

A war of **WORDS**

The Ukrainian conflict includes aggressive use of propaganda and misinformation

By Viacheslav Dziundziuk, National Academy of Public Administration, Ukraine

Just a year ago, the word “hybrid” had exclusively peaceful connotations for the vast majority of Ukrainians, conjuring up images of hybrid automobiles, for example. Now, the word has deleterious, even bloody associations. The reason: In 2014, Ukraine was given a practical lesson in hybrid warfare.

Interestingly, despite the current ubiquity of the term “hybrid warfare,” and active use of the concept by the research and expert community, the concept is not an official one — no Ukrainian or international legal or official documents offers a definition. One definition is a military strategy that combines conventional, low intensity and cyber warfare

Hybrid warfare includes these three components, but the above definition does not mention one more critical ingredient: information warfare.

The famed military theoretician and strategist Karl von Clausewitz wrote that war could not be understood without a broader grasp of the political and social context in which it takes place. It is clear that, in today’s world, it is impossible to achieve any political or social objectives, or form the context for any actions, including war, without information support. The ultimate, most aggressive form of such a policy is information warfare.


The importance of information in politics — according to Clausewitz, war is the continuation of politics by other means — has long been understood. For example, the phrase “He who controls information, controls the world” is often attributed to Winston Churchill, but was actually coined by the 19th century financier Nathan Rothschild after Napoleon Bonaparte’s defeat in the Battle of Waterloo.



A couple watches Russian President Vladimir Putin on television in the Crimean port of Sevastopol in April 2014. Separatist misinformation spread through Russian TV led the Ukrainian media regulator in March 2014 to remove four Russian national channels from cable networks nationwide. AFP/GETTY IMAGES







Dissonance appeared between the reality that exists in the physical world and the alternative reality that exists in the minds of gullible viewers of the Russian mass media.

Information warfare

The weapons of information warfare have been honed over time. In the past, traditional mass media such as the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* or the Nazi German *Völkischer Beobachter* were key examples, and the Internet and social media were added into service at the end of the 20th century. The Kosovo conflict is considered to be the first Internet war, in which various groups of Internet activists used the World Wide Web to condemn the actions of Yugoslavia and NATO, distributing a narrative about the horrors of war, citing select facts and opinions of politicians and public figures. It delivered propaganda to a wide audience, scattered around the globe. The same tactics are actively deployed in today's war against Ukraine — a hybrid war initiated by Russia.

Analysts claim that Russia has been preparing for today's war with Ukraine over the last decade. The creation of mass media networks under total state control, some of them planting commissioned articles in foreign media outlets, shape a specific public opinion. This method has clearly been used for a long time within Russia, but it is only now that a full-scale information war is being waged internationally. Clearly, Russia Today, the international, multilingual information TV network, performs the function of propaganda, rather than merely providing objective information.

A Crimean boy hands out free Russian newspapers in Simferopol's Lenin Square in March 2014. Newspapers are a powerful source of information in the Ukraine.

Russia is accused of manipulating photos and videos and of lying in a war of misinformation.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Russia's information warriors and pro-Russian forces in Ukraine are pursuing three key objectives: The first is what I call "preparation by artillery," softening the opposition by trying to delegitimize Ukraine as an independent country. The second objective is the creation of an alternative reality and the third is spreading panic. The first two objectives are relevant for those who loyally support Russia's actions in Ukraine, as well as the actions of Russia-supported separatists, while the third objective is aimed at persons living in Ukraine, who do not support separatist trends.

Preparation by artillery

"Preparation by artillery" began in advance of the current events in Ukraine and consists of shaping a single identity, shared by Russians and Ukrainians, consisting of both ethnic and religious aspects of the so-called Russian world. Through numerous articles in the printed media, TV stories, scientific conferences, round tables and other events, Russia has promoted the idea that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians were one people, with Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, in essence, one single nation with a common historical root: Kievan Rus. Emphasis was placed on a common history, while certain shared symbols were imposed, such as the so-called St. George's Ribbon, which became the symbol of separatism in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the Russian mass media actively promotes the idea that Ukraine is a *nedogosudarstvo* — an incomplete, deficient state — with no right to exist in its current form. For instance, as early as 2008, *Ukrainian Pravda* reported that Vladimir Putin told then-U.S. President George Bush at a closed session of the Russia-NATO Council: "You understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a state! What is Ukraine? Part of the territory is Eastern Europe, and part — a significant part — was a gift from us!"

Russians have been told that they make up the most authentic and spiritual nation, especially compared to the "stagnating West," beyond comparison with failed, doomed states such as Ukraine. Another Putin quote, uttered during a live TV exchange with Russian citizens in December 2010, was the claim that Russia could have emerged as the victor in World War II even without any Ukrainian assistance. "We still would have won, because we are a country of winners."

By the beginning of 2014's "hot" war in Ukraine, the vast majority of Russians and some Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens were convinced that Russia had a unique historical mission that consisted of eliminating historical injustice and recreating the "Russian world," including the territory of Ukraine, which would and could never be an independent state.

Alternative reality

The creation of an alternative reality by Russian media began when it became evident that the Maidan demonstrations that formed at the end of 2013 would not dissipate of their own accord and could not be easily dispersed. This is when a dissonance appeared between the reality that exists in the physical world and the alternative reality that exists in the minds of gullible viewers of the Russian mass media.

