PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS DURING THE RUSSIAN WAR OF AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE

Marian Nicușor STANCU
"Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
stancumariannicusor@yahoo.com

George CĂZĂNARU
"Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
caznarugeorge@yahoo.ro

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the way and motivation of the Russian Federation to carry out psychological operations in the war of aggression that it has unleashed in Ukraine from the perspective of the information environment. These operations are specific to the cognitive layer of the information environment and are aimed at influencing the perceptions, behavior, and decisions of both the Ukrainian population and the international community by using disinformation, propaganda, and manipulation. By analyzing these operations, it highlights how Russia has exploited the lack of robust regulation of social networks. The analysis underlines the importance of developing effective strategies to counter these operations by increasing information resilience and strengthening protection mechanisms against harmful external influences.

KEYWORDS: communications, information environment, propaganda, psychological operations, war

1. Introduction

The complexity of today's security context and the challenges we face generate, through the sheer amount of information, real cognitive ripples throughout the modern world.

Throughout history, conflicts have been part of and have contributed significantly to modernization, innovation, and, implicitly, evolution. Today's war of aggression waged by the Russian Federation in Ukraine is the first large-scale conflict in Europe and in the vicinity of the world's most powerful politico-military and politico-economic alliances, NATO and the EU.

The significant differences with the great wars of the last century, apart from developments in military technologies and the way of fighting, are based on the information environment and the tools by which people, combatants, and non-combatants alike, can be cognitively affected.

Modern warfare is at the cognitive level, which is not always related to a conflict involving kinetic weapons, and success or failure is largely determined by psychological operations – PsyOps (NATO, 2019).

2. Historical Milestones. The Road to Today's War of Aggression

To be able to understand the complexity of the Russian dictator's motivation to attack Ukraine, it is imperative to be able to understand its roots, which date back hundreds of years.

Below, are the most important historical milestones for a good

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understanding of the Russian Federation's motivation to attack Ukraine.

The starting point of Russian-Ukrainian tensions is what President Putin calls "Kyivan Rus", a confederation of principalities formed in the 9th century, referring to Russia and Ukraine as creating "one people". The union referred to was forged by the Vikings of the Rus tribe, who united with Slavic tribes found in the area. From the middle of the 11th century, the confederation began to fragment into semi-autonomous principalities.

In the 17th century, large parts of Ukraine became part of the Tsarist Empire, and with its disintegration in 1917, Ukraine became independent for a time. This independence was short-lived, as Soviet Russia soon regained it.

Another turning point is the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, labeled by Putin as *"the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century"*. After splitting from Russia, Ukraine became the world's third-largest nuclear power but gave up its nuclear arsenal in 1994 in exchange for strong security guarantees from Britain, Russia, and the US by signing the Budapest Memorandum. France and China backed the Memorandum by signing a separate declaration.

In 1997, a "Friendship Agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation" was signed, in which Moscow recognized the borders of its neighbor, including the Crimean Peninsula, which was inhabited mainly by Russians.

The first major diplomatic crisis between the two countries occurred in 2003, when the Russian Federation, under President Putin's leadership, began building the Taman-Tuzla breakwater in the Kerch Strait. The situation eased after the leaders of the two countries met, but it also marked Putin Russia's first intention to expand.

Russia has always tried to get involved in Ukraine's internal politics, using all means at its disposal. In the 2004 presidential elections, Russia supported Viktor Yanukovich. Through the "Orange Revolution", the Ukrainians prevented the election from being falsified and Viktor Yushchenko, a pro-Western candidate, secured victory. Under President Yushchenko, Russia cut off gas supplies to Ukraine twice, in 2006 and 2009.

In 2008, President Putin demonstrated that the Russian Federation was not willing to allow Ukraine full independence. He is protesting against US President George W Bush's desire to include Ukraine and Georgia in NATO. Germany and France, members of NATO and the EU, did not support the US president's intention. At the NATO summit in Bucharest the same year, Ukraine and Georgia were offered the prospect of NATO membership, but without a clear timetable.

Lacking firm support to join the world's most powerful politico-military alliance, Ukraine moves towards the European Union, with an association agreement to be signed in 2013. The Russian Federation puts economic pressure on Ukraine, which decided to suspend its association agreement with the EU.

This move by the Ukrainian government has sparked widespread pro-European protests, also known as EuroMaidan, after the name of Kyiv's Independence Square, "Maidan Nezalejnosti". Several violent clashes take place, in which dozens of Ukrainians lose their lives and hundreds are injured. In February 2014, President Yanukovych fled to Russia, and Russian-speaking groups triggered the Crimean crisis, not agreeing to the political changes. Also, from the end of February, unmarked Russian soldiers and military vehicles, together with the Russian-speaking population, occupy public institutions and much of Crimea. By early March, about 60% of the population of the Crimean Peninsula was ethnic Russian. On March 16 a so-called referendum is held to choose between

Nazism and Russia. At the end of the referendum, the Crimean Peninsula is annexed by Russia, but without solid international recognition (Embassy of Ukraine in Romania, 2021).

