

New Face of War:

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Technological development is advancing so fast that our society finds it hard to adopt to the new reality it is creating - new information environment ¹, new power relationships between states, organizations and individuals and new ways of waging a war as well. New-generation warfare has blurred the boundaries between the peacetime and the war and it does not necessarily involve usage of conventional force. Instead of the land, the air and the sea, the new-generation war takes the advantage of the modern information environment. Today, it has become easier and potentially cheaper to break enemy's ability to resist by applying targeted cyber and informational attacks rather than by employing conventional military force.

¹ An example of how the information environment is defined according to the US Info Ops doctrine: "The information environment is the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information. It consists of three dimensions - physical, informational, and cognitive. The physical dimension is composed of command and control systems, key decision makers, and supporting infrastructure that enable individuals and organizations to create effects. The informational dimension specifies where and how information is collected, processed, stored, disseminated, and protected. The cognitive dimension encompasses the minds of those who transmit, receive, and respond to or act on information." http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_13.pdf

New Warfare, New “Weapons”

When NATO was created in 1949, the understanding of a state of war was pretty straight forward - tanks rolling over the borders, army shelling the cities, airplanes dropping bombs and enemy's army marching across the terrain. Now we are facing a new reality where organized trolling on social media networks, manipulative TV programs, hacked email correspondence and cyber-attack on banking systems can achieve as detrimental effects on our societies and governments as a large-scale conventional military attack.



Of course, we can quote Sun Tzu to argue the point that the art of subduing an enemy without conventional fighting was at the core of military art already around 500 years BC. But when Sun Tzu made his point he could not have imagined the scale and speed of digital information which we need to process in the 21st century. Likewise, he could not have imagined the scale of deception and manipulation that has become possible in the inter-connected, digital world.

Our societies have become highly dependent on the information environment and new technologies. Our decision-making cycle has shrunk immensely and often we are forced into situations when we have to act in a matter of seconds, having been subjected simultaneously to numerous units of information of uncertain origin. The same applies to our politicians and military leaders and this makes the decision-making process increasingly difficult and the manipulation - increasingly easy. This allows for relatively simple ways of weaponization of the information - processing and channeling information to achieve desired military effects. Moreover, thanks to the new technologies, source attribution often becomes difficult or impossible, so we might not even know for sure whom we are up against.

Faced by this new reality, we must ask ourselves: how do we perceive the ongoing conflicts in the world? What forms our judgments about them? How much of that information which forms our perceived reality can we actually verify? Or, better still, how much of that information we think requires the verification?

New-generation War in Ukraine

Throughout the centuries, human history has witnessed conflicts, which were construed as seemingly internal clashes between groups of interest or freedom-fighting separatists and an oppressor state, whereas in reality it has been an attack by a state on another state. The most recent example in the Europe is the war in Ukraine which is still being portrayed as an internal conflict, although the direct involvement of Russian military troops has been proven on multiple occasions – not the least of which is the recent report by the Atlantic Council “Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin’s War in Ukraine”². Although there is a war ongoing on the ground, still the fight about people’s perception of these events is no less important.

There have been numerous reports and analysis on the Crimea operation when the peninsula was annexed without firing a single shot. The operation would not have been as successful if Russia did not take all advantages of the new information environment, including long before the actual conflict. The ongoing war in the east of Ukraine continues to demonstrate the importance of targeted action within the information environment to achieve the desired end-state: creating certain perception and beliefs in the minds of all concerned, starting from the groups directly involved in a conflict and their “international judges”, down to individual members of our societies.

The strategic objectives of the Kremlin’s information campaign against Ukraine have been:

- undermining our perception of the world order as we know it;
- creating and maintaining a permanent state of confusion and destabilization;
- deliberately misinterpreting and thus distorting the core Euro-Atlantic values which serve as a basis of our democratic societies;
- distracting from the causes and objective circumstances of the conflict, obstructing self-reflection and discussion on solution scenarios.

²<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/hiding-in-plain-sight-putin-s-war-in-ukraine-and-boris-nemtsov-s-putin-war>

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On the operational level, the Kremlin used the new information environment to demonize the adversary (Ukraine), to demoralize Ukrainian population and armed forces, to legitimize its own activities to the general public, to mobilize target populations and to promote own political elite. If all of that can be achieved, then there is really little need to resort to the use of conventional military force in order to achieve the desired political end-state. But in order to achieve this, the Kremlin needs to have a supportive mechanism, rooted into its political ideology.

