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**RUSSIA’S WEAPON OF WORDS IN NUMBERS.
EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN ASSERTIVE (DIS)INFORMATION
ACTIONS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
OF THE CASES OF RUSSO-GEORGIAN WAR 2008
& ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA 2014**

Abstract:

Russian assertive actions over the last decade have led some observers to think that the Kremlin is employing fundamentally new concepts of an armed conflict. Subsequently, the scholars of the field came up with several buzzwords and ill-defined concepts such as ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’. This paper claims that the novelty of Russian actions is not in terms of its military transformations per se, but rather the specific way the military had been integrated with other instruments—mostly state-run and coordinated information operations. Thus, the study puts a novel emphasis on information operations and asserts that, while in certain cases Moscow still uses the conventional military, the Kremlin's new plan is to achieve goals through information online in the first place. Thus, the paper focuses on analysing the evolution of Russian information strategy. In doing so, quantitative content analysis is deployed to examine narratives built by RIA Novosti and Russia Today/RT during the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and annexation of Crimea in 2014. The comparative analysis of the two successive cases demonstrates the gradual progression of Russian information strategy insofar as by 2014, in contrast to 2008, pro-Kremlin media exploited some contested areas of international law in a more

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sophisticated manner to depict compatibility of the Russian actions with the democratic procedures and standards of international law.

Keywords:

Gerasimov Doctrine, hybrid warfare, information warfare, disinformation, Russian Federation, Georgia, Ukraine

Introduction

The International Relations study domain has long concluded that every country attempts at promoting its interests on the international scene. However, while countries vary in how they pursue their strategic goals and national interests, the assertive actions of the Russian Federation over more than a decade now have earned the state a specific reputation.

The Kremlin's actions in Ukraine made some observers think that we had encountered fundamentally new concepts of armed conflict². This thought was later extended due to Moscow's alleged meddling in the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign. Consequently, these narratives resulted in the widespread adoption of various buzzwords such as 'hybrid warfare' and the attempts to conceptualise Russian actions into something novel.

Despite the numerous debates and scholarly contributions, even after six years since the annexation of Crimea, there is still a lack of comprehension regarding Russia's actions. As scholars and politicians are still struggling to understand the elements of so-called Russian 'hybrid warfare', the consequent ways to counter it are puzzling. The relevance of the term 'hybrid' as well as the novelty in contemporary Russian actions is to be questioned.

This study contends that Russian assertive activities do not necessarily represent any new form of warfare, but are a result of the Kremlin's effective and expanding use of information as a weapon. As the new technologies have revolutionised the exchange of information together with the ways of communications, it consequently enabled the transformation of media into an excellent tool for information warfare. It should be noted that while speaking about Russian media, we mostly

² K. Giles, *Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power*, London 2016.

mean Kremlin-owned outlets that tend to contribute to interpreting events in compliance with the narratives of the official Russian government. Consequently, the main focus of the paper is to find empirical evidence of how Russian handling of information has been evolving and what it incorporates. In examining this evolution the paper looks into two leading Russian media outlets, RIA Novosti and RT, and analyses their coverage during the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The case of the Russo-Georgian war is selected as it is believed to serve as a testing ground for the Russian government before their further actions (i.e. annexation of Crimea). The 2008 war showed several unprecedented tactics in use, as the Kremlin incorporated cyber and other information operations together with its traditional deployment of military powers. As Crimea represents Russia's successive confrontation after Georgia and the information operations have played a vital role in this conflict, it has been selected as the second case for the paper.

In parallel with the conventional military operations, Moscow not only managed to destroy Georgia's physical communication infrastructures but also shut down governmental and news websites via DDoS attacks, leaving the country in an information vacuum. At the same time, the Kremlin tried to deny the Georgian government a chance to set its own narrative of the conflict. However, despite the know-how, as argued by Heinrich and Tanaev Russian state-backed media coverage was generally not doing its best in pretending objectivity and echoed official Kremlin statements³. On the other hand, the Georgian government hired Aspect Consulting, a comparatively well-known PR firm, to spin public opinion. Thus, some observers noticed that despite Russia winning the physical war, Georgia was more successful on the information battlefield insofar as the West initially accepted the narrative of the Georgian government⁴.

A small war of 2008 led the Russian Federation to rethink many issues related to its information strategy. As a result, several reforms have been carried out. Russian government increased military spending and started a modernisation program⁵. The new Military Doctrine was soon

³ H. G. Heinrich, K. Tanaev, *Georgia & Russia: Contradictory Media Coverage of the August War*, "Caucasian Review of International Affairs", 2009, 3(3), pp. 244-260.

⁴ P. Wilby, *Georgia has won the PR War*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2008/aug/18/pressandpublishing.georgia>> (06.04.2019).

⁵ J. Cooper, *Russia's state armament programme to 2020: a quantitative assessment of implementation 2011-2015*, Stockholm 2016.

adopted. While acknowledging their defeat on the information battlefield, Kremlin even created Information Troops – the special governmental agency inside the military to deal with information operations⁶. Thus, the informational aspect of conducting the war was highly prioritized by the official Moscow after the 2008 war.

Eventually, when it came to Crimea, the Kremlin was more prepared, lessons had been learned, mistakes analysed and reforms carried out. Therefore, the Kremlin employed some of the cyber and operational tactics already tested in Georgia, but this time with a more coordinated effort to win the war-related narrative over Ukraine. As a result, the altered and modified information tactics proved to be effective: instead of trying to win the hearts and minds of the international and domestic societies at the same time, Moscow refocused on establishing her narrative within the Russian-speaking population in Russia and Crimea. In parallel, the Kremlin managed to leave the West and even the rest of Ukraine in total confusion about the ongoing situation in the region and won the information war even before the start of the physical one.

The paper first develops a theoretical framework for locating the Russian use of information as a warfare tool. Theoretical analysis is followed by the qualitative examination of the empirical data in comparison of the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and annexation of Crimea in 2014.

What is Russia's new way of warfare?

