure of information” (*фаза «широкомасштабного информационного прессинга»*).³⁴

Col. ret. Vyacheslav Gusarov (2.03.2016), expert of information security, pointed out:

*The active phase of information war began in 2013. We think that it began in July 2013 after the presentation of President Vladimir Putin on celebration of 1025 years since Christianisation of Kievan Rus. In his speech Putin said that Russia will never leave Ukraine, will be it in Europe or in Eurasian Customs Union.*³⁵

In the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea, Russian information operations during 2014 were used at all levels starting with the political level (against the state of Ukraine, its structures and politicians) up to the military level. According to Jolanta Darczewska³⁶, an unprecedentedly large scale exploitation of federal television³⁷ and radio channels, newspapers and online resources was supported by diplomats, politicians, political analysts, experts, and representatives of the academic and cultural elites.

³² Head of Center for Military and Political Studies, Information Resistance (IR) section.

³³ **Тымчук, Д.; Карин, Ю.; Машовец, К.; Гусаров, В.** 2016. Вторжение в Украину: Хроника российской агрессии. Брайт Стар Паблшинг, Киев, р. 209. [**Тымчук et al.** 2016]

³⁴ **Тымчук et al.** 2016, pp. 211–214.

³⁵ Interview with **V. Gusarov**, carried out by Sazonov and Müür.

³⁶ **Darczewska** 2014, p. 5.

³⁷ Federal television of the Russian Federation.

In Russia's information campaigns against Ukrainian state and army, Moscow propagandists use different myths, ideas and narratives that are mostly related to contemporary Russian and Soviet history – e.g., the Second World War, Stepan Bandera and banderovitsi³⁸, but also Nazism and violence, genocide³⁹, Russophobia, Chauvinism etc. Additionally, they use the images of the “glorious” Soviet period, especially from reign-time of Joseph Stalin, who again has become more popular among Russians since Vladimir Putin became president of Russian Federation.⁴⁰ Such manipulations in Russia's media are very common since Vladimir Putin came to power in the Russian Federation.⁴¹ Narratives, which is related to Nazis is successfully and massively used by Russians in information campaign against Ukrainians. The Ukrainian defence forces and its volunteer units are often compared to executions squads (e.g., *Einsatztruppen* in Third Reich), Nazis, killers, terrorists, bandits, servants of the Kyiv junta. Ukraine is portrayed as a failed state, or a puppet of NATO and Western countries. Many Russian media channels have published fake news about foreign soldiers and NATO troops in Ukraine⁴², or try to show that some of NATO or European Union's states help the Kyiv junta and Ukrainian army, who kill civilians and are Nazi sympathizers.⁴³ Another strong narrative promoted is the Western conspiracy against Russia, Russians and the Russian World.⁴⁴ Western politicians are

³⁸ *Banderivitsi* – followers of Stepan Bandera (1909–1959). Stepan Bandera was leader of the Ukrainian nationalists, head of Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN, in Ukrainian *Організація Українських Націоналістів*). Bandera was also the leader of Ukrainian independence movement. See e.g., **Київ митингує проти нацизму і бандерівщини**, 7.11.2015. – IA Regnum, <<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2007058.html>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

³⁹ **Гришин, А.** 2014. Обыкновенный геноцид: «Высшее руководство Украины приказывало уничтожать русскоязычных». – Комсомольская Правда, 29 September, <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26288.5/3166244/>> (accessed on 06.05.2016).

⁴⁰ **Булин, Д.** 2011. Популярность Сталина в России стремительно растет. 27 апреля 2011 г. – BBC Russian, Русская служба, <http://www.bbc.com/russian/society/2011/04/110427_stalin_vciom_support.shtml> (26.05.2016).

⁴¹ **Липман, М.** 2009. Media Manipulation and Political Control in Russia. Chatham House, Moscow.

