



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

**THE ROLE OF INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN DEALING  
WITH A STRONGER ADVERSARY: AN ANALYSIS  
OF THE PREOCCUPATION OF CRIMEA AND THE  
PREPARATORY PERIODS FOR THE RUSSIAN  
INTERVENTION IN UKRAINE IN 2022**

by

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June 2023

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STRONGER ADVERSARY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PREOCCUPATION OF  
CRIMEA AND THE PREPARATORY PERIODS FOR THE RUSSIAN  
INTERVENTION IN UKRAINE IN 2022**

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## ABSTRACT

Russian active operations in the information environment (OIE) against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, which preceded military interventions, demonstrated the importance of dominating in the information space in 21st-century conflicts. In 2014, to maintain the image of the ruling regime for the domestic audience and to manifest victory, the Kremlin targeted the Crimean Peninsula and the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Lugansk in aggressive Russian operations. The success of the information operations in those regions was significantly conditioned by the public's vulnerability to narratives spread by the Kremlin. In 2022, Russia attempted to achieve its goal using the OIE and massive military strikes in tandem but failed. Comparing the content of the OIEs produced by Russia in 2014 and 2022 and analyzing the results of Russian aggression, this thesis shows that civil unity and the military-political structures' will to fight act in tandem and strengthen each other's resilience. The success of the adversary's operations in the information environment is significantly conditioned by the fragmentation and political polarization of the target society, which contributes to the implementation of the aggressor's military-political tasks. Therefore, this thesis makes recommendations on how to combat an adversary's aggression by strengthening the resilience of the target society through purposeful planning of OIE activities implemented by government and non-governmental institutions.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

|        |                                           |
|--------|-------------------------------------------|
| COE    | Center of Excellence                      |
| EU     | European Union                            |
| FSB    | Federal Security Service                  |
| GEC    | Global Engagement Center                  |
| GRU    | Russian Military Intelligence             |
| IO     | Information Operations                    |
| NATO   | North Atlantic Treaty Organization        |
| OIE    | Operations in the Information Environment |
| PSYOPS | Psychological Operations                  |
| RT     | Russian Television Network                |
| SBU    | Ukrainian Security Service                |
| WVS    | World Values Survey                       |

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, during the Russia-Ukraine war, the resistance shown by Ukrainian society and its armed forces furthered the question of how important morale and the will to fight is.<sup>1</sup> In light of the resistance demonstrated by Ukrainians in the current conflict and Russia's easy occupation of Crimea in 2014, it is particularly important to analyze the impact of enemy operations in the information environment on the outcome of the ensuing military conflict; more specifically, were Russia's ineffective operations in the information space a key contributing factor to the failure of the Russian military operation in 2022?

After the Maidan Revolution in 2014, Russia targeted the Crimean Peninsula and the eastern regions of Ukraine in order to pursue its own geopolitical goals and to save its image as the ruling regime to domestic audiences. The strategic plan of the Russian president was the reunification of Russian territories in order to make Russia great again.<sup>2</sup> To achieve its goal, Russia leveraged technology and much cheaper media tools to conduct information operations for mobilizing the domestic audience as well as for eroding morale in Ukrainian society and sowing panic among the citizens. Prior to and following its seizure of Ukrainian territory in 2014, Russia especially actively used cyber capabilities as a means of supporting information operations to facilitate the smooth delivery of messages from the Russian government to the local population to gain support, cultivate proxy sources, provide social media with the necessary content for propaganda, and spread disinformation among the population.<sup>3</sup> Russian cybercriminals and hacktivists deliberately damaged the image of the pro-Western government of Ukraine to erode the local population's trust in the central government of Ukraine and to present Russia as the only defender of the local

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<sup>1</sup> *Ukraine's Fighting 'Spirit' Plays Major Role in War against Russia*: Richard Kemp, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWrlwBdjMmw>.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Galeotti, *Putin's Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine*, 1st ed. (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Brandon Valeriano, Benjamin M. Jensen, and Ryan C. Maness, *Cyber Strategy: The Evolving Character of Power and Coercion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking Ukrainians from the “Ukrainian fascists.”<sup>4</sup> The dynamics of the events on the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 clearly showed that Russia’s operations in the information environment significantly prepared the ground so that the quick, unexpected, and counted-on deceptive (Маскировка) occupation of Crimea did not cause public resistance.

Soon after the occupation of the eastern regions of Ukraine, it became clear that by its annexation of Crimea Moscow could not declare its “historical mission” accomplished. It could not ensure the image of Putin as a powerful leader in the eyes of the domestic audience for a long time. Despite increased Russian pressure on the Ukrainian government after 2014, the latter country continued to integrate into Western institutions, which Moscow still perceived as an existential threat.<sup>5</sup> It was becoming clear to Russia that the protracted conflict in Ukraine and Putin’s long rule without tangible success were reflected in the sentiments of the Russian people. To prove commitment to its strategic goals and to influence society, Russia began demonstrating military capabilities near the Ukrainian borders in 2021.<sup>6</sup> Russia’s operations against Ukraine were also aimed at placing responsibility on Ukraine and its allies for any further escalation.<sup>7</sup> Along with this, Russian news outlets and social media groups tried to portray Volodymyr Zelensky as an irresponsible politician, an enemy of the Ukrainian people, and a promoter of fascist ideology. Russian efforts sought to exploit cyber capabilities for espionage and sabotage against critical infrastructure and to demoralize military personnel and society.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Leonard, “Russian Propaganda War in Full Swing over Ukraine,” Yahoo News, March 15, 2014, <https://news.yahoo.com/russian-propaganda-war-full-swing-over-ukraine-085411498.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Pifer, “Poroshenko Signs EU-Ukraine Association Agreement,” *Brookings* (blog), June 27, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2014/06/27/poroshenko-signs-eu-ukraine-association-agreement/>.

<sup>6</sup> Reuters, “OFFICIAL Russian Military Build-up near Ukraine Numbers More than 100,000 Troops, EU Says,” Reuters, April 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-military-build-up-near-ukraine-numbers-more-than-150000-troops-eus-2021-04-19/>.

<sup>7</sup> Arsalan Bilal, “Гибридная война: новые угрозы, сложности и «доверие» как антидот [Hybrid warfare: new threats, complexities and ‘trust’ as an antidote],” *NATO Review*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/ru/articles/2021/11/30/gibridnaya-vojna-novye-ugrozy-sloyonosti-i-doverie-kak-antidot/index.html>.

Ukraine has taken important steps to neutralize Russian operations. Ukrainian operations in the information environment countered Russia's covert military actions under the guise of separatists with clear actions. Furthermore, Ukraine made great efforts to show the public that the ongoing processes in Donbas were not acts of self-determination, but rather, the Russian occupation. The non-governmental sector was also involved in the information campaign, which deliberately disseminated information about Russia's subversive activities. Various accounts of the role of Western partners in increasing the combat capability of the Ukrainian army were actively reported in the news.<sup>8</sup> All this increased public trust in the army, which also had a positive effect on the soldiers' will to fight. At the same time, Russia's aggressive actions have contributed to increasing confidence in Western institutions across Ukraine. Surveys conducted at the end of 2021 clearly indicated that Ukrainian society's trust in its own government, armed forces, and Western partners had significantly increased.<sup>9</sup>

As the first phase of the 2022 military intervention showed, Russia's calculations did not pan out for two main reasons, among others. First, Russia's cyber activities, other information-related operations, and military components were not properly coordinated before the intervention. Second, Ukraine was well-prepared for Russian cyberattacks and Kremlin operations in the information environment. Additionally, Ukraine's resistance capabilities were increased by the force support of international institutions.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Russia's operations in the information environment have served several purposes: to increase the level of polarization in Ukrainian society, to prevent the population from uniting, and to promote a sense of insecurity among Ukrainians by generating fear and

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<sup>8</sup> Andrzej Wilk, *The Best Army Ukraine Has Ever Had: Changes in Ukraine's Armed Forces since the Russian Aggression*, Prace OSW = OSW Studies, nr 66 (Warsaw, Poland: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> ZN News, "Большинство Граждан Высказались За Вступление Украины в ЕС и НАТО – Опрос [Majority of Citizens Voted for Ukraine's Accession to the EU and NATO – Poll]," *Дзеркало тижня* [Mirror Weekly], December 21, 2020, <https://zn.ua/POLITICS/bolshinstvo-hrazhdan-vyskazalis-za-vstuplenie-ukrainy-v-es-i-nato-opros.html>.

chaos. These operations were also intended to lead to a disconnection between the citizens and the authorities and make the public believe that the Western partners did not have the ability and desire to protect the Ukrainian people. In 2014, Moscow's deliberate actions yielded positive results in preparing the ground for the occupation of Crimea. The sense of national identity among the population of the Crimean Peninsula was damaged by the low level of integration within society, leaving it vulnerable to Russian propaganda.

After 2014, the conflict in eastern Ukraine contributed to the strengthening of anti-Russian sentiments among Ukrainian citizens. The growing threat of military aggression also intensified anti-Russian grievances. This was facilitated by the deliberate actions of the Ukrainian government which had given hope to the population. The intransigence of military personnel and political leadership against Russian plans also had a positive effect on the psychological resilience of Ukrainians and helped to strengthen the sense of national identity.

Following the example of the developments in Ukraine, we can conclude:

- Monitoring the adversary's stories, narratives, and activities aimed at damaging the unity of the society is important to maintain and strengthen the psychological resilience of the population.
- Neutralizing the adversary's aggressive information campaign, resisting cyber operations, exposing the enemy's hostile planning, and promoting motivational narratives imbued with the spirit of patriotism have a significant impact on public sentiment.
- Correctly conveying information about the reforms implemented by the government to the public is as important as the reforms themselves. It significantly raises positive sentiments in society and increases support for democratic governments.
- Demonstrating the will to fight, the army and the government increase the psychological resilience of society, which, in turn, has a positive influence on the fighting ability of the armed forces.

- Gaining external support from partners and increasing the degree of mutual compatibility are important factors in building the country's resistance capability. Sharing the experience of international partners and their involvement in dealing with enemy operations in an information environment helps to improve local capabilities and increases the public's confidence in partners.
- Maintaining constant communication with ethnic minorities and facilitating their integration in society is important so that these groups can associate themselves with state institutions and government.
- Managing the strategic communication system effectively with the participation of both the state and the non-governmental sector contributes to the unification of society around the idea of the state.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In an interview about the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, a former British commander, Richard Kemp, said that the morale of Ukrainians to fight plays a major part in the war. According to him, “You may have all kinds of equipment, but without a fighting spirit you cannot deal with the enemy.”<sup>1</sup> In keeping with his view, the formation of the fighting spirit and resilience in society should be facilitated by information narratives accessible to society. The occupation of Crimea and eastern parts of Luhansk and Donetsk in 2014 once again demonstrated the importance of information warfare in achieving military-political goals.<sup>2</sup> Along with this, the Russia-Ukraine war which began in 2022 has even more actively brought back to the agenda the importance of society’s psychological capabilities in achieving military success. The history of armed conflicts clearly shows that for dealing with an adversary and waging a successful war, it is essential to create a resilience system consisting of many components, from the political system to military capabilities.<sup>3</sup> In terms of strengthening a country’s military resistance, the psychological resilience of the society is also crucial.<sup>4</sup> Dealing with the enemy requires a successful combination of two critical elements, a military unit’s capabilities and willingness to fight and a nation’s will to fight.<sup>5</sup>

The main question that this thesis seeks to answer is: How important is it to deal with influence operations in the information space to deter the aggression of a much stronger opponent? The aforementioned question can be answered if the research can determine

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<sup>1</sup> SkyNews Australia, “Ukraine’s Fighting ‘Spirit’ Plays Major Role in War against Russia: Richard Kemp,” video, 9:12, YouTube, accessed 2023, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWrIwBdjMmw>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia’s Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1498.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1498.html).

<sup>3</sup> Wolf-Diether Roepke and Hasit Thankey, “Resilience: The First Line of Defence,” *NATO Review*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/02/27/resilience-the-first-line-of-defence/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Shannon Houck, “Psychological Capabilities for Resilience,” War on the Rocks, December 27, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/12/psychological-capabilities-for-resilience/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Connable, Michael J. McNerney, William Marcellino, Aaron B. Frank, Henry Hargrove, Marek N. Posard, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Natasha Lander, Jasen J. Castillo, James Sladden et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB10040.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10040.html).

whether Russia's ineffective operations in the information space were a key contributing factor to the failure of the Russian military operation in 2022. The impetus for this thesis is to demonstrate, using Ukraine as an example, the importance of the population's psychological resilience in terms of military resistance to the aggression of a hostile state that is much stronger militarily in modern warfare. The research also aims to demonstrate the significance of operations carried out in the information space to gain the support of the population. In short, the research seeks to identify what factors contributed to the success or failure of the parties in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

The Russian-Ukrainian relationship predates 2014 and has a long history of military conflicts and confrontations in the information environment and cyberspace.<sup>6</sup> During the last decades, Russia has implemented a deliberate policy to reach its strategic goals: specifically, to restore Moscow's influence over the countries of the former Soviet Union, starting with Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> Following the color revolutions in Georgia (2003), in Ukraine (2004), and in Kyrgyzstan (2005), Russia's fear of losing its "spheres of influence" and the approach of the European Union and NATO to its borders grew even stronger.<sup>8</sup> Russia's aspirations to return the countries of the former Soviet Union to its orbit were reflected in different strategic and conceptual documents such as the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine, Russia's Military-Naval Policy Strategy, Russia's National Security Strategy, and the Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation.<sup>9</sup> To that end, the Kremlin deliberately uses a wide range of hybrid warfare operations. According to Jeffrey Mankoff, "Hybrid warfare entails an interplay or fusion of conventional as well as unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion. These instruments or tools are blended in a synchronized manner to exploit the

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russia's War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-war-ukraine-identity-history-and-conflict>.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Rumer, "Putin's Long War," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 9, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/12/09/putin-s-long-war-pub-88602>.

<sup>8</sup> Jayson M. Warren, "Review of *Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace*, by Oscar Jonsson," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2021): 138–40.

<sup>9</sup> Valery Gerasimov, "Ценность Науки в Предвидении [The Value of Science in Foresight]," *Военно-Промышленный Курьер [Military Industrial Courier]*, VPK News, February 27, 2013, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

vulnerabilities of an antagonist and achieve synergistic effects.”<sup>10</sup> With such an approach, Russia tries to create the desired preconditions for realizing its strategic goals:

1. Moscow seeks to erode cooperation formats and international institutions based on a Western liberal agenda to prevent the formation of a consolidated policy against the Kremlin.
2. It intimidates the population of the target countries, promotes political polarization in the society, and creates the informational narrative necessary to incite pro-Russian sentiments on the ground.
3. If a pro-Russian political agenda cannot be formed in the target country with elements of soft power, then the Kremlin seeks to occupy neighboring countries or territories at the lowest possible military-political cost.
4. The Kremlin’s military-political activities also aim to consolidate Russian citizens around the authoritarian regime.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has repeatedly used a wide range of hybrid warfare tools against its neighbors to occupy their territories or change their pro-Western governments. In the case of Ukraine, in 2014, the Kremlin carried out a successful operation and annexed significant territories in a short period. In 2022, its plan mostly failed, and Russia was unable to carry out a successful military offensive operation with a blitzkrieg.<sup>11</sup> Observing Russia’s influential operations in the information environment before the 2014 occupation and before the 2022 invasion seems helpful in analyzing the Kremlin’s strengths in this regard. It is also critical to understand the principles of the Russian military-political machine operating in the information environment during the active phase of offensive actions to prepare the ground for the military invasion. To formulate conclusions based on such information, it is crucial to understand the specificity of operations carried out

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<sup>10</sup> Arsalan Bilal, “Hybrid Warfare – New Threats, Complexity, and ‘Trust’ as the Antidote,” *NATO Review*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/11/30/hybrid-warfare-new-threats-complexity-and-trust-as-the-antidote/index.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Seth G. Jones, *Russia’s Ill-Fated Invasion of Ukraine: Lessons in Modern Warfare* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-ill-fated-invasion-ukraine-lessons-modern-warfare>.

by Russia within the political and psychological warfare operations against Ukraine. At the same time, understanding the power and form with which Russia uses cyber activities to achieve success and have the desired effect on the target audience is also essential. Analyzing the nature and outcomes of Russia's military-political actions in the run-up to the two events mentioned above can serve as a prerequisite for reaching critical conclusions—identifying the strengths and weaknesses of Russia's hybrid strategy to develop the necessary tools for small nations to deal with it.

The observation of Ukraine's countermeasures carried out in the information space against Russia's activities should be productive in determining what tools can be used to successfully confront the aggressor country. The resistance of Ukrainian military units prevented the achievement of Russia's military-political goal in 2022.<sup>12</sup> However, it is clear that the Ukrainian military and the country's government received widespread civilian support. The continuous flow of Ukrainian volunteers going to war indicates that this support has not waned even after Russia invaded Ukraine and massive ground and air strikes have killed thousands of civilians. This kind of behavior indicates the psychological readiness of the Ukrainian people to fight against the enemy—the Russian military machine. This psychological readiness could be largely determined by several factors, including the correct information delivered to the public about Russia's hostile intentions and also about the successful reforms implemented by the Ukrainian side.<sup>13</sup> It is essential to analyze what measures Ukraine has taken to counter Russian operations in the information field before the 2014 annexation and before the 2022 invasion and how much these measures have affected the development of resilience in Ukraine; what was the impact of the measures taken by the Ukrainian government in terms of creating populace cohesion? Such an approach allows us to analyze how the Kremlin achieves success in its relations with neighboring countries, what calculations its strategy is based on, and what key tools it uses to achieve its goals.

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<sup>12</sup> Louis-Alexandre Berg and Andrew Radin, "The Ukrainian Military Has Defied Expectations. Here Is How U.S. Security Aid Contributed," *RAND* (blog), March 29, 2022, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/03/the-ukrainian-military-has-defied-expectations-here.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Arda Mevlutoglu, "Ukraine's Military Transformation between 2014 and 2022," *Politics Today*, April 7, 2022, <https://politicstoday.org/ukraine-military-transformation/>.

