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‘Hybrid Warfare’ or ‘Weaponisation’ of Information?
Comparative study of the evolution of Russian assertive (dis)information actions

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Abstract

Russian assertive actions over the last decade have led some observers to think that Kremlin is employing fundamentally new concepts of armed conflict. Subsequently, scholars came up with a number of buzzwords and ill-defined concepts such as 'hybrid warfare' and 'Gerasimov Doctrine'. This paper believes that novelty of Russian actions is not in terms of its military, but rather the specific nature of operations employed by Kremlin had to do more with the way military was integrated with other instruments, mostly state-run and coordinated information operations. Thus, the project puts a whole new emphasis on information operations and claims that while in certain cases Moscow still uses conventional military, Kremlin's new plan is to achieve goals through information online in the first place, rather than fight the enemy on the battlefield. As paper intends to analyse how Russian information strategy has evolved, it employs quantitative and qualitative content analysis to examine narratives built by RIA Novosti and Russia Today/RT during Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and annexation of Crimea in 2014. The results show that Russia has learnt its mistakes from Georgian case as in 2014 pro-Kremlin media was more sophisticated and relied on using contested areas of international law to depict Russian actions to be in accordance with the democratic procedures and standards of international law.

Chapter I: Introduction

1. Introduction

It would be stating obvious to say that more or less every country tries to promote its interests. Such is the nature of international relations, no matter the ideas of which school you sympathise with. However, while countries vary in how they pursue their strategic goals and national interests, the assertive actions of the Russian Federation over more than a decade have earned her quite a reputation.

The Kremlin's actions in Ukraine made some observers think that we encountered fundamentally new concepts of armed conflict (Giles, 2016). This thought was later supported due to Moscow's alleged meddling in 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign, while almost every other action from Russia once again adds fuel to the fire. Consequently, all of these resulted in the widespread adoption of various buzzwords such as 'hybrid warfare' and attempt to conceptualise Russian actions into something new.

Despite numerous debates and scholarly articles, even after almost five years since the annexation of Crimea, there is still a lack of understanding of what Russia is doing exactly and how. As scholars and politicians are still struggling to understand elements of so-called Russian 'hybrid warfare', hence ways to counter it are nowhere to be found. In fact, one would even wonder whether there is anything new and 'hybrid' is actually a correct term to use when trying to analyse contemporary Russian actions.

This study contends that Russian assertive activities do not necessarily represent any new form of warfare, but are a result of Kremlin's effective use of information as a weapon. As new technologies have revolutionised the way information is shared, it enabled to transform media into an excellent tool for information warfare. Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin (2010, p. 4) even claim that "media are becoming part of the practices of warfare to the point that

the conduct of war cannot be understood unless one carefully accounts for the role of media in it". It should be noted that while speaking about Russian media, we mostly mean Kremlin-owned outlets, which tend to construct an image of events extraordinarily similar to narratives of the official Russian government. Consequently, the main focus of the paper is to find empirical evidence of how Russian use of information has been evolved and what it incorporates. While the paper intends to answer the main research question - "how Russian information strategy has evolved" it looks into two leading Russian media outlets, RIA Novosti and RT and analyses their coverage during Russo-Georgian War in 2008 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

As Russian information operations are quite a broad and challenging topic to research, this study believes that the selected two cases represent the pre-eminent fit in order to analyse the evolution of Kremlin's information tactics and give the reader an idea to understand a broader picture.

The case of Georgia is selected as it is believed to serve as a testing ground for Russians before their further actions (i.e. annexation of Crimea). The 2008 war saw a number of unprecedented tactics, as Kremlin incorporated cyber and other information operations with its military. Moscow not only managed to destroy Georgia's physical communications infrastructure but also shut down governmental and news web-sites via DDoS attacks and left the country in an information vacuum. At the same time, Kremlin tried to deny the Georgian government a chance to set own narrative of the conflict. However, despite the know-how, as argued by Heinrich and Tanaev (2009) Russian state-backed media coverage was generally not doing its best and basically echoed official Kremlin statements. On the other hand, the Georgian government hired Aspect Consulting, a quite well-known PR firm to spin the public opinion. Thus, most observers agree that despite Russia winning the physical war, Georgian was more successful on the information battlefield as West initially accepted the narrative of the Georgian government (Wilby, 2008).

A small war of 2008 led the Russian Federation to rethink a great deal of issues. As a result, a number of reforms have been carried out. Russian government increased military spending and started a modernisation programme (Cooper, 2016). The new Military Doctrine was soon adopted. While acknowledging their defeat on information battlefield, Kremlin even created Information Troops, a special governmental agency inside the military to deal with information operations (Unwala & Ghori, 2015).

Eventually, when it came to Crimea, Kremlin was more prepared, lessons have been learnt, mistakes analysed and reforms carried out. Therefore, Kremlin employed some of the cyber and operational tactics already tested in Georgia, but this time with more coordinated effort to win the narrative against Ukraine. At the end of the day, these altered and modified information tactics proved to be effective, as instead of trying to win hearts and minds of international and domestic societies at the same time, Moscow decided to sell her own narrative to Russian-speaking population in Russia and Crimea. On the other hand, Kremlin managed to leave the West and even the rest of Ukraine in a total misunderstanding about the ongoing situation in the region and won information war even before the start of the physical one. As Crimea represents Russia's first confrontation after Georgia, and since information operations have played a vital role in this conflict, it has been selected as the second case for the paper.

The paper first develops a framework as lenses to see through the Russian use of information as a warfare tool. Consequently, the research explores and reviews a number of terms and concepts (including 'hybrid warfare') in order to have a full understanding of what can constitute as an explanation of Russian assertive actions and what cannot. Theoretical findings further proceed with the search for the evolution of Kremlin's use of information as the paper uses quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse the case of the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Finally, all of these leads to the concluding note regarding Russian 'weaponisation' of information.

2. Literature Review

This section of a paper reviews a vast number of concepts and terms that are dominating the literature regarding Russian assertive actions. Consequently, literature review is divided into two parts: what Russian actions do represent and what they do not.

As the paper puts the main accent on the Russian use of information, first of all, it analyses the Western and Russian understanding of information Warfare. Subsequently, it tracks Soviet roots of Russia's modern tactics and lastly in conjunction with modern innovations, the paper develops framework of what does Russian information operations represent.

