

Krzysztof Kaczmarek\*

# Appealing to compassion as an element of Russia's hybrid warfare against the West

## Abstract

The advancement of information technology makes societies increasingly vulnerable to disinformation and manipulation. A skillfully conducted disinformation campaign may weaken the state's potential and make it vulnerable to external influences. The article presents an outline of the possibilities of influencing mass behavior. An attempt will also be made to answer the question of whether the combination of knowledge in the field of neurobiology, mathematics, sociology, and other sciences combined with the use of artificial intelligence and big data allows for the development of a new type of cybernetic weapons influencing the subconscious.

**Key words:** hybrid warfare, psychomanipulation, disinformation, information policy, information literacy

\* Krzysztof Kaczmarek, PhD, Faculty of Humanities, Koszalin University of Technology, e-mail: puola@tlen.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-8519-1667.

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## Introduction

The emigration crisis caused by Lukashenko on the Polish-Belarusian border is part of an effort to destabilize the internal situation in the European Union and NATO. One can state with a high probability that the Belarusian authorities are not independent in this case, and that everything is happening at the initiative or with the consent of Russia. These actions are part of the hybrid warfare waged by the eastern autocrats. This conflict is multifaceted and has been going on for several years, and the means used are evolving; new means are also emerging. The development of modern technologies and the ever-increasing computational powers of artificial intelligence make it possible to combine knowledge from sociology, psychology, neuroscience, mathematics or cultural studies. Such multidimensional analyses and their results make it possible to influence the behavior of individuals and societies on an unprecedented scale. One way to influence is to appeal to human emotions and instincts, often atavistic ones. Elements such as sexual desire, maternal instinct, or the desire to help are the most commonly used.

In the age of widespread access to any information, even false information, the ability to manipulate behavior has taken on new meaning. The almost unlimited access to erotic content has made influencing through sexual desire less important. Also, the enormity of negative information has caused it to diminish in impact. However, portraying in a specific way the images of suffering people creates sympathy, often unintentionally, in a part of the population. Knowledge of the mechanisms of its formation provides the opportunity to control the behavior of societies.

## Psychomanipulation

Evoking emotions is one aspect of information warfare, which is an element of hybrid warfare. Emotions are often created due to disinformation and are part of efforts to increase the influence of non-democratic states over democratic states. Autocratic governments can exploit the weaknesses of democratic societies and influence them using psychomanipulation techniques. When applied appropriately to societies, they can cause states to weaken internally and reduce their ability to resist external influences. This weakening may be the result of internal disputes ignited by disinformation and causing (deepening) polarization not only within societies but also on the political

scene and in the international arena. Despite the negative connotations, some forms of psychomanipulation are to some extent socially acceptable, e.g. in advertising, commerce, or the education system. However, manipulation to induce the commission of socially unacceptable acts is most often condemned<sup>1</sup>. By influencing individuals, the use of any manipulation technique makes it possible to shape the attitudes and behaviors of entire social groups, whether at the local, national, or international level.

Due to the depth of interference in the human psyche, manipulation techniques can be divided into: 1) superficial, the purpose of which is to induce one-time changes in behavior; 2) changing some attitudes, e.g., consumer attachment to a producer; 3) impacts that result in personality change; examples include the actions of religious sects, some political groups, or terrorist organizations<sup>2</sup>.

To effectively defend against psychomanipulation, it is necessary to be aware of the manipulators' actions and to know the psychological aspects of social attitudes and behaviors<sup>3</sup>. From the point of view of the influence of one state on the society of another, fifteen basic techniques of psychomanipulation can be distinguished: 1) lying – presenting false, although theoretically plausible information; 2) denial or feigning innocence; 3) rationalization – an excuse to explain unacceptable behavior or actions; 4) belittling – an attempt to present one's actions as the „lesser of two evils” using seemingly logical arguments; 5) selectivity – not accepting information that is inconsistent with officially proclaimed views; 6) distraction – actions that evoke high emotions to which public interest is redirected. In this case, dependent media may be helpful; 7) avoidance – giving ambiguous answers to questions; 8) intimidation – putting the opponent in a defensive position and making them withdraw from open confrontation; 9) inducing the feeling of guilt – e.g. by showing that the quality of life of some social (or ethnic) group is much lower due to historical reasons caused by the ancestors of the adversary; 10) inducing shame – causing moral and ethical doubts within the society; 11) victim blaming – attributing the blame to the victim 12) pretending to be a victim – arousing sympathy by portraying the perpetrator as a victim; 13) servility – inducing a sense of superiority in

1 M. Jankowska, *Psychomanipulacja jako technika werbunku wykorzystywana przez sekty oraz ich fasadowe organizacje*, „Warmińsko-Mazurski Kwartalnik Naukowy. Nauki Społeczne” 2012, no. 4, p. 161.

