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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Mitglied der
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

INTRODUCTION

Russia's Information Warfare

This issue of the *Russian Analytical Digest* features a series of articles examining Russian information warfare. Over the past decade, Vladimir Putin's Russia has employed unorthodox foreign policy tools with increasing frequency, intensity, and success. Perhaps the most effective of these tactics has been the use of information warfare designed to affect decision-making in countries Russia considers to be its adversaries. In the target countries, these measures aim to destabilize civil society, erode trust in democratic institutions, and foster uncertainty among allies.

If the United States and Europe hope to defend their economies, institutions, and identities, an immediate and effective policy response is required. To date, however, the United States and many of its European partners have struggled to develop policies that combat and counter Russian information warfare.

The articles gathered here examine the tools that Russia has used against Ukraine, Poland, the United States, and the European Union, as well as the strategies that these countries have employed to combat Russian information warfare. The joint article by the four authors concisely summarizes the findings and proposes policy options by means of which the democratic countries of the West can address the challenges information warfare poses. The final article looks at Russia, examining controversies around the political role of the aggregator Yandex.news in prioritizing media news.

ANALYSIS

Adaptive Russian Information Warfare in Ukraine

By Nash Miller (George Washington University)

Abstract

Information warfare is a key component of Russia's national security strategy and has impacted the United States, Europe, and—perhaps most notably—Ukraine. Ukraine has been on the front lines of Russia's information war for a decade, with Russia using both traditional mass media and social media to create divisions within the country and justify war. Ukrainian responses have involved limitations and bans on Russian mass media, attempts to expose Russian misinformation, and information campaigns of its own. These policy responses have forced Russian tools to adapt and have limited the audience of Russian information warfare.

Russian Tools

Perhaps nowhere is Russian information warfare more clearly on display than in Ukraine. Since before the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution, information campaigns have been a staple of Russian strategy in the country, being used to leverage ethno-linguistic cleavages, sow confusion and distrust, and fabricate justifications for war. This analysis will identify Russian tools and strategies of information warfare in Ukraine since 2014 and lay out Ukrainian policy responses.

Current Russian information warfare is an outgrowth of Soviet-era "active measures" and a key component of today's much-discussed Gerasimov Doctrine, or "hybrid warfare," which seemingly dominates Russian strategy. Russia employs many tools to wage its information warfare, including directly controlled state media, indirect control of traditional media (*samodeitelnost*), and social media efforts.

The Kremlin exercises direct control over many of the largest media outlets in Russia, which also broadcast throughout the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine. Each week, representatives of large Russian television channels, including Pervyi Kanal, NTV, Rossiia 1, and others, meet with Kremlin officials to receive approved narratives. Multiple pro-Kremlin Ukrainian channels are also said to have direct connections with Putin's inner circle. In 2014, 97% of Ukrainians reported that television was their main source of news, a share much higher than in other European countries (Onuch, 2021, p. 3). During the run-up to and immediate aftermath of the Euromaidan Revolution, Russian or Russian-controlled television enjoyed dominant viewership throughout Ukraine.

But the Kremlin also controls other media indirectly through a phenomenon known as *samodeitelnost*, or "independent initiative." Due to a combination of motivating carrots and threatening sticks, independent journalists, media outlets, and social media creators produce and disseminate information content that they anticipate will be in line with the Kremlin's desires.

Russia's innovative use of social media as a tool of information warfare has also had a major impact. Several pro-Kremlin Telegram channels in Ukraine—such as WarGonzo, Ukraine.Ru, and Donbass Decides—have over half a million subscribers apiece. Content from such channels is shared and re-shared across multiple social media platforms, flooding feeds with pro-Russian narratives. Often, content from these local pro-Russian Telegram channels in Ukraine eventually makes its way onto one of the main television channels in Russia.

Russian Information Strategy after Euromaidan

Russian messaging can be incredibly flexible to accomplish its aims and can pursue multiple contradictory narratives at once to sow confusion and fear. Russian information campaigns following the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014 focused on exploiting existing ethnolinguistic cleavages in Ukraine to spread existential fear among Russophones in the country.