What it is:

A. Information Warfare

This paper asserts that one cannot call Russian actions in Ukraine a new form of warfare, however, there was an element which still may stand out from what we used to see in warfare before. Ukraine conflict saw conventional military coupled with the uniquely developed state-run information campaign. At once glance this does not represent any novelty either, as disinformation campaigns were deeply embodied in Soviet practice, however, latest Russian actions took information operations to the whole new level.

Sergey Chekinov, a department head at the Russian General Staff Academy, and head of the General Staff's Centre for Military-Strategic Research wrote shortly before the conflict in Ukraine that in order to neutralise adversary actions without resorting to weapons, information warfare would be used in the first place (Chekinov & Bogdanov, 2013). Indeed, Russian actions

were not novel in terms of its military, the specific nature of operations in Crimea had to do more with the way military was integrated with other Russian instruments, mostly information operations (Cimbala, 2014).

When it comes to the use of information for pursuing strategic goals, one might face a vast number of terms as scholars cannot agree neither on name nor on a definition of the concept (Franke, 2015). While 'information warfare' is the most popular term in the literature, the way it is understood varies. The western understanding of the term is that 'information warfare' is a strategy that calls for "the integrated deployment, during military operations, of information related capabilities . . . to influence, disrupt, [or] corrupt audiences" (Perry, 2015, pp. 4-5). It incorporates both information-physical components (e.g., denial-of-service attacks, physical targeting of critical IT infrastructure) and information psychological tactics. Aro (2016, p. 122) defines 'information warfare' as "a state-conducted, strategic series of information and psychological operations that influences the target's opinions, attitudes and actions in order to support the political goals of the state's leaders". While Western scholars only see the application of 'information warfare' during peacetime, Russian attitude differs. Rear Admiral Vladimir Pirumov, former head of the Directorate for Electronic Warfare of the Main Naval Staff, wrote in Information Confrontation that "information war consists in securing national policy objectives both in wartime and in peacetime through means and techniques of influencing the information resources of the opposing side… and includes influences on an enemy's information system and psychic condition" (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 12). According to him, information influence techniques include "disinformation (deception), manipulation (situational or societal), propaganda (conversion, separation, demoralization, desertion, captivity), lobbying, crisis control and blackmail" (ibid). Another Russian Military man, Colonel Koayesov states that "information warfare consists in making an integrated impact on the opposing side's system of state and military command and control and its military-political leadership — an impact that would lead even in

peacetime to the adoption of decisions favourable to the party initiating the information impact, and in the course of conflict would totally paralyze the functioning of the enemy's command and control infrastructure" (Giles, 2016, p. 29).

As seen in the latest military doctrine, from 2014 Russia considers herself to be engaged in full-scale information warfare and thus puts whole new emphasis on information operations (Government of the Russian Federation, 2014). This new approach to information coupled together with modern information technology takes Russian information operations on an unprecedented scale, and according to Hansen (2017) serves as a force multiplier. He also believes that effective use of the information space "may compensate much more today than until very recently for deficiencies in the physical arena" (ibid, p. 5).

As a former KGB officer, Putin knows the true value of information and for him it is a simple equation: "whoever owns the media, controls what it says" (Dougherty, 2015). Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) believe that nowadays information precedes essence for Kremlin. They state that military manoeuvres are planned for Russian cameras as the primary aim is to spread information rather than engage in a conventional war (ibid). Bērziņš (2014) agrees, that instead of a destruction of the enemy on the battlefield, more focus was put on achieving goals through information operations. This necessitates an extreme level of close coordination between different institutions of Russian state machinery (Monaghan, 2014).

B. Soviet Roots

Bruusgaard (2014, p. 81) claims that "[a]lthough Russia demonstrated new principles of warfighting in Crimea, most of the tactics and doctrine displayed represented traditional Russian (or Soviet) warfighting principles refitted for modern war". While he sees Soviet roots of Russian tactics, he also

stresses that a seamless transition from peace to conflict was done in "innovative ways". Weisburd, Watts & Berger (2016) share the same idea as they call contemporary Russian approach 'active measures on steroids'. 'Active measures' was an umbrella term used by Soviet Intelligence which included various tactics, mostly disinformation and propaganda (Averin, 2018).

According to the dictionary definition, disinformation is "false information deliberately and often covertly spread in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth" (Webster Dictionary, n.d.). Fallis (2015) calls it the manipulation of information that purposefully aims to mislead and deceive, while the UK House of Commons report (2018) identifies disinformation as unconventional warfare, using technology to disrupt, to magnify, and to distort. Misinformation, on the other hand, is inaccurate information that is the result of an honest mistake or of negligence (Fallis, 2015).

Back in the Soviet days, Russians used to call the concept 'dezinformatsiya', which Former CIA expert Lothar Mertzel (1974, p. 921) defined as "operations aiming at pollution of the opinion-making process in the West," with the aim to "[u]ltimately…to cause the adversary to reach decisions beneficial to Soviet interests" (Holland, 2006, p. 4). Indeed, Soviet 'dezinformatsiya' was mainly aimed at weakening Western democratic values, in most cases spreading fabricated stories and conspiracy theories about the USA (Ostrovsky, 2016) (Kolpakidi & Degtyarev, 2009) (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).

When it comes to propaganda, Cambridge Dictionary states that "propaganda is information, images, opinions or ideas, mostly offering only one side of an argument, through published, broadcast, or some other methods of disseminations, with the intention of swaying people's opinions". It is important to mention that by its nature propaganda does not does not disregard truth, but uses elements of truth in the 'deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions', in order to achieve a specific response or reaction from an audience, meant to benefit and 'further the desired intent of the propagandist

(Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015, p. 7) (McManus & Michaud, 2018, p. 18). Bernays (1928, p. 52) defined propaganda as "a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group".

Herrick claims that the real menace of propaganda is the discovery by governments that it can be readily utilized to sway and control democratic masses. As after this, he states, no government will conduct any big business without propaganda being an essential activity (Bruk, 2013). This was well shared by the Soviets, as since the beginning of the regime, Communists regarded the use of information and propaganda as powerful a weapon to re-create reality. In his classic study of propaganda Jacques Ellui (1973, p. XVI) wrote that: "the Communists, who do not believe in human nature but only in the human condition, believe that propaganda is all-powerful, legitimate, and instrumental in creating a new type of man." Sherr (2013) shares the same view as he claims that Lenin believed in spinning the West against itself using various propaganda instruments.

