DEFINING HYBRID WARFARE. THE RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF PROPAGANDA MECHANISMS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN DEVELOPING FOREIGN POLICY

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Abstract

In the past few years, the Russian Federation has become a central point on the security agenda of the most important international actors due to its aggressive foreign policy, proven by its latest actions (the illegitimate annexation of Crimea, the actions conducted in Syria and so on). However, by comparison with the Cold War era, Russia has developed new mechanisms to gain power and influence on regional and international level, demonstrating that it can and has the willingness to become the powerful actor that used to be before the Cold War and the fall of the Communist Block by building an empire able to stop the expansion of the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyse (through instruments like discourse and content analysis and literature review) the methods used by the Russian state to conduct remote wars, without taking responsibility for its actions. Moreover, the article will try to identify the role of the Russian propaganda machine in developing Kremlin's foreign policy, as well as in defining the concept of hybrid warfare as a new form of confrontation.

Keywords: *hybrid warfare, propaganda, disinformation, foreign policy, Russian Federation.*

Motto: *"Social media has evolved. Once considered as a platform for democratic dialogue and deliberation, civic engagement and expression of political ideas, today it has become an instrument of mass manipulation, suppression of votes and of*

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> *propagation of false or tendentious information. Several categories of political actors, from authoritarian governments to Islamist extremists and traditional political parties have efficiently used social media to stifle important political debates, to make reports seem vague, to exacerbate divisions and to block consensus in identifying a response to various public crises".* (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p. 16)

Defining hybrid warfare

The concept of hybrid warfare took the road of success in the last decades, becoming a recurrent subject on the security agendas of many international actors and organizations. The first advocates of this topic considered that hybrid warfare was defined as a blend of insurgency and conventional warfare, characterized by the use of new technologies, new clandestine methods or the actions of new actors, operating below the thresholds that could define armed conflict (Johnson, 2017, p. 3). In the same line, Hoffman claimed that hybrid wars are a "mixed form of the lethal characteristic of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervour of irregular warfare, where adversaries (represented by states, state-sponsored groups, or self-funded actors) take advantage of their access to modern military capabilities, while promoting extensive insurgencies by using ambushes, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and coercive assassinations" (Hoffman, 2009, p. 37):

> *"A hybrid war is any adversary that simultaneously employs a tailored mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behaviour in the same time and battle space to obtain their political objectives"* (Hoffman, 2014).

The hybrid warfare concept is not considered to be of recent history, however, making reference to the same types of war, but with a far more extended complexity, hybrid forces being able to "effectively adopt and include up-to-date technological systems into their force structure and strategy and to exploit these systems beyond the intended employment parameters" (Nemeth, 2002, p. 74). Theoreticians argued that one of the main objectives of the hybrid war package follows to force any enemy to be compliant to the will of its

adversary, thus combining methods of attack designed to fulfil easily identifiable political 'ends', aspects familiar to scholars of classical war theory (Gat, 2001).

In this context, from a historical point of view, the concept of hybrid conflict came into circulation in order to define a new reality of the conflict between state and non-state actors, a conflict that began to run beyond the commonly agreed principles of the classic war, throughout a series of practices considered to be innovative. Thus, to understand the paradigm shift that the hybrid conflict brings to the configuration and negotiation of power capital in the twenty first century, one must first understand what its precursors are.

Classic conflict/war has been defined on a modern basis at the beginning of the nineteenth century by political philosopher and gunman Carl von Clausewitz, in his work, that later become a landmark in conflict studies, entitled "On War". Clausewitz proposed that war should be understood as a mere continuation of politics by other means. For the Prussian philosopher, war was a form of instrumentalisation of violence under the sign of state power and law, whose goal, most rationally, was to force the adversary to carry out what the subject wanted. Therefore, the conflict came out of the sphere of biological violence and was ethically regulated, becoming a morally accepted form of maintaining/accumulating state power. The ultimate goal of the war, understood in this manner, was not the destruction, but the disarmament of the opponent or the wear of its resources to the point where it could be subjected to its own will (Clausewitz, 2013).

Addressing the conflict as a form of attrition of the enemy's forces, without the actual destruction of the army or the conquest of its territories, the concept of war was later defined by tactics of the asymmetric war, by those agents of power who did not have the same military, political, financial and territorial strength as its opponent.

