



INFORMATION WAR. CASE STUDY: THE ROLE OF *RUSSIA TODAY* FOR COVERAGE OF THE MISSION CONDUCTED BY RUSSIA IN EAST UKRAINE - MAY 2014 - FEBRUARY 2015

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Disinformation and propaganda activities are a basic element in the successful conduct of the hybrid war in the acceptance of the Russian Federation. Considering the technological and, especially economic, gap between Russia and the other world powers (USA or China) Russian military strategists have concluded that the full exploitation of the advantages offered by the skillful use of the information power tool, may lead to the elimination of the disadvantages of the insufficient economic development of the country or of the deficient endowment of the Armed Forces with military technology of last generation in serial production. In the following pages we analyzed the most important aspects of the information war carried out by the Russian Federation, using the well-known media (*Russia Today*), during the conflict in Ukraine, focusing on the themes and contents specific to each of them.

Keywords: *Russia Today*; information war; battlefield; hybrid war; propaganda; manipulation; disinformation.

Introduction

In the last decade, the information war waged by the Russian Federation developed much more efficiently than expected by analysts and military experts. However, in terms of its content, the new procedures are not at all new in terms of information aggression, especially as Moscow's new propaganda preserves some fundamental landmarks of Soviet disinformation techniques. Authors of Russian propaganda and disinformation learned from their own failures in the democratic revolutions of Georgia (2003 – "Rose Revolution"), Ukraine (2004 – "Orange Revolution") and Kyrgyzstan (2005 – "Tulips Revolution"), adapting to the new information technological challenges of the 21st century, especially through the use of cyber space.

Ukraine is the example which showed that the information environment constituted the battlefield of the hybrid war, skillfully modeled by the Russian Federation, through disinformation, manipulation and propaganda. The hybrid war in Ukraine has been strengthened by the efficiency of the information war, a concept that has proven to

be rather late understood by the West. My opinion regarding hybrid warfare is that it is conducted against conventional military forces, paramilitary forces, terrorist and insurgent groups whose tactics, techniques and procedures are specific to the entire range of power instruments of a state: political, economic, military and informational. The concept of "information warfare" developed by the Russian Federation represents a method of manifesting hybrid warfare through deliberate disinformation campaigns, supported by intelligence agencies, in order to defeat the enemy and obtain strategic advantages at a minimal cost. Given its hybrid nature, the information war is extremely difficult to detect, given its purpose - to confuse the enemy and neutral observers. Thus, the West needed time to understand that the Russian Federation uses information warfare techniques to reach its regional interests, namely the federalization of Ukraine or obtaining concessions from Kiev on the legal status of the ethnically controlled separatist provinces controlled by the pro-Russians from eastern Ukraine.

We may say that the modern information war developed by Moscow continues to basically use the elements of Soviet propaganda, such as: *informational intoxication, physiological exhaustion of the enemy, inoculation of trust in leaders, enhancement of the dissensions among*

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social classes, enemy incrimination, spread of threats and reflexive control. This is defined as “the action of transmitting, to a partner or an opponent, a piece of information to cause the enemy to make a predetermined decision, in the sense desired by the initiator of the action”¹. However, there are also differences from Soviet propaganda. Thus, the new type of propaganda used by the Russian Federation, especially that conveyed outside the borders of the country through the internet (social networks, news sites, etc.), displays all the characteristics specific to a shrewd information warfare, whose end-state does not necessarily aim persuading the opponent, but rather inducing a state of confusion with the purpose of destabilizing this opponent and, at the same time, inducing disagreements between allies.

The key elements of the reflexive control techniques orchestrated by the Russian Federation in Ukraine were the following:

- actions to deny and deceive Western public opinion in order to hide the presence of Russian armed forces in Ukraine;

- concealment of the real objectives of Moscow, an aspect which, on the one hand, generated fear in some societal circles, while others “convinced themselves” that Kremlin’s interference is limited and ultimately acceptable;

- expressing the legality of Moscow’s actions by virtue of its recognition, by the international community, as part of the conflict and not as a belligerent part, invoking similar precedents generated by the West, such as the independence of Kosovo or the invasion of Iraq, in 2003;

- actions to intimidate the West by using various methods, such as executing strategic military flights in the airspace of NATO states and some non-NATO states or exaggerated media statements about the success and performance of its armed forces;

- undertaking a complex effort at global level, through different media channels, to influence public opinion on the conflict in Ukraine.