To describe the significance of Russia's activities in the information environment, it is essential to review conceptual approaches created by Russian special units at different times, such as the "Russian world," "Compatriots abroad," "Orthodox Christian world," and others.<sup>14</sup> Russia has actively used these concepts for decades to indoctrinate the domestic audience, as well as to carry out psychological operations (PSYOPS). According to the Doctrine for Joint Psychological Operations, PSYOPS are "planned to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals" against the population of the former Soviet Union countries, to falsify history, and wage political warfare.<sup>15</sup> Such an approach will contribute to concluding to what extent the activities of the Kremlin in the information environment as a preparatory part of the military intervention determine Russia's military success. Such an approach allows for a summary of the findings in two important directions: 1) What Russia did in 2022 in contrast to 2014 in terms of planning operations in the information environment and in their execution. 2) What Ukraine did before the 2022 invasion in contrast to 2014 to strengthen the citizens' unity and gain popular support. The information gathered as a result of the mentioned conclusions is essential for preparing assessments for developing recommendations for small nations on how it is possible to successfully create resilience against Russia's aggression in the information environment.

Before going into the details of Russia's information operations (IO) in 2014 and 2022, it is crucial to understand the Kremlin's goals and the reasoning behind its choices. This is made possible by the knowledge that has been amassed in academic literature, which offers a crucial key to the interpretation of Moscow's strategic objectives and tactical operations.

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<sup>14</sup> Delia Gallagher, "In Putin's Vision for the World, a Medieval Narrative Resurfaces," CNN, March 14, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/14/europe/patriarch-kirill-putin-spiritual-battle-intl-cmd/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for Joint Psychological Operations*, Joint Pub 3-53 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs Of Staff, 2003), [http://www.information-retrieval.info/docs/jp3\\_53.pdf](http://www.information-retrieval.info/docs/jp3_53.pdf).

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## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. INTRODUCTION

Russia presents an existential threat to its neighboring small nations and will continue to do so whether or not it succeeds in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Russia views the democratization of Ukraine and other former Soviet nations as an existential threat to its regime.<sup>16</sup> It does not welcome their aspirations to Western institutions, rising prosperity, and reforms based on liberal-democratic principles. The Kremlin has unresolved and opposing views on the security order of Europe, which could become a source of many conflicts in the future, both in relation to neighboring countries and Western powers.<sup>17</sup>

In order to correctly assess the threat from Moscow, it is crucial to understand the Russian Federation's strategic goals and study the tools of information warfare that the Kremlin uses to undermine the statehood of other countries. The actions taken by the Kremlin during the 2014 occupation and before the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war provide a good opportunity for this.

### B. CURRENT LITERATURE

Russia is trying to achieve its strategic goals with minimal political, economic, and military costs and thus effectively uses a wide range of elements of hybrid warfare. "Hybrid threats combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups, and use of regular forces. Hybrid methods are used to blur the lines between war and peace and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations."<sup>18</sup> An important component of hybrid warfare is operational capabilities in the information environment, which is one of the most

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<sup>16</sup> Stanford University, "Putin Sees Ukrainian Democracy as Threat That Undermines Russia's Mission," *Stanford News* (blog), March 2, 2022, <https://news.stanford.edu/2022/03/02/putin-sees-ukrainian-democracy-threat-undermines-russias-mission/>.

<sup>17</sup> Cyrus Newlin and Andrew Lohsen, "Russia Futures: Three Trajectories," CSIS, May 4, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-futures-three-trajectories>.

<sup>18</sup> NATO, "NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats," NATO, March 4, 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_156338.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm).

dangerous weapons in Russia's hands. The purpose of operations in the information environment is to obtain tactical and strategic level data about the enemy's plans. In addition, such operations aim to spread propaganda messages to influence the target audience.<sup>19</sup> The Russian secret services have a long history of gathering enemy information through various means and then using it for their own objectives, which began even under the Soviet Union, and significant resources were spent on their advancement.<sup>20</sup>

Ukraine has always been an important place for Russia, as it is where the Russian people came from historically. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the withdrawal of Ukraine from the Russian orbit was not considered a serious threat by the Kremlin. However, the situation changed significantly after the so-called Orange Revolution in 2005. Later, the collapse of President Yanukovich's regime in 2014 became a source of considerable alarm for Russia. Vladimir Putin believed that in the eyes of the Russian people, Crimea has always been a Russian land that was mistakenly transferred to Ukraine during the Soviet Union. In the wake of believing in such ideas, the strategic plan of the Russian president was the reunification of Russian territories in order to make Russia great again in the eyes of the Russian people.<sup>21</sup>

After the color revolutions, Russia's rhetoric and actions changed significantly. President Putin's speech at the Munich Conference in 2007 was an important underscoring of the Kremlin's assertiveness. Putin openly stated that American unilateralism was unacceptable and that Russia would not allow its interests to be pushed to the background. Russia considered color revolutions damaging to its interests and actively continued strong military-political actions until 2019. Confrontation with the United States softened slightly after the 2008 war with Georgia during Medvedev's presidency. Over the years, Russia has significantly deepened its ties with Western European countries, which the Kremlin used to

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<sup>19</sup> RAND, "Information Operations," RAND, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/topics/information-operations.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Olga Oliker, "Russia's New Military Doctrine: Same as the Old Doctrine, Mostly," *RAND* (blog), January 15, 2015, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2015/01/russias-new-military-doctrine-same-as-the-old-doctrine.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Galeotti, *Putin's Wars*.

prepare the ground for achieving its own goals in the neighborhood.<sup>22</sup> It should also be noted here that the Russian president also accused the White House of interfering in the country's internal affairs. According to Putin, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's statements in 2011 that the Russian parliamentary elections were undemocratic and unfair represented direct support for anti-government protests in Russia.<sup>23</sup>

The purpose of Russia's strategic documents, among other tasks, is to state that country's readiness to engage in any conflict, which at the same time has both a deterrent and coercive function. According to the typology of conflicts developed by Russia, Moscow's main challenge is local, regional, and large-scale wars, and the content of Russia's actions corresponds to each. According to Russian military-political documents, to achieve its goals, Russia is ready to act according to the call, to use both defensive and offensive potential, which also includes offensive cyber operations, or, as the Russian military refers to them, weapons based on novel physical principles.<sup>24</sup>

Modern technological capabilities have improved Russian information operations. Russia has had good results using the Netwar method against various societies and states. Netwar is directed against an adversary's awareness and accumulated knowledge and aims to manipulate the target audience's knowledge, falsify facts, and offer a desired alternative narrative.<sup>25</sup> Russia has leveraged the advantage of technology and much cheaper media tools to conduct information operations over the past decades. Russia's modus operandi in the modern era includes leveraging the Internet, social networks, social media, professional journalists, amateur bloggers, social groups, and also pro-Russian politicians.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, Moscow views social media as a tool of asymmetric warfare. It is a cheap and effective

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<sup>22</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, Sixth (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Michael Crowley and Julia Ioffe, "Why Putin Hates Hillary," POLITICO, July 25, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/clinton-putin-226153>.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Kofman and Anya L. Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy," War on the Rocks, June 23, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, "Cyberwar Is Coming!" (RAND Corporation, January 1, 1993), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP223.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, July 11, 2016), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.

tool for mobilizing the domestic audience as well as for eroding the society of Western countries and sowing panic among the citizens. Prior to and following its seizure of Ukrainian territory in 2014, Russia especially actively used social media, both against Ukrainian society and to create the desired effect for the Kremlin in European countries.<sup>27</sup>

To achieve its goals, Russia adapts various concepts in the information environment, such as “Compatriots Abroad,” the “idea of Great Russia,” and the “Russian World,” among others. Through these concepts, Russia tries to implement its military-political plans smoothly. These narratives should contribute to the emergence of protest in the minds of the citizens of the former Soviet Union due to the significant difference between Russia’s imagined and real geographical borders.<sup>28</sup>

The nature of the Kremlin’s efforts against Ukraine in 2014 shows that information operations are Russia’s most effective tool for carrying out its plan to conquer the territory of its neighbors. Through it, the Kremlin demoralizes the audience of the target country, divides society, and spreads an anti-Western and pro-Russian narrative to exhaust political and public institutions. Russia’s modus operandi first leverages soft power as a coercive tool to extract concessions. When Russia is unsuccessful, it uses military force to invade the weaker nations. Along with social networks, public groups, and pro-Russian media, Russia also successfully used cyberattacks to expand this in the 2014 intervention. Russia has used cyberattacks against Ukraine to achieve several goals, including Disruption (taking down websites, disrupting online activities, usually low cost, low pain incidents such as vandalism or DDoS techniques) and Short-term espionage (gaining access that enables a state to leverage critical information for an immediate advantage).<sup>29</sup>

Russia is not an advanced country in terms of cyber capabilities, but it is one of the most dangerous players. The threat from Russia is due to the fact that the Russian special

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<sup>27</sup> Elina Treyger, Joe Cheravitch, and Raphael S. Cohen, *Russian Disinformation Efforts on Social Media* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, June 7, 2022), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4373z2.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z2.html).

<sup>28</sup> Igor Zevelev, “The Russian World in Moscow’s Strategy,” CSIS, August 22, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-world-moscows-strategy>.

<sup>29</sup> Ryan C. Maness et al., *Codebook for the Dyadic Cyber Incident and Campaign Dataset (DCID)*, Version 2.0, 2022.

services actively use cyber criminals to achieve their own goals.<sup>30</sup> Russian cyber activities are an auxiliary means of total political war, the purpose of which is to sow uncertainty in the target society, provoke chaos, and, as a result, exert maximum influence on the political elites of different countries.<sup>31</sup>

### C. WHAT IS THE GAP?

There is a lot of information in the literature about Russian operations in the information environment. Additionally, the academic press and scientific journals go into great depth on the subject of Russian communication operations during the occupation of Ukrainian territories in 2014. Also, enough information has already been accumulated about the actions taken by Russia in the period before the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war, both directly against Ukraine and against the unity of its partners and allies. Due to the fact that the Russia-Ukraine war is a relatively new event and not much time has passed since its beginning, the scientific analysis of the Kremlin's actions in the information environment during the mentioned period is less available. Therefore, no comparative analysis is available on the information operations carried out by Russia in 2014 and in the pre-war period of 2022. Such an analysis would help us see whether the operations carried out in the information environment played an important role in Russia's successful occupation of Crimea in 2014 and what similar circumstances prevented the rapid realization of the Kremlin's goals towards Ukraine in 2022. The preconditions for why Russia did not succeed in 2022 can be both—components of an information operation conducted with less credibility by Russia and countermeasures taken by the Ukrainian authorities, which increased Ukraine's resilience against the spectrum of Moscow's information operations.

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<sup>30</sup> Nadiya Kostyuk and Erik Gartzke, "Why Cyber Dogs Have Yet to Bark Loudly in Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 5 (Summer 2022): 113–26.

<sup>31</sup> Brandon Valeriano, Benjamin Jensen, and Ryan C. Maness, *Cyber Strategy: The Evolving Character of Power and Coercion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

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### III. BACKGROUND

#### A. RUSSIA'S ASPIRATIONS TOWARD FORMER SOVIET COUNTRIES

Russia's diplomacy has always been a "muscle demonstration" policy aimed at creating uncertainty in the adversary's ranks, provoking a rift in the allies, and then demanding the maximum.<sup>32</sup> In such a situation, the Kremlin consistently tries to take not as much as it needs but as much as opponents will give. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's maximalist policy has considered its goal to contain Western influence beyond the former Soviet Union borders. For Russia, this has meant regaining control over former Soviet countries as a deterrent against Western incursion in this space.<sup>33</sup> In other words, this policy is aimed at complete domination over these countries. To achieve this goal, Moscow has tried to increase its military-political influence in the border regions. In target countries, the sense of insecurity and the emergence of public distrust of their governments is fertile ground that allows Russia to successfully implement its objectives.<sup>34</sup> To achieve this, the Kremlin is taking various steps, including the using the levers of foreign policy pressure, various conflicts, military force, and a powerful tool—Kremlin propaganda.<sup>35</sup> The Kremlin attempts to structurally damage the statehood of target countries and thus hinder their integration process with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Of course, Ukraine has all along been Russia's number one target. In the Russian perception, Ukraine, as a Slavic country originating from Kyivan Rus, should share all political fortunes with Russia and is expected to never go against the interests of its "big brother," even if these interests mean the

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<sup>32</sup> Time News, "Waking the Bear: The Goals and Aspirations Behind Putin's Steps," Time News, February 18, 2022, <https://time.news/waking-the-bear-the-goals-and-aspirations-behind-putins-steps/>.

<sup>33</sup> Rumer, "Putin's Long War."

<sup>34</sup> John Arquilla et al., *Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper* (Boston, MA: NSI, Inc., 2019), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/1080>.

<sup>35</sup> Maksym Skrypchenko, "Russia's New Foreign Policy Looks Old and Soviet," *Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2023, sec. Opinion, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-new-foreign-policy-looks-old-and-soviet-putin-strategy-western-hostilities-china-india-detente-95d996a3>.

destruction of Ukraine's statehood and being under the influence of the Kremlin.<sup>36</sup> Russia's similar efforts emanate from many factors. Paramount among them is that the success of Ukraine as an independent state without Russia means the disappearance of the idea on which the power of "Derzhava" stands for the Russian political elites.<sup>37</sup> Moscow has constantly tried to return the country to its orbit by various means, by bribing Ukrainian political elites, organizing internal disturbances, or even through direct military intervention.

Russia's military-political moves towards Ukraine and other countries of the former Soviet Union have historically been aimed at demonstrating that the Kremlin perceives their territory as its own operational space and will not tolerate the growing influence of alternative forces in these theatres. Vladimir Putin reaffirmed this ambition in his February 2022 address to the Russian people.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Moscow believes that the political and economic successes of the former Soviet countries increase mistrust of Russia's authoritarian regime domestically, as those democratic successes can serve as an example to the Russian people that a better life is possible. Open debate on the causes of Russia's severe socio-economic problems presents a great threat to the country's ruling regime, which is why Moscow has feared democratic processes in neighboring countries, too.<sup>39</sup> The Russian authorities, therefore, see the success of democracy in the neighborhood as a prerequisite for domestic political and social destabilization. That is why the Kremlin is afraid of so-called color revolutions, democratic shifts, and pro-Western courses in the former Soviet countries.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mankoff, *Russia's War in Ukraine*.

<sup>37</sup> Melissa De Vitte, "Putin Sees Ukrainian Democracy as Threat That Undermines Russia's Mission," Stanford News, March 2, 2022, <https://news.stanford.edu/2022/03/02/putin-sees-ukrainian-democracy-threat-undermines-russias-mission/>.

<sup>38</sup> Interfax News, "Обращение Владимира Путина к россиянам в связи с ситуацией на Донбассе. Текст [Vladimir Putin's address to the Russians in connection with the situation in the Donbass.]," Interfax, February 21, 2022, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/823522>.

<sup>39</sup> Michael John Williams, "How Putin's Fear of Democracy Convinced Him to Invade Ukraine," *Atlantic Council* (blog), March 6, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-putins-fear-of-democracy-convinced-him-to-invade-ukraine/>.

<sup>40</sup> Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvr697c8>.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin has been actively using a wide range of hybrid means of warfare to regain and strengthen political influence over post-Soviet space.<sup>41</sup> Since the 2000s, when Russia was able to overcome economic problems and international isolation following the Cold War, the Kremlin's activities have become particularly aggressive and purposeful. President Vladimir Putin's goal was to restore the country's great power status and deepen its influence in target theaters.<sup>42</sup> For this purpose, Moscow actively supports pro-Russian social and political groups in various countries to achieve its goal. For example, such a political force in Ukraine is "Opozytsiyna Platforma—Za Zhyttia" (Opposition Platform—for Life), which was the strongest pro-Russian political force in the country before the 2022 military intervention.<sup>43</sup> Also, The Russian Center for Science and Culture was actively operating in Kyiv until 2021, funded by the Russian "Fund for the Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad."<sup>44</sup> These groups contribute to the spread of the Russian propaganda narrative and cause divisions in society, attempting to create attitudes in line with the Kremlin's interests locally and influencing the countries' foreign policy. Anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives are systematically disseminated through the traditional media and the Internet, through the views of NGOs, politicians, and experts. The spread of these messages aims to demonize the West and discredit the values of liberal democracy while portraying Russia as a defender of traditional values.<sup>45</sup> Creating such a narrative aims to strengthen the influence of the Russian nationalist idea both within the country and in the post-Soviet countries. The Kremlin, among other tools, successfully uses the Russian Orthodox Church

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<sup>41</sup> Bilal, "Hybrid Warfare – New Threats, Complexity, and 'Trust' as the Antidote."

<sup>42</sup> Дмитрий Тренин [Dmitry Trenin], "20 лет Владимира Путина: трансформация внешней политики [20 years of Vladimir Putin: the transformation of foreign policy]," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 14, 2019, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2019/08/14/ru-pub-79670>.

<sup>43</sup> Ukraine Crisis Media Center, "The Changing Face of Pro-Russian Political Forces in Ukraine," Ukraine Crisis Media Center, July 9, 2021, <https://uacrisis.org/en/changing-face-pro-russian-forces>.

<sup>44</sup> Russian Fund for the Protection and Support of Compatriots Abroad, "Российский Центр Науки и Культуры в Киеве Будет Закрыт [The Russian Center for Science and Culture in Kyiv Will Be Closed]," Prav Fond, August 4, 2021, <https://www.pravfond.ru/press-tsentr/rossiyskiy-tsentr-nauki-i-kultury-v-kieve-budet-zakryt/>.

