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Russia's social-impact operations in the context of cognitive warfare in Ukraine in 2022

Abstract

In this article, we attempt to identify Russia's social-impact operations in the context of information operations conducted by the Russian Federation during 2022 in the war against Ukraine. The need to undertake the analysis of the creation and proliferation of information threats, as a result of Russia's actions in the ongoing conflict, is dictated by the growing impact of communication processes on global security. This article discusses the impact and role of mass media on the shaping of people's minds, by exposing the mechanisms behind the formation of public opinion.

Key words: information warfare, media, information operations, disinformation

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to attempt to identify the social-impact operations in the context of information operations conducted by the Russian Federation in 2022 in the war against Ukraine. The study outlines the impact of trends in the creation of information threats acting as determinants of social threats. The analysis of the emergence of information threats, taking into account the creation and distribution of information, both via direct messages and with the use of intelligence techniques, constitutes an important part of the article. The authors, when selecting the topic to be discussed in the paper, referred primarily to the up-to-datedness of the problem under analysis. This is because Russian information operations represent the modern use of armed forces in accomplishing military objectives. Actions targeted at Ukraine reflect the practical implementation of Russia's assumptions.

Communication space as an area of information operations

Nowadays, in the times of efficient and rapidly-acting media, the range of opportunities they offer, when it comes to exerting social impact, are being intensively exploited. Nowadays, it is not the courts that determine who is guilty – public opinion does so, being judgemental and passing sentence every moment. A synthetic expression of public opinion, in the context of Russia's actions in the war in Ukraine, is the way they are presented. This means how they appear, in overall terms, to the public. Therefore, it appears of the utmost importance to investigate, in scientific terms, the appropriateness of selecting tools and techniques to exert social impact in the formation of public opinion.

In doing so, the thesis that mass media are a powerful weapon used by many circles (not only by authorities) to direct and shape public opinion should be considered the starting point. Public opinion means views, attitudes and assessments (judgements), concerning some specific current subject (value) or some specific person, and the way he/she behaves, formulated and communicated to one another by members of the public, focused on the value or the person being subjected to judgement. It is, therefore, quite easy to understand why the mass media are so often used to shape public opinion, and its creators may include: state bodies, services dedicated to implementing social impact operations, non-state actors, social activists, and institutions

involved in the transmission of information with broad access to social groups (press agencies, newspapers, television, radio, and the Internet)¹.

When dealing with the issue in question, we need to make it clear that it is a well-known regularity in the development of the art of war that exploring the specific features of future conflicts requires analysing and evaluating future events. Only then, based on the results obtained, can any specific conclusions for the future be formulated. This is of particular importance as regards the ongoing war, in which information operations play a vital role. It should be stressed that the present situation has been challenging to define for both the parties involved in the conflict and the international community, and has exposed the dynamics with which information spreads and, in particular, the impact it has on international public opinion. Therefore, it should be assumed that the psychological dimensions of the conflict are as important as the physical ones. The conflict is a battle of intent which is fought both in people's minds and on the battlefield and is a conflict of clashing forces. These can be political (ideological), economic, cultural, religious and military forces, i.e., all those aspects of social life that, by intertwining, exert influence on people's will. Skilfully „whispered” warfare shapes and influences individual and group beliefs and behaviours, contributing to the accomplishment of the tactical or strategic goals of the aggressor.

Before proceeding with a detailed discussion, the authors will outline Russian military thoughts from the angle of information operations, along with referring to the main Russian ideologist of neo-imperialism, Aleksandr Dugin, who made a significant contribution to developing new-generation warfare strategies. The adviser to Putin and his generals, by referring to information operations, argues that the effective conduction of such operations makes it possible to secure victory in a conflict without establishing numerical superiority beforehand, even on a classic battlefield. This component of the adopted strategy should be viewed as the most original and as the one requiring particular attention. One of its manifestations includes actions aimed at distorting public order by destabilising the internal situation. Bringing about such a state causes social tensions to escalate, which results in social atomisation and polarisation. As a consequence, decision-making processes are disrupted, causing destabilisation of international cooperation; a potential adversary loses its position as a responsible and credible partner in

1 J. Braun, *Potęga czwartej władzy. Media, rynek, społeczeństwo*, Warszawa 2005, p. 77.

the international arena, especially in the economic or energy context, or in terms of other issues that are important from Moscow's point of view. Another, and often parallel, activity is to promote a negative image of an adversary, depreciating its authorities, antagonising societies, and portraying it as an aggressor that is intolerant, xenophobic, fascist, etc. Yet another method is to create the impression that Russia is more dangerous than it is, thus discouraging the West from escalating or becoming militarily involved in conflicts.