⁴² See e.g. **Титов, С.** 2015. Рада впустила на Украину иностранные войска. – Комсомольская правда, 4.6.2015. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26390.4/3267570/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

⁴³ See e.g. **Смирнов, В.** 2014. В Эстонии «поставят на ноги» бойцов украинской армии, бомбивших Донбасс. – Комсомольская правда, 22.9.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/online/news/1850795/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

⁴⁴ See e.g. **Коц, А.; Стешин, Д.** 2014. Ополченец из Афганистана: Ливия, Сирия, Ирак... Вас, русских, окружают. – Комсомольская правда, 20.11.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26310.3/3188038/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

depicted as cowardly and double-faced persons who support killing civilians in Ukraine, especially children.⁴⁵ Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers are also often portrayed as criminals, drug addicts, alcoholics, robbers and cowards, who torture and killed civilians (especially children, old people and woman).⁴⁶

The Ukrainian armed forces are pictured as revolting due to grave conditions in the army and Ukrainian soldiers do not want to shoot civilians.⁴⁷ An article claims that “*the moral conditions of the Ukrainian army make us more and more concerned. But the moral condition of army authorities is laughter through tears*”.⁴⁸ *Komsomolskaya Pravda* tries to show that Ukrainian army is ruled by violence and chaos, hunger, and illnesses. During the escalation of conflict in Donbass, especially before the mobilisation of Ukrainians, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* regularly spoke about deserters from Ukrainian army, hundreds and thousands who massively leave the army and go to the Russian side⁴⁹.

Russian propaganda machine is continuously creating new terms, especially those related to WWII⁵⁰ that should support them in information war – trying to humiliate Ukrainians by using metanarratives such as *Maidanjugend* (*майданюгендовец*), which is a direct analogy with *Hitlerjugend*.⁵¹

⁴⁵ See e.g. **Туханина, О.** 2014. Почему Запад вступает за Пусси Райот, а не за мертвых девочек из Луганска. – Комсомольская правда, 24.08.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26273.7/3150573/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

⁴⁶ See e.g. **СМИ: Военные ВСУ спиваются целыми подразделениями.** – IA Regnum, 20.10.2015, <<https://regnum.ru/news/society/1994593.html>> (accessed on 22.06.2016); **Пьяные украинские солдаты неудачно штурмовали позиции ДНР – Басурин.** – IA Regnum, 20.10.2015, <<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1994847.html>> (accessed on 22.06.2016); **Баранец, В.** 2014. «Комсомолка» узнала имена фронтовиков, которых ограбили украинские солдаты. – Комсомольская правда, 26.9.2014, <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26287/3165405/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016); **Дэ, В.** 2014. Украинская армия открыла огонь по своим же солдатам. – Комсомольская правда, 17.10.2014, <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26296/3174231/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

⁴⁷ **В украинской армии начались бунты.** – Комсомольская правда, 23.04.2014, <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26223/3106716/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ **Стешин, Д.** 2014. Снова бои под Донецком: армия Украины перешла в отступление. – Комсомольская правда, 3.6.2014, <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26389/3267064/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

⁵⁰ See e.g. **Гришин, А.** 2014. Никогда мы не будем близнецами с фашистами. – Комсомольская правда, 9.12.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26317.5/3196304/>> <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26317/3196365/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

⁵¹ **Людей заставляют врать, что их бомбили ополченцы 2014.** – Комсомольская правда, 4.09.2014. <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26278.4/3155601/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

Additionally, Russia has used Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate in its information campaigns.⁵² Very often one can find articles, where a priest is telling a story how Ukrainian army is killing people, priests, looting churches.⁵³ Sometimes the Ukrainian government is represented as evil and associated with demons and Satan.⁵⁴

Here were listed only some few man narratives which Russia is using in information war against Ukraine.

3. Russia's information and psychological operations in ATO region in 2014–2015

Col. ret. Vyacheslav Gusarov describes that situation about Ukrainian army before 2014 in following way:

*There was no army in Ukraine, because the army kept falling apart. This is my personal opinion, because I served in the army for a long time and I saw that no one of presidents, no one of prime ministers, no one of heads of national security have not done anything to support the army, and not only the army – the whole security forces – militia, SBU, state emergence services – they all were demoralized.*⁵⁵

In such difficult situation, when Ukrainian army was weak and ministries and some governmental organisations (especially in security sphere) were demoralized, Russia began an active information war against Ukraine.