In the twentieth century, the **asymmetric warfare** approach was developed and refined – a term derived from the Clausewitz's advanced concept of people's war. This evolution had as a starting point the inclusion, in addition to the classic form of confrontation between two armies, of the guerrilla confrontation for the oppression of the opponent. The new type of war that combines the two types of tactics

has been called irregular war. In this manner, the idea of asymmetric war was further developed from the concept of irregular war. The first theorists of this concept were Karl Marx, Friederich Engles, T.E. Lawrence, Mao Zedong, and Vladimir Lenin, who introduced the idea of developing tactical warfare through the instrumentalisation of popular revolts (Engels, 1949), as well as an army of assuring a working class, a political assassination, and a propaganda to strengthen the morale of their own troops and to undermine the adverse forces (Lenin, 1965).

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century, we witnessed a new conceptual mutation by the introduction of a new term – that of *hybrid war,* which initially referred to a type of war developed through the synchronized, flexible and well-coordinated use of operations specific to the classic warfare, combined with guerrilla actions, information operations, and the use of advanced technologies. W. J. Nemeth, one of the first authors who spoke about hybrid war, uses this term to describe the war between the Chechens and the Russian forces. In Nemeth's sense, this type of war meant "*involving the whole society and combining conventional war tactics with irregular warfare tactics, as well as information operations that used in an innovator manner modern technology*" (Racz, 2015, p. 30).

The concept of "*hybrid warfare*" saw afterwards a prolific evolution, being usually invoked and refined as to refer to a whole series of conflicts, from the Vietnam War, to the war in Afghanistan, Iraq or Lebanon. In essence, hybrid warfare had been defined as any form of war that incorporates an extensive range of modern instruments, that uses in a fluid manner and well-synchronized tactics specific to various forms of conflict, that act both directly and indirectly in the confrontation area, in order to maintain the adherence and support of its own citizens and the international community, and to weaken the morale and efficiency of target audiences in the area considered to be adversary. Furthermore, Russel W. Glenn offered a new dimension to this concept, making it to incorporate actions in the economic and social area (Glenn, 2009), while Margaret Bond further expanded the dimensions of the hybrid warfare to include "*all elements of national power, through a continuum of activities, from those designed*

to ensure/undermine stability and security, to reconstruction operations, to armed confrontation" (Bond, 2007, p. 4).

To sum up, it is true to say that the term hybrid warfare demonstrates an excess of contextual characterization and an inadequate conceptual clarification, any new instrument, social behaviour or practical use of new technologies offering another element to describe a set of confrontational and competitive approaches, which will certainly define, in time, a new form of conflict approach. For now, however, Russel W. Glenn was right by saying that in defining the hybrid war, the use of metaphors is welcome:

"*The best-known hybrid in the animal world is the mule, the product of a horse and donkey. The mule is sterile; it cannot by itself evolve. One must study the evolution of horses and donkeys to understand the potential nature of future mules. The metaphor holds true for the study of what are being labelled hybrid conflicts. The new term may help inspire debate and a better understanding of modern warfare much as did «indirect approach» for some. However, hybrid conflict is ultimately a concept whose character is better described in terms of other constructs that offer superior clarity and will be better understood by students of conflict. «Hybrid» in its several forms fails to clear the high hurdle and therefore should not attain status as part of formal doctrine*" (Glenn, 2009).

Even though the specific literature has not managed to identify and develop a mutual definition of this concept, the following understanding can, however, be quite comprehensive:

"*Hybrid conflicts...are full spectrum wars with both physical and conceptual dimensions: the former, a struggle against an armed enemy and the latter, a wider struggle for control and support of the combat zone's indigenous population, the support of the home fronts of the intervening nations, and the support of the international community...To secure and stabilize the indigenous population, the intervening forces must immediately rebuild or restore security, essential services, local government, self-defence forces and essential elements of the economy*" (McCuen, 2008; Kanwal, 2018, p. 16).

Therefore, hybrid wars are based on mixed tactics and strategies resulted from combining instruments of both hard and soft power, fact

that allows an actor to obtain the desired results with less effort, by conducting actions that are difficult to track back. With the various extensive effects of globalization and the large development of technology that permitted states to develop a set of instruments which can be used in multiple state areas/domains, avoiding formal commitment of the state into the official war (Banasik, 2015, p. 23), it is true to say that the new form of war exceeds the borders of traditional war, being predominantly based on military operations directly on the ground.