One of the most notable tactics of Soviet propaganda was known as 'whataboutism'. Once the Soviet Union was criticised, they would try to neutralise the argument with a completely different story. The Soviet response would often be something like "What about…" followed by an absolutely different accusation towards the West.

Another preferred Soviet propaganda tactic was 'dehumanization', in other words "denial of the victim's humanity" in order to emphasize the image of an enemy (Courtois, et al., 1997, p. 749)

It is believed that Soviets used the concept of reflexive control as a crucial tool in order to create a permissive environment for effective spreading of propaganda and 'dezinformatsiya' (Thomas, 1998). The concept was first developed by the mathematical psychologist Vladimir Lefebvre in the 1960s and refers to systematic measures aimed at shaping an opponent's perceptions, latently compelling him to act willingly in ways that are favourable to one's

own strategic objectives (Kasapoglu, 2015). Grigory Smolyan, one of the first Russian scholars to develop this concept further, underlines that "successful reflexive control requires a deep understanding of the 'inner nature' of the enemy, his ideas and his way of thinking" (Averin, 2018, p. 62). Within the frameworks of reflexive control the Soviet Union would spread disinformation as a base, so later Soviets could influence the decisions of adversaries by subtly convincing opponents that they are acting in their own interests, while following Kremlin's playbook (Thomas, 2004).

C. 'Weaponisation'

One might find numerous similarities between above-mentioned 'dezinformatsiya' and propaganda tactics and current Russian actions. In fact, while analysing coverage of information warfare in the new Russian Military Doctrine, Jolanta Darcewska (2015, p. 7) pointed out that "doctrinal assumptions about information warfare demonstrate not so much a change in the theory of its conduct... but rather a clinging to old methods (sabotage, diversionary tactics, disinformation, state terror, manipulation, aggressive propaganda, exploiting the potential for protest among the local population)." However, while similarities cannot be neglected, one cannot draw a clear equation mark either. Russian tactics have clearly evolved…

Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) state that current Russian tactics represent a combination of Soviet propaganda with new strategies of information management and control, in conjunction to international efforts to neutralize opposing views through an array of false flag operations and other dirty tricks.

According to Pomerantsev (2014) the new Russia does not just deal with disinformation, lies, forgeries and leaks usually associated with information warfare. He claims that Kremlin under Putin "reinvents reality, creating mass hallucinations that then translate into political action" (ibid, p. 1). Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) argue that Kremlin uses information as a sort of weapon. They

claim that since at least Russo-Georgian war in 2008, military and intelligence decision makers in Moscow do not regard information in the familiar terms of 'public diplomacy' or 'propaganda', instead they see it in weaponized terms "as a tool to confuse, blackmail, demoralize, subvert and paralyze" (ibid, p. 4). Indeed, in 2015 Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu openly supported the thought as he said that: "the day has come, where we recognise that the word, the camera, the photograph, the internet and information in general have become yet another type of weapon, yet another expression of the Armed Forces. This weapon may be used positively as well as negatively. It is a weapon which has been part of events in our country in different years and in various ways, in defeats as well as in victories" (Hansen, 2017, p. 29).

Even though traces of the use of internet communication during military conflict could be traced back to Kosovo in 1999, Nissen (2015) believes that utilization of internet resources for 'military' purposes, which he calls 'weaponisation' only recently became a coherent concept (Szwed, 2016).

MacFarquhar (2016) believes that the 'weaponisation' of information is not a project devised by a Kremlin policy expert but it represents an integral part of Russian military doctrine. Simon (2004) argues that 'weaponisation' started on a domestic level, as during the early 2000s, when Russia's Security Council adopted an "information Security Doctrine" asserting that only state could provide reliable information. This was the first step in 'weaponising' media and establishing control over traditional media outlets in Russia. Later the Russian government adopted anti-extremist law, under which the government can prosecute individuals for posting "extremist" content online. Similarly, the Ministry of Communications can revoke the license of any internet web-site, that it regards extremist (Lupion, 2018).

While 'weaponising' information, Kremlin made vital alterations to Soviet tactics. The main characteristic of Soviet 'dezinformatsiya' and propaganda was portraying the narrative of 'us' against 'them' (Bruk, 2013). 'Us' or Soviet side was presented positively in almost every matter, while

'others' mainly the West was criticised and diminished. This approach however did not prove to be effective. As Nye (2004) explains, Soviet propaganda was inconsistent with its policies. This was lesson well-learnt as modern Russian information operations do not necessarily promote the Kremlin's agenda. Lucas and Nimmo (2015, p. 1) believe that instead Kremlin aims to "confuse, befuddle and distract", also agreeing with Pomerantsev and Weiss that "modern Russia has weaponized information, turning the media into an arm of state power projection".

This lead to another vital change in the strategy. For Soviets, the idea of truth was crucial, even while lying Soviet propaganda always tried to "prove" that Kremlin's disinformation was a fact (Pomerantsev, 2014). However, for modern Russia, the idea of truth is irrelevant (ibid). Gleb Pavlovsky, a political consultant who worked on Putin's election campaign and was a long-time Kremlin insider agrees with Pomerantsev's point as he claims that "the main difference between propaganda in the USSR and the new Russia, is that in Soviet times the concept of truth was important. Even if they were lying they took care to prove what they were doing was 'the truth'. Now no one even tries proving the 'truth.' You can just say anything. Create realities" (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 9). While Soviets used to repurpose concepts such as 'democracy' and 'human rights' to mask their opposites, Putin's Russia combines Soviet-era 'whataboutism' and 'active measures' with a postmodern smirk claiming that everything is a sham and suggest that not even West really believes in concepts of 'democracy' or 'human rights' (Pomerantsev, 2014). Nowadays, Kremlin does not try to persuade people that it is telling the truth, instead, it questions the whole notion of 'objective truth', claiming that any opinion, no matter how bizarre, has the same weight as others. With this whole notion of Post-truth, Moscow is making it clear that it can dictate the terms of the truth and thus enhance its aura of power.