<sup>45</sup> Алексей Никольский [Alexey Nikolsky], "Путин: Россия всегда будет защищать традиционные ценности Новости [Putin: Russia will always defend traditional values]," Газета, April 21, 2021, [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2021/04/21/n\\_15888164.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2021/04/21/n_15888164.shtml).

to achieve this goal. At the same time, the Russian propaganda machine tries to contrast Russian nationalism and Western liberal values in an all-good versus all-bad context. Simultaneously, Russia's policy of constant force demonstrations and aggressive information strategy aims to portray the situation in such a way that Western institutions are powerless to protect former Soviet countries, and their sovereignty is completely dependent on the Kremlin's goodwill.

Through such hybrid warfare, the Russian government aims to create a rift in society, overthrow pro-Western governments, create a precondition for war, or annex territories.<sup>46</sup> The Russian propaganda narrative, among many others, includes calling for the protection of Russian-speaking population, promoting the status of the Russian language, provoking ethnic and religious tensions, and speculating about occupied territories. An important component of Russian propaganda is an active attempt to rewrite history. To strengthen the image of modern Russia (to falsify the real image), Moscow is systematically attempting to portray the Soviet occupation as an act of liberation from Nazism. To successfully disseminate such narratives, Russian special services use Netwar's method, which "refers to information-related conflict at a grand level ... trying to damage or modify what a target population knows."<sup>47</sup> It is noteworthy that the same tools were actively used by Russia even back in Soviet times, with the aim of not only obtaining information but also falsifying information about the adversary and creating an alternative narrative. Russia is still actively using this approach to falsify history and reduce resistance to the Kremlin in neighboring countries.

Russia uses a well-planned and orchestrated PSYOP campaign to deliver specific narratives to a foreign audience. Russian propaganda carries out information-psychological operations using a variety of methods, including questioning/denying proven facts and disseminating alternative versions of specific events to confuse the audience. The message of Russian propaganda is simple and easy to understand, while pro-Kremlin views and

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<sup>46</sup> Christopher S. Chivvis, *Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare": And What Can Be Done About It* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT468.html>.

<sup>47</sup> John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *Cyberwar Is Coming!* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1993), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP223.html>.

assumptions are presented as facts. The orchestrated actions of the Russian propaganda machine aim to provide people with alternative information from their memory as real facts and, at the same time, change their way of thinking; to reformulate and influence individual and group views and behaviors in favor of Russia's tactical or strategic goals. In this process, the human mind becomes a battlefield, and victory on this battlefield allows the aggressor to hide many military-political shortcomings.<sup>48</sup> In other cases, the weaknesses of the superpowers like Russia become apparent during the very first major military operations.

Russia has made significant investments over the past two decades to bolster its propaganda machine. During Vladimir Putin's presidency, substantial financial resources were spent to spread the Russian narrative inside and outside Russia. Such moves aimed to strengthen the soft power instruments, including increasing the influence of state-owned and government-loyal TV channels and other sources of information. In addition, during the Vladimir Putin's presidency, the number of local and international institutes, research centers, and socio-cultural organizations financed by the Kremlin and the scale of their work has increased significantly.<sup>49</sup> With such diverse and quite influential levers, Putin's regime, over time, has become increasingly bolder in carrying out foreign policy tasks.

It should be noted here that Russia's activity in cyberspace has also increased significantly over the past two decades, allowing Russian special services to gain access to important information and influence political processes. Russia has never been a technologically strong cyber state but has always successfully used its cyber capabilities to support psychological, political, and kinetic warfare. Russia actively uses cyber resources to blackmail its adversary and sow chaos in the target society.<sup>50</sup> To this end, Russian cyber organizations, pro-Russian cyber activists, and hacktivists launch attacks on the energy and

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<sup>48</sup> Kathy Cao et al., "Countering Cognitive Warfare: Awareness and Resilience," *NATO Review*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/05/20/countering-cognitive-warfare-awareness-and-resilience/index.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Michael McFaul, "How to Contain Putin's Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-01-19/how-contain-putins-russia>.

<sup>50</sup> Valeriano Brandon and Ryan C. Maness, *Cyber War versus Cyber Realities: Cyber Conflict in the International System* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2015).

banking sectors to instill fear and panic in target audiences, providing additional leverage to pressure national governments.

To ensure the success of its strategy toward former Soviet Union countries, the Kremlin has constantly embraced various concepts. For example, “Compatriots Abroad” and “Russian World” are two concepts that formed the basis of the relevant narratives of the Russian Grand Strategy.<sup>51</sup> These concepts have been actively used to carry out both Russian information and military-political tasks, which the Kremlin has been actively and purposefully pursuing for the past decades. The two concepts have different origins and histories. Still, they have one primary unifying motive: both concepts reflect the conflict between the political boundaries of the Russian Federation and the “Mental Map” that has developed over the years (including through the deliberate work of Russian special services and propaganda) in the minds of “citizens of the Soviet Union” living inside and outside of Russia, who find their identity in connection with “Mother Russia.”<sup>52</sup>

Given these favorable circumstances, Russia has pursued a similar information strategy to both its domestic audience and the countries over which it has sought to regain influence since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin has always aimed to mobilize an internal audience around the “Great Russian idea,” for which every Russian citizen must sacrifice his or her well-being and political freedom. In countries the Kremlin sees as within its sphere of influence, Moscow’s strategy has always been to “ideologically manipulate society” in order to restore influence in those countries with political cost and, if necessary, by using military forces.

## **B. RUSSIA’S DOCTRINAL POLICY OF INFLUENCE**

Russia’s attempts to reduce Western influence and expand Kremlin power in the territory of the former member states of the Soviet Union have been reflected in various

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<sup>51</sup> Igor Zevelev, “The Russian World in Moscow’s Strategy,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, August 22, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-world-moscows-strategy>.

<sup>52</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many people who considered themselves part of the Russian world (mainly on the basis of ethnicity or even mental association) found themselves on the territory of newly formed independent states and became citizens of those countries accordingly.

official policy documents and doctrines.<sup>53</sup> Russia, through different agencies, deliberately pursued its policy so that it would be possible to restore influence over the newly liberated Soviet-independent countries as quickly and efficiently as possible. The Russian state propaganda machine attempted to carefully plan how to use the tools at its disposal to carry out successful operations on the opposing country's audience. In Russia, such mechanisms include socio-cultural organizations, companies, non-governmental organizations, and media outlets, as well as formal state structures and agencies. Their survival is entirely contingent on their loyalty to the regime and completion of the given responsibilities. Strategic narratives are written in Russian state documents, and the orchestrated action of representatives from diverse professions facilitates their release. Such a document is the *Concept of Foreign Policy of The Russian Federation*, in which Russia's position on global and regional powers was described in 2008.<sup>54</sup> Moscow's foreign policy positioning is also expressed in the *Foreign Policy Review* (2007) and the *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation* (2009).<sup>55</sup> According to the mentioned concepts, Russia's concern was to occupy strong and authoritative positions in the global community. State documents underline Russia's role as one of the world's most significant centers, which is an important component of the strategic narrative addressed at the people of Russia and former Soviet countries. As expressed in strategic documents, one of the key goals of Russia's foreign policy course is to support the deepening of the comprehensive agreement developed in Russian society on the central issues of the country's foreign policy.

The Kremlin's military-political moves are based on the hybrid warfare theory that has evolved over the decades, to which Russian military theorists have made significant contributions.<sup>56</sup> The specifics of Russian hybrid war and its objectives at the strategic level

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<sup>53</sup> Russia's National Security Strategy; Russia's naval policy strategy; Information Security Doctrine.

<sup>54</sup> Kremlin, "Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации [The concept of foreign policy of the Russian Federation]," Президент России [President of Russia], July 23, 2008, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/785>.

<sup>55</sup> Kremlin, "Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации до 2020 года [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020]," Президент России, April 21, 2023, <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/424>.

<sup>56</sup> Chivvis, *Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare."*

are well explained in the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine, which is a several-page paper by Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of Russia. Gerasimov's work "The Value of Science Is in Foresight" was published one year before the occupation of Crimea in the industry weekly *Military-Industrial Courier*; it also describes the tactical principles of the implementation of strategic goals through hybrid warfare methods. In his work, Gerasimov combined Soviet tactics with the strategic military idea of total war and outlined a new theory of modern warfare. General Gerasimov's article discussed the events of the Arab Spring and concluded that military force will be used secretly in the "new generation war" without an official declaration. According to the Russian general, "The rules of war have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has increased; in many cases, it significantly exceeds even the force of arms in terms of effectiveness. [...] All this is complemented by covert military measures."<sup>57</sup>

This article is an interesting explanation of Russia's strategy and the Kremlin's vision of total war, in which politics and military confrontation are in the same range of action, both philosophically and practically. This approach is applied on all fronts involving various players and means such as cyber criminals, information providers, business, and of course, disinformation, in addition to conventional and asymmetric warfare actors.

Implementing this strategy using social media and mass media has become even more accessible and successful in the modern world. According to the Gerasimov Doctrine, non-military techniques are not an afterthought to the use of force, but rather an expedient approach to prevail. In fact, use of hybrid instruments represents a real war. Injecting uncertainty into the society of the target country contributes to the realization of strategic military-political objectives, as it creates panic among the citizens. In such a situation, it becomes difficult to distinguish the correct information from the noise. It can be said that the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine is an attempt to formalize the multi-decade actions of the Russian special services. It describes the characteristics of the "new generation [of] war"

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<sup>57</sup> Gerasimov, "Ценность Науки в Предвидении [The Value of Science in Foresight]."

that Russia later used in 2014 against people living in Crimea and the creation of hotbeds of destabilization in the Donetsk and Luhansk.<sup>58</sup>

According to the doctrine, the “new generation war” has the following characteristics:

1. Military action begins in peacetime, i.e., no war has been officially declared; instead of large-scale military operations, the conflict is characterized by small-scale, local clashes.
2. If hostilities break out, special forces and armed civilians are used.
3. The battle takes place, not in three but four dimensions: on land, in the air, at sea, and in the information field.

Thus, much of the Russian theory of “hybrid war” is devoted to activity in the information space, which is one of the main tools of the “new generation war.” The hybrid character of this war also implies political subversion, proxy sanctuary, intervention, coercive deterrence, and negotiated manipulation.<sup>59</sup>

Particular attention to the Russian theory of hybrid warfare focuses on the preparatory phase, which includes the following activities: identification of vulnerable areas of the target country; formation of a pro-Russian network, i.e., individuals and organizations loyal to the attacking country; and active information processing of the population in the target country. This strategy aims to arouse public dissatisfaction with its government and to make citizens supportive of the aggressor country or not oppose its actions. Creating preconditions for conventional military action is another key element of Russia’s “hybrid war.” As far back as 2008, the war in Georgia, the subsequent annexation of Crimea, and the war in Ukraine in 2022 made clear the threat that Russia might create a precondition for military action in any country.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Piotr Bajor, ed., *Information Security Policy: Conditions, Threats and Implementation in the International Environment* (Kraków, Poland: Księgarnia Akademicka Publishing, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.12797/9788381388276>.

<sup>59</sup> Phillip A. Karber, “Russia’s ‘New Generation Warfare,’” National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency News, June 4, 2015, [https://www.nga.mil/news/Russias\\_New\\_Generation\\_Warfare.html](https://www.nga.mil/news/Russias_New_Generation_Warfare.html).

<sup>60</sup> Mark Galeotti, *Putin’s Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2022).

In the production of a “hybrid war,” the center of gravity of the target country is created by the local population’s attitude towards their government and the aggressor.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, the attacking country must gain the support of the local population. Otherwise, producing a “hybrid war” is virtually impossible. That is why Russia, through propaganda and political warfare, as well as psychological operations, stirs up controversy among the ethnic groups, political elites, and civil society of the target country. At the same time, the information space is prepared for domestic and international audiences. For example, in late 2013, in parallel with the protests in Kyiv, the Russian media intensified their campaign against the Ukrainian opposition forces. Russian propaganda portrayed them as ultra-radicals, fascists, and Russophobes whose coming to power threatened Russians living in Ukraine. A similar narrative has often been used by the Kremlin at different times and in different places.<sup>62</sup> In this way, Russian propaganda incited a significant part of the population against Ukraine and, most importantly, aroused resistance to the government among the citizens of Ukraine.

Russia uses a variety of methods to wage a “new generation” of war, including:

- The tactic of denying involvement in the conflict while the Kremlin itself manages the conflict.
- Non-military asymmetric methods (information, psychological, economic, and ideological).
- Misleading the adversary’s military and political leadership by using special operations (through diplomatic channels, the media, and deliberately leaking data compiled by political and military agencies).
- Blackmailing, bribing the military and political leadership of the enemy.

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<sup>61</sup> Dale C. Eikmeier, “The Center of Gravity Still Relevant After All These Years?,” *Military Review Online Exclusive*, May 2017, 1–8.

<sup>62</sup> Sam Sokol, “Russian Disinformation Distorted Reality in Ukraine. Americans Should Take Note.,” *Foreign Policy*, August 2, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/02/russian-disinformation-distorted-reality-in-ukraine-americans-should-take-note-putin-mueller-elections-antisemitism/>.

- Demoralizing the population.
- Penetrating enemy territory through the use of small subversive groups and action.
- Implementing active, large-scale reconnaissance and sabotage activities.
- Using information operations and means of radio-electronic warfare.

The Kremlin is well aware that, in most cases, it cannot beat its rivals economically, politically, or even militarily or become more robust than its opponents. With this in mind, the peculiarity of modern Russian methods of warfare makes it clear that Russia aims to disguise its weakness and, with similar approaches, make the adversary weaker than itself and increase the degree of its vulnerability by creating chaos in its target countries. Weakening an adversary primarily involves initiating misunderstandings and creating cracks among allies to prevent the target country from receiving military-political assistance from partners and allies. A similar approach involves defeating the opponent not by using maximum force but by demonstrating power in the shortest possible time.

Observing the operations carried out by Russia to prepare the ground for the occupation of Crimea is important to understand how the Kremlin conceals its shortcomings in practical actions on the ground. Also, the events in Crimea provide a good example of how Russia makes the most effective use of the military and non-military elements at its disposal and how Kremlin propaganda has purposefully worked for years to sow chaos and political polarization in society on the Crimean Peninsula.

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## **IV. RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT BEFORE THE 2014 OCCUPATION**

### **A. RUSSIAN OPERATIONS IN THE INFORMATION SPACE BEFORE THE MAIDAN REVOLUTION**

The so-called “Orange Revolution,” which took place in Ukraine in 2005, was perceived as the biggest challenge and an existential threat by Russia.<sup>63</sup> As Graeme Herd describes in his article “Russia and the ‘Orange Revolution,’” the Kremlin believed that the West was “manufacturing democracy” through color revolutions in the countries of the former Soviet Union, which was a deliberate act against Russia. Consequently, with the help of well-tested information-propaganda methods, the Russian propaganda machine constantly tried to show that the Ukrainian people could not have a future without Russia. Since Vladimir Putin’s presidency, Russian propaganda had made good use of well-known Russian narratives, such as the idea of “Great Russia” and “Compatriots Abroad,” to dampen anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine. Such an action was also aimed at undermining the unity of the Ukrainian people, reduce public support for the government in Ukraine, and weaken Ukrainian resilience. This kind of narrative was generated and supported by the joint, orchestrated actions of Russia’s information-propaganda machine and the political spectrum. Russian President Vladimir Putin himself participated in the dissemination of relevant messages as the most reliable and authoritative source for the Russian audience. He openly stated that Russia-Ukraine relations are the business of the Russian people only, and no one else has the right to determine how these relations will develop.<sup>64</sup> By bringing historical examples to the fore, Vladimir Putin tried to show the Ukrainian people and the West that Ukraine is within the sphere of Russian influence, Russia is ready to do everything to protect this sphere of influence, and the West cannot

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<sup>63</sup> Graeme P. Herd, “Russia and the ‘Orange Revolution’: Response, Rhetoric, Reality?,” *Connections* 4, no. 2 (2005): 15–28.

<sup>64</sup> James Marson, “Putin to the West: Hands off Ukraine,” *Time*, May 25, 2009, <https://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1900838,00.html>.

protect and help the Ukrainian people. Such a narrative was intended to sow fear in the Ukrainian public, which would weaken support for Ukraine's pro-Western government.

Since 2009 Russia's active information campaign was also aimed at enabling the Kremlin to influence Ukraine with minimal political and economic costs. At the same time, Russia constantly affirmed its being in a state of readiness to activate the military component if necessary and to interfere with the Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity by forceful methods. The main goal of the Russian informational narrative was to prevent the victory of the representative of the "revolutionary government" in the Ukrainian presidential elections in 2010. In the presidential elections, the government candidate and acting Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko was defeated, and Victor Yanukovich won.<sup>65</sup> Yanukovich was Ukraine's prime minister until the Orange Revolution in 2005, repeatedly accused of corruption and considered to be loyal to Russia.<sup>66</sup> His victory by a small margin was due to the large support of the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine which are densely populated with Russian-speaking citizens. It should also be noted that Yulia Tymoshenko, as a pro-Western politician, received great support from the central and western Ukrainian voters (see Figure 1).

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<sup>65</sup> Daryna Krasnolutska and Kateryna Choursina, "Yanukovich Wins Ukraine's Presidential Election," OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, February 8, 2010, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/news-a-media/press-releases/press-2010/yanukovich-wins-ukraines-presidential-election>.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Ray, "Viktor Yanukovich: President of Ukraine," *Britannica*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Viktor-Yanukovich>.



was published on dozens of sites.<sup>69</sup> In his analytical column, Soloviev described what opportunities Yanukovich's victory in Ukraine opened up for Russian-Ukrainian cooperation and the former Soviet space as a whole. In the aforementioned letter, the author also focused on Vladimir Putin's main findings regarding the Orange Revolution. According to Putin, during the revolution in 2005, the organizers and their supporters in the West made use of people's expectations and ultimately disappointed the Ukrainian public. Soloviev conveniently told the public how Putin characterizes the previous Ukrainian government as Nazis because they declared themselves to be the successors of the Ukrainian hero Stepan Bandera (who was killed by the Russian KGB in 1959). He was a leader of Ukrainian nationalists who believed that the Soviet Union was a far greater evil than Nazism. Stepan Bandera believed that with the help of the Germans, he would liberate Ukraine from Soviet captivity and therefore took an anti-Soviet position in World War II.<sup>70</sup> According to the mentioned statement, with such actions, Yushchenko's government insulted not only the Ukrainian people but also their Western allies. As reported by Soloviev, "In Ukraine, the 'hell machine' of the American administration, which planted the 'orange revolution,' failed. Similar emphases by Russian propagandists and politicians were aimed at reviving the old narrative that fascism was the main enemy of the Slavic people and Russia was the only liberator from the fascist aggression. At the same time, such an approach would show that fascism had not yet disappeared and Russia's role in defeating it remained unchanged, as it was during the World War II. The Russian information narrative was designed to show that a move westward would not bring success to the Ukrainian people, that Ukraine would never be recognized as a real ally by the Western countries, and that Ukrainian society would constantly be humiliated in return for its partnership with the West. The Kremlin believed that spreading such a narrative should affect the psychological resilience of the Ukrainian people, which would increase the polarization in society and erode public support for pro-Western parties.