One of the most common non-military means used nowadays by states to project their power/influence against their declared adversaries is represented by information operations, which can be defined as a form of political warfare, where targets include besides a nation state's government, military, private sector, and general population (Theohary, 2018, p. 1). In this context, traditional and social media remain the main mechanism used by a state to target a large audience, playing, at the same time, the role of practical instruments for information operations. With technology becoming a crucial element in the existence of a society, propaganda, disinformation and fake news become a must have asset in a state's portfolio, not necessarily for offensive purposes, but mainly for being able to defend from the offensive actions against the state.

Russian Foreign Policy – Propaganda Mechanisms and Tools

> **Motto:** "*The rules are simple: they lie to us, we know they're lying, they know we know they're lying, but they keep lying to us, and we keep pretending to believe them"*. Elena Gorokhova, *A Mountain of Crumbs* (2010)

The concept of hybrid warfare came to the attention of the main actors of the international scene and of the general public, at national level, with Kyiv's EuroMaidan in late 2013 and the Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, where the international scene considered that Russia forces have successfully combined psychological warfare instruments with deception operations, skilful internal communication mechanisms, intimidation and media propaganda in

order to avoid direct confrontation and make a favourable context to be able to deny its interference (Tulak, 2009, p. 35).

However, this is not the first case when the Russian Federation used information operations to achieve its objectives, this country being considered a historical past master of disinformation. From the myth of the Potemkin villages, that dates back to 1787, when Russia constructed hollow façades of villages to impress the delegation consisting of European diplomats and demonstrate the success of Russian power and civilization in colonizing the new imperial lands[1] (David-Fox), to the 2001 textbooks episode, when the entire Russian government was convened to analyse the content of textbooks and teacher's books on contemporary Russian history (Snegovaya, 2018, pp. 2-3), concluding that the "*many negative descriptions that appeared in textbooks in the 1990s should be replaced by a vision of Russian history that promotes the strengthening of patriotism, citizenship, national self-consciousness, and historical optimism*" (Butterfield & Levintova, 2009), and to the 2007 "*Munich speech*" of Vladimir Putin, when he expressed his criticism towards an international scene where the United States got to make decisions in a unilateral manner and used tough anti-Western rhetoric are all demonstrative examples. This propensity for disinformation reached its pinnacle in the Soviet era (Pacepa & Rychlak, 2013; Saberwal, 2018, p. 62).

Moreover, it should not been forgotten the fact that over the last 20 years, a defeated, demobilized and cracked "*red army"* has slowly, but surely, turned into an army of professionals, with state-of-the-art technology and with determination as Mother Russia's ambitions. From the objectives point of view, the Russian foreign policy of the last 100 years can be characterized by continuity. Many of the statements made by specialists in Russian territory more that 40-50 years ago are still valid today, and the new Russian Security Strategy took over the main force lines of the *Russian Foreign Policy Strategy from 2013.*

In a report conducted by the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), part of the U.S. Army War College, the Russian strategy is defined by five elements: "(a) asymmetric warfare – the main base defining the

[1] Article available at https://histoire.ens.fr/IMG/file/Coeure/David-Fox%20Potemkin%20villages.pdf

Russian methods of conducting wars; (b) strategy of low intensity – a strategy that has been developed by Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command in 1980; (c) understanding and theoretical elaboration of the network-centric warfare; (d) definition of sixth generation warfare developed by general Vladimir Slipchenko; (e) strategic concept of reflexive control – which plays the role of maintaining the balance between the usage of military and non-military means in combat, in accordance with the strategic characteristics of each operation" (Deni, 2018, p. 19).

In the same context, in Putin's era, Russia's foreign policy is built around the following main goals, with applicability at both international and regional level: "(a) regain the status of great power and become one of the main actors on the international scene; (b) maintain its influence on post-Soviet countries and expand the sphere of influence of the 'Russian World' (Russkiy Mir) and Eurasian Union; (c) contain democracy and solidify a Russian style of governance" (Lough, Lutsevych, Pomerantsev, Secrieru, & Shekhovtsov, 2014, p. 2).