The perception Russia attempts to create is that Ukraine (particularly Crimea) is the historic part of the Russian World³ and there is no such a thing as an independent Ukrainian nation. Therefore, Russia finds its duty to protect the people of Ukraine from the new, illegitimate government with neo-Nazi sentiments that tries to impose absurd nationalistic policies on the Russian people of Ukraine - the ones who only wish to re-unite with the “motherland”. If Russia succeeds in its plans, then nobody would question its activities in Ukraine, including the people themselves. Hence, we witnessed such active weaponization of the informational environment by Russia starting with the active propaganda campaigns and ending with even more subtle measures discussed below in the article.

Ukrainian society initially responded by mobilizing like-minded volunteers for the establishment of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre to coordinate government’s messages and fight back on the mass media front, setting-up of the StopFake.org to unmask black propaganda and fakes. There was even the anonymous activist group - the “Cyber Hundred”, which engaged in a narrative-driven cyber-fight with the pro-Russian “Cyber Berkut”. Those are the most well-known examples. Now the Ukrainian government has undertaken an initiative to strengthen its capability in strategic communications and in addition, it works on the State Information Security Policy under the responsibility of the Ministry of Information Policy, which has been established earlier this year. The key questions in the public discussions are as follows: how to define an attack in the new information environment and how to respond to it in a best way whilst adhering

³ Russian World is a concept and soft power tool developed under the President Putin. Since 2007 it has been formalised under the foundation with identical name, outreaching to estimated 150 million people abroad whom Russia defines as their compatriots abroad or foreign citizens belonging to the Russian World due to historic, cultural or other ties, or simply because of their interest in Russia.

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to the core value of the freedom of speech. There is an increasing talk among the experts, and not only in Ukraine, that democratic systems should have some protection mechanisms when they face informational aggression undermining the sovereignty of the state, attempting to distort the core values of a democratic society and manipulating with the perceptions of the people by the use of active propaganda campaigns. Centralization of the power, censorship and disconnection from the world wide web clearly are not the right answers.



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“Through the Looking-glass”

In order to decide on prevention measures, one has to understand the premise of the Kremlin operation. One can not be guided by traditional understanding of state ideology or assumption that there is a certain logical pattern to follow in order to make it possible to predict further developments. There is a logic, but a different one; very comfortable for the uncertain reality of the new-generation war.

The Kremlin’s ideology under the rule of President Putin is not one of the classic political ideologies, as we know them. It is multi faced, opportunistic, “liquid”, shape-shifting, consisting of elements of different political ideologies which allows making friends where and how convenient. The Kremlin’s approach is to present different (sometimes even conflicting) narratives to different audiences in order to create the desired perception and exploit any point of the perceived common interest to advance one’s goals.

British documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis in his short work on a non-linear war⁴ explains how the deliberate maintenance of the state

⁴First aired on Charlie Brooker's 2014 Wipe, 30 December 2014

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of confusion helps to support a system of political control. He speaks about the “grey cardinal” behind President Putin’s success - his advisor and former Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Surkov. Curtis argues that this constantly changing political environment resembling a theatre performance was created by Surkov to paralyze any opposition (either internal or external) in order to make it impossible for anybody to distinguish the reality from the falsehood⁵. Surkov’s idea of the non-linear war where one never knows what the enemy is up to or, in fact, who the real enemy is, perfectly fits the Kremlin’s political ideology being construed as a cluster of different ideas allowing shape-shifting and showing of different “faces” to different target audiences.

As Ariel Cohen put it already down in 2006, the new Kremlin’s political ideology combines controversial elements of democratic and market rhetoric with deliberate actions of power centralization and ideological and economic nationalism bordering on protectionism⁶. The current ideology combines ideas from the “Westernisers”, the “Great Russians” (essentially – chauvinists), and the “Eurasianists”. In his recent book **“The Surreal Heart of the New Russia: Nothing is True and Everything is Possible”** (2014), Peter Pomerantsev goes further to describe the Kremlin’s current ideology as something allowing to switch between European right-wing nationalists, the far-left and even conservatives – all being seduced by a different message, being either anti-EU, anti-US or anti-gay. “And the result is an array of voices, working away at global audiences from different angles, producing a cumulative echo chamber for Kremlin support,”⁷ Pomerantsev states. However, it is not just about gathering support. It is also about confusion and permanent state of uncertainty that helps to keep things under the ruling elite’s control and at the same time, limits the opposition’s ability to act strategically. Similarly, one could argue that Kremlin’s supporters can never be sure what exactly they are supporting and there might come a time when the new ideology turns against them.