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<sup>69</sup> Vladimir Soloviev, "Конфета По-Киевски [Candy in Kiev]," *Kommersant*, February 22, 2010, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1323691>.

<sup>70</sup> Associated Press, "15,000 Ukraine Nationalists March for Divisive Bandera," *USA Today*, January 1, 2014, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/01/01/ukraine-bandera/4279897/>.

Despite Russia's high expectations, Viktor Yanukovych did not refuse integration into Western structures during the first period of his presidency. Maintaining the country's Western course, even formally, was an important source of legitimacy for him and a means of political maneuvering. While Russia tirelessly tried to return Ukraine to its orbit, at the same time, Yanukovych engaged in serious negotiations with the European Union, the goal of which was to bring Ukraine closer to Europe. At that time, Ukraine's integration into European structures seemed inevitable. In 2012, the European Union and Ukraine initiated the Trade Pact and Political Association Agreement, on which the parties worked actively until November 2013.<sup>71</sup> The European Union and Ukraine reached a deal that the Association Agreement would be signed after the ratification of certain decisions by the Ukrainian Parliament. The proposed plan also meant sending the imprisoned ex-prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko abroad for medical treatment.

In parallel with the ongoing negotiations between the EU and Ukraine, the Kremlin had been increasing pressure on both Ukrainian citizens and the government using various levers.<sup>72</sup> Russian propagandists tried to create a narrative that would make the public believe that it was not in the EU's interest to support Ukraine's economic development but to use the country's resources for its own benefit. At the same time, Russian politicians and the representatives of state-owned energy companies openly hinted that in case of signing an agreement with Europe, they would demand immediate payment of Ukraine's accumulated gas fee debt. In addition, it was expected that in the future, the price of gas would increase for Ukraine, and the country would no longer be able to get natural gas from Russia at a discounted price, which would put a heavy burden on the population. This increased the public pressure on the Ukrainian government. At once, Vladimir Putin

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<sup>71</sup> Andrew Gardner, "The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement: A Potted History," Politico, September 17, 2014, <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-eu-ukraine-association-agreement-a-potted-history/>.

<sup>72</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia Tightens Pressure on Ukraine with Rise in Natural Gas Price," *New York Times*, April 1, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/02/world/europe/russia-ukraine.html>.

promised the Ukrainian people to review the accumulated debt, which was actually aimed at gaining positive public sentiments in Ukraine.<sup>73</sup>

It seems that at the end of 2013, Russia considered that the social and political ground in Ukraine was quite well prepared to take radical measures and put an end to Ukraine's European future. During this period, bilateral talks were held between Vladimir Putin and Viktor Yanukovich, followed by a meeting between the Prime Ministers of Ukraine and Russia. After these meetings, the ruling party of Ukraine no longer supported the plan agreed on with the European Union, and President Yanukovich demanded the suspension of negotiations with the European Union.<sup>74</sup> Apparently, Russia did not expect a radical reaction from the Ukrainian people, even though all social surveys confirmed that 50% of the Ukrainian population strongly supported Ukraine's integration into European structures, and only 14% of citizens were in favor of joining the Customs Union initiated by Russia.<sup>75</sup> It should also be noted that the majority of citizens supporting European integration were residents of central and western Ukraine. President Yanukovich's decision was followed by a wave of protests across Ukraine, which clearly indicated that Russia's efforts to reduce the pro-Western course of the Ukrainian people and strengthen pro-Russian sentiment had not succeeded. The protest wave was particularly strong in the western and central regions of Ukraine, where Russian operations in the information space seemed to have worked less successfully than in the eastern regions of the country. The following map clearly shows how deep-rooted public resistance to the pro-Russian narrative was and how strongly citizens were motivated to defend a European future (see Figure 2).

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<sup>73</sup> Kathrin Hille, "Ukraine Bailout Could Derail Putin's Drive to Boost Russian Economy," *Financial Times*, December 18, 2013, sec. Energy sector, <https://www.ft.com/content/3b3db13c-67e3-11e3-a905-00144feabdc0>.

<sup>74</sup> Ian Traynor and Oksana Grytsenko, "Ukraine Suspends Talks on EU Trade Pact as Putin Wins Tug of War," *The Guardian*, November 21, 2013, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/21/ukraine-suspends-preparations-eu-trade-pact>.

<sup>75</sup> James Marson, "Poll Finds Ukrainians Favor EU Pact," *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2013, sec. Europe, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304644104579193992459983238.html>.

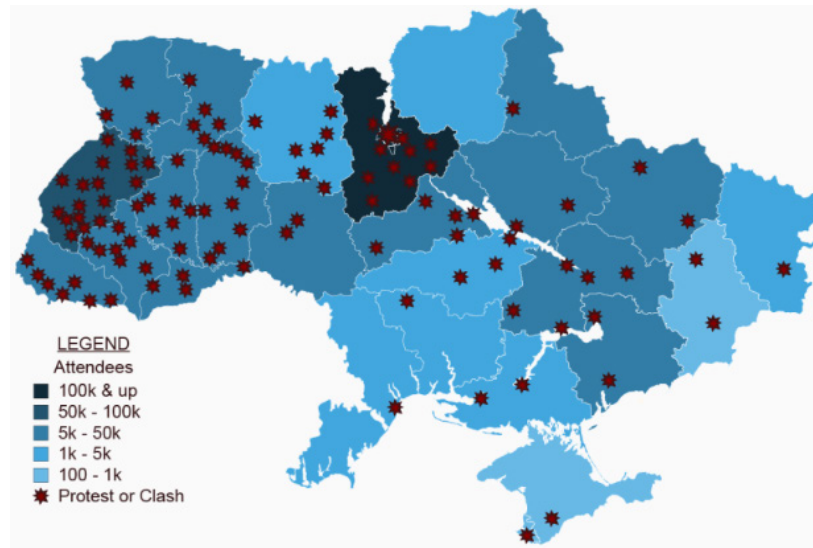


Figure 2. Protests across Ukraine, November 2013–March 2014.<sup>76</sup>

The wave of protests caused by the decision of the Ukrainian government to cancel the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union and the attempt to return to the Russian orbit turned into the Maidan Revolution. After three months of continuous demonstrations and civil disobedience, President Yanukovych was forced to flee to Russia with the help of Russian special services.<sup>77</sup> Pro-Western politicians took over the government of Ukraine, and elections were appointed in the country. The recent events clearly showed that Russia's plan to fully recover Ukraine under Russian influence did not work. The public was so fed up with the Russian-style corrupt governance that the accumulated grievances over the destruction of the European perspective could not be covered by Russia's targeted and well-orchestrated information campaign. This was greatly facilitated by the fact that the society in western and central Ukraine was well aware of the historical lesson of cooperation with Russia. Even after the Orange Revolution, although there was no rapid defeat of corruption and a radical increase in the level of welfare, the public always maintained strong support for Western democracy, which was also facilitated by the expansion of Western governmental and non-governmental projects

<sup>76</sup> Source: Young, "10 Maps That Explain Ukraine's Struggle for Independence."

<sup>77</sup> Euromaidan Press Staff, "A Timeline of the Euromaidan Revolution," *Euromaidan Press*, February 19, 2016, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2016/02/19/a-timeline-of-the-euromaidan-revolution/>.

in the country. This support of the Ukrainian people was repeatedly reflected in the results of the elections in Western and central Ukraine. It can be said that in the spring of 2014, following the unsuccessful operations in the information space in Ukraine, Russia's strategic goals suffered a collapse.

## **B. RUSSIA'S ACTIONS AFTER THE MAIDAN EVENTS**

After the Maidan Revolution, the belief that society could have a real influence on the country's domestic and foreign policy grew even stronger among Ukrainians. Simultaneously, it raised the psychological resilience of Ukrainians and contributed to the consolidation of society. Along with this, a serious problem for the Russian government was the popularity index of President Putin, which at that time was experiencing a significant decline even inside Russia.<sup>78</sup> Putin's popularity rating fell to a ten-year low of 63% at the end of 2013, according to data from the Levada Center. The events in Ukraine had an even more negative impact on the ratings of the Russian president. This required taking radical steps on the part of the Russian authorities. In response to the revolutionary events in Kyiv, as well as in other cities of western and central Ukraine, the Russian special services targeted the regions of eastern Ukraine and further strengthened various operations in the information space. The Russian propaganda machine again resorted to the already well-tried method and began to demonize the supporters of the revolution and the West. According to Russian news media, a coup d'état in Ukraine was carried out by fascist groups, who killed the participants of the demonstrations to aggravate the situation.<sup>79</sup> According to Russia's information narrative, Western countries backed the insurgency fascist groups in Ukraine. Lev Gudkov, the head of a polling agency operating in Russia, wrote that he had never seen such an intensive, aggressive, and orchestrated information campaign since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Such an overwhelming information campaign was aimed at preparing the ground for the occupation of Crimea using the methods of non-linear warfare, the principles of which were described by Gerasimov in the

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<sup>78</sup> Levada Center, "Как рос и падал рейтинг Путина [How Putin's rating grew and failed]," Levada Analytical Center, October 4, 2013, <https://www.levada.ru/2013/10/04/kak-ros-i-padal-rejting-putina/>.

<sup>79</sup> Leonard, "Russian Propaganda War in Full Swing over Ukraine."

so-called Doctrine bearing his name. This kind of approach meant achieving the maximum military-political goal in the regions of eastern Ukraine without declaring war, using military and non-military means. Along with the actions in the information environment, Russia had effectively used military units, military intelligence components, local support groups, cyber criminals, and paramilitary groups to implement its plan.<sup>80</sup>

### **1. Russian Information Campaign Targeting Crimea and Eastern Regions of Ukraine**

To sow panic among the people of the eastern regions of Ukraine, Russia deliberately used all the means of information at its disposal, including government-run TV stations, radio programs, and social networks. The main goal of the news media was to erode the local population's trust in the central government of Ukraine and to present Russia as the only defender of the local ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking population from the "Ukrainian fascists." According to research by the U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC), Russian government-run media activities served several key purposes.<sup>81</sup> Among them, it was necessary to facilitate the smooth delivery of messages from the Russian government to the local population to gain support, cultivate proxy sources, provide social media with the necessary content for propaganda, and facilitate the disinformation of the population by engaging in cyber activities. The GEC study describes the importance of the role of the Russian government-controlled media in brainwashing the population and sowing panic in the public. Kremlin-crafted narratives were disseminated particularly effectively through the international broadcasts of Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik. Since 2005, these campaigns had had a well-organized system of TV channels, various social networks, websites, and publishing outlets. The Russians also

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<sup>80</sup> U.S. Army Special Operations Command, *"Little Green Men": A Primer On Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine, 2013–2014* (Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Operations Command, 2016), <http://archive.org/details/primer-on-modern-russian-unconventional-warfare>.

<sup>81</sup> Global Engagement Center, *Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2022), <https://www.state.gov/report-rt-and-sputniks-role-in-russias-disinformation-and-propaganda-ecosystem/>.

successfully blocked access to Ukrainian TV/radio in the region.<sup>82</sup> The spread of the Russian narrative through traditional news channels was also facilitated by the fact that in 2014 the population of Ukraine actively used television, radio broadcasting, and other traditional means of information to get the news. Also, social media was quite popular. According to the data of the World Values Survey (WVS), up to 95% of Ukraine's population got their daily news through television.<sup>83</sup> More than 55% of citizens used radio as a source of information, and 35% of the population also received news through the Internet (see Figure 3). The high level of interaction among Ukrainian citizens also facilitated the spread of well-packaged disinformation by Russian agencies. According to the WVS survey, more than 80% of the population received various types of information from friends or colleagues.

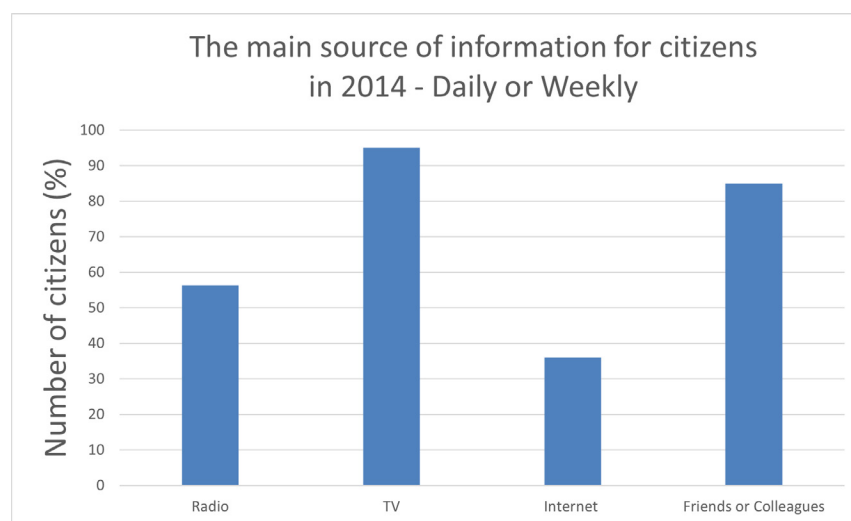


Figure 3. The main source of information in Ukraine in 2014.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Meduza News, "Separatist Government in Eastern Ukraine Bans Dozens of TV Channels," Meduza, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2015/03/12/separatist-government-in-eastern-ukraine-bans-dozens-of-tv-channels>.

<sup>83</sup> World Values Survey, "World Values Survey Wave 6: 2010–2014," WVS Database Online Data Analysis, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp?WAVE=6%26COUNTRY=875&WAVE=6%26COUNTRY=875>.

<sup>84</sup> Source: World Values Survey.

According to a report prepared in 2015 by NATO's StratCom Center of Excellence (COE), in 2012, the source of information for the population living on the Crimean Peninsula was almost exclusively Ukrainian TV stations. In the period from 2012 to 2014, Russian operations yielded results and made Russian channels the main source of information for the population. According to the COE, already in the spring of 2014, Russian television broadcasting was the main source of information for more than 90 percent of Crimea's population.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, according to the report, the public mainly watched channels controlled by the Russian government, including Russia 24, NTV, RTR, and ORT. In addition, the Russian social network Vkontakte, which also had the largest number of users throughout the Russian Federation, was the most popular. In 2014, the main task of Russian TV stations was to provide informational support for Russia's state policy and military-political actions. Along with that, the information campaign aimed to facilitate the mobilization of "compatriots abroad."

The dynamics of the events on the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 clearly showed that Russia's operations in the information environment significantly prepared the ground; that the quick, unexpected and counted-on-deception (Маскировка) occupation of Crimea did not cause public resistance. According to an analysis prepared by the RAND Corporation, after Yanukovych's ouster, Russia immediately began organizing movements against the central Ukrainian government in Donetsk and Luhansk regions as well.<sup>86</sup> Instead of activating special operations forces and making a military intervention to conquer the eastern regions of Ukraine, Russia used a political-warfare campaign. Such a circumstance allowed the Kremlin to present the situation as if the separation of Crimea and the eastern regions from Ukraine was the desire of the local population. Moscow portrayed itself as the guarantor of the will and self-determination of the local population. Russian politicians categorically denied Russia's participation in the events taking place during the annexation of Crimea. The Russian president himself categorically denied any kind of intervention and

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<sup>85</sup> Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili, "Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine," NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Riga, Latvia, October 5, 2014, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/analysis-of-russias-information-campaign-against-ukraine-executive-summary/150>.

<sup>86</sup> Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations*.

stated that the soldiers dressed in Russian military uniforms operating in Crimea were actually provocateurs whose actions were simply aimed at falsifying facts to blame Russia.<sup>87</sup>

During the occupation of Crimea, the Russian military did not take part openly in the processes. But it should be noted that Russian special forces on the territory of Ukraine began to be significantly more active in 2010, immediately after Yanukovich became president. Their covert actions did not attract any attention of Ukrainian law enforcement.<sup>88</sup> The agents recruited by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Russian military intelligence (GRU) played a major role in the occupation of Crimea. In addition, their success was facilitated by the fact that after Viktor Yanukovich came to power, the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) shifted the focus of counterespionage from Russia to America.

According to Ellen Nakashima, the GRU campaign in February 2014 was an overwhelming propaganda attack against the new government in Kyiv and the advocates of Western ideas.<sup>89</sup> Russian special services also actively used social networks to spread information. Fake profiles were created on Facebook and VKontakte that discriminated against Western values and expressed frustration and fear over the revolutionary events taking place in Ukraine. Classified information of the GRU leaked to the media testifies that the main task of operations carried out in the information space was to justify the methods of occupation of Crimea to a wide audience and, at the same time, provide information for the implementation of the Russian covert operation.

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<sup>87</sup> Александр Бобраков-Тимошкин [Alexander Bobrakov-Timoshkin] and Андрей Шароградский [Andrey Sharogradsky], “Владимир Путин в комментариях [Vladimir Putin in the comments],” *Радио Свобода*, 2014, sec. Политика, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/25285016.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Tor Bukkvoll, “Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas,” *The U.S. Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 46, no. 2 (June 1, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2917>.