Nimmo (2015) has further characterized tactics in what he calls Russia's 4D propaganda. According to him when a major event happens involving

Kremlin's interest, Russia uses following strategy: Dismissing the critics (i.e. accusations as Russophobia), Distorting the facts (i.e. falsifying evidence and presenting so-called alternative facts), distracting from the main issue (i.e. accuse someone else and blur the reality) and/or dismaying the audience (i.e. threatening any action with military consequences) (Lucas & Nimmo, 2015).

Above-mentioned changes in strategy are not the only ones, as Russians changed the means too. The internet and ability to proliferate fakes easily provide an ideal form to spread such ideas. Which leads us to another change from the Soviet times, technological.

While realising the importance of the online field, current Russian information operations link some of the Soviet tested tricks in combination with modern technology and its capabilities (Madeira, 2014). Use of internet and technology radically revolutionised the game, as if in Soviet times KGB would have to work hard to spread its 'dezinformatsiya' in Western press, today spreading fake photos and then reposting them as 'fact' in traditional media is matter of hours, if not minutes (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).

Giles (2016) believes that Russia has invested hugely in enabling factors in order to adapt the principles of subversion to the internet age. According to him, these investments cover the following three areas: Firstly, internally and externally focused media with a substantial online presence (i.e. RT and RIA). Secondly, the use of social media and online forums as a force multiplier in order to achieve a broader reach and penetration of Russian narratives. And lastly, language skills, in order to engage with target audiences in their own languages (Simons, 2015).

Weisburd, Watts & Berger (2016) divide Russian strategy regarding the use of technology for political purposes in 'white', 'grey' and 'black' measures. The 'white' measures are mainly controlled by RT and Sputnik, which push Kremlin-approved messages online. At the same time, 'white' content provides ammunition for 'grey' measures, which employ smaller outlets, bots as well as so-called useful idiots. Some of them regurgitate Russian narratives, sometimes

even without taking a direct order from Russia or realising that they are playing Kremlin's game. Next come the 'black' measures. According to the 1992 USIA report during Soviet times, the 'black measures' were mainly conducted by special agents, while all it takes now is coordinated hackers, honeypots and hecklers (United States Information Agency, 1992).

When it comes to objectives behind above-mentioned Russian actions, the overwhelming majority of scholars agree that what Kremlin tries to do is to disrupt the Western narratives rather than provide a counter narrative, sow confusion, cause doubt, divide opinions and undermine the notion of objective truth being possible at all (Pomerantsev, 2014) (Averin, 2018) (MacFarquhar, 2016) (Giles, 2016) (Lupion, 2018). Pomerantsev (2014) believes that Russia wants society to think that "If nothing is true, then anything is possible". This, according to him, will give us the sense that Putin's next moves are unpredictable and therefore dangerous and we will end up "stunned, spun, and flummoxed by the Kremlin's 'weaponisation' of absurdity and unreality" (ibid, p. 19). The aim is to control information in whatever form it takes. Creating this information chaos and ambiguity serves as the strategic advantage to further Russia's interests abroad (Rogers & Martinescu, 2015). On the one hand, it cast doubts of Europeans in Western values and leads to successful penetration from the public opinion space into the decision-making space (Lupion, 2018). And on the other hand, the Russian government translates such kind of foreign policy success into greater regime stability at home (Averin, 2018).

What it is not:

It should be mentioned that while trying to conceptualise Russian assertive actions, scholars came up with a number of ill-defined concepts and terms. The paper groups them into the following three categories. As one group claims that Russia invented a new way of warfare, opposing group does not see

any wrongdoings in Russian action as they often label Russian actions as ‘soft power’ and ‘public diplomacy’. The third group oversimplifies Russian actions by regarding them as just a lie, often labelling it as ‘fake news’. Following part of the paper argues that none of the groups provides a clear understanding of Russian actions.

A. New type of War

When it comes to recent Russian activities ‘hybrid warfare’ is the most popular and often cited term, therefore, needs to be discussed before others. While the term ‘hybrid warfare’ first appeared at the beginning of the century to describe Hezbollah’s tactics in Lebanon War (Puyvelde, 2015), it only became widespread buzzword after Russian actions in Ukraine. Attempt to define the term takes the paper to one of the most notable scholars of the field, Michael Hoffman.

Hoffman (2007), thinks that we enter a time when multiple types of warfare will be used simultaneously by sophisticated adversaries, which he calls “hybrid wars”. According to Hoffman (2014, p. 1), hybrid warfare is “any adversary that simultaneously employs a tailored mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behaviour in the same time and battlespace to obtain their political objectives”. Hoffman (2007, p. 8) further states that hybrid war “can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors”. He mentions similar definition from General Raymond T. Odierno (2012, p. 1), 38th chief of staff of the United States Army had, as he defines hybrid warfare as “operating in environments with both regular military and irregular paramilitary or civilian adversaries, with the potential for terrorism, criminality, and other complications”. Speaking of the US Army, definition they provide is following: "the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, criminal elements, or a combination of these forces and

elements all unified to achieve mutually benefiting effects" (Fleming, 2011, p. 2).

One can argue that above-mentioned definitions are very broad, vague and can be labelled as a catch-all definition. Same can be said about Russian 'hybrid warfare'. As Michael Kofman (2016) points out, the term 'hybrid warfare' has evolved to include literally everything that Moscow does in relations to other countries.

Admitting that existing descriptions of the term are not quite accurate Lanoszka (2016) tries to describe the logic of 'hybrid warfare' himself. Lanoszka cites a couple of definitions of the term, which mainly suggest that it is a combination of conventional military forces and irregular warfare. However, according to him, Russian actions in Ukraine reveal the inadequacies of these definitions as they are once too broad and too narrow. Definitions are too broad because many wars incorporated both features, following this logic even Second World War can be considered to be a 'hybrid' war. They are too narrow as these definitions use regular and irregular wars either simultaneously or sequentially in the theatre of operations. However, Lanoszka claims that the annexation of Crimea had a lack of regular warfare.

Lanoszka asserts that 'hybrid warfare' is a tool of a strong state against weak as he claims that in order to able to successfully apply tools of 'hybrid warfare' a state should possess an escalation dominance, meaning that it can engage and defeat the target in military escalation if necessary. Lanoszka concludes that 'hybrid warfare' thus represents a kind of paradox. A state resorts to irregular warfare in order to pursue policy objectives while avoiding military escalation, but using the threat of military engagement as a deterrence tool for the target country. At the same time, according to him, 'hybrid warfare' gives the belligerent 'plausible deniability' and thus deters external intervention.