Also, analyzing Gherasimov’s doctrine², Mark Galeotti brings significant insights into how the information war is conceptualized in the new strategy of the Russian Federation. The need for the development of this form of war was determined by the fact that Moscow understood its inferiority position from the military point of view towards

the US and even towards China, which is in full progress of the army- technological development, avoiding in this way any direct confrontations with anyone between the two actors³. Thus, the Russian Federation has chosen to compensate the relative weakness of its army with subtle and indirect strategies that seek to confuse opponents in identifying its true objectives. Also, the financial and economic power of the Russian Federation is inferior to many global actors, and the Kremlin has countered this by developing disinformation strategies and non-military ways of conducting armed combat, as a much more cost-effective alternative. Last but not least, unlike the classic military operations, the information war does not seek to resolve the conflict sharply, but to extend it by supporting the belligerent party that gives the Russian Federation the possibility to influence the permanent conflict or even to cause a change in the political regime.

Information warfare, through all its elements (disinformation, propaganda and manipulation) has a destructive potential for the stability and integrity of a state, being able to alter the local public opinion, thus affecting the strategic interests that define foreign policy and significantly influencing the internal politics decision-makers by damaging the government institutions and diminishing the degree of confidence of the population in the structures of the national defense system and in their ability to protect the territory of the country. Thus, information warfare has all the necessary components to be perceived as one of the most serious threats to the national security of a state, especially for states with a young democracy, precarious institutions, eroded by corruption, a population lacking national ideals, democratic values and civic attitude. This category also comprises the states in the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation, as is the case of Ukraine, where the Russian mass media has considerable coverage⁴.

Russia’s disinformation and propaganda activities conducted against Ukrainian society began long before the Euromaidan demonstrations, annexation of Crimea and the Donbass conflict. Indeed, immediately after the Orange Revolution of 2004, the main Russian media channels tried to discredit the Kiev authorities and their intentions to adhere to Euro-Atlantic structures. The Russian

media used to function without restrictions in the Ukrainian information space, an aspect that facilitated the broadcast of information on various issues to the Ukrainian population. In 2013, when the protests at Euromaidan began, the number of obviously anti-Ukrainian messages increased dramatically. According to studies conducted by members of the Internews organization, 71% of the residents of Donetsk region were watching Russian TV channels at the beginning of the conflict. Given that they were some of the most popular sources of information, Russian media channels used propaganda and fake news as the essential tool for influencing the Ukrainian population and central authorities. Having the clear purpose of discrediting the European Union and popularizing the ideas emanated from the leaders in Kremlin, the Russian Federation was able to gain the support of the population of Crimea and Donbass, a decisive aspect which led to the Kiev government losing control over these regions.

In order to protect the information space and to stop the spread of separatist feelings, Kiev leaders took some measures to ban the Russian media on the territory of Ukraine. Thus, by adopting laws 159/19 and 3359, they prohibited the broadcasting of films and serials which contained elements of propaganda of the Russian authorities. At the same time, the Ukrainian Audiovisual Council adopted a series of decrees prohibiting the broadcasting of Russian channels on the territory of Ukraine. Also, some non-governmental organizations, such as "Detektor Media", monitor the Ukrainian media space to detect Russian propaganda materials, and others, such as "Stop-Fake", focus on identifying false messages spread by the Russian media.

One of the most debated decisions of the Kiev government was the establishment of the Ministry of Information, considered by the European partners as a kind of *ministry of truth* or *ministry of censorship*. Moreover, some projects conducted by this structure include carrying out counter-propaganda activities. "The Ministry of Information set up the *Ukrainian Information Forces*, a project that aims to involve social media users in distributing credible information about Ukraine and the fight against Russian propaganda"⁵.