Highlighting the collaboration of some Ukrainian nationalists with the Nazi occupiers during the Second World War, Russian media was swift to label Euromaidan protestors and the resulting new government as "fascists" (Osipian, 2015, p. 152) and "brutal Russophobic thugs" (Osipian, 2015, p. 119). Multiple Russian-language television channels declared that soon, neo-Nazis from Western Ukraine would come to Crimea and the Donbass to carry out genocidal reprisals against Russophones. Russian media couched the conflict in the Donbass in the language of the Great Patriotic War, using terms like "Banderists," "fascist," "Nazi," "*opolchentsy*" (defensive militia created during wartime), and "anti-fascist" to depict the combatants on the two sides. Russian media expertly instrumentalized powerful historical memories of the Great Patriotic War to paint the new regime in Kyiv as an existential threat to Russian-speakers in Ukraine.

As a result of this messaging, mostly broadcast on television, significant Russophone populations in Crimea and the Donbass came to support either separatism from Ukraine or outright annexation by Russia. According to a 2014 study, viewing Russian television was strongly correlated with holding negative views of Euromaidan (Hale et al., 2014). A sizable proportion of the Russophone population in other regions of Ukraine, according to a National Science Foundation-sponsored

study (O'Loughlin & Toal, 2016), believed pro-Kremlin narratives about the annexation of Crimea, the shooting-down of the Malaysian Airlines passenger plane, and the alleged domination of Ukraine's military and government by Nazis.

Russian Information Strategy in the 2020s

In preparation for the current war in Ukraine, Russia adapted its use of information warfare. In the weeks leading up to the full-scale invasion, Russian media operating in Ukraine—first Telegram channels and then traditional media—disseminated a narrative that Ukraine was preparing a major and violent attack on the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Russia relied on staged or fabricated videos and reports to legitimize this narrative. Explosions were consistently reported in the city centers of Donetsk and Luhansk, without any evidence being provided. Car bombs and other terrorist attacks within the breakaway republics were fabricated. A few days before the full-scale invasion, a video was posted on a pro-Kremlin Telegram channel of a supposed Ukrainian artillery attack on a civilian village. A villager could be seen screaming in pain, having lost a leg in the attack. In a few frames of the video, shown below, an attachment for a prosthetic leg can be seen, indicating that this crisis actor had in fact already lost his leg prior to the supposed shelling.

Source: Twitter User @OAlexanderDK

Russian television showed a helmet-camera video of an alleged firefight in which DNR soldiers halted an alleged Ukrainian offensive. It was later determined that the video was an edited version of a training exercise by the Russian military years earlier. Today, the dissemination of false images and videos is a key component of Russia's information warfare strategy.

Ukrainian Responses

Ukrainian responses to Russian information warfare were initially slow but have now taken on a dynamic and effective character that provides a model for other

states subject to such influence. Responses include banning vectors of Russian information warfare, exposing misinformation, and conducting their own information campaigns.

Limiting and Banning Russian Mass Media: One of the most potent actions Ukraine has taken is limiting, sanctioning, and outright banning Russian-controlled mass media. Prior to the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014, Russian state-controlled media originating from Russia enjoyed widespread viewership in Ukraine. As many as 97% of Ukrainians received most of their news from television in 2014, according to survey data (Onuch, 2021, p. 3). Particularly among the Russian-speaking population, much of this television programming originated in Russia.

In 2014, the Ukrainian National Council for TV and Radio Broadcasting issued regulations banning several pro-Russian television channels that broadcasted disinformation. In February 2015, Ukraine's legislature passed a law banning Russian propaganda from Ukrainian television. That same year, the hardwired, analog cable connections between Russia and Ukraine that had allowed Russian media to access Ukraine were cut. By 2015, Ukraine had been almost entirely cut off from directly controlled Russian media originating from Russia.

However, pro-Kremlin indigenous Ukrainian mass media remained, the most potent of which were a series of television stations owned by Putin-friendly Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk. In February 2021, President Volodymyr Zelensky sanctioned three pro-Kremlin television stations owned by Medvedchuk and associated with the pro-Russian opposition party Za Zhizn (For Life): 112 Ukraine, NewsOne, and ZIK TV. Ukraine's sanctioning and banning of Russian-directed mass media, particularly television stations, has removed millions of Ukrainians from Russia's information warfare audience.

Exposing Misinformation: Civil society groups have also joined the fight against Russian information warfare in Ukraine by exposing misinformation and pushing to increase media literacy. The Media Reform Center at the Mohyla School of Journalism at the National University of Kyiv was established in 2014 and operates programs to increase media literacy and warn the public of the dangers of misinformation and propaganda. The center runs fact-checking workshops for journalists, public officials, and students in many cities across Ukraine.