Chivvis (2017) proposes somewhat similar definition to Lanoszka, as he states that 'hybrid warfare' refers to Moscow's use of a broad range of subversive tactics, many of which are non-military, such as informational,

diplomatic, economic instruments of power, in order to further Russian national interests and meet specific policy goals – such as undermining EU and weakening of NATO, subverting pro-Western government, annexation of territories and protecting domestic regime.

There are quite a number of problems with Lanoszka's theory. He claims that Russian hybrid warfare is aimed to revise the status quo. However, as seen from examples of Moscow's actions in Georgia and later in Ukraine, the aim was vice-versa. Both Georgia and Ukraine were actually the ones changing status quo, by leaning towards the West, thus, Russian actions were aimed at saving the status quo, rather than altering it. An even bigger problem is identifying escalation dominance as one of the main conditions for the Russian 'hybrid warfare'. Even when the example of Russia is discussed, Lanoszka admits that there are various features in the former Soviet space which gives Kremlin advantages to use 'hybrid warfare' tactics, such as the virtue of being in the region, historical familiarity with conflicts in the area and historical past. However, he argues that all these advantages would not matter and be irrelevant if Russia did not have escalation dominance over its neighbours. While this is very much true in a case of former-Soviet Republics, Russian assertive actions go way beyond this region. Over the years, Moscow has applied her tactics in various Western countries such as Germany, the UK and even the US. While Russia does not have an escalation dominance and would not stand a chance in a conventional military escalation with any abovementioned countries, Kremlin still tries to further its interests.

Nevertheless, the main critique does not go to Lanoszka and his theory per se, but to the term 'hybrid warfare' in general and its appliance to the Russian actions. Even Frank Hoffman, who coined the term, has doubts when it comes to using the term towards Kremlin. Opposed to the idea of other above-mentioned terms which had problem of focusing on non-violent measures only, Hoffman (2014, p. 1) points out that '[t]he problem with the hybrid threats definition is that it focuses on combinations of tactics associated with violence

and warfare (except for criminal acts) but completely fails to capture other non-violent actions'. However, as seen from Russian actions, non-violent actions are used quite frequently and effectively, in most of the cases, they even dominate over violence and actual warfare.

Other than 'hybrid', other groups of definitions include vague terms, such as 'new generation war' and 'special war' (Seely, 2017). Group of scholars from this group, often cite 'Gerasimov Doctrine' as they believe that it represents the official thought of Russian military and strategic command when it comes to Kremlin's 'distinctive' actions.

In his 2013 article, the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, General Valery Gerasimov (2013) described how armed conflicts have developed new methods. He claimed that the very rules of war have evolved and the role of non-military means to achieve strategic and political goals, has increased and in some cases exceeded the conventional military power. Gerasimov calls this 'new generation warfare' where military action is started without an official declaration of war. 2008 war campaign in Georgia made the General think about the future of warfare, thus, he states that military science would play a crucial role. In order to identify a new type of warfare, Gerasimov looks to 'Arab Spring' and claims, that while some may ignore the event, military men should learn the lessons. His lessons learnt is that asymmetrical actions have come into widespread use, enabling the nullification of an enemy's advantage. As a conclusion, Gerasimov (2013, p. 29) states, that "no matter what forces the enemy has, no matter how well-developed his forces and means of armed conflict may be, forms and methods for overcoming them can be found. He will always have vulnerabilities, and that means that adequate means of opposing him exist… We must not copy foreign experience and chase after leading countries, but we must outstrip them and occupy leading positions ourselves" (ibid).

However, when it comes to 'Gerasimov Doctrine', it is important to bear in mind that it does not reflect Russian military thinking but is another buzzword

for PowerPoint presentation made by Western analysts (Renz, 2016). While Gerasimov made various points about the nature of modern warfare, it is dubious whether he tried to set any sort of doctrine. As it was figured out later by Mark Galeotti (2018), who accidentally created the term, Gerasimov was not actually setting up a hybrid doctrine for Kremlin. In reality, he was analysing 'Arab Spring' uprisings and the 'colour revolutions' from the Russian perspective. Therefore, one cannot simply describe Russian actions by putting it into a framework of non-existing doctrine.

Another notable group of scholars call Kremlin's recent actions an 'old wine in new bottle' as they trace roots of contemporary Russian techniques and concepts back to Soviet times.

Roberts (2015) uses the word 'Maskirovka' as an umbrella term to describe a series of tactics Red Army held as core doctrinal principles. According to him, old 'Maskirovka' was aimed at protecting the Soviet Union on the battlefield while 'Maskirovka 2.0' is shaped at re-establishing Russian sphere of influence in the near abroad.

Roberts claims that 'Maskirovka 2.0' is designed as low-visibility, clandestine and non-attributable campaign, which allows Putin to push his foreign policy goals and agenda while not going above the threshold of conventional military engagement to avoid response from the West.

Palagi (2015) utilizes a historical approach to identify the relative context and doctrinal record of unconventional and irregular warfare, in order to see the logical emergence of hybrid warfare and identify Russian innovations and discrete components in applying 'hybrid' tactics.

Similar to Roberts, Palagi finds origins of Russian contemporary actions are deeply rooted in 'Maskirovka', which according to him is a tactic based on deception but extends further into a holistic strategy shaped to mislead, misinform and alter perceptions of all observers of the actions. In addition, Palagi claims, 'Maskirovka' hides the strengths, weaknesses and threats coming from the state in order to alter the perception of the target population.

Finally, Palagi concludes that ‘hybrid warfare’ is not a new concept by any metric, however, he states that the Russian Federation is the first and only modern state actor to fully employ various hybrid tactics and further national goals using it.

Another popular term used within the same group is ‘active measures’ (‘aktivnyye meropriyatiya’). According to KGB lexicon active measures are “agent-operational measures aimed at exerting useful influence on aspects of the political life of a target country which are of interest, its foreign policy, the solution of international problems, misleading the adversary, undermining and weakening his positions, the disruption of his hostile plans, and the achievement of other aims” (Mitrokhin, 2002, p. 13).