2 Ibidem, pp. 162–163.

3 A. Stefańczyk, *Psychologia wywierania wpływu i psychomanipulacji*, Gliwice 2006, p. 7.

the victim; 14) seduction – preaching flattery to the manipulated individual or social group; 15) guilt projection – transferring one's own thinking to the victims of manipulation, e.g. „if your state cared about the representatives of our people, we would not take any action against you”<sup>4</sup>.

Manipulation to change public attitudes in a state is most often done discreetly, and the changes it causes occur almost imperceptibly. Misleading others and misrepresenting reality through passing something over in silence, repetition, fragmentation, cliché, or suggestion can be done both verbally and nonverbally. Often all that is needed is an image presented in a specific context<sup>5</sup>. However, the core of manipulation is the unawareness of the recipient, and its impact depends on the level of knowledge and awareness of the addressee<sup>6</sup>. Most often, emotionally charged images are used to influence the public. Most of them involve disasters, accidents or conflicts. Very often they rely on emotions, showing the suffering of children, death, torture. Their effect may be to arouse sympathy, anger or fear<sup>7</sup>.

## Behavior of individuals versus behavior of societies

The ancient Greeks believed that each person's life is programmed at birth, and destiny cannot be changed<sup>8</sup>. Freedom of choice is therefore an illusion. Some modern scholars concede, to some extent, that the Greeks were right. However, they assume that human life is not predetermined by a higher force but by the functioning of the brain<sup>9</sup> and the basic, describable mathematical equations, the laws that govern human behavior. Some of these laws guide the behavior of individuals, while others can only be seen by changing perspective and analyzing the behavior of entire social groups<sup>10</sup>.

4 A.J. Wichura, *Manipulacja psychologiczna – definicja, przykłady, motywy*, <https://czlowiek.info/manipulacja-psychologiczna-definicja-przyklady-motywy/> [access: 26.12.2021].

5 A. Kampka, *Fotografia w mediach – wyznaczniki manipulacji*, „Rynek – Społeczeństwo – Kultura” 2015, no. 4, p. 34.

6 Ibidem.

7 Ibidem, p. 35.

8 A. Leder, *Paradoks a filozofia: niesamowitość człowieka w Grecji archaicznej*, „Sztuka i Filozofia” 2003, no. 2223, p. 178–179.

9 K. Siemienkiewicz, *Neurobiologiczne podłoże osobowości psychopatycznej*, „Przegląd Policyjny” 2017, no. 2017, p. 162–165.

10 A. Cichocka, M. Bilewicz, *Co się kryje w nieistotnych efektach statystycznych? Możliwości zastosowania analizy supresji w psychologii społecznej*, „Psychologia Społeczna” 2010, vol. 5, no. 2–3, p. 191–196.

It turns out that in everyday life, most behaviors are not analyzed by individuals; no one thinks about muscle movements while moving or eating, driving a car, or piloting an airplane. From an evolutionary point of view, automating behavior is beneficial and allows for faster responses. Research shows that the vast majority of activities in daily life are performed without consciousness, automatically<sup>11</sup>. The results of some studies also indicate that most decisions are made in the parts of the brain responsible for the subconscious, and only after a while are the other parts of the brain activated<sup>12</sup>. In some cases, the part of the brain responsible for the subconscious begins to process the decision even before it is realized<sup>13</sup>. It should be noted, however, that not all subconscious actions are hereditary; in most cases, the subconscious learns through experience. Thus, it can be assumed that humans can only make decisions within the range determined by prior brain activity.

In the case of the influence of external factors on social behavior, it should be remembered that the principles of functioning of society at one level of organization do not explain the functioning of the next level, e.g., the mechanisms of decision-making at the individual or family level do not allow to describe electoral behavior at the level of a province or a state. The behavior of individuals is governed by different laws than those that govern the behavior of groups. However, no individual is an independent object – they function in an environment and interact with others. These interactions are governed by rules derived from them<sup>14</sup>.