Taking these two aspects into account, strategists and analysts concluded that Russia tends to use generation warfare in order to achieve its foreign policy objectives, and that this type of war follows eight different phases (Chekinov & Bogdanov, 2013), which could be seen in the conflict against Ukraine (Deni, 2018, pp. 19-20):

1. "develop non-military asymmetric warfare, which includes moral, ideological, information, diplomatic, psychological and even economic measures used in order to establish a favourable military, economic and political set-up;
2. conduct special operations, executed so as to mislead military and political leaders by coordinated measures carried out by using diplomatic channels, mass media and military and governmental agencies to present and promote false data and information;
3. use deception, intimidation and bribery of government officials and military officers to convince them to abandon their service duties and betray their native country;

4. use propaganda in order to destabilize and increase the dissatisfaction and discontent of the population, boosted by the Russian militants who engaged in subversion;
5. develop no-fly zones over the country in order to be attacked and use both private military companies and armed opposition units;
6. conduct military operations, followed by large-scale subversive and reconnaissance operations (which includes special operation forces, espionage in the space, intelligence, radio, diplomatic and economic domains);
7. use a mix of electronic operations, targeted information operations and air force operations, and of high precision weapons;
8. crush of remaining points of resistance and surviving enemy units by using field military operations" (Deni, 2018, pp. 19-20).

Therefore, it is true to say that, assimilated to the second main foreign policy goal, as well as to the first phase of the so called Russian generation warfare, the Russian state declared to have as a foreign policy objective for the next decades to counter the U.S. and Western influence beyond its close sphere of "privileged interests" (Rumer, 2018, p. 5), as declared in the provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, adopted on December 26, 2014, with regards to the military risks and threats:

> *"build-up of the power potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and vesting NATO with global functions carried out in violation of the rules of international law, bringing the military infrastructure of NATO member countries near the borders of the Russian Federation, including by further expansion of the alliance"* (The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2015).

The same document describes Russia's perspective upon the new modern conflict, by saying that for the Russian state modern wars will be fought on all levels (land, sea, air, space and information space), with accent on the later, because Russians consider that information is a leverage that ensures victory no matter the type of war (Ermus &

Salum, 2017, p. 58). In addition to this, the Russian state has developed further concern with the Rose Revolution that took place in Georgia in 2003 and the 2004 Orange Revolution from Ukraine, the Russian political scene considering that the status of regional power of Russia has begun to pale by losing influence in the post-Soviet countries to the West. Therefore, fearing that possible regime changes in neighbouring countries may also lead to regime changes on the Russian territory, Russia started to promote the theory according to which the West and its main partner, the United States, used soft power instruments (in particular, social networks, organized youth groups, and foreign financed non-governmental organizations – NGOs) in order to expand their influence in the neighbouring areas of the Russian Federation, destabilizing and weakening its power (Meister, 2016, p. 3).

In this context, Russian political elite concluded that Russia needs to develop both instruments to fight against the perceived outside influence and tools of offensive countermeasures, aspects reflected in the later decisions of Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation who put into practice the following measures (Meister, 2016, p. 6):

- isolated the Russian forces available to foreign influence (that could become Western instruments in an attempt to start a revolution on Russian soil), by introducing in 2004 the first laws to step up control over NGOs;
- reduced the foreign ownership of Russian media investments shares to 20 percent by February 2017 through a law passed by the Duma;
- increased state control of television broadcasters (which is one of the main sources of information with a coverage of more than 90% of the population), creating a pseudo-reality for the Russian public opinion, picturing the outside world as a stage for crises, accidents and wars where Russia is the only actor able to provide stability.

Therefore, Russian society has adopted, during the last ten years of Vladimir Putin's presidency, both aggressive and expansionist political strategies, based on geopolitical, revanchist and imperialist

ambitions, developing military capabilities, as well as its propaganda machine (Sazonov & Müür, 2017, pp. 9-10).

The Kremlin's concern for developing its mass media instruments can be reflected by the decision of the Presidency to "launch **an informational TV channel called Russia Today** (RT)", in order to compete with other "influential international channels, such as CNN International and BBC World". Even if the main objective of this channel was, as declared by Mikhail Seslavinsky, head of the Russian Federal Agency for Print and Mass Media, "to create a positive image of Russia abroad", nowadays RT is used as the main soft power tool of Kremlin, broadcasting in English, Spanish, and Arabic (Institute of Modern Russia, 2012).

