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## COUNTERACTING RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN INFORMATION SPHERE

## ПРОТИДІЯ РОСІЙСЬКІЙ АГРЕСІЇ В ІНФОРМАЦІЙНІЙ СФЕРІ

## ПРОТИВОДЕЙСТВИЕ РОССИЙСКОЙ АГРЕССИИ В ИНФОРМАЦИОННОЙ СФЕРЕ

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**Abstract.** *Aggression of Russia against Ukraine has implemented the concept of modern hybrid threats. Information assets are becoming instruments of force. Opportunities have been created to combine them with armed force. Russia's regular use of negative information and psychological influence on Ukrainian society is one of the most significant threats to information security of Ukraine. The problem of effective opposition against Russian mass media propaganda today, is extremely urgent for the EU and Ukraine, where the strategic narrative is in the process of formation. In fact, the cooperation between Ukraine, the EU and other international actors in this aspect would be topical and useful for all sides.*

**Key words:** *hybrid warfare, aggression of Russia against Ukraine, information space, information security, strategic communications, propaganda and counter-propaganda, strategic narrative, EU recommendations.*

**Анотація.** *Агресія Росії проти України реалізувала концепцію новітньої гібридної загрози. Інформаційні засоби стають інструментами силового впливу. Створено можливості для їх поєднання з військовими силовими засобами Системне здійснення РФ негативного інформаційно-психологічного впливу на українське суспільство є однією з найбільш значущих загроз інформаційній безпеці України. Проблема ефективної протидії пропагандистському впливу російських ЗМІ сьогодні надзвичайно актуальна для ЄС та*

України, де стратегічний нарратив перебуває в процесі формування. І тут, дійсно, співпраця України, ЄС та інших міжнародних акторів є надзвичайно важливим та плідним аспектом взаємодії.

**Ключові слова:** гібридна війна, агресія РФ проти України, інформаційний простір, інформаційна безпека, стратегічні комунікації, пропаганда і контрпропаганда, стратегічний нарратив, рекомендації ЄС.

**Аннотація.** Реализация современной концепции гибридной угрозы проявилась в факте продолжающейся российской агрессии против Украины. Информационные методы становятся инструментами силового влияния. Созданы условия для их объединения с военными силовыми методами. Системное осуществление РФ негативного информационно-психологического воздействия на украинское общество является одной из наиболее значимых угроз информационной безопасности Украины. Проблема эффективного противодействия пропагандистскому влиянию российских СМИ сегодня выступает особо актуальной для Украины, учитывая, что стратегический нарратив Украины находится еще в процессе становления. При этом сотрудничество Украины, ЕС и других международных организаций является крайне важным аспектом.

**Ключевые слова:** гибридная война, агрессия РФ против Украины, информационное пространство, информационная безопасность, стратегические коммуникации, пропаганда и контрпропаганда, стратегический нарратив, рекомендации ЕС.

**Introduction.** Today, the Ukrainian society has to perceive and comprehend the scale of the RF information war against Ukraine and search for effective mechanisms for its counteraction. The experience of countering the information warfare in Ukraine was already obtained at the initial stage of the undeclared war, while forms and methods of responding to the corresponding threats began to take shape. The importance of information factor is stressed by the elaboration and adoption of the Doctrine of Information Security of Ukraine (2017), where basic principles of information security, directions of state policy in the information sphere, threats and countermeasures against destructive information impact of the Russian Federation are indicated [1].

**The purpose** of the given paper is to justify the expediency of using modern means to counteract the devastating informational influence of the Russian Federation and the important role of Ukraine's international cooperation with the European Union to develop effective strategic communications with its own nationwide narrative as the most effective way of fighting against the propaganda of the rival in a hybrid war.

**Review of literature.** Problems of counteraction to information operations and counterpropaganda were studied by domestic researchers such as A. Barovskaya, V. Gorbulin, O. Dodonov, D. Dubov, V. Konakh, O. Litvinenko, A. Moskalenko, M. Ozhevan, G. Pocheptsov. The majority of experts and political scholars, agree that Russia unleashed and now continues a full-fledged war against Ukraine – "hybrid" in form and "asymmetric" in content. The new quality of hybrid warfare lies in a radical shift of accents to motivate actions. RF military attacks and aggressive actions of other type look like forced actions of Russia aimed at protection of the downtrodden, overcoming the "world evil". "Soft" and "hard" power methods enable to carry out real tough operations using long words as a cover for Russian aggression and on the other hand to construct pseudo-events.