In April 2014, pro-Russian groups in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions broke into government offices and armed themselves. Moreover, these two regions have called themselves "people's republics". After the presidential elections, Ukraine launched a military offensive called "anti-terrorist intervention" in the two regions.

In June 2014, the new Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko met Vladimir Putin at events marking the 70th anniversary of the Normandy landings. The Ukrainian army drives out the separatists, but Moscow intervenes heavily with military forces. The Minsk I agreement appears to bring the conflict to an end. The provisions were not respected and in 2015 a new agreement was signed in Minsk, the Minsk II agreement, signed by Russia, Germany, France, and Ukraine. The situation eases slightly, but the conflict between the two countries continues in eastern Ukraine. An important gain in de-escalating the conflict was made in 2019 when the withdrawal of some forces from certain demarcation lines was achieved. After the "Normandy format" in Paris in December 2019, President Putin no longer wanted to talk to Ukraine's current President Volodimir Zelensky.

Russia's last move, which would have sent a clear message about its long-term intentions, came in December 2021, when Vladimir Putin asked the US for guarantees that Ukraine would never join NATO and would never receive military aid. The North Atlantic Alliance firmly rejected the Russian Federation's request.

Since spring 2021, the Russian Federation has been reinforcing military capabilities near its border with Ukraine, and by the end of the year, it is massing significant forces near its borders. Several European leaders hold talks with Vladimir Putin, who, in a press conference with the French president on February 7, 2022, offers a hard-to-understand line about Ukraine from a line in a Russian military song that is obscene and alludes to rape and necrophilia, "*Like it or not, bear it, my beautiful one*" (Ukraine's Official Website, 2024).

Russia – Belarus military exercises follow, and then Russia recognizes the separatist republics and brutally, illegally and illegitimately attacks Ukraine.

3. Information Environment and Psychological Operations

According to Cordray III & Romanych (2005), "*the information environment is a concept based on the idea that the existence and proliferation of information and information systems create a distinct dimension or operating environment. As a combination of tangible (physical computer systems and networks) and intangible (information and decision-making) elements, the information environment is both a resource for military operations and an environment in which armed forces operate*".

NATO (2014) defines psychological operations being "*those planned activities using communication methods and other means directed at approved audiences to influence their perceptions, attitudes, and behavior, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives*".

The primary purpose is to influence approved target audiences to have direct effects on both understanding and will, together with indirect effects on capability (NATO, 2017).

Essential conditions for psychological operations to lead to success:

- Effects-based thinking – consideration must be given to the effect for which an effect has been asked to be generated on audiences and what role it

plays in the overall plan for achieving the stated objectives.

➢ Understanding and empathy – these two characteristics are particularly important for achieving objectives. Target audience analysis is the tool to identify issues of concern such as vulnerabilities, current and desired behaviors, accessibility, and susceptibility.

➢ Evaluation – ongoing analysis and evaluation of target audiences is extremely important for refining and adjusting psychological operations.

➢ Early integration and coordination – psychological operations need to be integrated from the outset of the planning process, and coordination is important to ensure that other activities being undertaken do not undermine them or vice versa.

➢ Timeliness – psychological operations must be conducted at the right time to generate the desired effect.

➢ Truth – psychological operations must be based on truth. Using untruths is counterproductive in the long run.

➢ Consistency – although products may vary, depending on location, culture, and other factors, psychological operations must be consistent, both vertically and horizontally.

➢ Attributability – to maintain credibility, products must be attributable.

➢ Credibility – the success of psychological operations depends on credibility from the perspective of target audiences.

NATO (2014) gives the simplest categorization of psychological operations in terms of assumption or attribution and divides them into three categories:

– White PsyOps – assumed;

– Gray PsyOps – not assumed;

– Black PsyOps – assigned to another entity.

Concerning the actions of the Russian Federation, we can conclude that PsyOps products are either unassumed or attributed to another entity, which significantly decreases their credibility.

The means of transmission of the products of these operations can be oral, written, visual – images, audio-video, material, and financial. Sometimes more than one means of transmission is used to increase the chances of success (NATO, 2022).

3.1. Why are Psychological Operations Important?

All actions or inactions of a force have a psychological impact (NATO, 2023b).

Every activity (action) of a force has psychological implications that can be harnessed to influence individuals or groups of people.

Psychological operations can amplify success, sustain/support deception, and induce early surrender.

3.2. Psychological Operations in Russia's War of Aggression in Ukraine

Since the time of the Covid 19 pandemic, the Russian Federation's products of influence have become increasingly visible and have been consistently promoted on social media. The Russian Federation's motivation for developing psychological operations with a high chance of success is based on three aspects: the Russian-speaking population, the old ties between the two states, and shared values (religion, society, perceptions of governance, frustrations).

The main communication channels used by the Russian influence machine are social networks – Telegram, TikTok, and Facebook, national and satellite media, its staff, politicians, vloggers, bloggers, pro-Russian influencers, and artists, and the church.

Of all these channels, the ones with a superior effect are social networks, which amplify messages in a very short time, identify specific target audiences, and distribute messages to international audiences.

3.3. Main Themes Used by the Russian Federation's Propaganda Machine

➢ Ukraine:

Ukrainians and Russians are brothers, and the West profits from the conflict.