In an attempt to conceptualise Russian assertive actions, the scholars of the study domain came up with many concepts and terms that do not adequately serve in describing the process. Seely⁷ found out that there are more than 25 terms used to describe elements of the Kremlin's contemporary warfare, however, all of them could easily be put in three categories. As one group claims that Russia invented a new way of warfare, the opposing group does not see any wrongdoings in Russian action as they often label Russian actions as 'soft power' and similar terms. The third group oversimplifies Russian actions by regarding them as simply a lie, often labelling it as 'fake news'. Unfortunately, neither of

⁶ A. Unwala, S. Ghori, *Brandishing the Cybered Bear: Information War and the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, "Military Cyber Affairs", 2015, 1(1), pp. 1-11.

⁷ R. Seely, *Defining Contemporary Russian Warfare*, "The RUSI Journal", 2017, 162(1), pp. 50-59.

them provides a clear and comprehensive understanding of Russian actions.

For several years, the scholars from the first group relied on the so-called ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ as an explanation for Russia’s new, so-called ‘hybrid warfare’. The problem is that ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’, as a strategic doctrine, does not exist. As it was figured out later by Mark Galeotti, who had accidentally created the term, Gerasimov was not setting up a hybrid doctrine for Kremlin⁸. Indeed, it would be complicated to prove the novelty of ‘hybrid warfare’ (or any other similar term). The idea of furthering national interest without going into a traditional war could be traced back to Sun Tzu, who famously advocated creating the conditions of victory without fighting. Moreover, nearly all wars in the past had some elements of ‘hybridity’ and have certainly used ‘unconventional’ methods. It would be a mistake to assume that war could be limited by and put in certain frames⁹. Thus, labelling Russia’s approach as ‘hybrid’ would not merely be incorrect but might also be unhelpful and misleading¹⁰. Marking Russian actions as a new form of warfare, for which no preparation could have been possible, might be counterproductive. Mansoor states that “hybrid warfare has been an integral part of the historical landscape since the ancient world, but only recently have analysts – incorrectly – categorized these conflicts as unique”¹¹. Indeed, no matter what label we attach, Russian contemporary actions do not represent a new kind of warfare, as the war was rarely just a military affair.

The limitations with the second group’s logic, who brand Russia’s actions as just ‘soft power’ is not difficult to identify. By the classic definition, ‘soft power’ is a concept of achieving state aims while using attraction instead of coercion¹². Russian actions are not short on violence as seen in Ukraine and Georgia, however, even when violence is the last resort, Russian non-violent means do not necessarily rely on ‘attraction’. Thus, considering the exploitation of the coercive measures and absence

⁸ M. Galeotti, *I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’*, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-creating-the-gerasimov-doctrine/>> (11.12.2018).

⁹ R. Johnson, *Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures: A Critique of the Literature*, “Small Wars & Insurgencies”, 2018, 29(1), pp. 141-163.

¹⁰ K. Giles, *op. cit.*

¹¹ P. R. Mansoor, *Introduction: Hybrid Warfare in History*, [in:] W. Murray, P. R. Mansoor, eds. *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, New York 2012, pp. 1-17.

¹² J. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*, New York 2004.

of 'attractive' courses by Russia, the framework of soft power would be irrelevant in understanding its strategies.

The third group, mainly politicians rather than scholars, have oversimplified Russian actions. They assert that the Kremlin is occupied with disseminating lies, lately commonly labelled as 'fake news'. However, the definition of 'fake news' seems a bit more problematic as it could include satire and parody as well. Misinformation is yet another term often used in a similar context. However, as defined, misinformation is just inaccurate information that is the result of an honest mistake or negligence¹³. All in all, it would be a clear underestimation of Russia's strategy to assume that all they do is spread lies.

This paper asserts that one cannot call Russian assertive actions in Georgia and Ukraine a new form of warfare. At the same time, there was an element that still may stand out from what we used to see in warfare before. The conflict in Ukraine saw the conventional military paired with the uniquely developed state-run information campaign. At one glance this does not represent any novelty either, as disinformation campaigns were deeply embodied in the Soviet practice. However, the latest Russian actions took information operations to a whole new level.

Nowadays, the Russian Federation uses information as a weapon. According to Pomerantsev the new Russia does not just deal with disinformation, lies, forgeries, and the leaks usually associated with information warfare¹⁴. He claims that Kremlin under Putin "reinvents reality, creating mass hallucinations that then translate into political action"¹⁵. Since the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, military and intelligence decision-makers in Moscow do not regard the information in the familiar terms of 'public diplomacy' or 'propaganda', instead, they see it in weaponised terms "as a tool to confuse, blackmail, demoralize, subvert and paralyze"¹⁶. Indeed, in 2015 Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu openly supported the thought as he claimed: "the day has come, where we recognise that the word, the camera, the photograph, the internet and information, in general, have become yet another type of weapon, yet another expression of the Armed Forces. This weapon may be used positively as well as negatively. It is a weapon which has been

¹³ D. Fallis, *What is Disinformation?*, "Library Trends", 2015, 63(3), pp. 401-402.

¹⁴ P. Pomerantsev, *Russia and the Menace of Unreality*, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/russia-putin-revolutionizing-information-warfare/379880/>> (25.01.2019).

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

part of events in our country in different years and various ways, in defeats as well as in victories”¹⁷.

While ‘weaponising’ information, the Kremlin made vital alterations to the Soviet tactics. The main characteristic of Soviet *dezinformatsiya* and propaganda was based on portraying the narrative of ‘us’ against ‘them’¹⁸. ‘Us’ or the Soviet side was presented positively in almost every matter, while ‘others’ mainly the West were criticised, demonized, and diminished. This approach, however, did not prove to be effective. As Nye explains, the Soviet propaganda was inconsistent with its policies¹⁹. This was a lesson well-learned as modern Russian information operations do not necessarily promote the Kremlin’s agenda. Lucas and Nimmo believe that instead the Kremlin aims to “confuse, befuddle and distract”²⁰, further agreeing with Pomerantsev and Weiss in stating the following: “modern Russia has weaponised information, turning the media into an arm of state power projection”²¹.