A confirmation for the discussed course of action can be found in the concept of new-generation warfare announced by General Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of General Staff of the Russian Army. The document was officially announced on 25 January 2014 at the Academy of Military Sciences, and its detailed discussion was published on 27 February 2013². The following year, an amendment was published to the War Doctrine of the Russian Federation, signed by President Vladimir Putin on 26 December 2014. The doctrine has „egitimised” hybrid warfare, which implies the need to take into consideration a possible subliminal aggression scenario. The doctrine in question also recognises the emerging trend of shifting the dangers and threats of war to the information space. Furthermore, the doctrine enumerates the features and characteristics of modern military conflicts by referring to the complex use of military, political, economic and information power as well as other measures of a non-military nature, by exploiting the potential of public protests and forces conducting special operations. Attention is drawn to the fact that the impact on an adversary will be exerted across its entire territory, in the global information space.

Disinformation operations

Acquiring newer and newer interfaces requires increasingly greater efficiency. In facing this challenge, artificial intelligence is one of the solutions that may prove useful. Its use in the fabrication of fake news is becoming increasingly important. Simply put, bots are programs designed to allow a machine to perform certain actions at the command of a human. Their functioning is fully automated and based on algorithms. These algorithms,

² P. Mickiewicz, *Rosyjska myśl strategiczna i potencjał militarny w XXI wieku* [in:] *Rosyjska myśl wojskowa i jej przeobrażenia w kontekście zmiany zagrożeń i sposobów wykorzystania potencjału militarnego w XXI w.*, ed. D. Kasprzycki, Warszawa 2018, p. 196.

for example, select content that matches our expectations and provides us with specific advertisements or webpages. They are becoming an increasingly important player in election campaigns by imitating people and influencing their behaviour. Social networking sites constitute a specific domain within which they operate. Being perfectly capable of processing large amounts of information in a short period, they are ideal tools for manipulation. There is an ever-increasing spread of false information that inspires ordinary people to disseminate misinformation. This is how people get locked in information bubbles and their views, which are not always correct, become reinforced. This mechanism is very likely to accelerate with the emergence of specialised bots (chatbots) dedicated to human-machine communication. David A. Broniatowski, Director of the GW Institute for Data, Democracy and Politics, argues that „bots can make the platforms’ algorithms assume that automated content is more popular than it is, which can lead to platforms actually prioritising disinformation and spreading it to even larger audiences”³. So, numerous factors seem to suggest that the race between the makers of social-impact tools intended to manipulate people more effectively is well underway.

An extremely significant issue concerning disinformation is possessing knowledge of an adversary, and the methods and tools that an adversary employs in information warfare. It should be stressed that humans are the entities most vulnerable to disinformation. Disinformation mechanisms influence the selection of appropriate methods and techniques to exert impact on people’s attitudes and behaviours. In the contemporary world, there is a strive towards a means of communication that is based on a combination of all elements, including written texts, images and sounds, and these possibilities are provided by modern means of communication, i.e., television, press, radio and the Internet. This is also connected with the capabilities of the human brain to receive information and content⁴.

The media occupy an undoubtedly important place in the formation of public opinion, which is an extremely significant factor in the development of society. One of the disinformation methods is manipulation which, in the mass media, is a form of influencing an audience to make them carry out actions

3 *Boty głównymi roznościcielami dezinformacji w pandemii*, oprac. N. Makarewicz, https://www.rmfm24.pl/raporty/raport-koronawirus-z-chin/polska/news-boty-glownymi-roznościcielami-dezinformacji-w-pandemii,nld,5285963#crp_state=1 [access: 16.06.2021].