However, the broadcasting of Ukrainian stations in Crimea and Donbass was not possible during the period analyzed. Meanwhile, Russian

channels such as "Zvezda" and "Russia Today" and the separatists' media posts, such as "Novorossiya TV" or "First Republican Channel" were present in the information space of the occupied territories. It is even more striking that the soldiers of the Ukrainian army, located in the areas close to the state border with Russia, did not have access to local TV channels and had to watch the Russian or separatist channels. To solve the problem, Kiev approved of a plan for building TV towers in the region and blocking the broadcasts of the Russian or separatist stations.

Finally, it can be said that the outcome of the information war orchestrated by the Russian Federation was uncertain for long time. Moscow managed to avoid the involvement of the West in Ukraine, thus gaining time to strengthen its military intervention in the conflict. It also sparked differing opinions and attitudes within the North Atlantic Alliance regarding the situation in the region, creating confusion over the potential forms of response from the Allies. However, information warfare managed to change fundamentally neither the popular attitude nor the elites' attitude towards Russian actions in Ukraine and did not create a favorable information environment of Moscow. Moreover, the Russian Federation was not able to transpose its strategic objectives, identified and exploited by the hybrid war strategy, into consistent and sustainable success on the ground. As originally estimated, the success of the Russian Federation was reduced gradually as Moscow continued the same information strategy based largely on disinformation and propaganda fabricated and false news. This strategy was successful in the early stages of the conflict, when the vast majority of the directly affected population and public opinion in the region were more sensitive to the media challenges launched by Moscow. It can be seen that the same scenario was used in the conflict in Syria, where the information war orchestrated by the Kremlin which was, at a certain time, the upward trend, had the same outcome after popular attitudes in the region gave up digesting Russian information machinations.

In order to analyze the propaganda arranged by the Russian Federation for the preparation of the Ukrainian intervention, we chose to build the basis for the case study by presenting the role played by *Russia Today* in covering the mission

in eastern Ukraine. This TV channel is the main instrument used by the government in Kremlin in order to convey its own vision upon the major events worldwide. The articles in *Russia Today* selected for analysis were issued in the period May 2014 - February 12, 2015 (Peace Summit in Minsk - Ukraine, Russia, France, Germany).

During the mentioned period, *Russia Today* website published about 3,000 articles in which it presented, debated or referred to the crisis in Ukraine. Of all these, we tried to select the most representative that aim to discredit state authority, personalities and leaders with a special status. There were published a lot of materials in this regard, such as:

- 1) Dehumanizing the opponent;
- 2) Exacerbating the stakes involved in a fight or war;
- 3) Carrying out actions of national treason;
- 4) Practicing onerous actions;
- 5) Indifference to the sufferings of the people.

The rest of the article will be dedicated to presenting the manner in which RT activities discredited state authority, personalities and leaders with a special status.

Discrediting state authority, personalities and leaders with a special status

Dehumanizing the opponent

The Kiev government forces used cluster munitions in civilian areas. "While it was not possible to conclusively determine responsibility for many of the attacks, the evidence points to Ukrainian government forces' responsibility for several cluster munition attacks on Donetsk [Donetsk Region, Eastern Ukraine]"⁶. Andrey Lysenko, spokesman for the National Security Council of Ukraine said that HRW (Human Rights Watch) observers received manipulated information aimed at influencing international public opinion and blaming Ukraine.

Residents of Odessa gathered to commemorate those killed as a result of the violence on May 2, 2014, in the Chamber of Commerce area⁷. The confrontations from that time resulted in 46 dead and 200 injured. Witnesses say that those who managed to escape the flames were hanged or beaten to death by radicals. A total of 42 of those killed were identified by the locals or the media. The Odessa news portal published an unofficial list

of the causes that led to the death of those people - fire, poison by gas, shooting, hanging, physical violence. Pro-Kiev forces killed at least seven police officers and injured dozens, including civilians, in clashes in Donetsk region. Some members of the pro-Kiev forces tried to desert and flee the national guard, but were killed by their comrades⁸. The local population, including children, went to beg them not to shoot their own comrades, but without success. The soldiers wanted to desert as a result of the decision not to listen to the orders to shoot the militia and the civilian population.