Another soft power instrument used by Russian Federation as a propaganda tool is the **newspaper published by the Government of Russia, Rossiyskaya Gazeta**, which received a support of 156 million dollars from the President in 2013. According to a report of the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Media[2] (коммуникациям, 2012), this newspaper is another instrument in Russia's information mechanism, whose role is to promote and strengthen the image of the state outside its borders. As a proof, starting with 2007, Rossiyskaya Gazeta has published supplements on a monthly basis in 21 foreign publications, action considered to be part of the Russian project "*Russia beyond the Headlines"* (RBTH) (Institute of Modern Russia, 2012).

At national level, the Kremlin targets to obtain the control over the largest mass media, by **managing directly several national TV channels** (such as VGTRK and Channel One), or by **using government-owned corporations like Gazprom-Media** which owns the national channel NTV **or government-friendly companies like the National Media Group** (controlled by Yury Kovalchuk, a friend of the Russian president) which owns the channel REN-TV. Interesting is the fact that "the same National Media Group also owns 25% of the shares of Channel One, Russia's main TV station, the other 75% being controlled

[2] A federal executive body responsible for providing government services and managing government property in the field of press, mass media and mass communications, including public computer networks used in electronic media as well as in printing and publishing. See more at http://www.fapmc.ru/rospechat.html

by the government". Virtually, all the newspapers that benefit from wide-distribution inside the borders of the Russian state – such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Argumenty i fakty*, and *Izvestiya* – are trying to achieve objectives in favour of Kremlin: they only disseminate information that presents Russian authorities in a favourable light and stop the spread of negative information, portraying a false reality (The Propaganda of the Putin Era. Part One: In Russia, 2012).

So, massive expansions took place in the last decades within Russian mass media, directed at foreign markets such as the television broadcaster RT and the radio station Voice of Russia (which merged with RIA Novosti and formed Sputnik). Sputnik, another propagandistic tool, has developed into a state-funded network of media platforms, producing radio, social media and news agency content in local languages in 34 countries. Even if the Russian foreign media aimed at first to provide the Russian perspective of world at an international level, in response to the Western perspective offered by CNN and BBC, nowadays Russian mass media's main role abroad is to promote conspiracy theories to defame the Occident so as to destabilize the masses and make them question the decisions of their own governments and think that they are being lied (Meister, 2016, p. 8).

In an article published by the Institute of Modern Russia, a public policy think-tank that strives to establish an intellectual framework for building a democratic Russia governed by rule of law[3], have been presented other partners of Russia's ruling elite that play an active role in the propaganda process at national level, as follows (The Propaganda of the Putin Era. Part One: In Russia, 2012):

- cultural figures (e.g. „Stanislav Govorukhin – filmmaker well-known to Soviet-era viewers, that has led Vladimir Putin's election campaign; Nikita Mikhalkov – Oscar winner filmmaker who made several films extolling Russian authorities");
- "top hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church" (e.g. Patriarch Kirill strongly criticized the citizens who attended the rallies protesting against fraud during the Duma election

[3] See more at https://imrussia.org/en/about-us

and he endorsed Putin in the presidential elections; Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov, "rumored to be to be Putin's confessor – who produced in 2008 the film *The Fall of Empire: Lesson of Byzantium*, which presents "Putin's mission", and accuses the "destructive Westernization");

- "education bureaucracy, particularly in schools" (the way the government influence the education act is demonstrated by different actions, such as: the "rewriting of history textbooks; agitation among students and their parents; the organization of «*patriotic*» line-ups before classes; gifts with symbols of the «*party of power*» to students").

The same principles also apply to the Russian foreign policy, the Russian Federation expanding its propaganda machine by promoting fake news and conspiracy theories through mass media channels outside its borders, especially in post-Soviet countries (considered to be "in the Russian sphere of influence"), as well as in the European Union and the United States (as shown by a report of the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a project conducted by the German Marshall Fund, "Russia has interfered in the political processes of at least 27 countries of Europe and North America since 2004 by using disinformation operations and cyber-attacks") (Laurinavičius, 2018, p. 5).