When analyzing the mass behavior of human communities, it is important to go beyond the level of individual interactions. Predictability and rules that can be described by mathematical formulas can be observed here. Not all of them are widely known, but it can be assumed that in many countries scientists have already discovered them or are close to doing so. As a starting point for exploring such relationships, we should assume that the social environment and the amount of data available are the limiting factors for decision making. The use of modern technologies (e.g., big data), knowledge of individual psychology, and social psychology may allow for changes in the way entire

11 R.B. Cialdini, *Wywieranie wpływu na ludzi – teoria i praktyka*, Gdańsk 2009, p. 21–23.

12 M. Jaracz, A. Borkowska, *Podejmowanie decyzji w świetle badań neurobiologicznych i teorii psychologicznych*, „Psychiatria” 2010, no. 7, p. 68–72.

13 D. Majewska-Bielecka, R. Nowak-Lewandowska, *Neuronaukowe implikacje w podejmowaniu decyzji*, „Zeszyty Naukowe ZPSB Firma i Rynek” 2019, no. 1, p. 176.

14 M. Marody, *Zindywidualizowane społeczeństwo masowe*, „Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny” 2020, no. 3, p. 275–280.

societies behave. One of the starting factors is that, when observed from a distance, society has a natural tendency to nullify factors that impede the functioning and shows predictability of seemingly chaotically behaving groups of people. Therefore, most often unconsciously, people behave in certain ways. Such mass behavior occurs, for example, on public transportation, in schools or universities, in militarized structures, or on crowded hiking trails. It is only natural to duplicate the behavior of others when being in such a group. The behavior of drivers when a road detour is designated is also an example; one usually follows someone who is taken as a guide. All such behaviors can be described by functions of multiple variables. Knowing the correct pattern, one can therefore predict mass behavior. In this case, skillful modification of even a single input variable can produce desired changes in social behavior and attitudes. Such a variable can be an almost imperceptibly manipulated piece of information (a statement or a picture presented in the right context). Especially if it is a message aimed at the human subconscious and instincts, intended to evoke (often atavistic) emotions.

When studying the mechanisms that shape human and social behavior, it is important to consider that there is a difference between them, similar to that between classical and quantum physics; both describe the same reality but at different levels.

## Russia's actions

The migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border appears to be part of a broader effort by the Russian Federation to regain influence in states that became independent of Moscow after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The integration of some of them into the economic and military structures of the West has made it in Russia's interest to weaken relations within the European Union and NATO<sup>15</sup>. One means to achieve this goal is to destabilize the internal situation of individual states in advance. And one of the most effective ways to achieve this goal is through skillfully executed information warfare. According to some researchers, the Russians should be considered the pioneers of

15 K. Raś, M.A. Piotrowski, *Rosyjskie zagrożenia dla państw bałtyckich*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, [https://pism.pl/publikacje/Rosyjskie\\_zagro\\_enia\\_hybrydowe\\_dla\\_pa\\_stw\\_ba\\_tyckich](https://pism.pl/publikacje/Rosyjskie_zagro_enia_hybrydowe_dla_pa_stw_ba_tyckich) [access: 27.12.2021].

modern propaganda and disinformation activities<sup>16</sup>. As early as 2015, experts noted that Russia's strongest and most effective weapon in hybrid warfare is disinformation<sup>17</sup>.

The effectiveness of disinformation efforts may lead to the conclusion that authoritarian states have an advantage in information warfare because of the way they exercise power since, in democratic systems, state actors are generally unable to influence the activities of the media<sup>18</sup>. Paradoxically, by creating false images of reality, autocrats use both traditional media and the so-called social media created and functioning in Western Europe or the United States. It seems that to prevent this, it would be enough for giants like Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Instagram to start using the appropriate digital tools at their disposal for this purpose. However, any discussion of this issue ends with mere declarations. Meanwhile, algorithms that polarize societies weaken the West and cause Russia's influence to grow.

## Presenting the situation on the Polish–Belarusian border in the context of evoking sympathy

Most of the materials available on the Internet concerning the situation of emigrants trying to get from the territory of Belarus to Poland seem to be biased. Depending on the media, you can find pictures of tired and hungry mothers with children or aggressive men. Each of these materials has an axiological dimension and evokes specific emotions. Aggressive men who attack Polish services arouse resentment, fear, and aggression. In contrast, the image of misfortune, by definition, evokes compassion, and the image of hungry and crying young children may in some cases awaken the maternal or paternal instinct; there may be a desire to help. In some cases, this compassion is merely declarative. This is because feeling emotions different from those of the surroundings can be met with ostracism or even aggression. However,

16 Ł. Skoneczny, *Wojna hybrydowa – wyzwanie przyszłości? Wybrane zagadnienia*, „Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego” 2015, no. spec., p. 48.