Although thousands of civilians remained without drinking water for more than a week, the UN said that in eastern Ukraine there is still no humanitarian crisis.

Eastern Ukraine was the theater of anti-terrorist operations, with massive artillery attacks, targeting hospitals and civilian homes. At least 365 people, including 257 civilians and 14 children, had died since the beginning of these actions. Moscow held information that the humanitarian convoy destined for the population of Luhansk will be attacked by pro-Kiev forces. Sergey Lavrov told for *Russia Today* (RT) that "We draw attention to the sharp intensification of military actions by Ukrainian forces with the obvious goal to block the route, agreed upon with Kiev, of the humanitarian convoy from the Russia-Ukraine border to Lugansk"⁹.

Representatives of the RT spoke to international organizations, including the UN, UNESCO and OSCE, in order to act to protect the rights and dignity of journalists working in Ukraine against the illegal actions of the Kiev authorities¹⁰. "[Journalists] are being watched, their phone conversations wiretapped. There were cases when journalists were forced to get down on their knees, beaten during detention and illegally deported from Ukraine"¹¹.

Exacerbating the stakes involved in a fight or war

About 400 mercenaries from the well-known American security company Academy Blackwater took part in Ukraine's military operations in Slaviansk against anti-government protesters¹².

The German newspaper *Bild am Sonntag* wrote that, on April 29, 2014, the BND (German Intelligence Service) informed Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, about the participation of

mercenaries in military actions in Ukraine. There are no data on the subordination of troops in this mission. Sergei Lavrov said that Ukraine is using foreign military forces to suppress civilian protests. "Among the candidates for the role of gendarme is the Barbados-registered company Greystone Limited, which is integrated with the Academy corporation."¹³ Its members were repeatedly accused of violating human rights. The American security company Blackwater gained worldwide reputation for its role in the Iraq war. It changed its name twice, in Xe Services in 2009 and in Academy in 2011.

Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, Valery Geletey said that NATO member states were supplying weapons to Ukraine. "Leading countries of the world, those that can help us, and they heard us. We have the supply of arms under way."¹⁴ Petro Poroshenko, the president of Ukraine, said he had directly negotiated with some NATO member states (USA, France, Italy, Poland and Norway). However, shortly after this statement, US, Norway, Italy and Poland denied information that they had supplied or intended to supply lethal or non-lethal weapons to Ukraine.

Carrying out actions of national treason

In an interview with RT, talking about Western states attitude towards Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that "I am sure that if such a position was taken, there would be neither civil war in Ukraine, nor the multitude of victims. Our colleagues [in the West] took another position"¹⁵. Putin said that Moscow is ready to mediate between Kiev and the anti-government forces. If Ukraine wants peace, then it should stop the attacks. Also, Vladimir Putin expressed regret for the failure to exchange prisoners between Kiev and the anti-government forces, stating that it was the fault of the Kiev authorities for this failure – "Yesterday [Wednesday] there was an agreement to exchange 30 people. The representatives of self-defense troops arrived at the place of prisoners' exchange; an official from Kiev authorities appeared and said, 'No. We won't exchange [the prisoners] until the Minsk talks."¹⁶ Putin pleaded that Russian citizens fighting for anti-government forces in eastern Ukraine are not mercenaries paid by the Russian Federation – "All those people who fulfill their duty or voluntarily take part in some military actions,

including those in Ukraine's southeast, are not mercenaries, as they don't get money for that."¹⁷

In a statement to RT, Sergei Lavrov accused European politicians and institutions of "refusing to admit that all responsibility for the actions of radical forces in Ukraine rests with the opposition. The Russian side is demanding the leaders on the streets to stop the violence in their country and immediately resume dialogue with the lawful government without threats and ultimatums"¹⁸.

Three members of the special anti-terror unit Alpha of the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) were arrested while on an undercover mission in the city of Gorlovka in Donetsk region¹⁹. Their mission was to kidnap the leader of the group that controlled the local police, Igor Bezler. The prisoners were taken to Slaviansk for questioning and being presented in front of the press.