⁵The video is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOY4Ka-GBus>

⁶Cohen, A. “Putin’s Legacy and United Russia’s New Ideology” (2006) <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2006/06/putins-legacy-and-united-russias-new-ideology>

⁷Pomerantsev, P. “The Surreal Heart of the New Russia: Nothing is True and Everything is Possible”, Public Affairs (2014), p. 234

Role of the Russian World

Such a system is difficult to sustain but the Kremlin has shown its commitment by allocating increasingly large resources to expand its mass media abroad (for example, the recent creation of the Sputnik news agency) and to develop a network of influence via international government-sustained foundations like the “Russian World” foundation and the “Foundation for the support and protection of rights for compatriots abroad”. A lot has been done since 2006 by President Putin to promote the idea of the Russian World (the foundation was formally established in 2007).

Its key purpose is to keep Russia’s compatriots under the one informational umbrella and the key areas of interest are the former USSR countries with the largest Russian-speaking populations (importantly, those do not have to be ethnic Russians).

Recent investigation by “Re:Baltica” published in the Latvian magazine “IR”⁸ illustrates how the Kremlin directs money through its foundations to a diverse network of NGO’s in the Baltic States. Current estimate stands at 1,5 million EUR for around 40 organizations in the past 3 years, but the actual amount could be larger as the above mentioned data covers only the officially declared money which the NGO’s have received from those Russian foundations. The task of these NGO’s,



Normunds Mezviets

⁸ Jemberga S., Salu M., Cernausks S., article “Miljons no Kremla”, IR #34, 27.08.-2.09.2015., p. 14-19

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according to the statements of the security services of the Baltic States and their Government representatives, is to participate in an influence operation. The Head of Latvian Security Police Normunds Mezviets says: “The key function of these NGO’s is to implement influence activities in the information domain. They are being used [by the Kremlin] as agents of information influence and their task is to construe certain messages in the public opinion which would correspond to the interest of Russia.” The investigation also reveals that the money is being routed also via NGO’s registered in other EU member states, hence becoming more difficult to track.

As the website of the “Russian World” foundation states, they estimate around 300 million people belonging to the Russian World. Provided that most of them use Russian language media offered by broadcasters under the narrative control of the Kremlin, it gives Russia an enormous resource supporting the Kremlin policies and actions. It also gives an array of voices through the individuals on social media, opinion leaders, NGO’s and political parties to help the Kremlin sustain and promote the desired perception of the conflict in Ukraine. Finally yet importantly, it has allowed creating of an international network of organizations that can mobilize people for action.

Your Chance to Get “Alternative Opinion”

If you have passed through the streets of London this year, for example, then you might have come across the posters of the RT TV (formerly known as “Russia Today”) suggesting that it is able to offer you an alternative view to the media dominated by the agenda of your home politicians. When switching the channel, you are immediately persuaded by a high quality news making, professional-looking TV hosts of foreign origin and skillful visual and content manipulation. The Kremlin has been investing huge resources in the further development of the RT channel, setting up the Sputnik news agency that operates under the same slogan and increasing its audience abroad. Obviously, there is a strategic understanding of how much support it can bring to any operation like Crimea, when it is the right time.

The audiences abroad are not the only thing that the Kremlin cares about. The Kremlin-controlled media presents itself also to the domestic audience as being the only mouthpiece of truth, revealing information that the West and Ukrainian Government are trying to hide from the people. In reality the home audience is exposed to a narrative control which excludes alternative views and promotes a single (Kremlin’s) position by using methods that are truly “alternative” to the free, professional media world. “When you go to check (through friends, news wires, anyone who isn’t Ostankino) whether there really are fascists taking over Ukraine or whether there are children being crucified, you will find it’s all untrue and the women who said they saw it all, are actually hired extras dressed up as “eye-witnesses”, and the whole line between fact and fiction at Ostankino has become irrelevant,”¹⁰ - Peter Pomerantsev suggests.

¹⁰ Pomerantsev, P. “The surreal heart of the new Russia: Nothing is true and everything is possible”, Publicaffairs (2014) P.230

Informational “Siege”

One of the tactics of a successful information attack implementations is the assuring that the desired information is present via a multitude of channels. The Kremlin uses not only televisions, other traditional media channels, its supportive network of foundations, NGO's and political parties for this purpose, but it also takes advantages of the modern technologies that allows reaching multiple audiences though the diverse platforms and at a very high speed.

The online platforms allow for a great deal of covert activities - the much discussed organized trolling over the online and social media is a bold example of it. However, Dr. Rebecca Goolsby of the US Office of Naval Research offers a new concept that she calls the social cyber attack ¹¹. This approach has been widely used by the Kremlin supporters since the well-coordinated actions and messages lead to a conclusion that all this gradually takes an organized form.