<sup>89</sup> Ellen Nakashima, “Inside a Russian Disinformation Campaign in Ukraine in 2014,” *Washington Post*, April 9, 2023, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-a-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-ukraine-in-2014/2017/12/25/f55b0408-e71d-11e7-ab50-621fe0588340\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-a-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-ukraine-in-2014/2017/12/25/f55b0408-e71d-11e7-ab50-621fe0588340_story.html).

## 2. The Role of Russian-Speaking and Ethnically Russian Society

In the Crimean Peninsula and eastern regions of Ukraine, the pro-Russian narrative was historically more successful, and the pro-Western Ukrainian government had had minimal public support (see Figure 1). People of different nationalities and Russian-speaking people living in Crimea rarely considered themselves an integral part of Ukraine. This was accompanied by a number of mistakes made by the Ukrainian government over the years in relation to the mentioned regions, which prevented their integration with the central and western parts of Ukraine.<sup>90</sup> The successful implementation of the Russian influence operation was facilitated by the fact that the peninsula was inhabited mainly by ethnically non-Ukrainians (mostly Russians), whose spoken language was Russian, and for whom Ukrainian was actually a foreign language (see Figure 4).

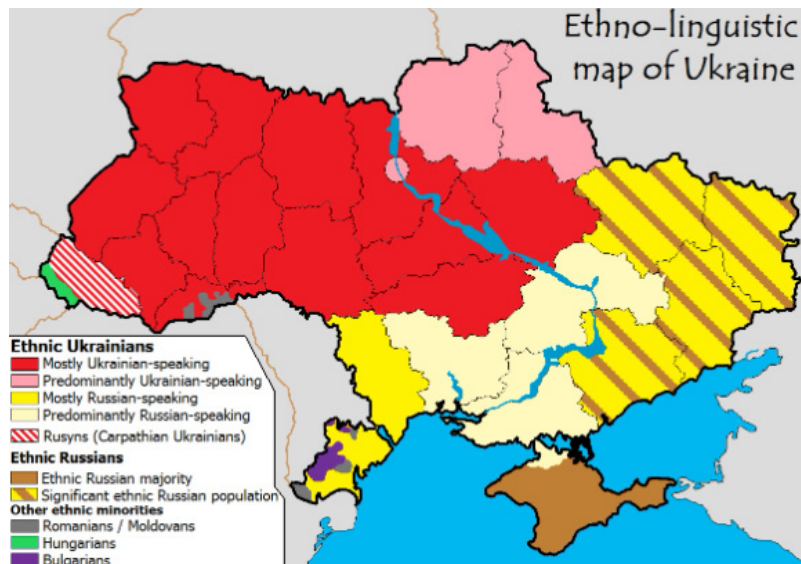


Figure 4. Ethno-linguistic map of Ukraine.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations*.

<sup>91</sup> Source: Max Fisher, "This One Map Helps Explain Ukraine's Protests," *Washington Post*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/12/09/this-one-map-helps-explain-ukraines-protests/>.

Such an ethno-linguistic configuration in the regions of eastern Ukraine provided Russia with fertile ground for influence operations in the information environment; also, it was a good means of justifying the intervention. Russia was given a chance to further activate the so-called compatriot policy and act with the motive of protecting the ethnically Russian and Russian-speaking population to implement its political goals. To get ahead, Russia needed to sow panic in the local society, which provided a good opportunity to present pro-Western demonstrators as fascists and enemies of the Russian people. In order to sow fear and panic in society, Russian proxy groups did not hesitate to organize life-threatening provocations during the demonstrations, while the Russian media covered the situation as the “special forces of the Maidan” were targeting ethnic Russians.<sup>92</sup> Such background propaganda worked even more successfully, according to which Russia was the only defender of the Russian-speaking population against the “fascists.”

A few days after the occupation of Crimea by Russian proxy groups, a referendum was held, the reason for which, according to the Russian narrative, was the local population’s right to self-determination.<sup>93</sup> Russian propaganda tried to ensure the participation of the population in the referendum as much as possible to legitimize it. Demonstrations were held in the streets by pro-Russian groups, who actively used posters with the fascist swastika as a symbol of the Maidan Revolution. The streets were also full of posters reminding the population of the danger of “Ukrainian fascists” and urging them to participate in the referendum (see Figure 5).

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<sup>92</sup> Leonard, “Russian Propaganda War in Full Swing over Ukraine.”

<sup>93</sup> Carol Morello and Anthony Falola, “Crimea Sets Referendum on Joining Russia,” *The Washington Post*, accessed April 20, 2023, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/crimea-sets-referendum-on-joining-russia/2014/03/06/d06d8a46-a520-11e3-a5fa-55f0c77bf39c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/crimea-sets-referendum-on-joining-russia/2014/03/06/d06d8a46-a520-11e3-a5fa-55f0c77bf39c_story.html).



Figure 5. Poster in Crimea: “Fascism will not win! Everyone in the referendum”!<sup>94</sup>

In order to increase the influence on the population living in Crimea and to legitimize the referendum, civil demonstrations in support of the Russian people living in eastern Ukraine were organized in Russia as well. Obviously, the organizer of such actions was the ruling party of Russia.<sup>95</sup> Anti-occupation manifestations were also held in Russia, which caused concern in the ruling power. Russian law enforcement strictly controlled this kind of activity and did not allow the public to hold demonstrations.<sup>96</sup> Russia’s goal was to show how the entire Russian society supported the unification of the “Russian people.” According to Russia’s plan, such a representation of general support should successfully work in favor of pro-Russian sentiment in the east of Ukraine, which would further facilitate the realization of the Kremlin’s tasks.

<sup>94</sup> Source: Петр Козлов [Petr Kozlov], Олеся Волкова [Olesya Volkova], and Олег Карпьяк [Oleg Karpyak], “Хроника аннексии: ‘крымская весна’ в воспоминаниях участников событий [Chronicle of the Annexation: ‘Crimean Spring’ in the Memoirs of Participants in the Events],” BBC News Русская служба, March 19, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-47609756>.

<sup>95</sup> BBC News, “У Кремля прошел митинг за присоединение Крыма к России,” BBC News Русская служба, March 7, 2014, [https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/03/140307\\_crimea\\_really\\_in\\_moscow](https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/03/140307_crimea_really_in_moscow).

<sup>96</sup> Sam Frizell, “Russia Vetoes U.N. Draft on Crimea, As Citizens Rally Against War,” *Time*, March 15, 2014, <https://time.com/26088/russian-moscow-protest-ukraine-intervention-50000/>.

Along with the pro-Russian demonstrations, there were also preoccupation rallies in Crimea, in which hundreds of citizens took part.<sup>97</sup> This kind of trend would have a negative impact on Russia's goal of legitimizing the annexation of Ukrainian lands with fewer political and economic costs. Russia decided to resolve anti-occupation sentiments with the use of a demonstration of force and announced the start of military exercises near the Ukrainian borders.<sup>98</sup> Later, information was spread in the press that the spokesman of the Russian Council, Sergiy Naryshkin called Ukraine's then-acting president Oleksandr Turchynov and warned that if Ukraine resisted Russia on the territory of Crimea, then Russia would bomb Ukrainian government buildings in Kyiv.<sup>99</sup> Russia's well-tried "muscle game" tactic served several purposes. Among them, such action was supposed to convince the West that Russia was not going to give up anything and was ready for a maximum confrontation. At the same time, the central government of Ukraine had to quit acting in Crimea. All this should have led to the reduction of anti-Russian sentiments in Crimea as quickly as possible. The purpose of Russia's spreading of fear-inducing messages was to create the desired political sentiments. Fear is a powerful motivator and, even in a democratic electoral environment, has a significant impact on people's political choices.<sup>100</sup> The society opposing the occupation should have felt that they would not have the strength to go against Russia and should not count on the help of the Western countries and the Ukrainian government. According to Russia's calculations, this would eventually lead to the suppression of civil resilience in the rather long term.

### **3. Russian Cyber-Enabled Information Operations**

Russian special services intensively employed cyber capabilities in the information environment to support influence operations during the takeover of Crimea. The use of cyber

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<sup>97</sup> Douglas Herbert, "Pro and Anti-Russian Demonstrators Clash in Ukraine's Crimea," France 24, February 26, 2014, <https://www.france24.com/en/20140226-pro-anti-russian-demonstrators-clash-ukraine-crimea>.

<sup>98</sup> Andrew Higgins and Steven Lee Myers, "As Putin Orders Drills in Crimea, Protesters' Clash Shows Region's Divide," *New York Times*, February 26, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/world/europe/russia.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Razom, Inc., "Ukraine and the Maidan," *RAZOM* (blog), accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.razomforukraine.org/projects/policyreport/ukraine-and-the-maidan/>.

<sup>100</sup> Kirk Waldroff, "Fear: A Powerful Motivator in Elections," APA, <https://www.apa.org>, October 13, 2022, <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/fear-motivator-elections>.

capabilities gave Russia the means to successfully carry out illegal activities while not leaving clear evidence of its guilt. This enabled plausible deniability for the Russian authorities.<sup>101</sup> Such an approach aimed to give Moscow an opportunity to influence political decisions and public events and, at the same time, get less damage.<sup>102</sup> The goal of Russian-sponsored cybercriminals and hacktivists was to ensure control of the information and communication space of the Crimean population, disrupt communication between the peninsula and the rest of Ukraine, provoke panic and promote activities supporting the Russian narrative.

Russia, despite its relatively unsophisticated cyber capabilities, is one of the most dangerous players in the world.<sup>103</sup> By illegally using its resources, Moscow is trying to turn cyber capabilities into an effective coercive mechanism, which it actively used in the pre-conflict period of 2014 and during the occupation of Crimea. Russia actively used cyberspace as a new and cheap domain for disinformation and propaganda to sow chaos among Ukrainian citizens and influence the formation of public opinion. At the same time, the Russians actively used the disruptive and espionage capabilities of cyber to support the Kremlin's military-political objectives.<sup>104</sup> One such campaign called "Armageddon" against Ukraine was carried out in 2013, which aimed to demonize the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union.<sup>105</sup> Lookingglass's investigative team found that Russian cybercriminals were using a not-so-sophisticated spearphishing method. Their target was the documents of the legislative and security forces of Ukraine.

After it became clear to the Russian special services that the campaign against Viktor Yanukovych was getting stronger and stronger, Russian cyber groups began attacking the

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<sup>101</sup> Political Dictionary, "Plausible Deniability," Political Dictionary, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://politicaldictionary.com/>.

<sup>102</sup> Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, "Grey Is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability," *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (May 2018): 477–94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy067>.

<sup>103</sup> Brandon Valeriano, Benjamin M. Jensen, and Ryan C. Maness, *Cyber Strategy: The Evolving Character of Power and Coercion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>104</sup> Valeriano, Jensen, and Maness, 138.

<sup>105</sup> Brian Prince, "'Operation Armageddon' Cyber Espionage Campaign Aimed at Ukraine: Lookingglass," SecurityWeek, April 28, 2015, <https://www.securityweek.com/experts-warn-critical-shortage-cybercrime-specialists/>.

websites of opposition parties in December 2013.<sup>106</sup> In addition, a pro-Russian group known as Cyber Berkut attacked civilian and government infrastructure in early 2014.<sup>107</sup> The group's goal was to spread the word that pro-Russian groups were holding numerous demonstrations in Kyiv to overthrow the newly formed pro-Western government. Throughout 2014, Cyber Berkut actively disseminated information through various Internet sources that directly responded to the Russian government's news narrative—portraying Ukrainians as fascists and enemies of the Russian people.

After activating pro-Russian forces in Crimea, the Russians attacked Ukrainian cyberinfrastructure in several directions, including some government websites.<sup>108</sup> According to the Ukrainian side, the Russians damaged the country's telecommunications system using special means at the initial stage of the conflict. The Russians also targeted the personal phones of members of the Ukrainian Parliament and the head of the SBU. According to Ukrtelecom, Russian services in Crimea illegally installed their own equipment on fiber optic cables, damaged the wires, and disabled the entire Internet and telephone systems.

Russian hackers and state-sponsored cybercriminals have been active in espionage against Ukraine and its allies after the Crimean referendum. For example, in October 2014, a fairly large attack was carried out against the telecommunications systems of NATO, the European Union, and Ukraine.<sup>109</sup> The purpose of such groups and their acts was to prevent the consolidation of society around the pro-Western government of Ukraine and to mobilize the population against Ukraine's Western allies. For example, in November 2014, when U.S. Vice President Joe Biden arrived in Kyiv on an official visit, pro-Russian groups hacked Ukrainian government websites and spread a message calling Joe Biden a "fascists' master."

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<sup>106</sup> Kenneth Geers, *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression against Ukraine* (Tallinn, Estonia: NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, 2015), <https://ccdcoc.org/library/publications/cyber-war-in-perspective-russian-aggression-against-ukraine/>.

<sup>107</sup> Valeriano, Jensen, and Maness, *Cyber Strategy*, 140.

<sup>108</sup> Pavel Polityuk and Jim Finkle, "Ukraine Says Communications Hit, MPs Phones Blocked," Reuters, March 4, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-cybersecurity-idUSBREA231R220140304>.

<sup>109</sup> Jim Finkle, "CORRECTED-Russian Hackers Target NATO, Ukraine and Others," Reuters, October 14, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-hackers-idUKL2N0S81AG20141014>.

At the same time, they voiced the demand to stop the “genocide of the Russian people” through messages.<sup>110</sup>

The content of the operations carried out and supported by the Russians during and after the occupation of Crimea in 2014 shows that cyber has become a tool for the Russians to indirectly manage crises and subvert the political will in the territory of the targeting country.

### **C. PRO-RUSSIAN NETWORK IN THE UKRAINIAN ARMY**

In February 2014, the Russian proxy groups and military units broke through an open door in Crimea.<sup>111</sup> Without a fight, the Russian military seized Ukrainian bases in Crimea and subdued Ukrainian warships in the Black Sea. Rather than fighting the enemy for even a few days and waiting for orders from Kyiv, the naval forces’ leadership ordered their subordinate soldiers and commanders to surrender. The Russian plan was most likely designed to exert psychological pressure on the public by demoralizing the army to suppress the desire to resist. As the observation of the events of the occupation of Crimea showed, the mentioned plan worked successfully, and zero resistance from the Ukrainian military units harmed the population’s psychological state. In the military units, which should have been a closed system for external information, in a short time, Russian messages were spread, offering Ukrainian soldiers to join the Russian army.<sup>112</sup> After the occupation of Crimea, the Ukrainian side created a website where information about all pro-Russian deserters who joined the enemy ranks was published.<sup>113</sup> Analysis of the pro-Russian network in the Ukrainian army stationed in Crimea shows that the critical part of the Ukrainian officers

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<sup>110</sup> Vitaly Shevchenko, “Ukraine Conflict: Hackers Take Sides in Virtual War,” BBC News, December 20, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30453069>.

<sup>111</sup> Polityuk and Zverev, “Why Ukrainian Forces Gave up Crimea without a Fight – and NATO Is Alert.”

<sup>112</sup> George Chkhikvadze, Raiver Pitkve, Alex Kaiser. “Pro-Russian Network in the Ukrainian Army Stationed in Crimea Before the 2014 Occupation,” Research prepared at the Naval Postgraduate School. DA 4600: Disrupting Dark Networks course.

<sup>113</sup> Armed Forces of Ukraine, “Військово-Морські Сил Збройних Сил України [Military-Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine],” ВМС ЗС України, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://vms-ukraine.info/>.

already supported Russian policy before the occupation. The Russian network was based on high-ranking officers, including the leadership of the Ukrainian Navy.

During the occupation events in Crimea on March 1, 2014, Ukraine's interim President Oleksandr Turchynov promoted Rear Admiral Denis Berezovsky to Commander of the Naval Forces of Ukraine.<sup>114</sup> According to the Deputy Commander of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine for Coastal Defense in 2014, Igor Voronchenko, Berezovsky was a one-day commander when he gave the command to surrender weapons.<sup>115</sup> On March 24, 2014, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu appointed Berezovsky as Deputy Commander of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. From the materials released by the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2014, it appears that a member of the Russian network was also the Chief of Staff and First Deputy of the Ukrainian Navy, Rear Admiral Dmitry Shakuro. Admiral Shakuro also resumed his military career on March 2, 2014, at the Russian Black Sea Fleet headquarters.<sup>116</sup> In February 2014, the deputy commander of the Ukrainian Navy, Serhiy Yeliseev, complained of poor health and wrote a letter of resignation from the Ukrainian Armed Forces. When the leadership asked him the reason for leaving the military service, Yeliseev openly answered that he was a Russian and would not participate in hostilities against the Russians. Later he also joined the Russian armed forces in the Baltic Fleet.<sup>117</sup> As a result of the research on Russian influence in the Ukrainian Navy, it is clear the pro-Russian network was successfully operating at all three levels, strategic, operational, and tactical. Information was successfully transmitted from the command to the officers of the subordinate units, and this process made the recruitment of new members even easier.

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<sup>114</sup> Interfax-Ukraine, "Denis Berezovsky Appointed Commander-in-Chief of Ukrainian Navy," *Kyiv Post*, March 1, 2014, <https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/denis-berezovsky-appointed-commander-in-chief-of-ukrainian-navy-338039.html>.

<sup>115</sup> Дмитрий Евчин [Dmitry Evchin], "Подальше от Крыма: где оказались офицеры, предавшие Украину [Further from Krym: where were the officers who betrayed Ukraine]," *Крым.Реалии*, January 10, 2022, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/krym-2014-god-ukrainskiye-oficery-izmena-prisyage-sluzhba-rossii/31646134.html>.

<sup>116</sup> Дмитрий Евчин [Dmitry Evchin], "Украинские Адмиралы На Службе у России. Истории «дезертиров» Не Вышедших Из Крыма [Ukrainian Admirals in the Service of Russia. Stories of 'Deserters' Who Did Not Leave Crimea]," *АРГУМЕНТ*, January 11, 2022, <https://argumentua.com/statii/ukrainskie-admiraly-na-sluzhbe-u-rossii-istorii-dezertirov-ne-vyshedshikh-iz-kryma>.