Ukraine is just a battlefield for the West.

There are US bacteriological and radiological laboratories in Ukraine.

➢ Russia:

Ukrainians are Nazis (Azov Battalion). The Russian Federation invested 200 million rubles, about 1.5 million US dollars, in a propaganda movie about the war of aggression waged in Ukraine, "The Witness", which turned out to be a big flop for Putin's propaganda machine.

The West wants to destroy Russia and its fundamental values.

There are US bacteriological and radiological laboratories in Ukraine.

Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO is a direct threat to Russia. "Special operation" has not progressed further because it is a fight against NATO and not against Ukraine.

A defeat of Ukraine will lead to the liberation of Palestine - Dagestan. A concocted concoction by which Russian propaganda has tried to appeal to the Russian Muslim population in Dagestan, using the conflict in the Levant and the grievances of the population in the Islamic region.

➢ Romania:

Western-style democracy has failed.

There are US bacteriological and radiological laboratories in Ukraine.

NATO and/or the EU are weak and cannot offer any relevant resistance to Russia.

NATO provoked Russia and thus triggered the crisis in Ukraine.

3.4. What is New?

According to Meta's latest quarterly report on adversarial threats, published on August 15, 2024, Russia remains number one in social networks for "coordinated inauthentic behavior" (CIB), with the most covert influence actions (Meta, 2024).

Meta-analysis also shows Russia as having three times more CIB networks than China and 25% more than Iran.

Another important point is that AI-based tactics offer only productivity and content generation gains.

The trends observed, after the illegal and illegitimate invasion of Ukraine, in the campaigns carried out by the Russian Federation highlight the will to undermine Ukraine both domestically and internationally. The narratives promoted in social networks are similar, which reinforces the idea of coordinated actions with a well-defined goal.

Another trend highlighted in the report is that more or less real companies continue to appear behind Russian Federation influence operations online.

Moreover, Russian techniques and procedures have not changed. It can be concluded that the effort is for as much information as possible, which is indicative of the desire to flood the information environment with misleading content, even though the media products are of very low quality.

The concentration of effort remains however in the web area, to maintain the network of sites through which they maintain their misleading content in the long term, taking into account the efforts of social platforms to remove misleading content.

Here it can be concluded that cyber operators are taking advantage of the lack of strong legislation and action by EU and NATO Member States on misleading and false information.

In addition, the target audience pursued by Russian Federation campaigns has several characteristics common to all countries, including poor education,

nationalist tendencies towards extremism, and strict religious adherence.

Perhaps the most important trend observed in Russian Federation campaigns is the desire to co-opt real people to promote their content, thus standing a better chance of credibility with actors who support Russian narratives.

The Russian Federation's operations also aim to attract public figures, journalists, or influencers, to induce them to take up the messages of the influence campaigns and gain credibility in the public space.

Here, too, we can talk about the useful idiots, the unaware, who promote Russian narratives without verifying them and failing to understand their small but important role in the ecosystem of disinformation and influence generated by the Russian Federation.

3.5. Reactions and Mitigation

Reactions at the international level have not hesitated to appear in this global disinformation campaign started by Russian propaganda, even if measures have been taken with some delay. At the EU level, some radio/TV stations have been banned and considerable resources have been allocated to countering information threats.

As far as NATO is concerned, pages demystifying Russian propaganda narratives – NATO-Russia relations: setting the record straight and NATO-Russia relations: the facts – have been opened and intensively publicized.

At the international level, there has been a growing emphasis on fact-checking. Several projects have been initiated against false information – StopFake, VoxCheck, Myth Detector, and FactCheck #Ukrainefacts. Several campaigns have also been run in education, reporting from official sources and source checking.

4. Conclusions

The PsyOps actions of the Russian Federation were partially successful in the first part of the conflict and very rarely during the conflict in Ukraine. This was also possible because the whole world was dealing with a new form of information aggression after a pandemic period when disinformation campaigns were started before information campaigns.

The most successful channels remain social networks, and Russian propaganda has been using them effectively since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The evolution of AI may bring major changes in COGWAR. In their latest bulletin, Artificial Intelligence in Precision Persuasion, researchers from the NATO Center of Excellence for Strategic Communication presented a study showing that the social networks where AI is used the most are Facebook and VKontakte. TikTok and X follow these two networks (Bergmanis-Korāts, Haiduchyk & Shevtsov, 2024).

Even if important steps have been taken in this direction, the lack of timely and forward-looking solutions may lead to the loss of the most important war, the cognitive war. In support of this is the lack of social platform algorithms to mitigate fake content or information attacks.

Although the information environment was quickly flooded with Russian propaganda, EU and NATO reactions were swift, which significantly minimized the possibility of negative impacts. At both the EU and NATO levels, precautionary measures and increased monitoring of the information environment were taken (NATO, 2023 a).

Going forward, psychological operations and the resulting products remain of paramount importance to gain the initiative and advantage in the information environment to achieve operational objectives.

Concerning possible Russian Federation psychological operations, they will focus on replaying older narratives of access to cheap resources, and nuclear rhetoric, and replaying narratives based on societal values, with an emphasis on religion.

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