The matter of the truth demonstrates another vital change in the strategy. For the Soviets, the idea of truth was crucial. Even while consciously lying, the Soviet propaganda always tried to ‘prove’ that the Kremlin’s information was a fact²². However, for modern Russia, the idea of truth is somewhat irrelevant²³. While the Soviets used to reclaim concepts such as ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ to mask their opposites, Putin’s Russia combines the Soviet-era ‘whataboutism’ and ‘active measures’ with a postmodern smirk claiming that everything is a sham and not even the West believes in such concepts as ‘democracy’ or ‘human rights’²⁴. Nowadays, the Kremlin does not make an effort to persuade people that it is telling the truth. Instead, it questions the whole notion of the ‘objective truth’ claiming that any opinion, no matter how bizarre, has the same weight as others. With this notion of the Post-truth

¹⁷ F. S. Hansen, *Russian Hybrid Warfare: A Study of Disinformation*, “Danish Institute for International Studies”, 2017, 6, p. 29.

¹⁸ B. V. Bruk, *International Propaganda: The Russian Version*, Institute of Modern Russia, <https://imrussia.org/media/pdf/Research/Boris_Bruk__International_Propaganda_Russian_Version.pdf> (20.11.2020).

¹⁹ J. Nye, *op. cit.*

²⁰ E. Lucas, B. Nimmo, *Information Warfare: What Is It and How to Win It?*, Washington 2015.

²¹ P. Pomerantsev, M. Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*, New York 2014.

²² P. Pomerantsev, *Russia and the Menace of Unreality...*

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

Moscow demonstrates its capacity to dictate the terms of the truth and consequently enhance its aura of power.

Lucas and Nimmo have further characterized ‘weaponisation’ tactics in what he calls ‘Russia’s 4D’²⁵. According to him, when a major event happens involving Kremlin’s interest, Russia uses the following strategy: dismissing the critics (i.e. accusations as Russophobia); distorting the facts (i.e. falsifying evidence and presenting so-called alternative facts); distracting from the main issue (i.e. accuse someone else and blur the reality); and/or dismaying the audience (i.e. threatening any action with military consequences)²⁶.

In combination with the strategy-related changes, the Russian government amended their means too. The technological transformations since the Soviet enabled large-scale changes in the ways how information is purposefully spread. While realising the importance of the online field, current Russian information operations combine some of the Soviet-tested tricks with modern technology and its capabilities²⁷. Use of the internet and technology radically revolutionised the game: if in the Soviet times KGB would have to work hard to spread its ‘dezinformatsiya’ in the Western press, nowadays spreading fake photos and then reposting them as ‘fact’ in traditional media is a matter of hours, if not of minutes²⁸.

The adjustment to and exploitation of the new circumstances of the online platforms has been rather comprehensive by the Russian government. Giles believes that Russia has invested hugely in adapting the principles of subversion to the internet age²⁹. According to him, these investments cover the following three areas: firstly, internally and externally focused media with a substantial online presence (i.e. RT and RIA); secondly, the use of social media and online forums as a force multiplier to achieve a broader reach and penetration of Russian narratives; and lastly, language skills, to engage with target audiences in their languages³⁰.

Weisburd, Watts, and Berger divide Russian strategy regarding the use of technology for political purposes in ‘white’, ‘grey’ and ‘black’

²⁵ E. Lucas, B. Nimmo, *op. cit.*

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ V. Madeira, *Haven’t We Been Here Before?*, Fife 2014.

²⁸ P. Pomerantsev, M. Weiss, *op. cit.*

²⁹ K. Giles, *op. cit.*

³⁰ G. Simons, *Perception of Russia’s soft power and influence in the Baltic States*, “Public Relations Review”, 2015, 41(1), pp. 1-13.

measures. The 'white' measures are mainly controlled by RT and Sputnik, which push Kremlin-approved messages online. At the same time, 'white' content provides ammunition for 'grey' measures, which employ smaller outlets, bots as well as so-called 'useful idiots'³¹. Some of them regurgitate Russian narratives, sometimes even without taking a direct order from Russia or realising that they are playing the Kremlin's game. Next, come the 'black' measures. According to the 1992 USIA report, during the Soviet times, the 'black measures' were mainly conducted by the special agents, while now it is delegated to coordinated hackers, honeypots, and hecklers³².

When it comes to objectives behind the above-mentioned Russian actions, the overwhelming majority of scholars agree that Kremlin tries to rather disrupt the Western narratives than to provide a counter-narrative via sowing confusion, causing doubts, dividing opinions, and undermining the notion of objective truth being possible at all³³. Pomerantsev believes that Russia wants the target to think that 'If nothing is true, then anything is possible'³⁴. This, according to him, will give us the sense that Putin's next moves are unpredictable and therefore dangerous. Hence we will end up "stunned, spun, and flummoxed by the Kremlin's weaponization of absurdity and unreality"³⁵. The aim then is to control the information in whatever form it takes. Creating informational chaos and ambiguity serves as the strategic advantage to further Russia's interests abroad³⁶. On the one hand, it cast doubts on the Europeans in the Western values and leads to a successful penetration from the public

³¹ A. Weisburd, C. Watts, J. Berger, *Trolling for Trump: How Russia Is Trying to Destroy Our Democracy*, <<https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/trolling-for-trump-how-russia-is-trying-to-destroy-our-democracy/>> (15.02.2019).

³² United States Information Agency, *Soviet Active Measures in the "Post-Cold War" Era 1988-1991*, Washington 1992.