<sup>117</sup> Polityuk and Zverev, "Why Ukrainian Forces Gave up Crimea without a Fight – and NATO Is Alert."

Figure 6 shows the Russian network within the Ukrainian military in Crimea. Each node indicates Ukrainian Navy high command officers and unit commanders or deputy commanders who were prominent in the pro-Russian network. Individuals with the most central role are marked in green. Behind each node marked with red color stood dozens of officers at different levels of units.

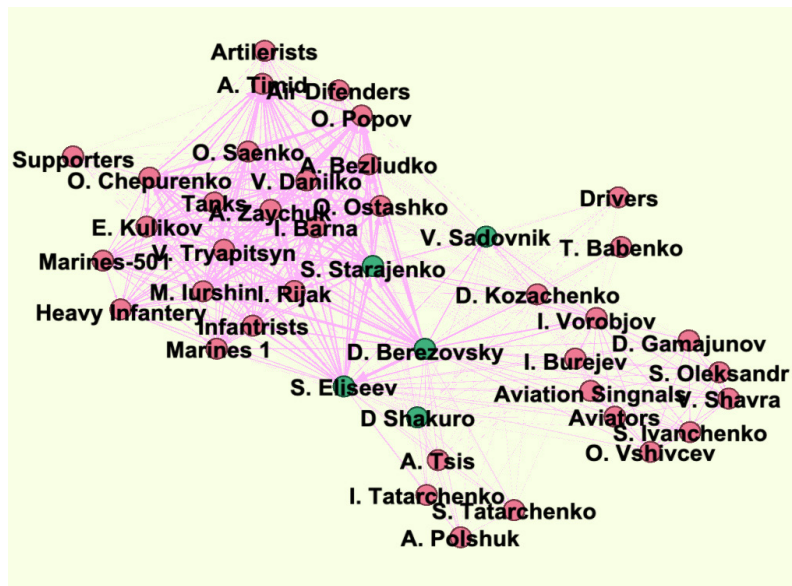


Chart created using Gephi.

Figure 6. Pro-Russian network within the Ukrainian military in Crimea.  
Based on the website of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.<sup>118</sup>

Figure 7 shows the number of high-ranking officers involved in the pro-Russian network in Ukrainian military units stationed in Crimea, according to the place of deployment. As can be seen from the figure, the Russians had their agents of influence in almost all subdivisions of the peninsula, and their number, in most cases, depended on the size of the subdivision. According to the data of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of

<sup>118</sup> Source: Armed Forces of Ukraine, “Сайт Військово-Морських Сил Збройних Сил України / ВМС ЗС України [Website of the Military-Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine],” Website of the Military-Naval Forces, 2023, <https://vms-ukraine.info/>.

Ukraine, the largest number of officers were involved in the Russian network from units stationed in Perevalnoe, Simferopol, and Sevastopol.

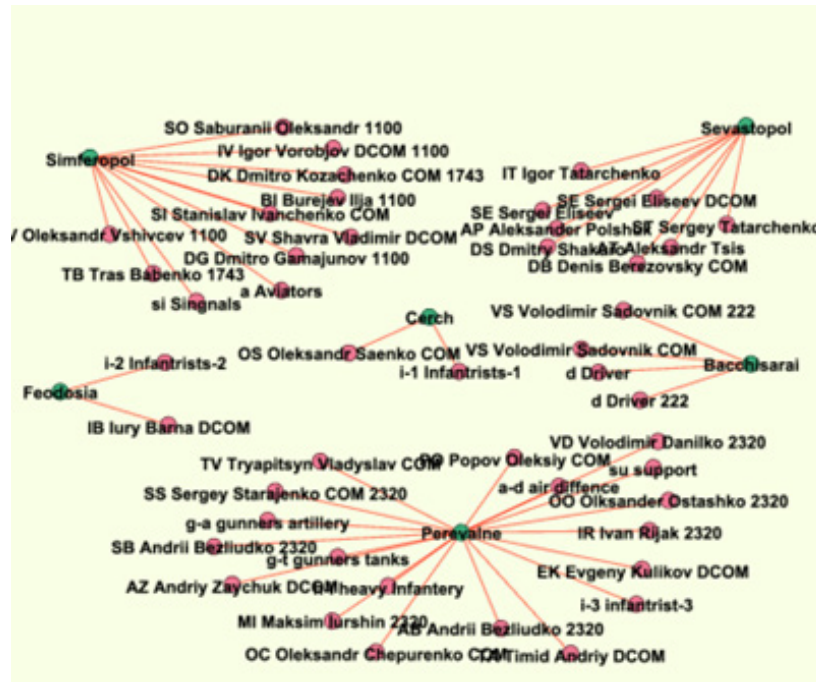


Chart created using Gephi.

Figure 7. Pro-Russian high-ranking officers in the Ukrainian military in Crimea, by place of deployment. Based on the website of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.<sup>119</sup>

With such a large number of pro-Russian officers, the Russian special forces should have had no trouble managing the bulk of the Ukrainian soldiers to align with Russian plans. At the very least, they could easily kill the charge of resistance and will to fight in the units. This picture makes it clear that the Ukrainian military units stationed in Crimea in 2014 did not have a central government that would resist Russian aggression, nor did the soldiers have the necessary will to fight for such actions.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Source: Armed Forces of Ukraine.

<sup>120</sup> Ben Connable, Michael J. McNerney, William Marcellino, Aaron B. Frank, Henry Hargrove, Marek N. Posard, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Natasha Lander, Jasen J. Castillo, and James Sladden, *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2341.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2341.html).

The will to fight of the armed forces and the public's desire to protect their country and freedom significantly determine the effectiveness of each other. The exhaustion of the psychological capacities of the society was additionally affected by the helplessness of the law enforcement officers, who could not or did not resist the campaign organized by the Russian proxy groups which occupied administrative buildings for hours across Crimea. The surrender of the army and the transfer of the largest part of the officers to the ranks of the enemy further contributed to the spread of panic and fear in society. Regardless of whether the purpose of Russian recruitment of Ukrainian officers was to influence the psychological well-being of society, it is clear that this ultimately had an even more negative impact on Ukraine's ability to resist the enemy during the occupation.

With the occupation of Crimea, the Russian political leadership was able to significantly restore its image in front of the domestic audience. At the same time, a large part of the population living in Crimea also believed in the power of Russia. Nevertheless, this victory could not ensure political stability inside the country for long. In addition, the annexation of Ukrainian territories without a fight also increased the courage of Russian political leadership in the foreign arena. Realization of Russia's strategic goals in the future meant more control over Ukraine and further limitation of Western access to the former Soviet space. To accomplish these objectives, Russia persisted in laying the foundation for the full-scale military assault against Ukraine which culminated in 2022.

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## V. RUSSIAN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS BEFORE THE 2022 INTERVENTION

### A. RUSSIAN ACTIVITIES IN THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT BEFORE THE ACTIVE MILITARY AGGRESSION

#### 1. Russian Narrative: Old Approaches with New Content

In an interview with Radio Liberty in 2022, Russian journalist Ilya Shepelin said that in the 1990s, children under the influence of TV entertainment programs jokingly were called zombie-boxes (Зомбоящик) by their parents.<sup>121</sup> At that time, they could not even imagine that 20 years later, zombification would be associated not with entertainment, but with political-ideological content that would incite hatred for neighboring countries. According to him, in 2014, many citizens in Russia knew that the annexation of Crimea was illegal. This was because there were still independent news outlets in Russia, for example the TV channel “Rain” (дождь). But soon such news channels were closed by the Russian government and the same people perceive the reality completely differently. For many Russians, Ukrainians and non-Russian people in general have become a symbol of the enemy. The purpose of Russia’s information war was to spread a narrative that would convince more than just Russian citizens to believe in an alternative version of history, one which worked only for the Kremlin. The Russian information machine tried to achieve a similar goal by deepening polarization and creating constant chaos. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia actively continued to conduct propaganda operations in the information environment, the main target of which were the population of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, the Russian-speaking community in the post-Soviet countries and, of course, the citizens of Russia itself. The purpose of Russian information operations was to justify the occupation of Ukrainian territories and portray Moscow as the savior of Crimea and the “Russian people” in general, while presenting Ukraine and its allied Western countries as fascists and the enemies of the Russian people (see Figure 8). In addition to

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<sup>121</sup> Елена Фанайлова [Elena Fanailova], “Больше ада. Российская пропаганда в войне с Украиной [Russian propaganda in the war with Ukraine: more than hell],” *Радио Свобода* [Radio Liberty], November 10, 2022, sec. Лицом к событию, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/russkaya-propaganda-v-voynе-s-ukrainoy-boljshe-ada/32124248.html>.

Russian, the Kremlin's informational propaganda was spread in English, German, French, Arabic, and other languages, and its goal was also to present Russia as a political center with an important regional and global role. Russia's well-orchestrated information war involved all relevant state and non-state institutions, from the president to the local governments. Special news releases and reports were prepared to present the annexation of Crimea as a great victory for the liberation of the Russian people. The main effort of the news stories was directed towards figuratively supporting the narrative of how the Russian army saved the Crimean population from genocide with their bare hands, trying to stop the Ukrainian tanks sent to kill them. For the same purpose, a special program called "Direct line with Vladimir Putin" was prepared, which was broadcast on the Russian state channels Russia 1, Russia 24, Channel One and on some radio stations.<sup>122</sup> The content of the program was also spread on social networks and Internet pages. The point of the program was also to support the popularity of President Putin and highlight his historical importance to the Russian people. In the mentioned program, Russian President Vladimir Putin answered the questions of journalists and allegedly randomly selected citizens for four hours. According to the Russian narrative, he described in detail the importance of the Russian "peacekeeping mission" in the regions of eastern Ukraine. Within the framework of the campaign to justify the annexation of Crimea, Russian propaganda and the Russian president himself actively tried to present the events of 2014 as a "democratic process" even years later.<sup>123</sup>

After the annexation of Crimea, it became clear that by occupying the eastern regions of Ukraine, Moscow could not declare its "historical mission" accomplished. Even a small expansion of the "territories of the empire" could not ensure the appearance of Putin as a powerful leader in the eyes of the domestic audience for long. The background of all this was the fact that Ukraine continued the process of integration with the European Union and Western institutions. Even though Russia continued to actively use mechanisms

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<sup>122</sup> Source: Press Office of the President of Russia, "Прямая линия с Владимиром Путиным [Direct line with Vladimir Putin]," Президент России [President of Russia], April 21, 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>.

<sup>123</sup> BBC News, "Putin Reveals Secrets of Russia's Crimea Takeover Plot," BBC News, March 9, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31796226>.

of economic and political pressure on Ukraine, shortly after the occupation of Crimea, the newly elected President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, signed the Association Agreement with the European Union.<sup>124</sup> Completion of the Association Agreement would expand Ukraine's political prospects and also open the way for the country's export opportunities and give it a good chance to reduce its economic dependence on Russia. During the following years, the government of Ukraine did not look back for the Western course, the leaders of the country always declared unequivocally that they would do everything to make Ukraine a member of NATO and the European Union.<sup>125</sup> As Ukrainian Finance Minister Oleksandr Danylyuk said in 2017, Ukraine, fighting Russian-backed armed groups in the eastern regions, was paying a high price for integration into the Western space and visa-free access to the European Union.<sup>126</sup>

In Russia, they were pinning their hopes on the 2019 presidential elections of Ukraine. During the pre-election period, the Russian propaganda machine worked in favor of the pro-Russian candidate Yuri Boyko.<sup>127</sup> The Kremlin again manipulated using the threat of war and tried to increase pressure on the citizens of Ukraine. On social networks and news media, pro-Russian propaganda equated the choice between Boyko and other candidates to a choice between peace and war. In the Russian media, programs were made in support of Boyko, and articles were printed in the press under the title "Yuriy Boyko, Ukrainian candidate – peacemaker."<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, the Ukrainian people did not support the pro-Russian candidate, and Boyko failed to advance to the second round. In the second round of the elections, Russian analysts and news media were counting on the victory of

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<sup>124</sup> Pifer, "Poroshenko Signs EU-Ukraine Association Agreement."

<sup>125</sup> Euronews, "Ukraine Prioritises EU Integration," Euronews, August 24, 2017, <https://www.euronews.com/2017/08/24/ukraine-poroshenko-prioritises-eu-integration-nato-membership-independence-day>.

<sup>126</sup> Robin Emmott, "Ukraine's Promise of EU Membership Remains Elusive," Reuters, November 24, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-eu-idUSKBN1DO18R>.

<sup>127</sup> Interfax News, "Кандидат в Президенты Бойко Призвал Украинцев Проголосовать По Совести [Presidential Candidate Boyko Urged Ukrainians to Vote According to Their Conscience]," Interfax.ru, March 31, 2019, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/656411>.

<sup>128</sup> Tass News, "Юрий Бойко. Украинский кандидат — миротворец," TASS, accessed May 6, 2023, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/6259414>.

former comedian and actor Volodymyr Zelensky. Although during the pre-election period Zelensky openly declared that he saw Ukraine's future only in Europe and NATO, many analysts considered him a politician influenced by Russia because he was supported by the famous oligarch Igor Kalamoysky.<sup>129</sup> The Russian propaganda machine was purposefully spreading messages that in case of victory, Zelensky would be forced to make a foreign policy choice in favor of Russia, because the difficult socio-economic situation in the country and the Russian military threat would leave him no other option.<sup>130</sup> Even after Zelensky's presidency, Russian propaganda deliberately tried to put pressure on him to agree to decisions beneficial to the Kremlin. Unlike Yanukovych, Zelensky proved to be more resistant to Russian pressure. Even though the leaders of France and Germany also supported the not-so-useful for Ukraine truce agreement and the holding of local elections in the conflict zone, Zelensky did not sign the document prepared in Minsk format.<sup>131</sup> It should be noted that thousands of demonstrators went to the streets in Ukraine, asking the president to refrain from signing the "Capitulatory Agreement." Overall, the initial stage of Zelensky's presidency went against Russia's wishes: Ukraine firmly supported the course of NATO integration, TV channels carrying a pro-Russian narrative were banned in the country, and Zelensky's government launched an investigation against the pro-Russian oligarchs for treason, and refused to take decisions harmful to Ukraine's interests regarding the conflict zone.<sup>132</sup> Zelensky became personally unacceptable to Russia, as he tried to deal with Russian messages using Russian methods and responded to Putin's

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<sup>129</sup> The Reporter, "Президент Зеленский: что это значит для России [President Zelensky: what does this mean for Russia]," Репортёр, February 1, 2019, <https://topcor.ru/5506-chem-mozhet-obernutsja-dlja-rossii-i-samoj-ukrainy-izbranie-zelenskogo.html>.

<sup>130</sup> BBC News (Russian), *Коломойский и Зеленский: какого президента выбирает олигарх [Kolomoisky and Zelensky: which president does the oligarch choose]*, video, 5:27, YouTube, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6v6JK-iGm0Y>.

<sup>131</sup> Justin Lynch, "Zelensky Flounders in Bid to End Ukraine's War," *Foreign Policy* (blog), October 11, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/11/zelensky-pushes-peace-deal-ukraine-war-russia-donbass-steinmeier-formula/>.

<sup>132</sup> Robin Dixon, "Six Reasons Russia Is at Odds with Ukraine's Zelensky," *Washington Post*, February 5, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/05/russia-putin-ukraine-zelensky/>.

propaganda messages with irony, while accusing the Russian president of falsifying the history.<sup>133</sup>

## **2. Combination of Russian “Muscle Play” and Disinformation in 2021**

One year after the election of Volodymyr Zelenskiyy as the President of Ukraine, it became clear that the Ukrainian government was less in agreement with the Kremlin’s approach to conflict resolution, trying to distance itself from Russia and act in accordance with national interests. Ukraine’s policy was painfully received in Russia, as it not only hindered the implementation of Moscow’s strategic goals, but also posed a threat to the stability of Putin’s regime. Added to this was the fact that the protracted conflict in Ukraine had a negative impact on the sentiments of Russian citizens. At the same time, Putin’s long stay in power without tangible success had a negative effect on his personal ratings. In early 2020, Gleb Pavlovsky, a former Kremlin ideologist and head of the Effective Politics Foundation, claimed that Putin’s speeches lacked the earlier influential effect, as they were devoid of public-important accents.<sup>134</sup> According to Pavlovsky, Putin started using communist-type, generic texts, reviving old narratives, and he no longer listened to the speechwriters. His inner circle was afraid of irritating Putin, they stopped working on solving the real problem around him, and everyone began to adapt to his wishes. All this was soon reflected in Putin’s popularity rating. According to a Levada Center report, 42% of Russians no longer wanted to see Putin as a president by the end of 2021, and his approval rating had fallen to 47%, the lowest since 2013.<sup>135</sup> It is worth noting that Putin’s popularity rating was maintained throughout 2021. That kind of situation led Russia to take radical steps and to portray Putin’s role again as a unifier of the Russian people. It seems that in 2021 Moscow decided that the tried and tested combination of actively spreading

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<sup>133</sup> BBC News (Russian), “‘Мы не один народ’. Зеленский ответил на слова Путина об украинцах и русских [“We are not one people.” Zelensky responded to Putin’s words about Ukrainians and Russians],” BBC News Русская служба, July 1, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-57681147>.

<sup>134</sup> BBC News – Русская служба, “Слова Путина: что осталось в речах президента и что исчезло за 20 лет [Putin’s words: what remains in the president’s speeches and what has disappeared in 20 years],” News русский, accessed May 6, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/resources/idt-8b36561c-1f51-4aa2-a2c5-5fab4d1b797e>.

<sup>135</sup> Levada Center, “Владимир Путин [Vladimir Putin],” *Levada Center* (blog), October 11, 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/10/11/vladimir-putin-10/>.

propaganda narratives and demonstration of military force would work successfully against the Ukrainian people and government. In addition, such orchestrated actions should have had negatively affected the desire of Kyiv's Western allies to provide assistance to Ukraine.