4 G. Nowacki, *Rola technologii informacyjno-telekomunikacyjnych w działaniach psychologicznych*, „Nierówności Społeczne a Wzrost Gospodarczy” 2017, no. 4, p. 280.

which correspond to the needs of the manipulator, without the audience even being aware. People are usually not interested in whether any actions taken by the recipient of the information bring benefits to the sender or whether they have any different effects. The individuals or groups of people being manipulated are not aware of how the influence is being exerted. The sender usually seeks to have some personal, economic or political gain at the expense of those subjected to manipulation. As a result of such activities, the person subjected to manipulation is most often unaware of it and, when this is made clear, he/she tends to strongly deny acting in an uncontrolled manner. The way recipients approach information which is spread via the media, and their conviction of making their decisions independently makes them extremely resistant to persuasion and to any attempts to show them the real situation. For this reason, it is necessary to equip institutions with indispensable tools and to educate citizens on how to effectively defend themselves against manipulation⁵.

The media not only contribute to the formation of certain opinions but can also stop their dissemination. Opinions can be easily measured, which makes them an important tool in the hands of the media as the media have the adequate resources to effectively encourage individuals to express opinions or, to the contrary, not to express them on a given topic⁶.

Intelligence activities and direct communication

The development of the Internet has made it possible for users to access not only various sources of information but also to create information, bypassing traditional information providers operating with the use of classic means of social communication. A special role in this process is played by various types of social networking sites. This method of gathering and disseminating information has also contributed to the creation of sources of information which contradict the truth or public morality, or which infringe upon personal rights. The narrative, addressed to a broad range of Russian audiences, was based on depicting a false image of reality, and information concerning Russia's attack on Ukraine was shaped to present it as special operations

5 Ibidem, p. 279.

6 E. Maigret, *Socjologia komunikacji i mediów*, Warszawa 2012, p. 322.

aimed at the alleged disarmament of Ukraine and the restoration of order in the country, as well as giving new shape to the socio-political and economic community that allegedly existed between Russia and Ukraine. Statements made in the media by numerous experts, who emphasised during debates that the ongoing operation would not aggravate relations between Russian and Ukrainian societies, can be seen as another example of direct communication. The displaying of information that is supposed to give credence to untrue theses is mainly carried out via special services and military intelligence, which has increased the number of people appointed as journalists in eastern Ukraine and the bordering regions. They were made responsible for producing videos and photographs showing alleged provocations, although they often participated in them themselves.

By implementing their security policies, states are constantly facing challenges connected with securing their own information needs. Tasks of this type are mainly carried out by special services, which in addition to information acquisition, are involved in information disruption carried out in both offensive and defensive operations. Disruption is a specific action type requiring the conduction of operational activities. This is a complex process that, in addition to an information supply, requires the involvement of an influence agency⁷.

Information warfare and information operations are conducted in the information space. They aim to damage resources and systems, including IT ones, and to undermine the political and social systems and weaken the psychological impact on society. Of note is the fact that each country has adequate resources responsible for information warfare. The situation created in Ukraine is often different than the one commonly portrayed. Both sides resort to disinformation and fight their information warfare.

Information provided by the Ukrainian government and administration, as well as the media using examples of disinformation, also constitute examples of direct communication in the Russian-Ukrainian war. In addition, the information provided directly by the Americans sometimes differs from that disseminated by Ukraine, for example, regarding the number of Russian soldiers killed. Ukraine's primary objective connected with presenting this figure as larger than appears is to boost the morale of its troops. A study conducted by experts dealing with social psychology revealed a difference

7 A. Żebrowski, *Agencja wpływu uczestnikiem walki informacyjnej*, „Studia nad Autorytaryzmem i Totalitaryzmem” 2018, no. 1, p. 61.

between the motivation and will of people who are faced with certain tasks and provided with information that the tasks were solvable, on the one hand, and those who have no such knowledge, on the other. This also holds true when it comes to the attitude of soldiers and civilians who help the military. The developed narrative of the incapacity of the Russian troops, coupled with information about the great successes attained by Ukrainian troops, is intended to influence Ukrainian minds and sustain motivation. One of the underlying tools of information warfare is intelligence services gathering necessary information about an adversary and conducting information warfare. As can be expected, intelligence activities should be supported by propaganda, which in turn can obtain a lot of valuable information from intelligence services. The most effective diversion method used by intelligence services is to inspire erroneous decisions on the part of the adversary and then exploit their consequences. This is a specific kind of manipulation, the essence of which is the covert steering of the adversary towards self-destruction⁸.