They did not say who authorized the operation and who was in charge, but acknowledged that they belong to a group of seven, not to mention where the other four are. They also did not specify how many such groups are located in the area. The prisoners said they were afraid of their families, now that the Ukrainian authorities had learned that they had failed in their mission.

The Slaviansk defense forces captured eight other military observers whom they considered "NATO spies". They had cards valid for all checkpoints, which means they were undercover, protected by their status as OSCE members.

Battalions of pro-Kiev volunteers prevented the distribution of humanitarian aid to the population of eastern Ukraine. The members of such battalions did not hide their Nazi beliefs and were involved in crimes, blackmail, kidnappings, etc. "As winter sets in, the already desperate situation in eastern Ukraine is being made even worse by the volunteer battalions preventing food aid and medicine from reaching those in need. It is no secret that the region is facing a humanitarian disaster with many already at risk of starvation. These battalions often act like renegade gangs and urgently need to be brought under control. Denying food to people caught up in a conflict is against international law and the perpetrators must be held to account."²⁰, declared Denis Krivosheev, the Director of Europe and Central Asia for Amnesty International for RT.

Oliver Stone, the famous American director, in an interview for RT, said that the "The armed

coup in Kiev is painfully like CIA operations to oust unwanted foreign leaders in Iran, Chile and Venezuela. Details to follow in the documentary, but it seems clear that the so-called 'shooters' who killed 14 policemen, wounded some 85, and killed 45 protesting civilians, were outside third-party agitators. Many witnesses, including Yanukovich and police officials, believe these foreign elements were introduced by pro-Western factions – with CIA fingerprints on it.”²¹ He viewed the collapse of the Ukrainian government and the imposition of another, just like other actions in other states, something that he calls - American soft power techniques, regime change.

Conducting onerous actions

Officials of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPRK) said they had clear evidence that the Kiev government was planning provocative actions in the days before the Munich Security Conference, intending to bomb a bus with civilians in the Debaltsevo area²². This information came from one of the Ukrainian officers who were part of the group that was to carry out the mission, Lt. Aleksandr Marchenko, who surrendered to the rebels. The action was aimed at discrediting RPD and considering it, in international public opinion, a terrorist organization.

Meantime, in the middle of the intensified military campaign, Donetsk was under siege. A city hospital was bombed, resulting in 15 people dying. In a separate incident, other 6 people died and 28 were injured. On the whole, there were 26 attacks on the respective place, most of them being against hospitals or schools. Human Rights Watch (HRW) said that the Kiev authorities had failed in finding the culprits for attacking the civilian population in their own army – “Yatsenyuk and many others like him must find it impossible that the laws and customs of war could be objectively applied to both sides... Rather than denying reports of abuses by its military, Kiev should recognize the obvious facts and stop conducting erratic combat operations”²³. HRW has published more evidence showing that Ukraine refuses to make differences between military targets and the civilian population, as required by international war laws.

The Ukrainian military started an operation against pro-autonomy activists in Mariupol and Konstantinovka. An eyewitness interviewed by a

reporter from RT says – “I am in the center of the city, there are a lot of ambulances outside the local administration building, gunfire is being heard, armored vehicles have entered the city and are moving towards the center. People are going there as well, to prevent the soldiers from shooting. We are hoping they won't shoot at civilians, though from what we've seen before, we are not sure anymore.”²⁴

RT made a documentary to show how the lives of people in the area changed after the conflict began, titled *South East Ukraine: The Diary of a Crisis*. “We are not separatists; we are not radicals. I live in Kharkov and I am 61 and want to understand what country I live in. When are they going to stop calling us separatists? We get up each morning and start greeting each other, ‘hello I'm a separatist’, ‘hello, I'm a terrorist’. Our home is Russia. How is it possible to listen to that so-called government from Kiev who gave orders today to kill their own people in Slavyansk”²⁵ – that's how the documentary began.