**Key research findings.** Russia, having employed all available resources of means and methods of information and psychological warfare, along with the military campaign against Ukraine conducted the information war both in its own and in Ukrainian and international media space.

Successful hybrid tactics of the Russians in Crimea, as analysts consider, was caused not so much by the integrated use of various power instruments, as by the reluctance or unwillingness of the population to resist, and by a partial betrayal of the Ukrainian military and intelligence services [13]. This hybrid warfare was not perceived by the population of Crimea as a real war. This can be explained, because the primary targets of Russian operations in Crimea of late 2013 – early 2014 were television and telecommunication networks. It should be noted that one of the main advantages of the Internet over television is that television has the effect of simultaneous reaching the mass audience of spectators.

Information space, the space of ideas is the key for Russian strategic culture. In approved on December 1, 2016 RF Foreign Policy Concept, much attention is paid to civilization competition and attempts to impose on other countries the own scale of values, which are determined by destabilizing factors in international relations [2].

Russia works efficiently with meta-histories – great stories that explain the inner and outer audience the world's picture, fitting in their context both their actions and the actions of their opponents. These stories are formed with the help of the dominant media (mainstream media), using the narrative for "setting priorities and setting agenda" (agenda setting). Russian ideologists do not expose the course of events and facts with chronological accuracy, but simplify the actual picture, as a result it becomes accessible for understanding, and so on.

The main message of Russian propaganda is simple: the United States is engaged in the fight for dominance in the world. Accordingly, any activities of Russia or any other country dealing with confrontation are worthy of approval and are justified. According to this logic, the association of Euro-Atlantic security, including NATO expansion to the borders of the former socialist camp, and support of Ukraine by the West are both insidious and unacceptable. Central and East European states that now border upon the Alliance, are portrayed as puppets of the United States. This message is adapted for a certain market, depending on the state, and it covers the domestic and foreign policy issues. Thus, a special dimension of aggressive behavior is introduced into action, which is motivated by the creation of a parallel reality as a combination of elements of real and imaginary reality.

According to well-known Ukrainian scholar H. Pocheptsov, the RF is waging the first in the world "sense war" against Ukraine [14]. It is in the sense war, where image and visualization initiate emotional world where there is no place for rational thinking. A prerequisite for maintaining a hybrid warfare is to develop the world-wide social information and cultural space as a powerful mechanism for modelling a reality according to rule: it is real and true which is offered being duly submitted and evaluated in this space, while the true facts are concealed or rejected and pushed away to the periphery. That is why TV through its visualization becomes a powerful instrument of hybrid war.

A stronghold of non-military Russian influence on Western states and neighboring countries is Russia Today TV channel (hereinafter RT) founded in 2005, which is broadcasted in more than 100 world states and has 700 million users (broadcast around the clock) [13]. In 2016, the RT budget was over \$US 400 mln. [10]. Experts mention that the activities of Russian propaganda in the US media space significantly increased with rising interest of American audience towards events in Ukraine [13].

At 2017 Munich Conference on Security, among other problems of discussion special attention was paid to new methods of presenting and following the own point of view on events, and increasing activity of Russian media was mentioned [10], in particular, of "RT America" and "RT UK" TV channels broadcasting from their centres located in Washington and London. Citizens of most world states have an access to RT via the Internet, satellite and cable channels. In addition, RT presents its own product to YouTube (in 2016 the number of views of 5 main chan-

nels exceeded 2 billion) [10]. Among internationally active players there is "MIA Russia Today" that was created basing on "RIA Novosti" and "Voice of Russia" radio. Sputnik News Agency has become a new instrument for distributing pro-Russian content, which uses radio and Internet broadcasts in more than 30 languages and thus appears a multimedia platform for lots of world countries. At the conference it was mentioned that the format of Russian channels enabled their active presence at the TV market of Europe and the USA. Russian disinformation is spread both in an open way – on TV in different languages, and in a hidden way, using some nominally independent journalists, experts and commentators (many of whom have no corresponding legitimate status or authority outside Russia) and Internet trolls (paid propagandists).