In any case, the Russian media have disregarded accuracy or diligence in reporting. There can be no comparison with Soviet propaganda, which strived not to be too obvious in its deception. Stock photographs of military action from all over the world are presented as recent images from Ukraine, interviews are given by nonexistent experts or straw men, and concepts and terms are confused to produce ambiguous connotations. The Russian mass media, for example, make ubiquitous use of the term "the junta in Kiev," which bears no relation to reality, because a junta is intended to mean a paramilitary gang that has taken power by force, following a coup d'état.

To shape this alternative reality, the Russian mass media appears to follow the maxim "worse is better." Take, for example, the story on pan-Russian TV channel Perviy Kanal about the young boy allegedly crucified in Slavyansk. According to the false story, when the Ukrainian military entered the town, they rounded up all the local residents in the main square, where they supposedly publicly executed the wife and young son of a rebel. The boy was crucified on the local bulletin board, while the woman was lashed to a tank and dragged through the streets until dead. To debunk such myths, a special website was created in Russian and English: www.stopfake.org.

The alternative reality, created by the Russian mass media, can be summarized as follows: as a result of an anti-constitutional coup d'état in Kiev, a junta came to power, which unleashed a war against objectors residing in Novorossiia, or New Russia. Mass genocide was conducted against the peaceful Russian-speaking population; *benderovtsy* and *zhidobenderovtsy* from the ultra-right-wing Praviy Sektor and Natsgardiya, the latest generation in a line of Nazis and fascists, have shown particular cruelty.

In this phrase, we see the main cliches that have been driven into the mass consciousness of Russians and pro-Russian residents of Ukraine: the "junta in Kiev," Novorossiia, "genocide of the Russian-speaking population," "benderovtsy," "zhidobenderovtsy," Praviy sektor and the Natsgardiya. All these cliches are negative, except Novorossiia, and all deserve some explanation.

- Novorossiia: the southeast areas of Ukraine, which according to Putin and Russian propaganda, have a different language and culture than the rest of Ukraine, and for this reason must have a special status, up to and including the formation of an independent state.
- Benderovtsy originally referred to members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, a World War II era nationalist group, headed by Stepan Bandera. The Soviet Union began using this term to paint all Ukrainian nationalists with the same, extremely negative, association. Russian propaganda currently uses the term synonymously with “Nazis” and “fascists.”
- The term zhidobenderovtsy was the invention of Russian propaganda to designate ethnic Jews who support Ukraine in the war with Russia (a salient example is Igor Kolomoisky, billionaire governor of Dnepropetrovsk Oblast). The term is a blatant oxymoron even under the logic of Russian propaganda, as the benderovtsy are by definition Nazis with an inherent hatred of Jews, whom they attempted to eliminate.
- Praviy sektor is a political party and public organization that first appeared as an open movement of activists from radical Ukrainian organizations—mostly with right-wing views — that crystallized at the end of November 2013 during the Euromaidan. According to Russian media, Praviy Sektor, together with the Natsguardiya, is a “punitive” organization that exploits any opportunity to annihilate peaceful Russian-speaking residents and “rebels” fighting for Novorossiia.

Spreading panic

If the tools for creating an alternative reality are the traditional media and Internet resources, the spreading of panic among people living in Ukraine is performed mainly via social media, because the main Russian media in Ukraine are forbidden since they were declared to be in violation of Ukrainian legislation. Panic is associated with two main themes:

- “Ukrainian soldiers were betrayed/are being slain in huge numbers.” Information supporting this thesis has regularly been released since the beginning of military action and follows the same pattern: A soldier from the war zone calls his wife, sister, mother, brother or friend and reports that a group has been abandoned by their commanders without munitions or food and have been surrounded by the enemy for

a long time — many have been killed and no one is doing anything to save them. It would be unjust not to confirm that several such incidents did indeed take place, but the phenomenon has not been as universal as Russian-backed reports attempt to indicate. The next step includes appeals to the mothers and wives of warriors to “collect” them from the war zone, or not allow others to go there, which on several occasions provoked protests that sealed off recruitment centers and blocked roads.

- “Russian troops are going to occupy our area in the coming days.” This topic is popular in eastern and southern areas where separatism is typical for the local population. One version includes messages reporting greater activity by separatists in one town or other, numbering in the thousands and ready at any moment to seize administrative buildings and create another “popular republic.”

The goals of spreading panic are: first, to undermine confidence in the current Ukrainian authorities; second, to reduce the ability for rational thought and boost fatalistic thinking; third, to reinforce tensions between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian residents of Ukraine.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, information war, as a whole, is aimed at building an alternative reality, within which the enduring image of an enemy is formed — an enemy whose qualities and actions deny him the right to be considered human and who, therefore, must be annihilated without mercy or hesitation. Therefore, the strategy behind hybrid war coincides with that of information war, rather than total war. In other words, the goal of military action in a hybrid war is not to capture or hold territory, but chaos, constant fighting and endless provocation by creating engineered military incidents — one more characteristic element of information and hybrid wars. Such incidents are intended exclusively for reproduction by TV cameras — the action often ceases immediately after the news cameras leave while the instigators vanish from the scene, according to a June 2014 article in *Ukrainian Pravda*.

This also means that a hybrid war can never be won if there is no victory in the information war. Ukraine is currently losing this war to Russia, although actions already taken do offer grounds for cautious optimism. Russian TV channels can no longer broadcast in Ukraine, terrorist and separatist websites are blocked, and volunteers are building special sites and social media accounts to debunk disinformation. Such responses are sufficient to minimize the information threat in the short term, if not eliminate it altogether. □