It shows how difficult it has become for Russian-speaking Ukrainians to live in the region. People were beaten on the street or arrested for carrying the St. George Cross, to commemorate those who died in World War II. – “There is no difference between us, except we don't speak Ukrainian. Why do they hate their own people so much? Where does all this bitterness and hatred come from?”²⁶

A gift from an elderly Ukrainian citizen turned out to be a weapon that killed one soldier and injured three others. The incident happened at Stanicya Luhanska checkpoint in eastern Ukraine. An elderly citizen, who claimed to be a local, came to the checkpoint at 2:00 p.m. local time and gave the soldiers three jars of honey, thanking them for their service. When the soldiers wanted to taste honey, the jars exploded (there were explosive devices inside). The governor of Luhansk region, Gennady Moskal, said that only people who were especially trained in this regard can make such devices. The purpose of these actions was to kill or injure the soldiers, but also to create distrust between the military and the locals.

Indifference to the sufferings of the people

In an interview for RT, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that “Unfortunately,

President Poroshenko has made the decision to resume military actions, and we – meaning myself and my colleagues in Europe – could not convince him that the way to reliable, firm and long-term peace can't lie through war. A reliable mechanism for monitoring compliance with it and the OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] should play an active role."²⁷

The result of the delay in signing the ceasefire agreement was exploited by the Russian Federation in the sense that many Ukrainians were killed or left homeless. Russia's UN Ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, declared at a conference "What do we have today? Today Kiev and Brussels have returned to the position, which they needed to start with: suspend the association talks with the EU, which is exactly what the toppled President Viktor Yanukovich wanted. Due to a year of decisions, thousands of people have died, almost a million have been left homeless, and we are facing a civil war and the destruction of the economy. We are in the middle of a civil war and the destruction of the economy. Nothing has changed under the old or new Ukrainian elite. There has been no dialogue and there have been no constitutional reforms."²⁸

Residents on the eastern border of Ukraine have been living in fear since the conflict began. In Gorlovka, Donetsk region, six people died and another 12 were injured only in the week of January 25-29, 2015. Local statistics showed 115 losses of human lives among civilians, of which 17 children. One of the locals declared "I am 63 years old, and have always worked for my country," a woman tells RT. "But now I feel like I've been discarded like a worn-out glove. I used to be happy about life, but now there's nothing to be happy about."²⁹ Another local, Vladimir Bobrishev, led RT reporters to the ruins of his house and told them what happened. The bombings hit his house. His wife was injured in the leg, and the younger child was killed instantly. When he got home, the older boy, Misha, was also hurt, having suffered a serious head injury. He wrapped his head in his vest and took him to the cellar as the bombing continued. There he found his wife covered with earth. He got her out of there. He looked for the little boy and he didn't breathe anymore"³⁰.

Conclusions

From the analysis presented in the case study it turned out that the Russian Federation used *Russia Today* to cover Russian actions in eastern Ukraine. Through this news site, Russian propaganda implemented a coherent strategic communication plan, developed at the level of the Russian authorities. The propaganda had an offensive character, with an aggressive and rapid information flow that did not allow for the opponents' time to react, so that the unidirectional messages transmitted reached the recipients, providing them with an unperturbed Russian point of view. This is characterized by generating very strong emotions, aggression and detachment from reality. *Russia Today* creates an increasingly complicated, unpredictable reality, "it generates fear, leading people to the limit of chaos and panic"³¹.

The propaganda targets were diversified, starting with the local population, local authorities, rebel forces, government forces and the international community. The propaganda was conducted on several levels of audience and targets. The population has been bombarded with the most diversified media products, starting with short news as "breaking news", simple news, with high emotional load and few identifying elements, up to extensive analyses that quoted independent studies, reports from different international organizations, but presenting only elements out of context and turning them into favorable media products, extremely difficult to counter.

Propaganda took the most diversified forms, from distorted presentation of facts, creating reports in which elements of interest are inserted, taking from reports and information provided by the international community favorable elements and setting up new media products favorable to Russia or unfavorable to the Ukrainian authorities. The propaganda had several components depending on the objectives set, as follows: the provision of products that manipulate the local population, the supply of media products that mislead the Ukrainian government authorities and influence international public opinion, as well as messages aimed at the population from the Federation.