Vyacheslav Gusarov, expert of "Information Resistance" Group considers that the target audience of the Kremlin is currently RF population, Russian diaspora abroad, the population of Ukraine, including those in the occupied areas of Donbas, the citizens of Western countries and the countries of BRICS and the Customs Union close to Russia in political views. The expert concludes that today the bulk of information events and measures should be secured by Ukrainian authorities and the diplomatic corps unconditionally supported by media [5].

Regular negative information and psychological influence exerted by the RF on Ukrainian society, is one of the most significant threats to information security of Ukraine. It should be mentioned that the strategy of information influence of Russia on the post-soviet territory is justified in the so-called Russian doctrine, which is not an official document, but concentrates moods of active supporters of some special way and messianic role of Russia. The doctrine envisages the transformation of Russia into "the world power and center of reunited East Slavic lands artificially separated in 1991". Russia is claiming where previously refused to claim, pointing to disputes while previously tried to avoid and veil them, and finally it sees the problem of a catastrophic collapse of the state while once proposed to come to the so-called civilized divorce. In other words, Russia is professing ideology of returning and reunification of those territories of historical Russia, for which, as it is stressed in the doctrine, it has a historical and moral right and which are worth being returned (for Russia, it first of all concerns Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan).

While using media product the authorities of the Russian Federation are trying to achieve a number of goals:

- using difficult socio-economic situation in Ukraine to split Ukrainian society for subsequent rejection of the European integration process;
- to justify the annexation of the part of the territory of a sovereign state, ignoring international law;
- to deprive Ukraine the support of the civilized world by splitting political elites of Europe and the USA;
- to draw attention of Russian citizens from their internal problems to an "external enemy" and to justify illegal actions by the necessity to fight against him.

The reaction to the aggressive actions of Russia in the global media space became looking for new ways and means to oppose Russian propaganda. In order to protect its information space Ukraine has resorted to measures connected with restriction of speech or distribution of content created by the aggressor-state. In general, during 2014 – 2016 because of violations of domestic law revealed during corresponding monitoring, functioning of 73 Russian TV channels, including "First Channel. World Network", "RTR-Planet", "NTV-Mir", "Russia-24", TVCI, "Russia-1", "NTV" and others is limited on the territory of Ukraine [11].

However, experts believe that the challenges facing Ukraine require modernization of the entire system of information security. If you continue trying to counteract the information campaign of the aggressor only by banning speech, Ukraine will lose, because the aggressor is prepared

for it and has certain experience, resources and desire to fight that way. As the Deputy Minister of Information Policy D. Zolotukhin mentioned, in terms of hybrid warfare it is necessary "to recognize that the state should pursue its information policy, and the state has the right to realize it by its authoritative bodies. You may call it 'government propaganda', 'counter-propaganda', 'straykom' 'infopolitics' – whatever you like" [8].

Experts believe the introduction of narratives into masses is the most effective way for the state to oppose the rival's propaganda in terms of hybrid warfare. According to H. Pocheptsov, a narrative is a virtual product which while being transmitted becomes the product of information and is aimed at stimulation of certain physical actions. The narrative sets the system world outlook. We can destroy the basic myth that lies in the basis of Russian propaganda, or we can construct an alternative history that should be a part of national security strategy [Pocheptsov, 2012: 333]. The narrative is actually introducing some particular view of the world into mass consciousness. The narrative creates a barrier effect. If we accept the narrative we simply reject non-corresponding texts. Narratives are structuring reality. When reality is presented in narrative form, it facilitates obtaining information and its assessment.

Thus, the Head of "Stratkom" Ukrainian public organization V. Lipkan defined the meaning of the state strategic communications, he defined it as a "postulate of hybrid world": a demonstration of unity while achieving goals; conviction and effective demonstration of proof of irreversibility of European choice; Ukraine is an independent sovereign state; Ukrainian nation is autochthonous, historical, political, information and security European nation, which itself, consciously and deliberately, even under the threat of war and destruction of the statehood, by its own conscious decision made the European choice, recognized European values as a part of axiological dimension of Ukrainian national identity, Ukrainian nation is aware of itself as a part of European community and the European future; Ukraine has its own place not only in history but in the future as a standalone independent and effective state; Ukraine is to turn from the object of a geopolitical entity into its subject [7].