Russian information warfare turned to the following methods in Donbass conflict in 2014:

Firstly: mobile phone operators were used as tools in information campaigns against Ukrainian army. During the psychological operations and information campaigns panic and fear were widely spread via mobile phone operators among Ukrainian people. The most widely used operator in

⁵² See e.g. **Riistan, A.** 2015. Ukraina konfliktit teopoliitikast: Moskva patriarhaadi perspektiiv. – Kirik ja Teoloogia, 20.03.2015, <<http://kjt.ee/2015/03/ukraina-konfliktit-teopoliitikast-moskva-patriarhaadi-perspektiiv-2/>> (26.05.2015).

⁵³ See e.g. **Новикова, А.** 2015. Украинские националисты планируют карательную акцию против священников. – Комсомольская правда, 14.10.2014, <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26294/3172487/>> (03.05.2016).

⁵⁴ **Варсеров, Н.** 2014. В души украинских правителей вселился дьявол. – Комсомольская правда, 17.09.2014, <<http://kompravda.eu/daily/26283/3161165/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

⁵⁵ Interview with **V. Gusarov**, carried out by Sazonov and Müür.

the anti-terrorist operations region⁵⁶ is *KyivStar*, the control packet of which belongs to Russian businessmen.⁵⁷ Phone numbers of people who visit the ATO area will be registered by information centres to be functioning in so-called Novorossiia. They began to send text messages with following content: e.g. “Soldier, go home if you want to live”, “Welcome to the territory of Donetsk People’s Republic”, “Your generals are cowards and liars”, “Your commanders have escaped, because they know that the war is already lost”, “You are alone and nobody will help you”.⁵⁸ The phone numbers of family members and friends are used in a similar way – examples of messages that have been sent include: “your son is a prisoner of war” or “your husband is dead/killed”. Sometimes separatists call the officers in the ATO area and try to intimidate them. The network of separatist agents uses the same scheme.⁵⁹ For example, when the battles were under Debaltsevo (in July 2014 and later, in January – February 2015) this strategy of calling or sending SMSes was used quite actively. However, not only there. During the intense phase of the battles, Ukrainian soldiers also received messages such as “your commanders have fled” or “the Ukrainian army will flee”, “your generals are cowards”.⁶⁰

Secondly, significant role in Russian information war also belongs to monitoring of newspapers by separatists and also in using pro-Russian activists in information and psychological operations. Separatists and pro-Russian activists began monitoring newspapers in ATO region. They also shoot the cars that belong to Ukrainian press centre of ATO. Separatist use also network of agents, lot of pro-Russian activists among local people and military personnel.⁶¹

Thirdly, they created fake homepages and portals. Pro-Russian separatist created several fake-homepages for Ukrainian press centre of ATO. Because cyber-attacks from Russian side and from separatists happened quite often, the Department of Information Operations of the General Staff of Ukrainian Armed Forces advised soldiers how to use Internet and social networks. The biggest group of risk is, of course, younger soldiers, who could often

⁵⁶ Here and later ATO (anti-terrorist operations region).

⁵⁷ **Из России с любовью.** Кому принадлежат украинские операторы, 30.6.2015, <<http://ukrainianiphone.com/2015/06/owners-of-ukrainian-operators/>> (accessed on 22.06.2016).

⁵⁸ Based on interviews carried out by Kopötin.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Interview with **D. Kuleba**, carried out by Sazonov.

⁶¹ Interview with **officers from Department of Information Operation** (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine). Interviewed by Igor Kopötin, Kyiv, 25.06.2015.

underestimate risks and whose habits from civil life are still strong. Another problem is that in Ukraine the legal basis (ground) for activity in cyber space do not exist.⁶²

Fourthly, the role of separatist mass media in information war was extremely high. Separatist's information channels such like *www.dnr-news.com*, TV channel *Lugansk24* etc., spread fear among Ukrainians, showing that Ukrainian army had huge numbers of losses, they demonstrated Ukrainian prisoners of war in *Youtube*.⁶³ The aim was to raise panic and mistrust among mobilized soldiers against leaders of Ukrainian army. With same purpose was published the march of Ukrainian prisoners of war in Donetsk in January 2015.⁶⁴