³³ A. Averin, *Russia and its Many Truths*, [in:] J. Althuis, L. Haiden, eds. *Fake News: A Roadmap*, Riga 2018, pp. 59-67; K. Giles, *op. cit.*; M. Lupion, *The Gray War of Our Time: Information Warfare and the Kremlin's Weaponization of Russian- Language Digital News*, "The Journal of Slavic Military Studies", 2018, 31(3), pp. 329-353; N. MacFarquhar, *A Powerful Russian Weapon: The Spread of False Stories*, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/world/europe/russia-sweden-disinformation.html>> (13.01.2019); Pomerantsev, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Pomerantsev, *op. cit.*

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁶ J. Rogers, A. L. Martinescu, *After Crimea Time for a New British Geostrategy for Eastern Europe?*, London 2015.

opinion space into the decision-making space³⁷. And on the other hand, the Russian government translates such kind of foreign policy success into greater regime stability at home³⁸.

Methodology

The paper focuses on analysing dominating media narratives of two Kremlin outlets with the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The main focus of the analysis is to find empirical evidence on how Russian use of information has been evolved. Since the Russian government views itself to be in an ongoing information war, mass communications represent a crucial arena of global politics, in which, according to the Kremlin's way of thinking, rival powers try to further their interests and undermine others³⁹. Russian government openly stated in its Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 the need to 'develop its effective means of information to influence on public opinion abroad', and 'counteract information threats to its sovereignty and security'⁴⁰. In line with this, Kremlin has made huge investments to be able to convey Russian points of view to other countries as well as to sell them domestically⁴¹. Besides, substantial changes were made to adapt the principles of subversion to the internet age. Giles stresses out that internally and externally focused media with a substantial online presence represents the top priority in Moscow's information strategy⁴². One might even consider 'weaponisation' information and projecting narratives to foreign and domestic audiences as a matter of national security.

Acknowledging the increasing significance of the internet and new communications for the Kremlin's politics, the paper looks at the 'weaponisation' of information through the strategic narratives. To see how the strategy works, the paper analyses coverage and narratives of the Kremlin media outlets during Russia-involved conflicts. As the outlets are directly controlled by the Russian power elite, they do represent the

³⁷ M. Lupion, *op. cit.*

³⁸ A. Averin. *op. cit.*

³⁹ S. Hutchings, J. Szostek, *Dominant Narratives in Russian Political and Media Discourse during the Ukraine Crisis*, [in:] A. Pikulicka-Wilczewska, R. Sakwa, eds. *Ukraine and Russia People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, Bristol 2015, pp. 173-185.

⁴⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2013*, Moscow 2013.

⁴¹ S. Hutchings, J. Szostek, *op. cit.*

⁴² K. Giles, *op. cit.*

Kremlin's official position. While some might view the coverage of these outlets just as pure journalism, the paper believes that the way Russian media frames and builds representations of events, personalities, or groups have an important public resonance and implications for the governmental aims. Therefore, analysing Kremlin's main narratives for domestic and international audiences shows the ideas, fears, and goals of the Russian government enabled us to understand Kremlin's information strategy. Analysing the coverage during two different conflicts with six years difference will also allow seeing the expansion of the Kremlin's strategy.

The study uses data of two sets of articles drawn from two state-backed pro-Kremlin digital news websites, RIA Novosti and RT (formerly Russia Today). RIA, a state-owned domestic Russian-language news agency, operates under the Russian Ministry of Communications and Mass Media. While Russia Today, also known as RT, promotes itself as an independent outlet, it is backed by the Russian government as even Putin admits their relationship⁴³. RIA represents the biggest and the most popular online news source for the Russian-speaking population and RT conveys Kremlin's messages to the international audience. At the same time, RT was the only international news outlet reporting from Tskhinvali during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war⁴⁴. However, after 2008 both outlets went through rebranding, reforms, and expansion. Russia Today was rebranded into RT, while RIA Novosti joined the newly established Russian international news agency Rossiya Segodnya. Therefore, to a certain extent, both outlets could be regarded as different players during the Crimea case.

The first set of data covers the 2008 Russo-Georgia war and consists of articles published within a week from 7th to 13th of August 2008. The timeframe is chosen as the 7th of August is acknowledged to be the starting date of the war, while the 13th is the day when it ended. The second set is devoted to articles covering Russia's annexation of Crimea, published during the timeframe of 20th February to 19th March 2014. In this case, the timeframe is much bigger compared to the Georgian case, however, this is due to the differences like Crimean case. While the Maidan demonstrations had been going on in Kyiv for months, they

⁴³ M. Fisher, *In case you weren't clear on Russia Today's relationship to Moscow, Putin clears it up*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/06/13/in-case-you-werent-clear-on-russia-todays-relationship-to-moscow-putin-clears-it-up/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6672d7c05a53> (12.05.2019).

⁴⁴ The outlet even mentions this fact on their history page as a milestone.

erupted into violence from February 20th. Therefore, this date has been selected as the starting point. By the 19th of March, the referendum was concluded and Russia had already integrated Crimea as part of the Federation.

Within these parameters, after a preliminary reading through of all the articles published by both outlets, 30 news articles from Russia Today and 60 similar pieces from RIA Novosti covering Russo-Georgian War have been selected. The selection was made based on the importance of the topic, the number of views per article, and the equal redistribution between the topics covered for the analysis. Following the same selective logic, 60 news articles have been selected from RT and 100 similar pieces from RIA Novosti. It should be noted that the study limits its analysis on news articles only as they convey the quickest reinterpretations and reach out to many readers instantly.

The scrutiny is based on the content analysis. The quantitative account of the data is generated following the keyword coding and the thematic analysis⁴⁵. The analysis encompasses 100 coded keywords and phrases, which are then grouped into different categories. For grouping, the paper is using the categories created by Miranda Lupion, as she put keywords into six broader thematic categories based on the ideas they represent: humanitarian, legal, chaotic/aggressive, historical/cultural, Western interventionist, and order/safety⁴⁶.

Through quantitative content analysis, the paper intends to assess the following three factors: First, the thematic consistency, as the paper looks on whether two different outlets promoted the same themes and narratives for the domestic and international audience. The second criterion is the keyword volume. Several keywords are analysed according to their groupings, to see which category has dominated the news cycle and which narratives were more preferred by each outlet. The final factor is sophistication, observed to see whether the outlets pushed the various Russian narratives at the same time.