Of particular importance in combating information threats from Russia is creating a system of international broadcasting, which aims not only at protection of Ukrainian information space, but above all at truthful informing the world community about the events in Ukraine, historical facts, cultural traditions, creating a positive image of the country outside its borders. Recently, in Ukraine there were several channels aimed at broadcasting to foreign audiences, both public and private ones, in particular those channels as UTR, First Ukraine and private Ukraine Today channel.

Experts of the National Institute for Strategic Studies of Ukraine acknowledged that due to objective and subjective reasons the state foreign-language service could not cope with the promotion and protection of national interests abroad [3]. In particular, public information resource Ukrainian National Information Agency "Ukrinform" (November 1996), which was to disseminate information about the state abroad, appeared not to be effective enough, while having all prerequisites to be competitive in the global information market.

In 2015, the Parliament of Ukraine adopted the Bill "On international broadcasting system of Ukraine", which was the main achievement of the Ministry of Information Policy. According to the Bill, the system of state foreign-language broadcast of Ukraine will consist of "Multimedia platform of international broadcasting of Ukraine" (UA/TV) state enterprise and Ukrainian National Information Agency "Ukrinform". As part of reform, Ukrinform was only subjected to rebranding. In contrast to it, UA/TV is a new project which actually combined two TV channels that had existed before – UTR and BTV (Bank TV channel). From the BTV, created by the National Bank of Ukraine in 2011, technical base was taken to use while from UTR – the whole staff of News program editorial board. Creation of the state system of international broadcast-

ing enabled the process of transfer to it virtual instruments of broadcasting in the market of corresponding services from commercial channels. Considering the purpose and motif of functioning of international broadcasting in Ukraine, the reduction of competition in this market is considered to be a positive development [3].

In addition to state initiatives, civil society appears to be rather active while realizing international information policy. On the initiative of the activists, a number of centers providing information about events in Ukraine and its position in the hybrid warfare abroad, was established; they deal with improvement of the image of Ukraine in the information, business and cultural spheres, among them there are: Ukrainian Crisis Media Center (March, 2014), "Stopfeyk" (March, 2014), Free Voice Information Analysis Center (October 2014), "Borysfen Intel" Analytical Center (December, 2012), "I Promote Ukraine" (October, 2014) and others [7].

T. Shevchenko, Director of the Media Law Institute said that civil society and non-governmental organizations are the driving force in the country. According to him, many issues of their initiatives are more useful, more mobile and more efficient for the public. Unfortunately, private centers and NGOs are hardly supported by Ukrainian authorities. Most of these projects remain active due to grants, the own funds and ideological position of their activists. Some of them are financed by partners from abroad. In fact, the community and government initiatives go along, although their methods look very much alike having almost the same goal [7].

Western partners also provide substantial support to Ukraine in the information sphere. In August 2016, the European non-governmental structure Center of European Policy Analysis (CEPA, Poland) together with the Legatum Institute (London) prepared a fairly extensive report on "Winning the information war: technology and counterstrategy to oppose Russian propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe" [4].

The report attempted to comprehensively address the problem of Russia's information war against European countries. They raised a number of topical issues relating to system analysis of disinformation, securing media quality and state reaction. Experts point out that reforming the information sphere involves finding a balance between freedom of speech and challenges of hybrid war. They point out that democratic states in principle cannot be as effective while working in the media (in the formation of a common world) as authoritarian governments. This is compounded by a permanent problem – the weakening of confidence to governments in democratic societies in general. Therefore, according to the authors, the way out should include more transparent and efficient governments and their more effective use of available information, evidence of financial crimes, video of secret military operations, audio-interception.

Another recommendation concerns creation of international structures (such as Global Witness or Transparency International), which can deal with tracking Russian deceptive campaigns (using modern information technology) and "destroy myths" for those key audiences who are able to accept arguments based on facts. However, they expressed doubt on the effectiveness of this work: "Today destroying myths or fact-checking that made by mainstream newspapers will reach only a small audience, and most likely not the one that the Kremlin chose as a target" [4].