For example LTC (ret.) Oleksiy Melnyk⁶⁵ described how Russia was trying to undermine the morale of Ukrainians in 2014 regarding to mobilisation:

*Another strong message is to create panic and horror about mobilisation and other issues related to manning the army. The aim of such messages is to undermine morale of soldiers, their relative and society at large by repeated demonstration of bloodied and mutilated corps, scared and demoralised prisoners (Ukrainian solders) admitting their fault, beaten and shot in front of a camera. For example, a Day of Victory parade took place in Donetsk on 9 May 2014 where prisoners were publicly humiliated.*⁶⁶

Fifthly, Officers from Information Department of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine are thinking that the problem is in Ukrainian newspapers and television channels, majority of which is controlled by of pro-Russian oligarchs. In General Headquarter believed that the biggest newspaper

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Е.г. **Пленные укропы под Иловайском**, 30.08.2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uM4t295e4k>> (accessed on 25.03.2016). **Пленные укропы**. Донецк, 22 января 2015 года, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9BWcS9sPwM&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3Dq9BWcS9sPwM&has_verified=1> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

⁶⁴ **В Донецке прошел «парад» пленных**. – Комсомольская Правда, 24.08.2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-EzdyyHQRA>> (accessed on 25.03.2016); see also **Захарченко устроил «марш пленных киборгов»: пусть просят прощения у жителей Донецка**. – МК.EU, 22 января 2015, <<http://www.mk.ru/social/2015/01/22/zakharchenko-ustroil-marsh-plennykh-kiborgov-pust-prosyat-proshheniya-u-zhiteley-donecka.html>> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

⁶⁵ He is co-director of the Foreign Relations & International Security Programmes (Razumkov Center), in 2005-2008 Melnyk works in Ministry of Defence of Ukraine as Head Organisational and Analytical Division and also as First Assistant to Minister of Defence.

⁶⁶ Interview with **O. Melnyk**, carried out by Sazonov.

with the provocative is newspaper *Vesti*, which is high-circulation Russian-language newspaper. Since this newspaper is distributed massively panic, it influences most strongly relatives of soldiers.⁶⁷

Sixthly, According to the officials of the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine and media experts, another effective way to get people quickly and effectively under control in the Donbass area are loudspeakers that were actively used already in the Second World War. Information that is transmitted through loudspeakers to Ukrainian soldiers on the front line reduces their willingness to wage war and influences their morale. Loudspeakers accentuate that Ukrainian government members and commanders are traitors and liars who have sent Ukrainian troops to death and left them here. And since the Russian military machine is so powerful, they all will die soon.⁶⁸

Seventhly, Russian side spreads panic and scary rumors using social networks such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Odnoklassniki* and *Vkontakte* and also local people. Such rumours or “news” – “Enemy forces are approaching”, “Russian tanks are coming” – spread via Facebook faster than through the formal chain of command. Ukrainian soldiers are not aware that they help to distribute these rumours, especially when they return home and tell their friends about frontline experience, which is also a cause of dangerous information leakages.

But rumours were also spread not only in social media, but also on the streets, markets in different cities and villages e.g., in Mariupol in May 2014 using popular jitneys⁶⁹ Stories travelled from one person to another. Stories were often telling that:

Militia does not want to cooperate with fascists from Kiev and that (Ukrainian) National Guard shot them using tanks in the building of city administration; There were prepared 300 coffins in the city; There are 150 dead bodies in the building of city administration etc.

These rumors caused discontent and sometimes anger in citizens towards government of Ukraine.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Interview with **T. Popova** (Deputy Minister, Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine), carried out by Sazonov, on 27.05.2015 in Kiev.