However, the propaganda instruments used to promote a perfect image of the Russian state at international level include besides traditional and modern mass media channels, **cyber tools** as follows:

- trolls – is a user whose online activity is intended to disrupt the activity of an online community by posting messages aimed at artificially diverting the attention of contributors to irrelevant topics or provoking emotional reactions. The user often uses multiple accounts in order to increase the number of posted messages and to create the illusion of an active conversation;
- bots – also known as web robot/WWW robot, is a software application that automatically runs certain scripts on the Internet, performing tasks that are simple and structurally iterative. Even if bots can be used for positive purposes to improve the quality of Internet services, they can also be

used with malicious purposes, for identity theft or the launch of DoS attacks. They can also be used to collect shared information on email lists, manipulate comments and/or votes on web pages that allow users to provide feedback. Bots as an online propaganda tool are used (1) for wide-spread (re)distribution of messages already posted by real users, and (2) in the process of filtering commentaries on social platforms that allow user feedback (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p. 8);

- honey pots – defined as a computer system/applications/ data that simulates the behaviour of a real system to appear to belong to a network, but is isolated and closely monitored. It is created as bait for cyber-attacks so as to allow detection, identification, rejection, or study of a cyber-attack. The term has been developed during the Cold War and was used to refer to an operative agent carrying out espionage through seduction means and/or compromising the target. Today, virtual honeypot accounts include a sex appeal component, but acts by designing a personality similar to the target, sharing with it political points of view, rare passions and hobbies, or issues related to personal history, family, traumas, and so on. Through direct messages or e-mail conversations, honeypot accounts engage the target in seemingly unrelated conversations with national security or political influence (Weisburd, Watts, & Berger, 2016).

One eloquent example of the Russian use of cyber instruments in their foreign policy is represented by the increased number of Russian-language messages about NATO created by bots, as shown in the result of the study conducted by NATO Strategic Communications Entre of Excellence[4]. Moreover, the study also states that in March 2018, Russian-language bot activity about NATO surged past 11 000 messages per month, fact that again confirms the hypothesis according to which

[4] Based in Latvia, it is a Multinational, Cross-sector Organization which provides comprehensive analyses, advice and practical support to the Alliance and Allied Nations.

NATO and the United States are one of the main enemies perceived by the Russian Federation (Fredheim, 2018).

Other Russian propagandistic instruments that are being used outside its borders are the **so-called pseudo-NGOs**, such as the Rossotrudnichestvo (Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation), an institution established in 2008 in order to promote the Russian culture and language in the ex-Soviet countries, that has extended nowadays its area of operation. As declared by the Russian state, the institution was constructed as a response to the worldwide activities conducted by the U.S. Agency for International Development and for its activity the federation receives 78 million dollars annually from the state budget (Lough, Lutsevych, Pomerantsev, Secrieru, & Shekhovtsov, 2014, p. 3). Other such institutions include the Foundation for Compatriots (established in 2009), the Gorchakov Foundation (in 2011) and the Russkiy Mir (Russian World) Foundation, conceived in 2007, which aims to protect and maintain the culture and language of the Russian-speakers diaspora[5] (Meister, 2016, p. 8).

In addition to this, the Russian Federation has taken further steps **to increase its control upon the local and regional activity of native/national NGOs**, beginning with 2004, when the first laws to step up control over NGOs were introduced so as to impose strict restrictions on the activities of Western NGOs in Russia, as well as on the foreign funding of independent Russian organizations. As a consequence, NGOs that apparently do not correlate their objectives with Kremlin's direction are stigmatized as "foreign agents", their work being hindered by immense bureaucratic hurdles, fact that hampered the process of accessing funds independent of state-controlled sources. Therefore, by March 2016, 122 groups had been labelled as foreign agents, and 14 groups were shut down (Russia: Government vs. Rights Groups. The Battle Chronicle, 2018). In addition to this, a blacklist (the so-called "stop list") has been drawn up by the Federation Council to ban certain foreign organizations (with a focus on those located in the United States, including The Jamestown Foundation, The Open Society Institute, The International Republican Institute, The National

[5] See more at Russkiy Mir Foundation, http://russkiymir.ru/en/

Democratic Institute, Freedom House), from working in Russia (Felgenhauer, 2015).

Moreover, the Russian government also has **many other partners,** "**including a large number of GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations**) that are cooperating with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the basis of presidential grants funding ($70 million per annum combined). In accordance with the results of a research conducted by experts from the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, such groups include human rights groups (e.g. Moscow Bureau of Human Rights), youth groups (e.g. Youth Sodruzhestvo, Russian Youth Association), conservative think tanks and pro-Kremlin experts (e.g. Centre for Social Conservative Policy, Izborskiy Club, Foundation for Research of Problems of Russian Influence Abroad Democracy), election observers (e.g. Commonwealth of Independent States-Election Monitoring Organization – CIS-EMO, Organization for Democracy and Rights of People), Eurasians integration groups e.g. (Internationalist Russia, Foundation for Support of Eurasian Integration, Eurasians-New Wave, Young Eurasia)" (Lough, Lutsevych, Pomerantsev, Secrieru, & Shekhovtsov, 2014, pp. 3-4).