According to Vasili Mitrokhin, defected KGB official, ‘active measures’ was a Soviet form of special warfare conducted by KGB (and other security services as Cheka, NKVD) to influence the course of world events (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2000). ‘Active measures’ used to range from media manipulations to special actions, both domestically and abroad.

During his CNN interview another former KGB official, General Oleg Kalugin (2007) described ‘active measures’ as “heart and soul of Soviet intelligence” and admitted that true mission of KGB was "not intelligence collection, but subversion: active measures to weaken the West, to drive wedges in the Western community alliances of all sorts, particularly NATO, to sow discord among allies, to weaken the United States in the eyes of the people of Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and thus to prepare ground in case the war really occurs" (ibid).

Despite all, it would be incorrect to brand ‘maskirovka’ or ‘active measures’ as a new way of warfare, as the group of scholars using these terms themselves agree that instead of facing anything new, we encounter reincarnation of old Soviet tricks. Indeed, Russia has used culture, religion and language as forms of influence back since the Russian Empire, through at least two centuries. While these terms do not describe anything novel, they do not

provide a full understanding of Russian actions either, as Kremlin's tactics have seen drastic improvement since the Soviet times.

Above-mentioned three groups represent a very limited illustration of terms that are nowadays used regarding Kremlin. Seely (2017) found out that there are more than 25 other terms used to describe elements of Kremlin's contemporary warfare. While the list of remaining definitions is huge, none of them make complete sense when it comes to conceptualising Russian tactics. Almost all of them have one key characteristic as a pillar – not crossing the threshold of actual war. While this might be true in various cases, it cannot provide a comprehensive portrait of Russia's contemporary warfare, since in a number of cases it involves the use of conventional military intervention –as seen with the cases of Georgia and Ukraine.

All things considered, the novelty of 'hybrid warfare' (or any other similar term) is nowhere to be found. The idea to further national interest without going to actual war, could be traced back to Sun Tzu, who famously advocated creating the conditions of victory without fighting. All wars in the past had some elements of 'hybridity' and have used 'unconventional' methods. It would be a mistake to assume that war could be limited and put in certain frames (Johnson, 2018). Applying 'hybrid' label to Russia's approach is not only incorrect but might be unhelpful and misleading (Giles, 2016). Marking Russian actions as a new form of warfare, for which no preparation could have been possible to be made might be counterproductive. Mansoor (2012, p. 1) states that "hybrid warfare has been an integral part of the historical landscape since the ancient world, but only recently have analysts – incorrectly – categorized these conflicts as unique". This is true not only for the term 'hybrid', indeed, no matter what label we attach, Russian contemporary actions do not represent a new kind of warfare, as war was rarely a military affair.

B. Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

While one group exaggerates Russian actions and brands it as a new type of war, some argue that instead of classifying Russian actions as any sort of warfare, be it 'hybrid' or informational, all it represents is just a 'soft power'.

'Soft power' is Joseph S Nye's (2004) concept of achieving state aims while using attraction instead of coercion. Russian actions are clearly not short on violence as seen in Ukraine and Georgia, however, even when violence is the last resort, Russian non-violent means do not necessarily rely on 'attraction'. "if the Western vision is based on building attractiveness," argues Alexander Dolinsky, "the Kremlin believes soft power to be a set of tools for manipulation. A sort of weapon" (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 12).

Another term, often used in conjunction with 'soft power' is 'public diplomacy'. As some scholars like Holbrooke (2001) and Elliott (2002) brand 'public diplomacy' as a "gentler term for international propaganda", one also might call Russian actions 'public diplomacy".

However, Fahnrich (2013) states that while propaganda implies persuasion through manipulation, subordinates truth, and develops in the environment of intransparency, the essence of public diplomacy is in persuasion through the attraction. Public diplomacy is an important "means of promoting a country's soft power" (Nye, 2008, p. 94), which is based on such ethical standards as "true and consistent information, transparency, dialogue" (Fähnrich, 2013, p. 4). While Zaharna (2004, p. 4) argues that propaganda "deliberately manipulates the communication" and embraces "information control and deception". Public diplomacy, on the other hand, rejects manipulation, coercion, and control; as its foundation is "open public communication in a global communication arena" (Zaharna, 2004, p. 4) (Bruk, 2013).

While some certain Russian values could be genuinely attractive for a specific audience, in general, neither 'soft power' nor 'public diplomacy' would be an adequate label for Russian assertive behaviour.

C. Oversimplification

Third group, mainly politicians not scholars, oversimplifies Russian actions, as they believe Kremlin is occupied with disseminating lies, lately popularly labelled as 'fake news'.

'Fake news' was even identified as one of the threats to democracy by the UK House of Commons (2018). In particular, Russian state-sponsored attempts to influence the political process in the US and the UK through Social media was singled out. In 2017 even the Prime Minister, Theresa May accused Russia of meddling in elections and planting 'fake news' in an attempt to sow discord in the West (ibid).

Spreading of false news has been a challenge since the printing press was introduced, however the term is relatively new and its definition is still less straightforward (McManus & Michaud, 2018). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 214) define fake news as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers". Sullivan (2017, p. 1) claims that fake news is "deliberately constructed lies, in the form of news articles, meant to mislead the public". The Shorenstein Center (2017, p. 1) identifies 'fake news' as "misinformation that has the trappings of traditional news media", at the same time recognizing the "ambiguity concerning the precise distinctions between 'fake news' on the one hand, and ideologically slanted news, disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, etc. on the other". Similarly, some insist that propaganda should be included, such as Khaldarova and Pantti (2016, p. 893), who argue that "fake news often takes the form of propaganda entertainment … which is a combination of scandalous material, blame and denunciations, dramatic music and misleading images taken out of context".

Despite numerous definitions, the term 'fake news' still remains vague. One might find similarities with above-mentioned 'dezinformatsiya', however, the definition of 'fake news' seems a bit more problematic as it could include

satire and parody. While ‘dezinformatsiya’, in most cases, is a deliberate action which has a political aim. Understanding these challenges with the definition of the term, the same report from the UK House of Commons (2018), that identified ‘fake news’ as one of the main threats, recommends to reject term ‘fake news’ and instead put forward agreed definition of ‘disinformation’. While ‘disinformation’/’dezinformatsiya’ might be a useful concept in explaining Russian actions, it does not provide a full picture but just presents a small part of a strategy. What Kremlin does is way more complicated than spreading fabricated stories.