Russia's information operations against Ukraine were also aimed at placing responsibility on Ukraine and its allies for any further escalation.<sup>136</sup> Such an approach implied that the citizens of Russia and the people of Ukraine should have believed that possible aggressive military actions by Russia were not due to the imperialist intentions of the Kremlin, but were a forced reaction to the actions of the "fascist government" of Ukraine and its inciting Western partners. If such a narrative were to be successfully propagated, Russia would have to gain public support and prevent Ukrainian citizens from consolidating around the country's government. The President of Ukraine also became the target of Russian propaganda channels. News outlets and pro-Russian groups on social media tried to portray Zelensky as an uneducated humorist, an irresponsible politician, and most importantly, an enemy of the Ukrainian and Russian people and a promoter of fascist ideology. Articles circulated on the Internet explaining to people that Zelensky equated the approaches of Hitler and Stalin and thus insulted the glorious past of the Russian people.<sup>137</sup> In social networks, there were actively distributed photo materials with appropriate content, which hinted at the fascist tendencies of the President of Ukraine, and then the content of social networks was actively spread on Internet sites and in news programs (see Figure 8). Russian propaganda went further and even wrote about the existence of a real kinship between Zelensky and Adolf Hitler. According to some articles, the genetic similarity to Hitler influenced the policy of the Ukrainian president (see Figure 9).

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<sup>136</sup> Arsalan Bilal, "Вестник НАТО – Гибридная война."

<sup>137</sup> Valeryy Burt, "Садись, Вова. «Двойка» по истории — новости политики [Sit down, Vova. 'Deuce' in history — news politics]," Russian Planet, January 28, 2020, <https://rusplt.ru/policy/sadis-vova-dvoyka-37435.html>.



Зеленский толкает Европу в пучину нацизма

Figure 8. Photo of Zelensky with the caption “Zelensky pushes the West and Putin towards Nazism.”<sup>138</sup>



Figure 9. Photos of Hitler and Zelensky from a social network with the caption “Distant relatives?”<sup>139</sup>

<sup>138</sup> Source: Karinka, “Зеленский толкает Европу в пучину нацизма [Zelensky is pushing Europe into the abyss of Nazism],” *Последние новости: России, Украины, Сирии и Мира. Новости Новороссии (ЛНР, ДНР)* (blog), August 13, 2022, <https://news-front.info/2022/08/13/zeleniskij-tolkaet-evropu-v-puchinu-nacizma/>.

<sup>139</sup> Source: Александра Савичева [Alexandra Savicheva], “Дальние Родственники? В Сети Сравнили Зеленского и Гитлера и Нашли Много Общего [Distant Relatives? The Network Compared Zelensky and Hitler and Found a Lot in Common],” *Блокнот Россия*, June 1, 2022, <https://bloknot.ru/v-mire/dal-nie-rodstvenniki-v-seti-sravnil-i-zelenskogo-i-gitlera-i-nashli-mnogo-obshhego-936548.html>.

At the same time, Russian propaganda tried to show that not only the actions of the Ukrainian government had a fascist nature, but even the logos used by Ukraine were similar to fascist symbols. An example of this is the logo of the Azov battalion in comparison to the German “Das Reich” copied side by side, which was actively used for visualization in Russian narratives on social networks and news broadcasts (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. Logos of Battalion Azov (left) and “Das Reich” (right) spread on social networks.<sup>140</sup>

In parallel with the activation of information propaganda, as early as the spring of 2021, Russia gathered more than 100,000 military personnel and equipment near the state borders of Ukraine and in the occupied Crimea for the purpose of military training.<sup>141</sup> Soon after, the Russian government announced the end of the military exercises and ordered the military to return to the place of deployment. Nevertheless, six months later, the situation at the borders of Ukraine became even more tense, when Russia again

<sup>140</sup> Source: Versia Blog, “Зеленский Одобрил Ношение Нацистской Символики в Украинской Армии [Zelensky Approved the Wearing of Nazi Symbols in the Ukrainian Army],” Версия – информационное агентство новостей, 2019, <https://versiya.info/politika/army/133089>.

<sup>141</sup> Reuters, “OFFICIAL Russian Military Build-up near Ukraine Numbers More than 100,000 Troops, EU Says.”

mobilized an unprecedented number of military personnel in the border zone.<sup>142</sup> The representatives of the intelligence services of Western countries and the NATO spoke openly about the high probability of the expected Russian military aggression in Ukraine.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, the Russian side started to use an aggressive rhetoric to achieve a political goal and declared Ukraine's aspiration to join NATO as crossing a red line for Russia's national interests.<sup>144</sup> The mentioned statement was made by Putin's press-spokesman during the visit of the United States Secretary of Defense to Kyiv.

Before the large-scale military campaign against Ukraine in 2022, Russia's actions were aimed at destabilizing that country and sowing panic among the population.<sup>145</sup> In addition, considering the experience of 2014, Moscow's goal was to reduce the ability of military personnel and politicians to resist by demonstrating the force, which would also have a negative impact on Ukrainian society and would prevent public mobilization in support of the government. Such a scenario would reduce the likelihood of resistance to Russian aggression in Ukraine and facilitate the rapid return of Kyiv under Russian influence at the lowest possible cost.

## **B. THE ROLE OF ARMED FORCES IN STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE**

The 2014 Russian aggression and the armed conflict in Lughansk and Donetsk raised public awareness about the Kremlin's plans. At the same time, the created situation pushed the Ukrainian authorities to reform the armed forces more quickly. In a study published in 2017, the Polish Center for Eastern Studies wrote that the Ukrainian army at

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<sup>142</sup> Katrina Manson, Max Seddon, and Roman Olearchyk, "Ukraine Warned of 'High Probability' of Russian Military Escalation This Winter," *Financial Times*, November 14, 2021.

<sup>143</sup> Anastasya Rokitina, "Запад предупредил Украину о 'высокой вероятности' вторжения России этой зимой, – FT [West warns Ukraine of 'high likelihood' of Russian invasion this winter – FT]," РБК-Украина, December 2021, <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/zapad-predupredil-ukrainu-vysokoy-veroyatnosti-1636973831.html>.

<sup>144</sup> Михаил Маркив [Mikhail Markiv], "Песков назвал худшим сценарием вступление Украины в НАТО [Peskov called Ukraine's entry into NATO the worst-case scenario]," Известия, October 18, 2021, <https://iz.ru/1237047/2021-10-18/peskov-nazval-khudshim-scenariem-vstuplenie-ukrainy-v-nato>.

<sup>145</sup> Nikolaj Skydsgaard, "Russia Likely to Stay on Diplomatic Track for next Two Weeks – Ukraine," Reuters, January 27, 2022, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-expects-russia-stay-diplomatic-track-next-two-weeks-2022-01-27/>.

that time represented the best armed forces in the country's history.<sup>146</sup> Due to the needs of the war and the anticipation of a greater threat, after 2014 the military budget increased from 1% to 2.5% of GDP in one year. Simultaneously, for the first time in decades, military units were modernized according to actual operational requirements.<sup>147</sup> The decision of the Ukrainian government to bring the army closer to NATO standards was followed by practical steps, and the state action plan for the Development of the Armed Forces was developed in 2017–2020. In 2018, the Ukrainian government passed a law requiring at least 5% of GDP to be spent on national security, of which 3% was dedicated to the armed forces.<sup>148</sup> Structural changes in the armed forces of Ukraine included: reforms in the Ukrainian army and navy; modernization of aviation units; and formation of the National Guard and territorial defense system. At the same time, bilateral cooperation with Western partners, especially the United States and Great Britain, increased significantly.<sup>149</sup> The population was constantly informed about the reforms implemented in the Ukrainian army, which had a positive effect on the psychological state of the society. The degree of interaction between Ukrainian law enforcement agencies and Western partners had also increased significantly, including the exchange of intelligence information.<sup>150</sup> This significantly strengthened the effectiveness of Ukrainian services. Prior to the Russian intervention, intelligence information released by the White House about anticipated Russian actions in Ukraine hindered Russia's efforts to successfully prepare the

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<sup>146</sup> Andrzej Wilk, *The Best Army Ukraine Has Ever Had: Changes in Ukraine's Armed Forces since the Russian Aggression*, Prace OSW Studies, no. 66 (Warsaw, Poland: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, 2017).

<sup>147</sup> Segodnia.ua, "Как изменились ВСУ с начала войны на Донбассе: взгляд из Европы [How the Armed Forces of Ukraine have changed since the beginning of the war in Donbas: a view from Europe]," SEGODNIA, July 11, 2022, <https://ukraine.segodnya.ua/ukraine/kak-izmenilis-vsu-s-nachala-voyny-na-donbasse-1046284.html>.

<sup>148</sup> Andrew S. Bowen, *Ukrainian Armed Forces*, InFocus IF11862 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 22, 2022), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11862#:~:text=Multiple%20military%20and%20national%20security%20documents%20lay%20out,of%20the%20Armed%20Forces%20%282017-2020%29%20outlined%20implementation%20steps>.

<sup>149</sup> Mevlutoglu, "Ukraine's Military Transformation between 2014 and 2022."

<sup>150</sup> Peter Dickinson, "The West Reaps Multiple Benefits from Backing Ukraine against Russia," *Atlantic Council* (blog), January 12, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-west-reaps-multiple-benefits-from-backing-ukraine-against-russia/>.

information ground for an invasion of Ukraine.<sup>151</sup> At once, based on intelligence information, at the very beginning of the war, the Ukrainian authorities constantly provided information to the population about the expected Russian false flag operation, which had a positive impact on the public and increased trust in the government. Ukrainians successfully used resistance warfare during both non-kinetic and kinetic war, in the formation of which the special forces of the United States made a significant contribution.<sup>152</sup> Pro-Western sentiments of the citizens were also positively influenced by the fact that it was clear that assistance from Western partners would bring important benefits to the armed forces and society.

The degree of mobilization of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the demonstration of fighting spirit, as well as the unshakable will of the government to protect the country's sovereignty and fight against aggression, had a positive effect on the psychological resilience of the society. This became even more evident in the initial stages of Russia's large-scale intervention. Instead of panicking during the very first days of aggression, the population of Ukraine continued to support the country's government and armed forces in the fight against the aggressor.<sup>153</sup>

### **C. RUSSIAN CYBER-AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE PRIOR TO THE 2022 INTERVENTION**

Since 2014, Russia has actively utilized its cyber capabilities against Ukraine. Such actions mainly aimed to impose psychological pressure on Ukraine's government and people. Furthermore, Russian efforts sought to exploit cyber capabilities for espionage, and sabotage against critical infrastructure. To this end, Russia conducted a series of cyberattacks against Ukraine's power supply, communication systems, and military

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<sup>151</sup> Vera Bergengruen, "How Putin Is Losing at His Own Disinformation Game in Ukraine," *Time*, February 26, 2022, <https://time.com/6151578/russia-disinformation-ukraine-social-media/>.

<sup>152</sup> Oren Liebermann, "How Ukraine Is Using Resistance Warfare Developed by the U.S. to Fight Back against Russia," CNN, August 27, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/27/politics/russia-ukraine-resistance-warfare/index.html>.

<sup>153</sup> George Chkhikvadze et al., "What Is More Important for Ukraineto Win: The Explosion of a Tank or the Spread of Information about a Tank Explosion?," *Small Wars Journal*, February 5, 2024, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/what-more-important-ukraine-win-explosion-tank-or-spread-information-about-tank-explosion>.

infrastructure.<sup>154</sup> Similar attacks occurred in 2015, 2016, and 2017, with the primary goal of spreading fear and disorder in society. Although Russia has actively deployed cyber tools against its adversaries, given its capabilities, this has been more an emulation of kinetic warfare in the information domain than serious damage-causing tactics. Russian groups have repeatedly targeted the Ukrainian satellite company Viasat, which the Ukrainian military relied on for communications. Pro-Russian groups also launched several attacks on Ukrainian airports, railway systems, and government sites to sow chaos.<sup>155</sup>

Russian cyber-groups' activities significantly increased in 2021 and early 2022. Their actions aimed to intensify the information war per the military goals, to facilitate intelligence activities and to damage the political will to resist.<sup>156</sup> To that goal, Russian cyberattacks have targeted the banking sector, government websites, and press outlets. Russian cyber groups have launched several attacks against Ukraine's Internet and telecommunications systems.<sup>157</sup> According to data published by Microsoft, in this period, Ukraine was the biggest target of cybercriminals (state and non-state actors) after the United States. Cyber groups of the Russian military intelligence (GRU), foreign intelligence (SVR), Federal Security Service (FSB), as well as pro-Russian cyber hackers and criminals, have been operating against Ukraine (see Figure 11). In this period, almost half of the hacker attacks were directed against the United States—46%, and every fifth intervention of “black hackers” was in Ukraine—19%. For example, about 1,200 structures suffered from the Russian hacker group Nobelium alone.

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<sup>154</sup> Susan Landau, “Cyberwar in Ukraine: What You See Is Not What’s Really There,” *Lawfare*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/cyberwar-ukraine-what-you-see-not-whats-really-there>.

<sup>155</sup> Andy Greenberg, “The Untold Story of NotPetya, the Most Devastating Cyberattack in History,” *Wired*, accessed May 6, 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/notpetya-cyberattack-ukraine-russia-code-crashed-the-world/>.

<sup>156</sup> Digital Security Unit, “An Overview of Russia’s Cyberattack Activity in Ukraine,” Online (Microsoft, May 21, 2022), <https://query.prod.cms.rt.microsoft.com/cms/api/am/binary/RE4Vwwd>.

<sup>157</sup> James Pearson and James Pearson, “Russia Downed Satellite Internet in Ukraine - Western Officials,” *Reuters*, May 11, 2022, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-behind-cyberattack-against-satellite-internet-modems-ukraine-eu-2022-05-10/>.

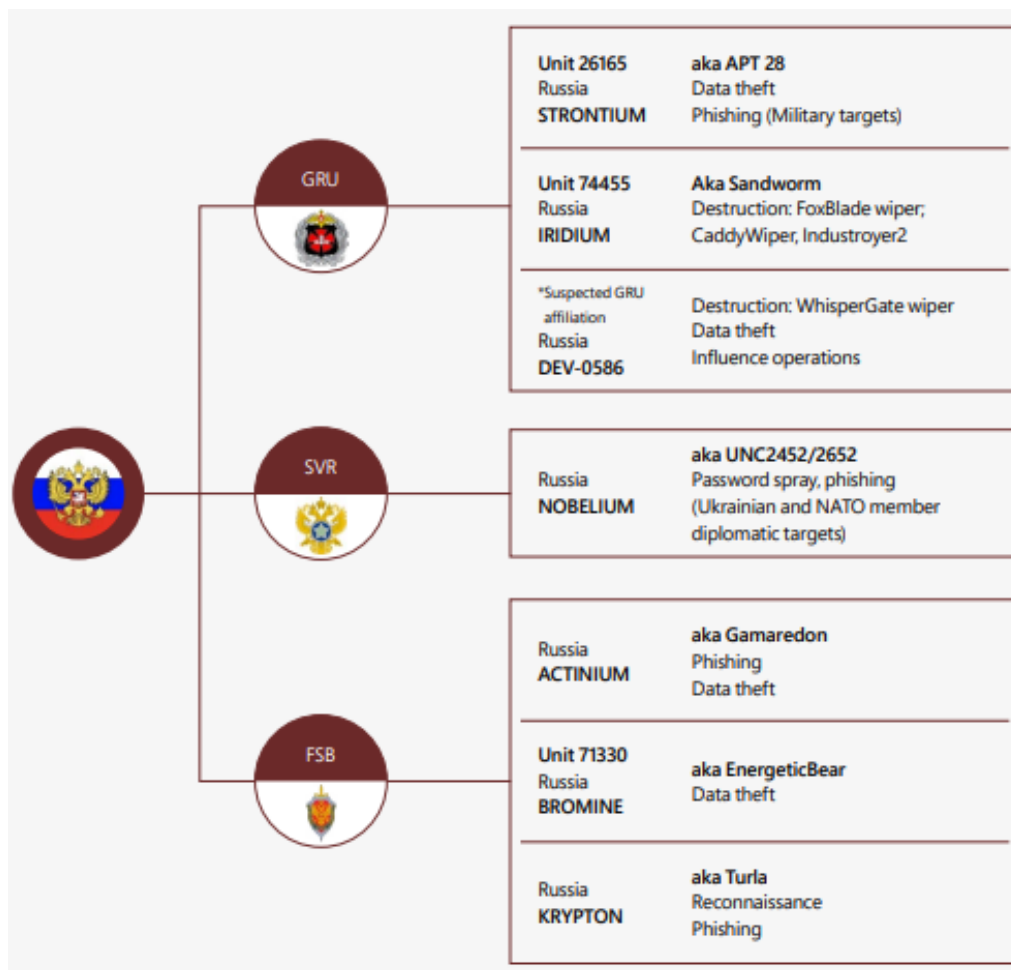


Figure 11. Russian cyber actors executing operations against Ukrainian targets before the invasion.<sup>158</sup>

Prior to Russia's military intervention, strong cyberattacks were aimed at damaging Ukraine's military capabilities, demoralizing military personnel and society, and making Russia's military-political goals simpler to realize. As the first phase of the 2022 intervention showed, Russia's calculations did not pan out for two main reasons, among others. First, Russia's cyber activities, other information-related operations, and military components were not properly coordinated before the intervention. This could be related to the fact that the swift political decision about military intervention was unanticipated by the Russian military and security sector leadership. Second, Ukraine

<sup>158</sup> Source: Pearson and Pearson.

was well-prepared for Russian cyberattacks and Kremlin operations in the information environment.<sup>159</sup> Ukraine's resistance was determined by the robust support of international institutions, and Western governmental and non-governmental organizations against Russian aggression.<sup>160</sup> With the help of NATO member states, Ukraine gained access to a cyber library where information about viruses that existed at that time was stored. The United Kingdom contributed £6 million in assistance, including firewalls, to prevent attacks and professionals from evaluating intrusions.<sup>161</sup> Along with the United States, Great Britain, and NATO countries, Western private companies helped Ukraine significantly. For example, shortly before the war, the information about Ukrainian government institutions was placed in the Cloud with the help of Microsoft, and Amazon provided state agencies with Snowball devices. Taking preventive measures against Russian cyber-aggression, Ukraine's deliberate efforts in the information environment significantly hindered the implementation of Russia's plans, which were primarily aimed at breaking the psychological integrity of Ukrainian society.

