

Countering Information Warfare

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The events preceding the de facto annexation of Crimea by Russia and throughout the following onset of the Ukraine crisis has brought Information Warfare to particular attention amongst political and military professionals as well as scholars. NATO General Philip Breedlove described Russian activity in information space as – perhaps – “the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare”¹. The suggested article aims at scrutinizing the challenges of reacting to such warfare based on the Russian theoretical grounds for future wars and in particularly information warfare. In particular this touches the theories of 6th generation warfare and “information superiority”, reflexive control as well as the emphasis on patriotism.

Scrutinizing the discourse amongst the Russian political and military practitioners and theorists it is observable, that a society as whole is in focus of what is assumed to be modern (or 6 sixth generation²) warfare. Such approach places influence on various levels of at the center of efforts. It is thus instrumental to influence the adversary’s society throughout – from grassroots level, throughout the economical actors and the ranks of military to top leadership by the means of diplomacy, information and disinformation, deception and coercion.³ Such approach is aimed at resulting in inner decay of the adversary but also facilitating the use of armed civilians. In order to safeguard the own country against such attacks, Russia has been focusing a lot of efforts on patriotic upbringing and manifestation of the patriotic thought throughout the society, which also aims at pre-mobilizing and preparing the peoples for a possible war.

In continuation, the new war is conducted in a largely non-contact manner assuming the use of new generation precision weaponry on full depth, simultaneously in all physical spaces as well as in the informational space. Information is thus central for the approach and information warfare – both as a military and a non-military mean – is conducted throughout the timeline of the conflict.⁴ This

¹ Gen. Breedlove, P. cited by Vandiver, J. (2014, September 4) SACEUR: Allies must prepare for Russia ‘hybrid war’. *Stars and Stripes*. Available at: <http://www.stripes.com/promotions/2.1066/saceur-allies-must-prepare-for-russia-hybrid-war-1.301464>

² Kipp, J, W. (2012) Russian Sixth Generation Warfare and Recent Developments. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. Volume: 9 Issue: 17.

³ Bērziņš, J. (2014) Russia’s New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy. *National Defence Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategic Research*. Policy Paper no 02.

⁴ Gerasimov, V. (2013) Ценность науки в предвидении. *Военно-промышленный курьер*. Available at: <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>

centrality is further established in the notion of “information superiority”⁵, which is thought to be essential for the outcome of a struggle. A central factor for this “information superiority” is the information space. While Russia has repeatedly used, both in communication and strategies, the notion of an inherently “Russian information space”, it is apparent that such geography-based delimitation is problematic and that Russia itself continuously makes use of the in reality rather borderless information space.

While Russia might not be the only actor treating information as a source of power over partners and adversaries, the processes aspired are fairly exceptional. Unlike efforts to create favorable outcomes through attraction (soft power) or changed behavior patterns, Russia aims to influence the adversary’s decision-making process following principles of theory of reflexive control. Reflexive control seeks to amend or regulate the flow and quality of information available in the decision-making process to force the adversary to reach decisions that are of advantage for the initiator.⁶ Here, information superiority comes into play assuming a variety of functions: Such superiority stretches from control over data systems and communication channels to cognitive information.

Following these theoretical ideas, Russia has evidently focused a lot of efforts into consolidating domestic media in efforts to align the discourse in accordance with Kremlin’s message. At the same time Russia also aimed to establish communication channels abroad, investing heavily in Kremlin aligned broadcast. Further, Russia employs more covert methodologies such as PR-agencies⁷ as well as opinion makers – pro-Russian paid or unpaid experts - and so-called “trolls” – social media users employed in organized manner in order to create and maintain a seemingly grassroots-level pro-Russian discourse.

Particularly the Baltic states show themselves concerned over Russian influence in the informational arena – mulling over its destabilizing effect, particularly amongst the Russian-speaking population.⁸ Two aspects are identifiable: For one, the countries are tasked with disrupting or damping the pro-Russian message, which is either openly transmitted through Russian or Russia-aligned media, or covertly finds its way into the societies through the so-called “trolls” or “opinion agents”. For the other, the concern encompasses providing and popularizing alternative information sources for the natively Russian-speaking parts of the population. Subsequently, these concerns gave rise to debate⁹ and a variety of activities¹⁰ to meet the informational challenge within countries

⁵ Chekinov, S. G. & Bogdanov S. A. (2013) О характере и содержании войны нового поколения. *Военная мысль*. No 10.

⁶ Thomas, T. L. (2004) Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military. *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*. 17: 237–256.

⁷ Heritage, T. (2013, September 12) 'Putin the peacemaker' tries talking to the U.S. public. *Reuters*. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/12/us-syria-crisis-putin-article-idUSBRE98B0PL20130912>

⁸ The Lithuanian Tribune (2014, April 10) Baltic broadcasters mull setting up pan-Baltic Russian TV channel. Available at: <http://www.lithuaniatribune.com/66567/baltic-broadcasters-mull-setting-up-pan-baltic-russian-tv-channel-201466567/>

⁹ Bahovski, E. (2015, January 21) What to do about Russian propaganda. *RKK/ICDS: Blog*. Available at: <http://www.icds.ee/blog/article/what-to-do-about-russian-propaganda/>

and at EU-level.¹¹ Further, labeling the overall Russian approach “hybrid warfare” NATO and the EU officials agreed to “intensify NATO-EU cooperation in countering”¹² the phenomenon. Countering the Russian narrative presents the planners with a number of challenges: For one there will be a domestic public response to any activity, potentially aggravated by presence of native Russian-speakers in the said country. Already at this point a criticism of possible “Western propaganda”, in the sense of political lie rather than truth, is detectable, which in turn can contribute to system erosion within the countering countries or their partners. For the other, due to the nature of the information space, informational counter activities are likely to result in a public response in Russia. Here, with a fairly patriotic interpretation base, a countering narrative might push the audience closer to Kremlin, thus assisting the public mobilization. In both cases one might assume that Russia is successively employing reflexive control to force their adversaries to engage in activities that are likely to be of advantage for Kremlin. Based on this hypothesis, we will scrutinize these and further approaches that have recently been promoted by western leaders and professionals. The results of such examination can assist both scholars and decision makers.

¹⁰ Vainio, J. (2015, April 25) Viranomaiset varautuvat Venäjän infosotaan – Suomeen perustettiin iskuryhmä. *Aamulehti*. Available at: <http://m.aamulehti.fi/kotimaa/viranomaiset-varautuvat-venajan-infosotaan-suomeen-perustettiin-iskuryhma?v=1>

Hoffmann, C. (2015, April 17) Kampf gegen russische Propaganda: Das Ende der Wehrlosigkeit. *Spiegel*. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/russland-frank-walter-steinmeier-sagt-balten-unterstuetzung-zu-a-1029168.html>

¹¹ Guarascio, F. (2015, March 19) EU gears up for propaganda war with Russia. *Reuters*. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/19/us-ukraine-crisis-eu-propaganda-idUSKBN0MF26A20150319>

¹² Croft, A., Siebold, S. (2015, May 14) NATO and EU to work together to counter Crimea-style 'hybrid' warfare. *Reuters*. Available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/05/14/uk-nato-ministers-idUKKBN0NZ1RM20150514>