The writers of the report put forward an idea to form an international commission led by the Council of Europe, which would assess broadcast of the channels concerning hostile content, misinformation and other violations. The Commission, according to experts, would be the benchmark for weak regulators, help in the dissemination of their findings and ensure independence; while it would define standards for the entire continent and become a platform for a broader discussion of this issue.

Without deconstruction of the narrative created by Russian media, as experts emphasize, it will be extremely difficult (if not impossible, because it is information victory which appears to turn into the establishment of the own narrative). It is necessary to promote the own strategic nar-

ratives able to explain the situation better and more accurately than Russia does. The problem today is extremely urgent for the EU and Ukraine, where the strategic narrative is in the process of formation.

In April 2016 the European Commission adopted and submitted to the European Parliament and the European Council "Common principles combating hybrid threats – the answer of the European Union" [12]. It is a recognition of the European Parliament the fact of Russia's information war against Europe. In p. 3.2 of the EU Common Principles it is stressed the necessity for member states to elaborate coordinated mechanisms of implementing strategic communications to reveal truth and counteract misinformation aiming at [public] exposing hybrid threats. In p. 6 the document also specifies that activities in the field of strategic communications provide for close cooperation with NATO.

The paper argues that provocateurs of hybrid threats can systematically spread misinformation, including within targeted campaigns in social networks, seeking the radicalization of individuals, destabilizing society and the control of political narrative. The ability to respond to hybrid threats, using reasonable strategic communication is of much significance. Providing immediate factual answers and raising public awareness of hybrid threats are major factors in achieving social stability. Strategic communications have to fully use social media and traditional visual, audio and Internet mass media. External Relations of the European Union, basing on the operational activities of the working groups – Eastern and Arab ones – from strategic communications of the European Union (East and Arab Stratcom Task Forces), should optimize linguists who are fluent in the relevant languages (which are not official in the EU), and specialists in social media, who can monitor information and provide targeted communication to respond to misinformation.

Operational Group East StratCom Task Force began its work in September, 2015 [16]. The team of East Stratcom includes five Russian-speaking experts from the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Latvia and Estonia, and is chaired by Giles Portman, who previously worked for the European External Action Service (EU diplomatic service). The practical activities of the group are as follows: monitoring of media sources around the world and identification of the key messages containing disinformation in different languages; direct response to false reports through the "dispel myths" campaign; creating a network of contacts to gather information and its inverse distribution. Experts of the East Strat Com Task Force working group during October 2015 – July 2016 registered 1,649 cases of Russian misinformation spread in the world and European media [12].

In February, 2016, the group launched a Russian-language website of the Foreign Relations of the European Union (European Foreign Affairs Service, EFAS), which actually became the official Russian-language EU website. The site, in English and Russian, is publishing news and weekly digests analyzing examples of Russian propaganda – from estimations of resonance-type #PanamaPapers to imperceptible distortions of translation, evident only for professionals, linguistic and stylistic manipulations and other techniques from the arsenal of the Russian (and not only Russian) press and television [16].

The next step in confronting Russian aggression was the adoption by the European Parliament on November 23, 2016 its resolution on "EU Strategic Communications as opposition propaganda against third parties", which contains a set of measures to counter propaganda influence from Russia (in particular, RT TV Channel, Sputnik agency, "Russian World" Fund and "Rossotrudnychestvo" [6]. Recent initiatives make it possible to predict that international information policy will become increasingly stronger and more effective while confronting the hybrid threats. However, as experts state, measures of EU opposition to Russian influence have no systematic character [12].

**Conclusions.** It is worth recognizing that Ukraine, as well as the EU states, was not prepared for such a massive military and informational aggression which was called a 'hybrid warfare' among experts. Ukraine needs effective strategic communications with its own all-Ukrainian narrative, with the concerted actions of government and civil society sector around this narrative. That refers to the need of creation a holistic worldview and promote high-quality information products of Ukraine's own production.

Hybrid warfare would prefer someone who can work with mass consciousness. The basis for winning the hybrid war is in effective public administration, with all components of national security, not just the military one. The attacker must prove the validity and justice of his actions both in front the own people and the people being attacked. For those being attacked it is pretty hard to respond an undeclared war. Information factor becomes a self-component and appears not less important than the military one.

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