Conclusion

To sum up, as it has been seen, calling Russian actions a new type of warfare and labelling it with various buzzwords would be incorrect and counter-productive. However, one cannot consider it ‘soft power’ or ‘public diplomacy’ either. While Kremlin’s contemporary information operations share a number of similarities with Soviet ‘active measures’, it would be an underestimation to call them the same thing. Terms such as ‘fake news’ and ‘misinformation’ are not the most suited ones either. Nowadays the Russian Federation is not engaging in information warfare, but is waging war on information instead. Moscow has a different conceptual understanding as portrays itself to be an object of Western special operations. Therefore, unlike the West, Kremlin does not consider information operations to be a short-term strategy used exclusively in wartime. Instead, Russia considers information confrontation as a constant feature of international relations, therefore, uses information as a weapon on a daily basis. Under the coordination of many government agencies, Russia actively uses modern technologies to reach a broader audience and engage into state-to-people and people-to-people interaction. However, unlike the Soviet

times, Kremlin does not push ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ narrative anymore, rather then it tries to muddy the waters and sow confusion to erode the notion of ‘objective truth’.

The study claims that above-mentioned planned, facilitated, coordinated and synchronized use of media by Kremlin in order to manipulate, mislead and distract public opinion as well as for other ‘military’ purposes should be understood as ‘weaponisation’ of information.

3. Methodology

The main focus of the paper is to find empirical evidence of how Russian use of information has been evolved and what it incorporates. While the main research question - “how Russian information strategy has evolved” is quite a comprehensive topic, the paper believes that analysing the change from the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 serves as a perfect example to see the broader picture. However, investigating all information-related aspects of both conflicts would be far beyond the scope and capabilities of this project, therefore, the paper focuses on analysing dominating media narratives of two Kremlin outlets.

As already seen, Russian government views itself to be in an ongoing information war, therefore, mass communication represents a crucial arena of global politics, in which, according to Kremlin way of thinking, rival powers try to further their own interests and undermine others (Hutchings & Szostek, 2015). Russian government openly stated in its Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 the need to ‘develop its own effective means of information to influence on public opinion abroad’, and ‘counteract information threats to its sovereignty and security’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 2013, p. 20). In line with this, Kremlin has made huge investments to be able to convey Russian points of view to other countries as well as to sell them domestically (Hutchings &

Szostek, 2015). In addition, substantial changes were made in order to adapt the principles of subversion to the internet age. Giles (2016) stresses out that internally and externally focused media with substantial online presence represents the top priority in Moscow's information strategy. One might even consider 'weaponisation' information and projecting narratives to foreign and domestic audiences as a matter of national security.

Coming from this, the paper understands the information in terms of strategic narratives. In order to see how the strategy works, the paper analyses coverage and narratives of Kremlin media outlets during Russia-involved conflicts. As the outlets are directly controlled by the Russian power elite, they do represent Kremlin's official position. While some might view the coverage of these outlets just as pure journalism, the paper believes, that the way Russian media frames and builds representations of events, personalities or groups shapes what readers think about and in what way. Therefore, analysing Kremlin's main narratives for domestic and international audiences will show the ideas, fears and goals of the Russian government, and will allow to understand Kremlin's information strategy. Analysing the coverage during two different conflicts with 6 years difference between, will also allow to see the development of Kremlin's strategy.

In order to analyse the development, the paper will employ a mixed-method approach.

The study uses data of two sets of articles drawn from two state-backed pro-Kremlin digital news web-sites, RIA Novosti and RT (formerly Russia Today). RIA being state-owned domestic Russian-language news agency is operating under the Russian Ministry of Communications and Mass Media. While Russia Today, also known as RT, promotes itself as an independent outlet, it is clearly backed by the Russian government as even Putin admits their relationship (Fisher, 2013). RIA represents the biggest and the most popular online news source for the Russian-speaking population and RT is Russia's main international propaganda machine. At the same time, RT was the only

international news outlet reporting from Tskhinvali during the war (the outlet even mentions this fact on their history page as a milestone). However, after 2008 both outlets went through rebranding, reforms and expansion. Russia Today was rebranded into RT, while RIA Novosti joined newly established Russian international news agency Rossiya Segodnya. Therefore, to a certain extent both outlets could be regarded as different players during the Crimea case.

The first set of data covers 2008 Russo-Georgia war and consists of articles published within a week from 7 to 13 of August 2008. The timeframe is chosen as 7th of August is acknowledged to be the starting date of the war, while 13th is the day when it ended.

The second set is devoted to articles covering Russia's annexation of Crimea, published during the timeframe of 20 February to 19 March 2014. In this case, the timeframe is much bigger compared to Georgian case, however, this is due to the differences in the nature of Crimean case. While Maidan demonstrations were going in Kiev for months, it erupted into violence from February 20th, therefore, this date has been selected as the starting point. While by 19th of March, the referendum was already over and Russia has already integrated Crimea as part of the Federation.

Within these parameters, after going through all articles published by both outlets, 30 news articles from Russia Today and 60 similar pieces from RIA Novosti covering Russo-Georgian War have been quasi-randomly selected. Since timeframe and also the number of articles is higher in Crimean case, 60 news articles have been selected from RT and 100 similar pieces from RIA Novosti. The selection was made based on the importance of the topic, view count the article while also special attention was devoted to equal redistribution between the topics covered.

First, the study follows with discourse analysis in order to analyse the text of selected articles. The paper intends to find narratives set by both outlets while also looking at wording and pro-Kremlin bias. While analysing narratives

will help to understand Russian strategy, increase in pro-Kremlin bias and wording will also be useful to see the development in these regards.

In order to make better use of qualitative findings, the study continues with simple content analysis. To make better use of the data, first, the paper uses simple content analysis. Based on the frequencies of keywords and a thematic analysis a quantitative account of the raw material will be generated (Bryman, 2012). The study codes about 100 keywords and phrases, which are grouped in different categories. For grouping, the paper is using the categories created by Miranda Lupion (2018), as she put keywords into six broader thematic categories based on the ideas they represent: humanitarian, legal, chaotic/aggressive, historical/cultural, Western interventionist, and order/safety.