Social cyber attack does not strictly fall under the cyber security, communications science or terrorism studies. It is interdisciplinary just like many other modern phenomena. The idea of a social cyber attack demonstrates how, by manipulating a “signal” in the social media, one can promote the chaotic mass behavior, the escalation of rumor, confusion, panic and even violence. Such “signals” can have any form starting from the falsified photos or videos, or a status post using false identity offering highly alarming information that is designed in a way to drive audience into hysteric response – preferably in the real life, not only in the virtual domain. This correlates with the approach in psychological operations when rumors are deliberately spread in order to cause fear, hatred or (unfounded) hope. During the conflict in Ukraine, the social media used to spread rumors about large refugee flows, soldiers deserting Ukrainian army, Ukrainian militaries being extremely violent towards the local population and even resorting to cannibalism, and the last but not the least - contaminating the water. This informational “siege” exposes the vulnerability of our societies since the social media platforms are trust-based and the manipulative “signal” can easily go viral due to the obvious presence of inter-relations between the users and our lack of understanding that it is not only the TV-set where the government-sponsored propaganda may appear.

¹¹ Goolsby, R. “On Cyber Security, Crowdsourcing and Social Cyber Attack” (2015), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/cybersecurity-crowdsourcing-and-social-cyber-attack>

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Edward Lucas, in his book “The New Cold War” (2014), calls the countries bordering the Russian Federation, including the Baltic States and Georgia, the “theatre of the New Cold War”. In fact, E.Lucas refers to Georgia as the “hottest spot for the New Cold War”, describing how the attempt of ideological and economic break-away from the Russian World resulted into economic warfare, matched by military measures, which, following a sequence of well-planned provocations, eventually lead to the 2008 August War with Russia. Back to that point, Russia had also used the pre-text of defending its compatriots abroad as it did in Crimea and is still continuing to do with the east of Ukraine. It is of utmost importance for Georgia to take the lessons from the ongoing new-generation war against Ukraine and start to integrate the knowledge in its defence, security, legal and education system.

Having learned from the 2008 War, Georgia has already made several important implementations by adopting a state strategy on Cyber Security and establishing the Cyber Security Bureau under the Ministry of Defence. Georgia is also working on increasing its strategic communications capability by establishing StratCom departments in the government agencies and looking to attract the expertise from their Western allies. Likewise, the NATO’s Substantial Assistance Package granted to Georgia at the Wales Summit in 2014, involves allied support in the above-mentioned areas.

Georgian civic society has made its effort to contribute to the analysis of the threat through organizing the expert’s discussions and issuing the reports on the subject - initiatives by www.damoukidebloba.com and the Media Development Foundation can be mentioned as examples.

Still, more remains to be done. The governments under informational or any other form of pressure from the Kremlin are becoming more vocal about it in the public discourse. It is becoming an issue for consideration also for the Georgian government.



Edward Lucas

The key lessons to implement include:

- **Unite the efforts of the civic society and the government for the analysis of the threats and opportunities offered by the new information environment and related levers of influence which can be applied by an adversary;**
- Strengthen the national media landscape by offering plurality of high-quality content, encouraging and protecting investigative journalism, and addressing the transparency of media ownership;
- **Support the quality content in the languages of minorities through Public Broadcasting as well as exploring alternative platforms like online and social media. This can be implemented effectively only after an accurate target audience analysis has been performed in order to understand not only the media consumption habits but also clear the general characteristics and interests in order to make the content and delivery methods relevant;**
- Develop the content-sharing platforms with partner countries for Russian-language content corresponding to Western standards (news and entertainment) in order to decrease costs and promote common effort;
- **Support the grass-root initiatives for exposing manipulated or fake information in the traditional, new and social media, and encouraging international cooperation for sharing the findings and alerting the public;**
- Develop the mechanisms for the identification of the organized political trolling; monitor, prevent and investigate the social cyber-attacks and introduce laws defining liability;
- **Significantly strengthen the national authorities responsible for the media monitoring in order to prevent illegal, hostile content engaging in hate-speech, promoting acts of violence and war and spreading falsified information;**
- Introduce the mass media and digital media literacy as a part of the standard school curriculums in order to ensure critical thinking of the society;
- **Strengthen the international cooperation in terms of cyber security and developing legal language to reflect the evolving threats in the social media platforms.**

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Some of these recommendations might take a generation to bring about significant changes but it does not mean that we should not start acting upon them today. At the same time, some of them can be implemented quickly and easily enough to allow the society and the government to increase their resistance against the influence campaigns.

In conclusion, there are three main take-aways from this entanglement of the Kremlin's approach to the new generation war. Firstly, there is no fair play as far as Russia is concerned. Secondly, we need to adapt our thinking and systems to the new generation war. Thirdly, we need to learn to detect the early warning signals of the new generation war since it will not start with conventional forces crossing the borders. It might never come to it, but we can lose the new-generation war and our independence without even realizing it.