A key pillar of the Kremlin propaganda machine is represented by **the global PR-agencies contracted by the Russian Federation in order to construct and disseminate worldwide positive messages aimed to improve the general perceived image of the Russian state**. Therefore, beginning with 2006, Russia employed, through the Russian bank Evrofinance Mosnarbank, Ketchum, one of the leading PR-agencies in the world, "for consulting and communication services during the period of Russia's G8 Presidency". During the last years, several contracts were signed with the same agency, expanding its activities to present Russia as a country with a favourable investment climate, to help the Russian company to find suitable channels to "*communicate with the media*" or even to make lobby at Time Magazine "to select Putin as its *Person of the Year* in 2007". Given the fact that Ketchum PR agency conducted its main activities in the U.S., Kremlin also employed another PR company, GPlus Europe (Ketchum's sister-company), to cover the same issues in the European market (Institute of Modern Russia, 2012).

In order to achieve its foreign policy objectives, the Russian Federation included in its strategy **orthodox groups**, that are either "affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate (Den'Kreshchenia Rusi), either private sector orthodox oligarchs like Konstantin Malofeev and Vladimir Yakunin (who chair the St Basil's Foundation and St Andrew's Foundation respectively)". These groups' activities include promoting Russian language, Eurasian integration (Christianity and conservative values being the core of Eurasian civilization) and demonization of the EU association agreements, "defending human rights of compatriots, promotion of, defending the Russian interpretation of history, and mobilizing people on to the streets for protests in order to undermine sovereignty and create/intensify tensions" (Lough, Lutsevych, Pomerantsev, Secrieru, & Shekhovtsov, 2014, p. 4).

Last but not least, Russia included **social media** on its propaganda machine, adopting increasingly sophisticated techniques, including, as mentioned above in the section regarding cyber tools, trolling on news sites, fake hashtag and Twitter campaigns, and the close coordination between social media operations and other media. The main event that determined Kremlin to invest in its social media tools was represented by the anti-government protests in 2011, their online coverage leading the Russian government to increase its efforts to control, monitor, and influence the Internet and social media (Freedom on the Net 2016 – Russia, 2016). Russia's propaganda on social media is considered to serve multiple purposes, including inducing paralysis, strengthening groups that share the same perspective and purposes as Russia, and creating alternative media narratives that match Russia's objectives (Giles, 2016, p. 37).

With regards to social media, there have been identified three different levels of attribution for the actors integrated in Russia's propaganda apparatus, based on their degree of accessibility and on their ability to further disseminate information, as follows (Helmus, et al., 2018, p. 11):

- "white" outlets – also known as overtly attributed, include official Russian government agencies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian state-controlled, state-affiliated, and state-censored media and think tanks – RT, Sputnik, the All-Russia

State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company – VGTRK, Channel One, Russian Institute for Strategic Studies);

- "gray" outlets – characterized by uncertain attribution, including conspiracy websites, far-right or far-left websites, news aggregators, and data dump websites (Weisburd, Watts, & Berger, 2016);
- "black" outlets – covert attribution, are outlets that produce content on user-generated media, but also add fear-mongering commentary to and amplify content produced by others and supply exploitable content to data dump websites, conducting activities through a network of trolls, bots, honeypots, and hackers (described above) (Weisburd, Watts, & Berger, 2016).