The paper intends to show that quantitative content analysis will provide sheer numbers and evidence behind the Kremlin's narratives, which while comparing two cases, will show how the clear evolution of Russian information strategy from the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. It should be noted, that while the paper shares the dominating idea that Russian information strategy was

⁴⁵ A. Bryman, *Content Analysis*, [in:] A. Bryman, ed. *Social Research Methods*, Oxford 2012, pp. 288-309.

⁴⁶ M. Lupion, *op. cit.*

more effective in the case of Crimea compared to Georgia, the project itself does not intend to examine the effectiveness or success of the Kremlin's new strategy as it is beyond the scope of the paper. Instead, the intention is to observe the particular strategic changes. Due to various limitations of the study, some other aspects of Russia's information strategy such as 'grey' and 'black' measures underlined by Weisburd, Watts & Berger ought to be more comprehensively addressed in further studies⁴⁷.

Quantitative Comparative Analysis of the Russian Information Weaponisation Strategies

The Russian Federation applied different yet strategically similar narratives to both Georgian and Ukrainian cases. While in the Georgian case the main justification for the military involvement was based on the notions of humanitarian intervention and Responsibility to Protect, in the Crimean case the contested norms of international law were further emphasized via more thematically diverse and sophisticated 'weaponised' media. The Kremlin outlets developed a whole chain of narratives based on Russian governmental interpretation of international law incorporating the norms of a humanitarian catastrophe; accusations of the illegitimacy of the interim government; fascist allegations and the right for self-determination. Instead of openly admitting the presence of Russian troops in the conflict like it was done in the Georgian case, in the Ukrainian case the outlets preferred to distort the facts to hide the connection of self-defence forces with Moscow. Also, Western criticism was met with the counter-arguments within the tactics of 'whataboutism' mainly referring to Kosovo as a precedent.

The paper accentuates quantitative data to empirically demonstrate the development in Russian information strategy from Georgian to the Crimean cases. Through quantitative content analysis, the paper evaluates the three following factors: (1) thematic consistency, (2) keyword volume, and (3) sophistication.

Russo-Georgian War 2008. Thematic consistency

As already stated above, thematic consistency refers to the extent to which Russia Today and RIA Novosti promoted the same topics within

⁴⁷ A. Weisburd, C. Watts, J. Berger, *op. cit.*

the narrative. If the outlets promoted similar themes, then the thematic consistency could be regarded as high, while the low thematic consistency would indicate that these two outlets covered the event from different thematic perspectives.

While looking at the 2008 case, thematic consistency looks quite high, as both Russia Today and RIA Novosti had prioritised more or less the same topics. Within both outlets, the chaotic/aggressive theme was the most popular, followed by the humanitarian theme, while the historical/cultural theme was the least popular in both cases. The topics coded as Legal, Western, and Order and Safety are in the middle-ranking for both outlets, with a slight difference as the Western theme was number three by popularity for Russia Today. In RIA Novosti's case, Order and Safety was the one in the top three, then followed by Legal and Western themes respectively. The full thematic rankings for both outlets are comparatively illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes ranked by the volume and priority on each outlet for the case of 2008

	Russia Today	RIA Novosti
1	Chaotic/Aggressive (372)	Chaotic/Aggressive (573)
2	Humanitarian (237)	Humanitarian (246)
3	Western (81)	Order and Safety (59)
4	Legal (80)	Legal (48)
5	Order and Safety (64)	Western (27)
6	Historical/Cultural (7)	Historical/Cultural (2)

Keyword Volume

Keyword volume counts several pro-Russian keywords used in articles published by Russia Today and RIA Novosti. The paper calculated the number of keywords separately by the topics alone and then in proportion to the total word count. The keyword volume is later compared to the respective data from the Ukrainian case to observe the transformation.

Table 2 depicts the raw keyword counts for Russia Today, while Table 3 illustrates the raw keyword counts for RIA Novosti. Subsequent

Table 4 shows the percentage of pro-Russian keywords adjusted to the word count for both outlets.

Table 2. Keyword count for Russia Today. The case of 2008

Category	Example keywords	Total number of keywords
Humanitarian	peacekeeper, refugee, civilians, humanitarian, aid, help	237
Legal	international law, genocide, ethnic cleansing, negotiations, tribunal, resolution	80
Chaotic/ Aggressive	military, killed, wounded, troops, violence, ruined, destroyed	372
Historical/ Cultural	Nazi, Hussein, Yugoslavia	7
Western	US, NATO, EU, UN	81
Order and Safety	stability, safety, a ceasefire	64

Table 3. Keyword count for RIA Novosti. The case of 2008

Category	Example keywords	Total number of keywords
Humanitarian	миротворец (peacekeeper), беженец (refugee), мирное население (civilians), гуманитарная помощь (humanitarian aid)	246
Legal	международное право (international law), геноцид (genocide), этническая чистка (ethnic cleansing), переговоры (negotiations), трибунал (tribunal)	48
Chaotic/ Aggressive	военные (military), убитые (killed), раненые (wounded), войска (troops), насилие (violence), разрушены (ruined), уничтожены (destroyed)	573

Historical/ Cultural	Нацист (Nazi), фашист (fascist), история (history)	2
Western	США (U.S.), НАТО (NATO), ЕС (EU), ООН (UN), запад (the West)	27
Order and Safety	стабильность (stability), безопасность (safety), прекращение огня (ceasefire), освобождение (liberation)	59

Table 4. Percentage of the thematic keywords of the total word count for both outlets. The case of 2008

Category	Russia Today	RIA Novosti
Humanitarian	2.20	2.04
Legal	0.74	0.39
Chaotic/Aggressive	3.45	4.75
Historical/Cultural	0.06	0.01
Western	0.75	0.22
Order and Safety	0.59	0.49

Sophistication

Within the frameworks of this analysis, sophistication stands for the volume to which outlets covered the event from various pro-Russian narratives at the same time. Therefore, the outlet which pushes more narratives per report has a greater sophistication, while the ones that promote only one topic have been evaluated as of lower sophistication.