Steering channels influencing an adversary's structure in information warfare processes can be divided into 1) information channels – collecting and passing relevant information to the headquarters, including, primarily, information about an adversary and its environment; and 2) steering and diversion channels – influencing an adversary's system, inspiring some decisions and actions while blocking others.

Both types can be covert or overt, with examples including an intelligence agent acting as a covert channel and a military attaché acting officially as an overt channel.

Along with destroying an adversary's system, information warfare is also about defending one's system against destructive impacts. Such defensive actions in information warfare can be perceived in the same way as offensive actions, except that their object is not an adversary's entire system, but certain organs conducting information warfare. For instance, on the national scale, defensive information warfare is conducted by counterintelligence which establishes its steering channels of all the aforementioned types, primarily in an adversary's intelligence organs (activities of this type can be referred to as offensive counterintelligence), as well as in all organisations which cooperate or may cooperate with an adversary's intelligence. The basis of countering an adversary's intelligence is the identification

8 J. Kosecki, *Elementy wojny informacyjnej*, http://autonom.edu.pl/publikacje/kossecki_jozef/elementy_wojny_informacyjnej-ocr.pdf [access: 20.06.2022].

of its channels. Steering and diversion channels can be traced by observing their operations and consequence, while purely information channels can be recognised indirectly, e.g., by observing an adversary's decisions and actions taken based on the information supplied via these channels. It is generally much easier to uncover the steering and diversion channels than purely information channels; therefore, in well-organised information warfare bodies, these channels should be separated⁹.

One of the underlying objectives of non-military hybrid conflicts is to influence people's way of thinking and to primarily manipulate those who are responsible for making key state decisions. The analysis of the events taking place in Ukraine since the beginning of the war has shown that, among the non-military methods of war-making, one can distinguish the increased activity of special forces, whose task is to collect information and to develop intelligence and sabotage networks to conduct operations in the territory of an attacked state. In addition, among the direct methods of conducting information warfare, the following can be included: the use of economic pressure, diplomatic actions, and offensive actions in cyberspace, carried out by the aggressor's special services or groups of hackers and hacktivists associated with these forces¹⁰.

Exerting information-psychological influence is a procedure through which direct information is deliberately spread to affect the functioning and development of an information environment. The purpose of information operations conducted during the war may be, for example, to convince society that the interests of an enemy state are also their interests, by undermining trust in the state authorities and even by escalating tension and engaging social groups in the conflict¹¹.

Conclusions

Non-contact warfare has been, still is, and will continue to be, a component of interdisciplinary combinations of pervading layers and dependencies. This makes impact operations even more imperceptible. This type of warfare

9 Ibidem.

10 M. Wrzosek, S. Markiewicz, Z. Modrzejewski, *Informacyjny wymiar wojny hybrydowej*, Warszawa 2019, p. 96.

11 Ibidem, p. 99.

has evolved over the years, and so has the broadly perceived military instrumentation that includes combat tactics, means of war-making or organisation of the military. The influencing of people's minds produces greater effects than could previously be assumed, in particular when a civilian population and the armed forces of an opposing side have not been prepared for facing such factors. In times of conflict and war, psychological factors become particularly important, both among the direct participants and the population outside the conflict-affected area, due to sudden changes in circumstances and behaviours. This type of war-making will be used more and more frequently in the future, and social impact operations will be increasingly important, becoming an intrinsic element of cognitive warfare.

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Rosyjskie operacje wpływu społecznego w kontekście prowadzonej wojny kognitywnej w Ukrainie w 2022 roku

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule została podjęta próba zidentyfikowania rosyjskich operacji wpływu społecznego w kontekście operacji informacyjnych prowadzonych przez Federację Rosyjską podczas wojny w Ukrainie w 2022 roku. Podjęcie analizy tworzenia i rozprzestrzeniania się zagrożeń informacyjnych w wyniku podejmowanych działań przez Rosję w trwającym konflikcie jest podyktowane coraz większym wpływem procesów komunikacyjnych na globalne bezpieczeństwo. W niniejszym artykule został zaprezentowany wpływ mediów masowych na kształtowanie świadomości przez odstąpienie mechanizmów kreowania opinii publicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: walka informacyjna, media, operacje informacyjne, dezinformacja