To conclude, information operations (or, in Russia's framing, information confrontation) is a major part of Russia's foreign policy, that helps the Kremlin to achieve its objectives by using less military force and avoiding direct confrontation with states perceived as enemies. Moreover, social media, together with cyber instruments, are one important element of Russia's state-led information activities, which allows the Russian Federation to conduct covert operations, difficult to be tracked back or demonstrated. A leading analyst on Russian information warfare, Timothy Thomas, wrote that there is "*a real cognitive war underway in the ether and media for the hearts and minds of its citizens at home and abroad.*" (Thomas, 2015, p. 12; Helmus, et al., 2018, p. 1)

Instead of conclusions

Motto: *"One will readily agree that any army which does not train to use all the weapons, all the means and methods of warfare that the enemy possesses, or may possess, is behaving in an unwise or even criminal manner. This applies to politics even more than it does to the art of war"*. (Lenin V. I., 1920, p. 96)

Hybrid wars have not appeared as a novelty, but they have characteristics that make them different from the other types of was. For this specific kind of warfare, different forces that are being used

either mix and become one single force or are used in the same battle space. The mix of irregular and conventional force capabilities is a challenging process, but this process has been encountered during history (Mattis & Hoffman, 2005; Hoffman, 2007).

As far as the definition of the hybrid warfare is concerned, there is no widely accepted approach to this term, but there are certainly differences in the ways this concept is perceived by each actor. For instance, in Russia's perspective, the hybrid warfare collocation has been replaced by generational warfare, which represents a combination of conventional and irregular instruments, based on psychological and information operations. On the order side, the European community identified hybrid wars as indirect conflicts that are conducted by (especially but not limited to) non-state actors, which use traditional and unconventional tools such as military force combined with cyber-attacks, propaganda, disinformation or terrorist attacks. Therefore, it is clear that there is a difference in Russian and Western terminology, which shows the actors' perspectives and certain aspects of the conflict (Dov Bachmann & Gunneriusson, 2015, p. 199).

However, the apparition and expansion of the hybrid warfare does not impact in a negative way the development of traditional or conventional types of war, but it has complicated the defence planning in the present times (Hoffman, 2009, p. 38). As John Arquilla, from the Naval Postgraduate School, has noted, "*While history provides some useful examples to stimulate strategic thought about such problems, coping with networks that can fight in so many different ways—sparking myriad, hybrid forms of conflict – is going to require some innovative thinking*" (Arquilla, 2007, p. 369). In the same context, "analysts highlighted the blurring lines between modes of war, by suggesting that one of the greatest challenges that will appear in the future will be created by states that opt for multiple tactics and technologies and blend them in innovative ways to meet their own strategic culture, geography and aims" (Hoffman, 2009, p. 35).

As far as Russia's foreign policy is concerned, this state identified the influence and activities of Western governmental and non-governmental institutions in the post-Soviet countries as instruments of war, whose perceived goal was to weaken the Russian government. In

this context, Moscow considered that is its right to react with the same methods to this non-linear warfare (that is, in its opinion, led by both NATO and the United States) and to respond with information operation and asymmetric means such as "little green men", media manipulation, and exploitation of networks and NGOs (Meister, 2016, p. 5). The main foreign policy direction followed by the Russian state focuses on stopping the expansion of NATO's and Western influence in the post-Soviet countries (which are considered to be in the Russia's sphere of influence) and on creating a better picture of Russian culture and civilization outside its borders. Moscow's strategy is to create facts on the ground to coerce its former partners turned rivals, to acknowledge Russia's security interests and accept Russia's importance as a great power to be reckoned with globally (Trenin, 2016).

As a proof, Russian strategic documents refer to a holistic concept of "information war", which is used to fulfil two main objectives (Theohary, 2018, p. 9):

- to achieve political objectives without the use of military force;
- to construct a favourable international response to the deployment of its military forces, or military forces with which Moscow is allied.

Moreover, the new battle space, that encompasses political, economic, informational, technological, and ecological instruments, created by the Russian Federation in order to achieve its foreign policy aims is characterized by the following principles: influence is prioritized over destruction; inner decay over annihilation; and culture over weapons or technology (Fedyk, n.d.). On the same line, Russia appears to be using different mass media channels, especially social media tools, to spread a mix of propaganda, misinformation, and deliberately misleading or corrupted disinformation. Tactics also include data breaches of servers of U.S. political parties and other groups, releases and possible manipulation of sensitive documents in an attempt to influence the U.S. presidential election, and the manipulation of publicly available information on Russian activities in Ukraine (Theohary, 2018, p. 9).

Therefore, in order to adapt to the new forms of war that rose in the last decades, the Russian state has constructed and developed a set of unconventional, asymmetric, irregular tools which allow it to conduct new forms of conflict, without direct involvement. The main challenge for international actors in terms of establishing and ensuring national security will be to create proper responses and develop efficient instruments so as to overcome and be able to fight against new types of war.

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