The initial glance at the articles left an impression that Russia Today might have had higher sophistication as judged by the length of their articles compared to RIA Novosti. 30 articles from Russia Today had almost the same total word count as 60 articles from RIA. The average word count for Russia Today was 325 words per piece, while for RIA the same number was 205. Almost 40 percent of articles by Russia Today were more than 400 words in length, while the number for RIA was less than 7 percent. Some of the articles from RIA were as short as 18 words only. This shows that RIA had focused on shorter reporting, promoted

mainly one topic at the time, and, therefore, demonstrated less sophistication.

As seen from the keyword analysis, the chaotic/aggressive topic was dominating the reports of both outlets. Table 1 shows that in total, both outlets used keywords related to this topic 945 times, which is more than the total number (851) of all other keywords. Only the total number of keywords related to the humanitarian topic is worth mentioning, which at 483, is nearly half of the number of chaotic/aggressive keywords, but still more than the sum number of all the other keywords from the other four groups. Thus, chaotic/aggressive and humanitarian topics were both mainly used together, to create an image of crisis and enemy, and then justify Russian intervention via portraying Russia as a rescuer. Therefore, both outlets were mainly promoting one topic, while the other themes/topics were comparatively underrepresented within the discourse.

Analysis of quantitative data from the Georgian case leads to the conclusion that the Kremlin-backed media in 2008 demonstrated high thematic consistency and low sophistication. This could be one of the reasons for less success on the informational battlefield in 2008, as according to Lupion, single theme alignment and low level of sophistication results in the less effective ‘weaponisation’ of information⁴⁸.

The annexation of Crimea 2014. Thematic consistency

While Russia Today and RIA Novosti have prioritised almost the same topics during the 2008 case, demonstrating a high level of thematic consistency, the same would be only partially true in their coverage of events of 2014. As seen from Table 1, in the Georgian case the same two topics (Chaotic/aggressive and humanitarian) were dominating in both outlets, at the same time, a historical/cultural narrative was the least popular for both of them. While looking at Table 5, reflecting on the thematic rankings for RT and RIA Novosti during 2014 coverage, one might think that the pattern is similar. Both media outlets tried to portray the interim government as illegitimate and the Crimea referendum legitimate. Therefore, the legal topic was the most popular with almost identical amounts of keywords used within the two outlets. Both RT and RIA devoted quite some time to

⁴⁸ M. Lupion, *op. cit.*

portray the situation in Kyiv as chaotic as possible, making the chaotic theme the second most popular for both outlets. However, RT had almost twice as many keywords for this topic compared to RIA. Apart from these two narratives, the priorities of the outlets are drastically different, with the only humanitarian topic being equally unimportant for RT and RIA. Hence, despite demonstrating three topics with the same rankings, one can still not call the thematic consistency for the Crimean case as high as it was during the Georgia case. It should be noted that the consistency is still high, but not as omnipresent as this was shown in the Georgian case where the two narratives had essentially dominated the coverage of the event. Therefore, if thematic consistency for the Georgian case was considered as high, in a respective manner, in the 2014 case it could be labelled as the medium.

Table 5. Themes ranked by the volume and priority on each outlet for 2014 coverage

	RT	RIA Novosti
1	Legal (1686)	Legal (1593)
2	Chaotic (1461)	Chaotic (761)
3	Order and Safety (646)	Western (427)
4	Western (564)	Historical/Cultural (410)
5	Humanitarian (547)	Humanitarian (332)
6	Historical/Cultural (378)	Order and Safety (278)

Keyword Volume

In measuring the number of pro-Russian keywords used in the articles, the paper first calculated the number of keywords according to their groupings and then compared it to the proportion of the total word count. Table 6 depicts the raw pro-Russian keyword counts for RT, as Table 7 illustrates the raw keyword counts for RIA Novosti, while Table 8 shows the percentage of pro-Russian keywords adjusted for the word count for both outlets.

Table 6. Keyword count for RT for 2014 coverage

Category	Example keywords	Total number of keywords
Humanitarian	refugee, civilians, humanitarian, aid, help	547
Legal	referendum, coup, coup-imposed, constitutional, illegal	1686
Chaotic/ Aggressive	Turmoil, radicals, bandits, military, crisis, rioters, protest, Kalashnikov, wounds, seized, Maidan	1461
Historical/ Cultural	Nazi, Bandera, neo-Nazi, Jews, Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Soviet Union	378
Western	U.S., NATO, EU, UN, Western, European, American	564
Order and Safety	self-defence, stability, safety, order, peace	646

Table 7. Keyword count for RIA Novosti for 2014 coverage

Category	Example keywords	Total number of keywords
Humanitarian	гражданское население (civilians), помощь (aid)	332
Legal	референдум (referendum), международное право (international law), переворот (coup), легитимность (legitimacy), закон (law)	1593
Chaotic/ Aggressive	кризиса (crisis), радикалы (radicals) убитые (killed), раненые (wounded), насилие (violence), Коктейль Молотова (Molotov Cocktail)	761
Historical/ Cultural	Нацист (Nazi), фашист (fascist), Бандера (Bandera)	410
Western	США (U.S.), НАТО (NATO), ЕС (EU), ООН (UN), запад (the West)	427

Order and Safety	стабильность (stability), безопасность (safety),	278
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Table 8. Percentage of the thematic keywords for both outlets

Category	RT	RIA Novosti
Humanitarian	1.43	1.12
Legal	4.42	5.36
Chaotic/Aggressive	3.83	2.56
Historical/Cultural	0.99	1.38
Western	1.48	1.43
Order and Safety	1.69	0.93

A glance at Table 8 implies an increase in keyword volume, however, Table 9 makes the picture more accurate. As seen from the thematic keyword percentage comparison, there has been a substantial increase from the Georgian case to the Crimean case in terms of pro-Kremlin bias in digital media coverage. Table 9 depicts that the usage of pro-Moscow keywords has increased for both outlets. For Russia Today/RT percentage of the specific keywords compared to the word count of the articles has almost doubled from 7.79 percent to 13.84 percent, this difference of 6.05 percent accounts for a 77.66 percent increase. While comparing keyword usage for RIA articles from 2008 to 2014, the keyword percentage growth is 4.88 percent as it grew from 7.9 percent in 2008 to 12.78 percent in 2014, accounting for a 61.77 percent increase.