17 R. Thornton, *The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare. Responding to Russian Information Warfare*, „The Rusi Journal” 2015, vol. 160, no. 4, p. 40–48.

18 B. Renz, *Blogi: Hybridisota lännen heikkous, ei Venäjän vahvuus*, Valtioneuvoston Selvitys – ja Tutkimustoiminta, <https://tietokayttoon.fi/ajankohtaista/blogi/-/blogs/hybridisotalannen-heikkous-ei-venajan-vahvuus> [access: 27.12.2021].

much of the compassion is genuine, induced by the use of appropriate psychomanipulative techniques that influence the subconscious.

It can be assumed that in provoking the crisis on the border the Russian side assumed the achievement of several goals (either combined or optionally): 1) to test the effectiveness and endurance of Polish services (including resistance to provocations); 2) to create fear and social unrest if large numbers of emigrants cross the border; 3) to divert attention from Russia's actions against Ukraine; 4) to divert attention from other Russian actions; 5) to deepen social divisions in Poland and throughout Western Europe by appropriately manipulating the image of emigrants. The latter objective appears to be part of Russia's long-term plan to internally weaken the European Union and NATO, and playing on sympathy is one of many tools.

When analyzing the materials available on the Internet presenting emigrants, it should be noted that almost every time there is a crying child in the foreground. One might therefore become suspicious that all the children shown are being made to cry and are becoming a tool of the information warfare going on in cyberspace.

It seems likely that all of these procedures may be used to collect data that could help in the development of a new type of cyberweapon based on neuromanipulation. In the age of big data and artificial intelligence, the possibility of developing one is becoming more and more likely. When cyber neuromanipulation weapons are used, no society can feel safe because there are no technical means to resist them. Especially since its application may go unnoticed. The only way to defend ourselves is through systemic solutions, consisting of continually improving the information competences of the society as a whole and developing a „vaccine” to immunize the society against new weapons.

## Conclusion

Cyber neuromanipulation weapons are likely to be only a fictional concept at present, and it is unclear whether such a tool will ever be developed. However, this cannot be excluded. Therefore, it is advisable to develop procedures that, once implemented, could reduce the effects of its use. This can be done at the national and/or supranational level. This issue is important because the onset of the use of such weapons is likely to go unnoticed, and will serve as a prelude to other, conventional military action.

A message that appeals to emotion can result in a diminished national defense capability. It seems that some of the messages from the Polish-Belarusian border may have been a test of the operation of some part of such a weapon. And to some extent, this test succeeded – the polarization of societies became even more apparent. This applies not only to Poland but to the entire West. And in each case, it is about compassion for refugees. Compassion and the desire to help are positive emotions and therefore are the easiest to manipulate on a mass level. The dissonance created between emotions such as fear and compassion, for example, can weaken individuals and, ultimately, the entire society. The effect of weakening the society will be an increase in external influences within it, especially from autocratic states. It is also worth noting that compassion can provoke anger or aggression directed at those who are perceived to be at fault for the suffering of others. When these emotions exceed a certain level, they can lead to violence the perpetrators of which see themselves as those who „rightly” stand on the side of the weak. The level of emotion that can be described as a limit level is not clearly defined and depends on many, as yet undefined, variables. Therefore, research on the impact of appealing to compassion should be multifaceted and multidimensional. No factor should be overlooked.

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## Odwoływanie się do współczucia jako element wojny hybrydowej Rosji z Zachodem

### Streszczenie

Rozwój technologii informacyjnych powoduje, że społeczeństwa są narażone na dezinformację i manipulację w coraz większym stopniu. Umiejętnie przeprowadzona akcja dezinformacyjna może osłabić potencjał państwa i spowodować, że stanie się ono podatne na wpływy zewnętrzne. W artykule autor przedstawił zarys możliwości wpływania na zachowania masowe. Podjął próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie: czy połączenie wiedzy z zakresu neurobiologii, matematyki, socjologii i innych nauk z wykorzystaniem sztucznej inteligencji i big data pozwala na opracowanie nowego rodzaju broni cybernetycznej wpływającej na podświadomość.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wojna hybrydowa, psychomanipulacja, dezinformacja, polityka informacyjna, kompetencje informacyjne