⁶⁹ Interview with **Sergey Pakhomenko and Vadim Korobko**, Russian information operations against Ukraine. Interviewed by Igor Kopötin in Mariupol on 08.03.2016.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

As an example we can take the following dialogue:

Local people see Ukrainian soldiers, they approach and ask:

Local people: *Were are you coming from?*

Soldiers: *From Zakarpattia.*

Local people: *But what are you doing here?*

Soldiers: *We are here to protect you.*

Local people: *We do not need your protection, go back where you came from.*⁷¹

This kind of attitude of local people depressed Ukrainian soldiers. Addition to that they were afraid that food products that local people gave them could be poisoned.⁷² So, Russian agents and Pro-Russian separatists very skilfully used local people and manipulated with their mind.

Eighthly, another influential problem is also a widespread and effective network of Russian agents in Ukraine (especially in Donbass area and Crimea), which are connected to the *GRU*⁷³ and *FSB*⁷⁴, which were created in Crimea and the Donbass region even before the outbreak of the military conflict. They began to spread information to create panic, fear and hatred. The psychological influencing of people was carried out in a highly methodological and systemic manner. With the support of local agents, the Russian information operations in Donbass area had begun already many years before the actual conflict broke out in Donbass. It is important to note that local Communist functionaries and pro-Russian activists played an important role in that. Based on its network of agents, separatists monitor the distribution of newspapers in the ATO region.⁷⁵

When the intensive phase of the conflict began, Donbass area had already become susceptible for Russia's propaganda and large number of groups of saboteurs, pro-Russian activists and Russian spies were brought there. This was done on earlier stage, particularly during the war, quite actively and vigorously. Russia had sent its spies and groups of diversants to the Donbass region. These groups sized approximately 30–40 people per group. They were professional and experienced intelligence officers (saboteurs, spies),

⁷¹ Interview with **officers from Department of Information Operation** (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine). Interviewed by Igor Kopõtin, Kyiv, 25.06.2015.

⁷² Interview with "**Oleksandr**". Interviewed by Igor Kopõtin, 03.03.2016.

⁷³ Main Intelligence Directorate (*Главное разведывательное управление*).

⁷⁴ The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) (*Федеральная служба безопасности Российской Федерации*).

⁷⁵ Interview with **S. Vysotsky**, carried out by Sazonov on 29.05.2015.

who were sent to Eastern Ukraine to destabilize the situation and carry out information operations, as well as military tactical tasks.⁷⁶

One example, which describes how the operation was carried out in 2014 in Eastern Ukraine took the following form. Saboteurs, spies (Russian “diversants”) and intelligence officers arrived in a certain location and were accompanied by trained journalists (usually two). One journalist was specialized in military field, and the second dealt with civilian issues. They began to fabricate certain “necessary” situations and then made a video that was immediately uploaded to *YouTube* or other social media.⁷⁷

These reportages were shown on television both in Russia and Ukraine. *LifeNews* in particular indulged in forwarding them, as well as Russian channels *NTV*, *Россия*, *Россия 24* and many others. Typical images broadcasted included the Donbass people rebelling against the Ukrainian fascists and executions squads, that Kyiv junta ordered troops to kill Russians, torture the civilians in Donbass, etc. This was coordinated by the group leader who was a professional saboteur and spies with significant experience in military operations who received instructions from an FSB coordinator. The leader of this group had at least two important numbers in his mobile phone. One was the number of the *FSB* coordinator, who was responsible for the region and local agents. Both the *FSB* coordinator and the group leader coordinated their work and tried to recruit local people. Many of the local groups of the militants were ready to help and were just waiting for the instructions from the coordinator. Essentially, almost all the Communist functionaries were recruited in Eastern Ukraine.⁷⁸

Ninthly, weaknesses of Ukrainian media communications between army and society were used masterfully by Russian propaganda machine. Improperities which took place during the mobilization and weak media communication of army with society caused the distribution of rumors and so-called video “reportages” with content which was harmful for army. For example in Ukrainian TV channel *Hromadske TV*⁷⁹ was spread information that in Kharkov in June 2015 during the mobilization the people were taken “for document” control to the department of militia (local police), but instead of that they got invitation to military service. It might cause massive protests in

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Ukrainian TV channel.