Table 9. Comparison of thematic keywords percentage for both articles during Georgia and Crimea cases

Category	RT 2008	RT 2014	RIA Novosti 2008	RIA Novosti 2014
Humanitarian	2.20	1.43	2.04	1.12
Legal	0.74	4.42	0.39	5.36
Chaotic/ Aggressive	3.45	3.83	4.75	2.56

Historical/ Cultural	0.06	0.99	0.01	1.38
Western	0.75	1.48	0.22	1.43
Order and Safety	0.59	1.69	0.49	0.93
Total sum of keyword percentage	7.79	13.84	7.9	12.78

Sophistication

While the case of Georgia was characterised by low-level of sophistication, Crimea’s coverage is drastically different. First, as seen from the keyword volume, both outlets increased their use of pro-Russian keywords in their articles by more than 50 percent which could lead to the presumption that the outlets have also increased their article length. Indeed, while covering the Crimea case, both outlets have put more effort and increased the number of words in each article. While in 2008 during the Georgian case, the average word count for Russia Today’s articles was 325 words, in 2014 the average length increased by 95 percent, as the average length of RT articles for Crimea case was 635 words. In parallel to this tendency, RIA has also seen an increase from 205 words on average per article in 2008 to 306 words, accounting for 49 percent growth.

Increased article length did not only result in an increased number of pro-Russian keywords but also let outlets promote more topics within each article. In 2008, one topic, chaotic/aggressive, was dominating reports for both outlets in such a notable way that it hijacked the whole news cycle and overshadowed the other narratives. As seen from Table 1, both outlets used the keywords from this thematic grouping more than keywords from any other topics combined. The keyword volume is drastically different in the 2014 case. Despite both articles prioritising the same topic, the legal narrative did not monopolise the news cycle. The situation was almost the exact opposite of the 2008 case, as a total number of keywords from legal thematic (3279) was almost half of the sum (5804) of keywords from the other groupings.

One could assume that both outlets have learned the lesson that, the less effective ‘weaponisation’ of information that occurred during 2008, might have been a result of low sophistication and single theme alignment.

Therefore, in 2014 one could witness higher thematic sophistication as both outlets devoted significant attention to all the topics and promoted a couple of narratives at the same time. While the increased length of pieces was crucial to achieving higher sophistication, the increase in the total number of articles also played a role. In 2008 Russia Today had only around 50 articles devoted to Georgia while for RIA the number was around 800. On the other hand, in 2014 RT published a couple of hundred pieces, while RIA Novosti had more than five thousand articles covering Ukraine. It should also be mentioned that the coverage period for Georgia was only a week, while for Ukraine it was a month, however, the increase in articles is still exceeding the expected discrepancy due to the periodic difference.

The increased number of the articles resulted in a more diversified news circle and an expanded number of the covered topics. However, even in one article, both outlets would try to integrate a piece from the other narratives. It is also worth mentioning that this was first done by RIA Novosti in 2008. The outlet demonstrated a tendency to conclude each article on the subject regardless of its theme with the following statement: “On the night of August 8, Georgian troops invaded the territory of the unrecognized republic and fired, including from the Grad volley fire, the capital of the Republic of Tskhinvali. The city is destroyed, nurseries, schools, the only hospital are broken. More than 34 thousand refugees left the republic. The authorities of South Ossetia reported 1.6 thousand dead. During the conflict, 18 Russian peacekeepers were killed, more than 150 were injured”⁴⁹. The text was repeated word after word in 9 articles out of 60 that have been analysed for the paper. Russia Today did not use this tactic back in 2008.

In 2014, both outlets used the above-discussed strategy more often and in a more sophisticated way. During the first stages of the coverage, RIA would finalize almost every article with a special piece entitled “how has the situation in Ukraine worsened”. The recurring text under this piece would blame the escalation on the opposition while portraying them as radicals. Furthermore, the notice would end up with an information of several deaths and injuries to emphasize the chaos narrative. Following this tendency, RIA would also conclude articles with the “what is happening in Ukraine” section using the same narrative. However, the outlet was not limited to this one narrative only. Articles

⁴⁹ RIA Novosti, *Iz Gruzii nie wypuskajut rossijskich turistow – oczewidcy*, <<https://ria.ru/20080810/150250631.html>> (17.04.2019).

published a bit later would notify the reader about “how [was] Crimea different from other regions of the country”, once again emphasizing the Crimea’s Russian population and the region being part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. In several cases, the articles encompass the section: “how was the government in Ukraine changed” section, serving to portray the interim government as illegitimate; labelling revolution as a violent seizure of power and underlining that Crimea was against the new illegitimate government. Before the referendum one would see a different section, entitled “how did the situation on the Crimean Peninsula escalate”, conveying the interpretation of the protests in Crimea and the demand for the referendum. There were several articles, where all of these three ending sections would be put together in one article. Other ending sections included ones about “how can Russia use its armed forces outside the country” and “how Russia provided fraternal help to Ukraine”. After the referendum, RIA switched back to labelling the change of government in Kyiv as a coup and added a new end section about the Crimea referendum reminding the readers that 96.77 percent of Crimeans have voted in favour of Russia.

RT was also using the same tactic however in a slightly different way. In several articles, the outlet would have different subsections about “ethnic controversy” or “how was Crimea separated from Russia” to provide the reader with another narrative. The outlet also repeated a couple of stories about the status of Sevastopol being the subject of debates in the 1990s and about Crimeans protesting about the illegitimate government in Kyiv. A number of times RT ended articles by reminding the readers that the majority of the population in Crimea was Russian and that they used Russian for communication. However, the tactic was seen through less volume compared to RIA. On February 27th the outlet published an article titled “the facts you need to know about Crimea and why it is in turmoil”. After this, in several other articles, the outlet would put a link to the article with the facts about Crimea. Later the same tactics were applied to the article entitled “Russia’s 25,000-troop allowance & other facts you may not know about Crimea”. In some articles, the outlet put links for both pieces at the same time.