#### **D. PUBLIC SENTIMENTS IN UKRAINE BEFORE THE 2022 INVASION**

As the unfolding events in Ukraine have shown, the increase in Putin's support rating in Russia due to the annexation of Crimea had a significant side effect. Russia's aggressive actions in Donetsk and Lugansk have contributed to increasing Ukrainians' confidence in Western institutions. In this regard, information operations carried out by the Ukrainian government, which were mainly aimed at disproving the Kremlin's narrative, played an important role. The Ukrainian government countered Russia's covert military actions under the guise of separatists with clear actions. Ukrainian media and government messages directly spoke about Russia's military intervention in the east of the country and provided the citizens with the information about current events on a

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<sup>159</sup> James Andrew Lewis, "Cyber War and Ukraine," CSIS, June 16, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/cyber-war-and-ukraine>.

<sup>160</sup> Susan Landau, "Cyberwar in Ukraine."

<sup>161</sup> Zona Media, "Как Россия проигрывает кибервойну в Украине. [How Russia is losing the cyber war in Ukraine]," Медиазона, December 13, 2022, <https://zona.media/article/2022/12/13/cyberwar>.

daily basis. Among them, the Ukrainian media actively covered the facts of the violation of the ceasefire agreement by the Russian military and pro-Russian separatists. Along with all these affairs, in March 2021, the Ukrainian Parliament approved a resolution, according to which the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine was officially referred to as the “Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict.”<sup>162</sup> This highlighted the fact that the ongoing processes in Donbas were not the rebellion of the local population and the process of self-determination, but the Russian occupation. The Ukrainian government also developed a state strategy for strategic communications and created relevant information portals.<sup>163</sup> The aim of this policy was to combat disinformation to strengthen the resilience of the Ukrainian people. The state’s strategic communications system aimed to create coordinated messages and narratives to reinforce Ukraine’s image in the directions most likely to be the target of adversary aggression. In this process, together with the state structures, the non-governmental sector was also involved, which deliberately disseminated information about the benefits that integration into the Western institutions could bring. Such a policy had a significant impact on the sentiments of society. According to a survey conducted at the end of 2020, European integration was supported by 72% of the population in the western regions of Ukraine, and 53% in the central regions.<sup>164</sup> At the same time, in the western and central regions of Ukraine, popular support for NATO integration was 68 and 47 percent, respectively. Trust in Western institutions was low in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, where citizens perceived the threat of the conflict in Donetsk and Lugansk regions more acutely. In addition, the Russian-speaking population represents an important part of the society in the mentioned regions. In total, at the end of 2020, 48% of the Ukrainian population supported the country’s integration into the European Union, and 42% of the citizens supported NATO integration. After the activation of the aggressive phase of

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<sup>162</sup> TKS.ru, “Украина официально заявила о войне с Россией [Ukraine officially declares war with Russia],” TKS, March 21, 2021, <https://www.tks.ru/politics/2021/03/31/0005/print>.

<sup>163</sup> Strategic Communication Centre of Ukraine, “About Us,” Centre for strategic communication, accessed May 6, 2023, <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/about-us/>.

<sup>164</sup> ZN News, “Большинство Граждан Высказались За Вступление Украины в ЕС и НАТО – Опрос [Majority of Citizens Voted for Ukraine’s Accession to the EU and NATO – Poll].”

Russian propaganda and the countermeasures taken by the Ukrainian government, the picture changed significantly. According to a survey conducted at the end of 2021, 67.1% of the Ukrainian population openly supported integration into the European Union, and 57.2% were in favor of NATO integration.<sup>165</sup> According to the authors of the study, taking into account the research methodology and the number of people who refrained from giving a direct answer, the public's real support for European integration was more than 75%, and the number of those who wanted to join NATO was almost 68% (see Figure 12).

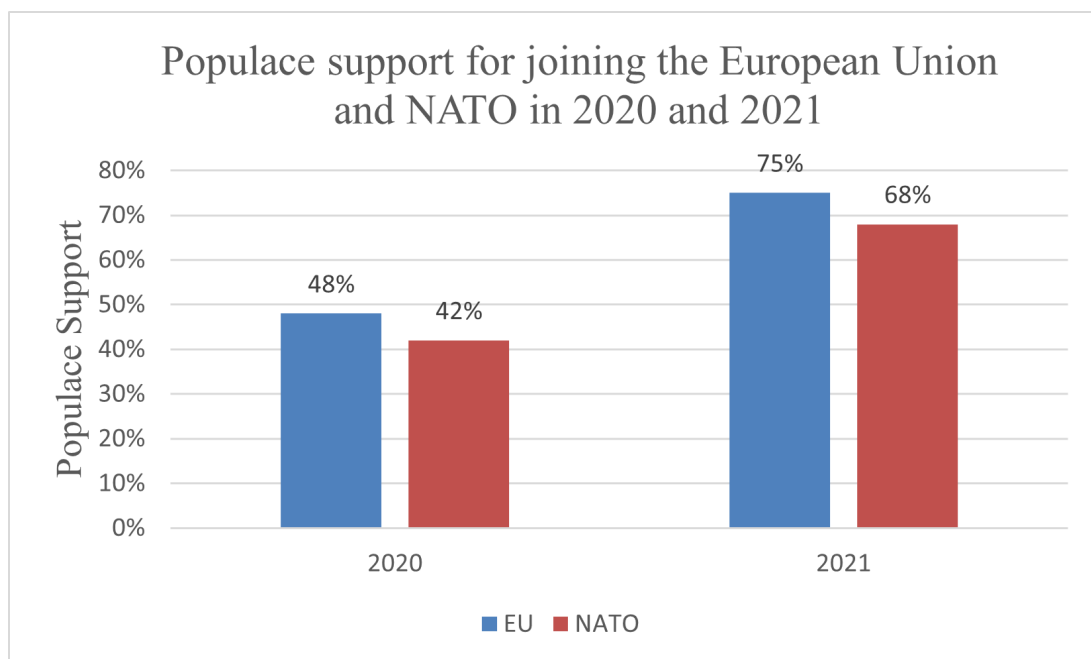


Figure 12. Populace support for joining the European Union and NATO in 2020 and 2021.<sup>166</sup>

As can be seen from the graph, trust in Western institutions increased significantly during one year. Aggressive Russian propaganda had the opposite effect,

<sup>165</sup> ZN News, “Большинство Украинцев Поддерживают Вступление Украины в Евросоюз и НАТО – Опрос [Majority of Ukrainians Support Ukraine’s Accession to EU and NATO – Poll],” *Дзеркало тижня* [Mirror Weekly], December 24, 2021, <https://zn.ua/UKRAINE/bolshinstvo-ukraintsev-podderzhivajut-vstuplenie-ukrainy-v-evrosojuz-i-nato-opros.html>.

<sup>166</sup> Source: ZN News.

and instead of intimidation, it contributed to the growth of grievances against Russia among Ukrainian citizens. The mentioned circumstance was an important precondition for the rapid mobilization of society in support of the pro-Western course and the Ukrainian government, if necessary. Such a change in public sentiment in a short period of time also indicated that at the end of 2021 and at the beginning of 2022, the public's readiness to protect the country's foreign policy course and to face the threat against the country's interests by remaining unified was high.

Information operations after active hostilities also played an important role in dealing with Russian aggression. The Ukrainian side was able to achieve significant success in this regard, involving almost all public agencies and private organizations, from the president to the non-governmental sector. From the very beginning of the war, news of how the Ukrainian people successfully countered Russian aggression and selflessly defended their freedom was reported not just in Ukraine but also around the world. From the very first days of the war, not only in Ukraine but throughout the world, the information was reported about how successfully the Ukrainian people coped with the aggression of the Russians and defended their freedom with self-sacrifice. The Ukrainians actively used social media and news outlets to highlight their success on the battlefield and actively disseminated video and photo footage of captured Russian soldiers and destroyed Russian military equipment. Along with this, in parallel with the war crimes committed by the Russians, information was spread about how the Ukrainians treated the Russian prisoners of war humanely and respectfully and took care of their health.<sup>167</sup> Soon, Ukrainian soldiers became a symbol of heroism, and the president of Ukraine with his war-weary image became an exemplary leader, whom even other world leaders tried to emulate.<sup>168</sup> All this had a positive effect on the psychological capabilities of the Ukrainian people, which strengthened the country's

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<sup>167</sup> Aaron Parsley, "Video Appears to Show Russian Soldier in Tears as He's Fed by Ukrainians and Allowed to Call Home," *Peplemag*, March 3, 2022, <https://people.com/politics/video-russian-soldier-fed-ukraine-citizens-allowed-call-home/>.

<sup>168</sup> David Averre, "Macron Displays Stubble, Jeans and Hoodie in Zelensky Style Pics," *Mail Online*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10611433/Is-Macron-copying-Zelensky-French-leader-displays-stubble-jeans-hoodie-war-room-pics.html>.

ability to resist. Despite the high expectations of analysts, unlike in 2014, after the start of the war, Russia has not been able to conduct a successful information campaign to justify its actions. In the European theater, Russians were active on various social networks and information platforms, although their actions were unprofessional and inappropriate.<sup>169</sup> This circumstance reflected both the resilience of Ukrainians and the willingness of Russian citizens to support their country's armed forces in Ukraine.

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<sup>169</sup> Simon Handler, "The 5×5—Conflict in Ukraine's Information Environment," *Atlantic Council* (blog), March 22, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/the-5x5/the-5x5-conflict-in-ukraines-information-environment/>.

## VI. CONCLUSION

### A. KEY CONCLUSIONS BASED ON THE CASE STUDY OF UKRAINE

In the period before the occupation of Crimea in 2014, as well as before the Russian military intervention in 2022, the ability of Ukraine to resist an aggressor was significantly influenced by the population's degree of resilience. The resilience of a society is what generates will in the population and the psychological capacity to deal with the pressure of an external force in order to protect the sovereignty and freedom of one's state.<sup>170</sup> Russia's operations in the information environment to reduce Ukraine's ability to resist and to put pressure on Ukrainian society served several purposes. Russian operations were supposed to increase the degree of polarization in Ukrainian society, which would prevent the population from uniting in defense of state ideals and disrupt the sense of national identity in a large part of the population. The Kremlin's operations were intended to promote a sense of insecurity among the population by generating fear and chaos. It would also lead to a disconnection between the citizens and the authorities, forcing the Ukrainian government to make political decisions in favor of Russia. In addition, Russia's task was to make the public believe that the Western partners did not have the ability and desire to protect the Ukrainian people, which would be a lever of additional pressure on the pro-Western authorities.

In 2014, the Russian plan to achieve the maximum goal with the minimum cost and bring all of Ukraine under the influence of the Kremlin did not work. Nevertheless, Moscow's deliberate actions had yielded positive results in preparing the ground for the occupation of Crimea. The sense of national identity among the population of the Crimean Peninsula and a large part of the eastern regions of Ukraine was damaged by the low degree of integration of different ethnic groups. The ethnically Russian and Russian-speaking community was particularly vulnerable to Russian propaganda. Due to the ineffective actions of the Ukrainian government with the mentioned groups, it was not possible to resist the Russian narrative. In the end, the well-orchestrated Russian operations achieved

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<sup>170</sup> Otto Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept* (MacDill AFB, FL: The JSOU Press, 2020).

considerable success. As it turned out, in 2014, a critical part of the population of Crimea did not feel safe in the Ukrainian state and saw their future more as part of Russia. The sentiment of the local population was also significantly affected by the transition of the local government bodies to the Russian side during the occupation. Moreover, the inactivity of the Ukrainian army stationed in Crimea and the transfer to the side of the enemy further increased the panic and the feeling of insecurity in the society, which was an additional effect in favor of Russia.

After 2014, the Russian aggression had a negative effect on the interests of the Kremlin among Ukrainian society. The occupation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine, as well as the increased threat of military intervention in 2021, contributed to the strengthening of anti-Russian sentiments among Ukrainian citizens. In the spring of 2022, it was clear to the majority of the population of Ukraine what Russia's intentions were toward their country, that is, intentions which threatened their lives, freedom, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Instead of chaos and panic among Ukrainians, the growing threat of military aggression had intensified anti-Russian grievances. This was facilitated by the deliberate actions of the Ukrainian government in several directions. Amid them, by constantly appealing to the benefits of integration into Western institutions, it became clear to the public that Russia was the threat to their successful future. A well-developed strategic communications system implemented by the Ukrainian government provided the citizens with continuous information about the threat from the Russians and the anti-state activities of groups hired by the Kremlin in the conflict zone or cyber space. The reforms carried out by the government of Ukraine in the armed forces and in the field of security in general had given hope to the population. The actions of the Ukrainian government contributed to the growth of solidarity in society. The intransigence of military personnel and political leadership against the plans of the enemy also had a positive effect on the psychological state of Ukrainians and helped to strengthen the sense of national identity.<sup>171</sup> In terms of strengthening Ukraine's resilience, the involvement of Western partners was also of

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<sup>171</sup> Jessica Pissano, "How Zelensky Has Changed Ukraine," *Journal of Democracy*, 2022, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/how-zelensky-has-changed-ukraine/>.

particular importance, including in the matter of intelligence activities and the ability to neutralize Russian aggression in cyberspace.<sup>172</sup>

## **B. A PRACTICAL LESSON ON THE EXAMPLE OF UKRAINE**

From the example of the developments in Ukraine, we can conclude that the information environment is especially important in terms of creating a resilient society. Neutralization of the opponent in the information environment significantly enhances the population's psychological capabilities. Neutralizing the adversary's aggressive information campaign, resisting cyber operations, and exposing the enemy's hostile plans contribute to the consolidation of society around government. Joint, orchestrated actions by various branches of government against the adversary also increase the will of citizens to defend their sovereignty and freedom.

Correctly conveying information about the reforms implemented by the government to the public is as important as the reforms themselves. In countries with low economic opportunities, the public may not feel the effects of reforms immediately, but constant communication about the expected benefits of Western style reforms significantly raises positive sentiments in the society and increases support for democratic governments. Informing the public about the reforms carried out in terms of strengthening the military and security sphere increases the feeling of security among population. This is an important motivation for citizens to have even more will to contribute to the implementation of the country's resistance plans. Demonstration and attitude of the will to fight by the army and the government increases the psychological resilience of society. The psychological resilience of society, in turn, has a positive influence on the fighting ability of the armed forces.

External support from partners and increasing the degree of mutual compatibility is an important factor in building a country's resistance. Sharing the experience of

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<sup>172</sup> Jim Garamone, "Ukraine's Success Was a Surprise Only to the Russians," U.S. Department of Defense, November 13, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3157239/ukraines-success-was-a-surprise-only-to-the-russians/>  
<https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FNews-Stories%2FArticle%2FArticle%2F3157239%2Fukraines-success-was-a-surprise-only-to-the-russians%2F>.

international partners and their involvement in dealing with enemy operations in an information environment helps to improve local capabilities and also increases the public's confidence in partners. The disruption of the pro-Russian network inside Ukraine's armed forces and political groups would be achieved through institutional reorganization, increased interoperability with Western military and political formations, and strengthening ties with Western partners. These institutional changes allow military and civilian personnel to share discipline-specific best practices with their Western peers. This also prevents the success of hostile narratives about the vulnerability and insecurity of the country's defense capabilities. At the same time, demonstrating readiness to fight for independence, territorial integrity, and commitment to principles, the government and society will positively affect foreign partners' willingness to help in dealing with the enemy.

Constant communication with ethnic minorities and facilitating their integration into society is important so that these groups can associate themselves with state institutions and government. Involvement in the current processes and continuous support for integration in such groups prevents the development of a feeling of alienation from the state and reduces their vulnerability to the hostile news narratives.

Monitoring the adversary's stories, narratives, and activities damaging the unity within society and reducing their influence is important to maintain and strengthen the psychological resilience of the population. Neutralization of information directed against the government and promotion of motivational narratives imbued with the spirit of patriotism also have a significant impact on public sentiment. This has an additional positive effect on the will of the armed forces to fight. Controlling social media while respecting democratic principles is a difficult task, but preventing the incitement of hostile sentiments requires significant efforts in this direction. Much success can be achieved by monitoring the storylines spread by the enemy on social media and taking planned and orchestrated action against pages that spread hostile narratives. Working with foreign partners to identify and neutralize hostile cyber groups and hacktivists is also an important prerequisite for success. In addition, providing positive information to the public about various political and military successes through social media and dominating this space

contributes to the emergence of positive sentiments in the public and a corresponding increase in support for the pro-Western government.

Further, the effective management of the strategic communication system, with the participation of both the state and the non-governmental sector, contributes to the unification of society around the idea of the state. The effective management of the communication strategy increases the likelihood that in the event of military aggression, the population will support their own government even more, and the society will not be polarized and divided due to fear and panic.

Due to the war in Ukraine, Russia's not-so-impressive military capabilities have been further weakened. In addition, the organized and orchestrated actions of the Western countries will have a negative impact on the Russian economy, which is intended to reduce economic ties with Russia as much as possible. Added to this, heavy sanctions will impair Russia's financial and economic opportunities in the medium and long term. Given Russia's military-political and financial circumstances, it is quite likely that the Kremlin's efforts against neighboring democracies will become more active in the information environment, given that such activity incurs fewer financial costs. Russia will likely try to use elements of soft power to influence neighboring democracies and prevent their political and economic rapprochement with the West by offering itself as an attractive alternative. In the future, it will be important to observe how an economically and militarily weak Russia will launch aggressive information operations against small democracies in the region, and how much it will consider the mistakes made during information operations in Ukraine.

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2. Dudley Knox Library  
Naval Postgraduate School  
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