Kharkov, where the number of Pro-Russian population is quite remarkable.⁸⁰ The “failure” of mobilization in Western Ukraine was shown via *Youtube*.⁸¹ Negative image of compulsory mobilization was also transmitted by Russian media channels.⁸²

Although Ukrainian media was successful in creation of positive image about Ukrainian mobilized soldiers⁸³, there still remained some problems, when mobilized have low motivation regarding their age and their inadequate military training. This all has negative influence on military discipline in whole military unit.⁸⁴ Mobilized volunteers and soldiers from National Guard organized in October 2014 protest in front of Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament).⁸⁵

Generally pro-Russian separatists and Russia quite masterfully used problems of Ukrainian army – surplus bureaucracy, logistic difficulties and social contradictions.⁸⁶

4. Summary

The interviews showed that Russian information operations are situational in nature, and make use of a wide variety of information tools and different methods. Russian propaganda machine is quite flexible and quickly adapts to new situations. Although many information operations are spontaneous, they are clearly derived from an existing bigger strategic plan.⁸⁷ Russian

⁸⁰ **Анна Соколова про мобілізацію у Харкові.** – Hromadske.TV, 26.06.2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AejHyGvRsdo>> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

⁸¹ **Новые хитрости военкоматов в ходе мобилизации.** – www.slovoidilo.ua, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZrK_6SwVd4> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

⁸² **На улицах Украины проходит шестая волна насильственной мобилизации.** – Polirussia.news, 06.07.2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSUzkh_PfZc> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

⁸³ **Мобілізовані.** – Hromadske.TV, 19.05.2015, <<http://www.hromadske.tv/politics/mobilizovani/>> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

⁸⁴ Interview with “Right Sector” activist Vadim “Mad”, carried out by Kopõtin on 29.06.2015.

⁸⁵ **СМИ: Группа срочников Нацгвардии закрыла командиров и пошла на акцию протеста в Киев,** 13.10.2014, УНИАН, <<http://www.unian.net/politics/995409-smi-gruppa-srochnikov-natsgardii-zakryila-komandirov-i-poshla-na-aktsiyu-protesta-v-kiiev.html>> (accessed on 25.03.2016).

⁸⁶ Interview with **officers from Department of Information Operation** (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine). Interviewed by Igor Kopõtin, Kyiv, 25.06.2015.

⁸⁷ However, this Russian system also has its weaknesses. Since many campaigns are hastily and spontaneously produced, sometimes even serious mistakes occur in Russian informational activity.

propaganda is like a chameleon that constantly changes and adapts. This makes it difficult to fight.⁸⁸

Information and psychological operations in 2014 and 2015 were carried out in parallel with military operations, often integrated to support each other. For example, at the start of one of the larger military offensives conducted by Ukraine, fierce fighting fronts were set up at Debaltseve, Ilovaysk, Mariupol, and the Donetsk Airport.

Information campaigns were also employed to respond to preparations for further mobilization of the Ukrainian army. In addition to Russian media and trolls, the FSB and the GRU, their agents active in Eastern Ukraine, and a myriad of recruited separatist activists also played an active role in information campaigns.

One technique is distribution of panic stories, which were also massively distributed on the frontlines. Local population and *Facebook*, *Vkontakte* and *Odnoklassniki* messages also played an important role in distributing such rumours and stories. As a result, Ukrainians were compelled to abandon a number of villages without a fight.

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⁸⁸ In addition we must not forget that Russian Federation has a long propaganda tradition into which it has always invested a great deal of time, money, and human resources. This tradition has its roots not only in Soviet past, but even in earlier periods of Russian history. Many historical phenomena, ideas and key narratives, historical myths originated from medieval period, 17th–19th or from the beginning of the 20th century (e.g. “Moscow is Third Rome”, Holy Rus, Greater Russia, Russian World, Russian soul and many others) are actively reused by Russian propagandist machine in their renewed forms. Various historical myths used during the Russian Empire before 1917 have been reawakened and mixed with numerous Soviet ideas, narratives and phenomena. Even the concept of the so-called Russian World is partly based on the legacy of Imperial Russia (1721–1917) and partly on the ideas introduced by Bolsheviks.

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