StopFake.org, also founded in March 2014, is a website operated by Ukrainian academics, students, journalists, and media experts dedicated to exposing misinformation and debunking Russian narratives in Ukrainian media. Since its founding, the organization has debunked over 4,000 false stories, images, and videos originating from Russia or produced by Russian agents in Ukraine. One of its most prominent exposés was that of a video apparently of a Russophone mother in Ukraine grieving her child, who had supposedly been crucified by Ukrainian soldiers. StopFake was able to verify that the mother in the video was in fact a Russian television actress. Another prominent success was the debunking of the widely circulated Russian claim that ISIS had established training camps in Ukraine with the approval of the "fascist" government.

StopFake also broadcasts a weekly television show on about 30 channels in Ukraine exposing the most outrageous misinformation of the week. A recently debunked narrative was that the Ukrainian government intended to print Hitler's face on its currency. Russian agents have reportedly attempted to hire journalists working at StopFake, indicating the Kremlin's awareness of the organization's effectiveness.

Conducting Pro-Ukrainian Information Warfare: In addition to countering Kremlin information warfare, Ukraine is endeavoring to conduct its own information campaigns in hopes that pro-Ukrainian memes, stories, and narratives will overpower pro-Russian ones. This component of Ukraine's strategy has become particularly prevalent since Russia's military build-up at the end of 2021.

President Zelensky has emerged in the conflict as a master communicator. Filming multiple daily videos addressing the Ukrainian people directly in his now-iconic green military shirt and stubble has become a tool to build unity and legitimize the government. Zelensky himself has taken part in the debunking of Russian misinformation about his own whereabouts by posting videos of himself roaming the streets of Kyiv.

Official Ukrainian government social media accounts have also actively conducted their own information campaigns. Memes have become a new front in information warfare. Recent memes posted by the Ukrainian government's official Twitter account, @Ukraine, for example, feature references to an episode of Seinfeld, Ukrainian national poetry, and even a Spiderman movie from the early 2000s. The Twitter account of Ukraine's Ministry of Defense posts videos of Lavrov's recent speeches justifying the war juxtaposed with images of the destruction of civilian areas in Ukraine.

The production value of such Ukrainian government-produced content is relatively high. The Ukrainian government publishes dozens of such memes, images, and videos every day, many of which make their way to Ukrainian television. The strategy here seems to be to flood social media feeds with so much high-quality, shareable, pro-Ukrainian content that Kremlin narratives are drowned out.

Pro-Ukrainian Misinformation

As pro-Ukrainian content continues to be enthusiastically disseminated by social media users and media outlets around the world, the Ukrainian government must take care to avoid propagating false narratives. In the opening days of the war, stories, images, and videos of an alleged Ukrainian ace fighter pilot— nicknamed the "Ghost of Kyiv"—credited with shooting down countless Russian aircraft were spread online. Many of the claims surrounding this pilot lacked evidence, and images and videos of the supposed fighter ace were found to be false. One video allegedly showing the "Ghost of Kyiv" shooting down a Russian plane was found to be taken from a video game called Digital Combat Simulator.

The story of the 13 defenders of Snake Island is another example of a widely disseminated pro-Ukrainian narrative. A video was shared online in late February of a radio conversation between the defenders of the island and a Russian warship. A Ukrainian defender's provocative alleged last words in reply to the Russian ultimatum to surrender instantly became a rallying cry in Ukraine and around the world. The story became more powerful once President Zelensky declared that the soldiers had died fighting to the last man. Mere days later, it was discovered that the 13 soldiers of Snake Island had in fact been taken as prisoners of war by the Russian military. To maintain credibility and legitimate control of the narrative, Ukraine should act to counter all forms of misinformation, even stories that are seemingly supportive of its cause.

Conclusion

Ukraine, perhaps more than any other country, has been a prime target of Russian information warfare for the past decade. Initially relying on traditional mass media, mostly television, to propagate its narratives, Russia has been forced by Ukrainian responses to adapt its strategies. By banning pro-Russian mass media, launching initiatives for media literacy, exposing misinformation, and activating its own information campaigns, Ukraine has severely limited the avenues for Russian information warfare in the country and worked to inoculate its domestic audience against misinformation. While Russian information warfare was until the mid-2010s relatively effective in shaping attitudes in Ukraine, especially among the Russian-speaking population, today its reach is limited and impact is relatively weak.

About the Author

Nash Miller is a graduate student at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University studying European and Eurasian Studies with a focus on Russian security. He received his B.A. in International Affairs from Brigham Young University in 2020.

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