Derived from the analysis, the following conclusion can be outlined: the deployed strategy by the two outlets served at conveying all the narratives from the different themes together. In addition to this, by providing the same information several times, the media outlets tried to portray their interpretations as facts in an attempt to shape the reader’s

opinions on the subject in favour of Moscow. Thus, by 2014 Russian strategy of ‘weaponisation’ of information turned into a more complex and sophisticated tool than it had been in 2008.

Conclusion

When it comes to the Russian assertive actions, scholars use different terms and concepts to describe the process. However, as seen here, most of them do not adequately or comprehensively represent an accurate framework for explaining Kremlin’s behaviour. The so-called ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’, which is increasingly mentioned by Western scholars, is not even an official doctrine, but an analysis of ‘The Arab Spring’ from the Russian perspective. This example demonstrates the problem with the conceptualization. In the absence of an adequate term, several scholars thought that Russia had been waging a completely new type of war, which some labelled as ‘hybrid warfare’. However, even the biggest proponents of the term cannot conceptualise it properly and admittedly reflect on the various flaws of the concept. Most of the definitions of ‘hybrid warfare’ are either too broad, as they incorporate both violent and non-violent features, or too narrow, as they use regular and irregular wars either simultaneously or sequentially in the theatre of operations.

While one group of concepts fail as they neglect violence, ‘hybrid warfare’ fails to conceptualise non-violent measures, which represent if not the main pillar, one of the crucial factors in certain Kremlin strategies. Other than that, while ‘hybrid warfare’ proponents focus on incorporating ‘unconventional’ methods with the traditional military, it does not indeed imply any novelty in warfare. All wars in the past have used ‘unconventional’ methods, therefore had some elements of ‘hybridity’. Neither ‘soft power’ nor ‘public diplomacy’ does the justice in describing Kremlin’s assertive behaviour as Russian means rarely rely on ‘attraction’ which represents a key pillar for both of these concepts. Terms such as ‘fake news’ and ‘misinformation’ did not prove to be the most suited concepts either.

Departing from the conceptual bewilderment, the paper attempted at demonstrating that novelty of Russian actions is not in terms of its military, but rather the specific nature of the operations that Russia has been pursuing on the latest occasions. In particular, the specificity is reflected in the way the military was integrated with other instruments, mostly the state-run and coordinated information operations in the cases

of the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the case of Crimea in 2014. While in certain cases Moscow still uses conventional military, Kremlin's new approach seems to be focused on achieving its goals through information online in the first place, rather than fight the enemy on the battlefield. Therefore, the paper had focused on information as the main 'weapon' in the hands of the Russian government.

Labelling such actions as 'weaponisation' of information, the study has shown that Moscow does not regard the information operations as a short-term strategy limited to wartime, but rather as a constant feature of international relations. Therefore, the Russian Federation is not engaging in information warfare but is waging the information war instead. This continuity in the Kremlin's strategy is also seen in the expansion and eventual sophistication of the tools deployed.

In an attempt to demonstrate the gradual evolvement of the Russian 'weaponisation' of information, the empirical analysis drew upon two comparative cases of Russo-Georgian and Crimean cases. The quantitative scrutiny focused on the Kremlin-backed media's coverage of the two cases during their escalation. Following the analysis of the related articles by Russia Today and RIA Novosti, the expanding sophistication and diversifying thematic alignment has characterized the development of the Russian information strategy over time.

In 2008, Russian media devoted just a few articles to the coverage of the conflict. At the same time, both the Russian language RIA Novosti and English Russia Today promoted mainly the same narratives for the international and domestic audiences. Both outlets prioritised the same 'chaotic/aggressive' and 'humanitarian' topics while heavily relying on official Kremlin statements. Thus, the coverage resembled state-orchestrated propaganda conveying Kremlin's narrative to the wider audience.

In contrast to 2008 coverage, the Russian information 'weaponisation' tactics for 2014 devoted a greater deal of attention to Crimea as seen in the number of articles. In conjunction with numbers, the length of the articles was also increased by 49 percent on RIA and by 95 percent on RT. This subsequently resulted in an astonishingly increased number of the thematic composition of the analysed data. The significantly increased number of the thematic keywords reflected the intensification of the more pro-Kremlin narratives in the media coverage. In contrast to the 2008 case, through which the main accent was towards cultivating anxiety and fear through portraying the situation as a chaotic humanitarian crisis, the 2014 coverage demonstrated a more balanced

and diverse news cycle. Also, in regards to the Crimean case, the absolute majority of the analysed media content encompassed the different identified topics, directed at influencing the readers' understanding of the events. RT and RIA built the whole chain of narratives concerning grey areas of international law, such as humanitarian catastrophe, protection of civilians, secession, and right for self-determination. Kremlin media used historical narratives quite well too, which they almost ignored in 2008.

A more diverse news cycle excluded the chances of any particular topic hijacking the narrative. Therefore, 2014 coverage demonstrated less thematic consistency between articles but a high level of sophistication reflected in the variety of thematic perspectives within single articles. This increased flow of information created an illusion of diverse opinions, challenged Western values, and misled the audience in their pursuit of objective truth.

In sum, the paper concludes that Russian assertive actions cannot be described with buzzwords like 'hybrid warfare' or 'Gerasimov doctrine'. Instead, all attention should be devoted to the Russian use of information for strategic purposes. The research of the Georgian and Crimean cases has disclosed that the Russian strategy of 'weaponisation' of media has undergone some notable advancements turning into a more sophisticated and complex tool. Further research on other elements of Russian use of information (such as 'grey' and 'black' measures) would complete the thesis. However, one cannot ignore the fact that the Kremlin's use of information for strategic purposes is evolving into a powerful weapon, and shortly Russian keyboard might be worse than an AK47 bullet.

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