The main axes of propaganda were built on a few major themes, namely fascism and the nationalism of the new Ukrainian authorities (based on the anti-fascist sensibilities of the populations

of the former USSR), their lack of legitimacy, the difference between the Ukrainian people (brothers to the Russians) and government, support and the interest of the West in the Ukrainian crisis, the humanitarian crisis, the suffering of the population in the area affected by the conflict and the crimes produced by both the government forces and the pro-Ukrainian paramilitary structures that acted in the area, the imminent collapse of Ukraine as a state and the moral support that it has to grants Russia to the local population, denial of Russia's direct involvement in eastern Ukraine and the legitimacy of annexing Crimea presented as a reparation for a great historical injustice.

Propaganda was constructed in such a way as to ensure, on the one hand, favorable attitudes from the population, and on the other, elements that created a long-term behavior and mentality according to the new Eurasian and anti-Western ideologies. Russia Today provided a favorable image for Russia and denigrated both Ukrainian authorities and the international community, which opposed the view and actions of Russia.

In February 2016, Russian television channels could be watched all over Ukraine. As some surveys pointed out, for the residents of eastern Ukraine, the Russian press was an important source of information. "Russian TV stations started talking about the break-up of Ukraine long before the events in Maidan and the emergence of conflicts in the east of the country"³².

In fact, many people in eastern Ukraine watched the revolution from Kiev through the "lenses" of Russian television stations, which claimed that the revolution was orchestrated by the West and carried out by Ukrainian ultra-nationalists.

The Ukrainian government realized this danger, but Kiev authorities' reaction was much belated. The pro-Russian separatists quickly interrupted the broadcast of Ukrainian television channels and started the broadcast of Russian ones. When the separatists conquered the last television towers, many observers knew that Ukraine's media influence in the region would be almost non-existent.

Up until approximately a decade ago, Russian propaganda had stated that Ukraine was a sister country, the Ukrainian people are brotherly people, and the Russians and the Ukrainians claim to come from Kiev Russia, being East Slavic, speaking a

Slavic language, being of Orthodox religion, and embracing the traditions of Byzantium and the values of Eurasian civilization. All these aspects are determining factors placing them in a position of only being able to conceive their future together, side by side. However, after the Orange Revolution, the Russians understood that the Ukrainian brothers can have a different perspective than Moscow, regarding their own political evolution, with a strong pro-Western character³³.

As a result of the crisis in Ukraine, *Russia Today* presented the protesters on the Maidan as fascists, nationalists, right-wing extremists, perpetrators of a coup orchestrated by the CIA, but they maintained a difference between the Ukrainian people and the radicalistic elements.

As the fighting spread in Donbass, Kremlin's propaganda became more and more aggressive. Reporters presented mutilated children, raped girls, humiliated elders, dozens of bloodied bodies, burning houses. Overwhelming sequences that develop strong feelings. Yet, the images that accompanied the stories proved to be from other wars. The bleeding boy presented to be from Slaviansk is not actually from this area, but from the Syrian hospital Alhurria. Also, from Syria is the 3-year-old boy, shown at Pervii Kanal, in July 2014. The state agency, Ria Novosti, presented a material about the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine in which it talked about hundreds of bodies found on a field, but the picture accompanying it was from Chechnya. Another Moscow television reported about the existence of a so-called prisoner camp in Ukraine, using a photograph from Bosnia in 1995.

A large news-report was presented on the main public television channel, about 140,000 Ukrainians fleeing to Russia, for fear of the fascist government installed in Kiev. The following evening, the reporter spoke about 600,000 people fleeing the country. There was broadcast footage filmed with hundreds of thousands of cars in a hurry to leave the country through the customs of Sheghini. However, one little detail was ignored: the customs point Sheghini is in the Lviv region, on the border with Poland, so it does not lead into Russia, but into Poland.

The combination of denial and indirect action, the mix of lethality, coercion and intimidation, as well as the use of cyber-actions blurred the distinction between war and peace by helping the

aggressor to hide and deny real intentions, creating delays in the adoption of decisions by Ukraine leaders and allies.

In this sense, the major risk is generated by the possibility that the national authorities will not be able to identify hybrid actions, on time and on the basis of concrete evidence, to be presented to the allies in a coherent and convincing way.

NOTES:

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