Through quantitative content analysis, the paper intends to assess the following three factors: First, thematic consistency, as the paper looks on whether two different outlets promoted the same themes and narratives for the domestic and international audience. It should be noted that the study limits its analysis on news articles only, as number of opinion pieces on these outlets was quite low to conduct study just based on them, while comparing news articles to opinion pieces would not provide the most adequate picture. The second criterion is the keyword volume. A number of keywords are analysed according to their groupings, to see which category has dominated the news cycle and which narratives were more preferred by each outlet. The final factor is sophistication, to see whether outlets tried to push various Russian narratives at the same time or not.

The paper believes that while discourse analysis will provide an in-depth look into Kremlin narratives and ideas behind, quantitative content analysis will additionally provide sheer numbers and evidence, which while comparing two cases, will show how the clear evolution of Russian information strategy from Russo-Georgian War of 2008 to annexation of Crimea in 2014. It should be noted, that while the paper shares the dominating idea that Russian information

strategy was more effective in case of Crimea compared to Georgia, the project itself does not intend to examine effectivity or successfulness of Kremlin's new strategy as it is beyond the scope of the paper, but intention is rather to see what was the change in particular. The paper admits, that while analysing Kremlin's narratives helps in understanding the evolution of Moscow's information strategy, some other technologies behind Russia's information tactics might need further analysis. Due to limitations of the study, some other aspects of Russia's information strategy such as 'grey' and 'black' measures underlined by Weisburd, Watts & Berger (2016) before, are not discussed and therefore, need to be researched further.

Chapter II: Qualitative Analysis

As it has been already stated, the research asserts that the main novelty and object of attention in Russian actions is the use of information as a weapon. While the military has undoubtedly played its role during Russian aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, the paper believes that control of information was crucial in both cases, especially in Crimea. While there is a lot of attention to Russian information resources and their technologies of (dis)information, the study focuses on specific discourses and narratives. While messages disseminated by Russian officials promoted a pro-Kremlin narrative of the conflict, control of media by the Russian government has ensured them to control information space as well. Thus, Russian media advanced the strategic narratives set by governmental officials.

In order to track above-mentioned process and research its evolution the paper further analyses first aspect of Russia's new tactic of subversion to the

internet age by identified Giles (2016), internally and externally focused media with a substantial online presence.

First, the paper uses discourse analysis in order to incorporate qualitative findings. In doing so, initially, the research examines the texts of selected 30 articles from Russia Today and 60 pieces from RIA Novosti and analyses Kremlin narratives dominating the media during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Furthermore, similarly to the section about Georgia, the paper uses discourse analysis for the Crimea case. While going through all articles published on two Kremlin-backed media outlets, 60 pieces from RT and 100 pieces from RIA Novosti would be examined to analyse narratives build up during annexation of Crimea in 2014. Analyses of Kremlin narratives of both conflicts will provide an understanding of how did Russian strategy regarding 'weaponisation' of media evolved during this timeframe.

1. Discourse Analysis: Russo-Georgian War 2008

Discourse analysis of Russo-Georgian War 2008 shows that both Kremlin outlets, Russia Today and RIA tried to promote more or less same narratives, in a similar manner and structure.

The Russian information strategy represented a clear example of reflexive control and 'weaponisation' of information in order to shape public opinion prior to Russia's military confrontation in South Ossetia (Selhorst, 2016). Since the beginning of the conflict, both outlets promoted an image of an enemy and dehumanized Georgian side. First of all, the outlets prioritized hiding the facts about Russian provocation and blamed the start of the war solely on the Georgian government. Both outlets stated that Georgia started "a massive aggression against the South Ossetian republic" (Russia Today, 2008) (RIA Novosti, 2008) and authorities in the breakaway region were "forced to return fire" (Russia Today, 2008). In following articles RIA declared that South Ossetian side stopped fire four times upon the request of the peacekeepers,

however, Georgian forces would continue firing after regrouping (RIA Novosti, 2008). One of the articles on RIA even ended with a section called “history”, showing that South Ossetia and Georgia had disputes for a while, therefore blaming it on historical roots, once again neglecting Russian factor (RIA Novosti, 2008)

RIA often relied on statements from Russian MFA, one of which stated that Russia fully played the role of the mediator, however, the same article would take sides and argue that all responsibility lied on the Georgian government (RIA Novosti, 2008).

Dehumanization efforts continued in the following days of the conflicts as well, since both outlets promoted various stories about the cruelty of Georgian army. Russia today would often affirm in a number of articles that Moscow’s emergency convoys “had to take a long route out as Georgian officials refused to guarantee safe passage, even for seriously injured children” (Russia Today, 2008). The outlet also claimed in various pieces that despite a ceasefire agreement, Georgian artillery was still shelling Tskhinvali (Russia Today, 2008). RIA claimed that Georgians were shelling Zar road, which was the only way to evacuate people from South Ossetia to Russia (RIA Novosti, 2008). A number of killed Ossetians was often exaggerated and special attention was devoted to the number of wounded Russian peacekeepers (Russia Today, 2008). In 10 articles from RIA Novosti out of 60 that have been analysed the outlet condemned Georgian side for using prohibited cluster bombs and GRAD systems, while Russian use of the same weaponry was left ‘unnoticed’ by both outlets.

Russia Today and RIA also promoted number of falsehoods such as stories about Georgian soldiers burning down a 10th century church used as a shelter for Ossetians, Georgians attacking Russian aid convoy and refugees (Russia Today, 2008) (Russia Today, 2008) or Georgian tank razing memorial cemetery in the yard of the school №5 in Tskhinvali (RIA Novosti, 2008). All in effort to dehumanize the Georgia side.

It should be noted that promoting the same fibs led to inaccuracies between the outlets. I.e. while Russia Today blamed Georgia for reconnecting water supplies to Tskhinvali as an attempt to flood the city (Russia Today, 2008), RIA claimed that the Georgian side blew up Kekhvi water canal, which resulted in the flooding of the basements in the western part of the capital (RIA Novosti, 2008).

While dehumanizing Georgian side, Russia Today and RIA promoted Russia as a rescuer who provided funds, sent doctors, medical supplies and all the necessary help to South Ossetian side (RIA Novosti, 2008) (RIA Novosti, 2008) (Russia Today, 2008) (Russia Today, 2008).

While one might think that dehumanizing Georgian side would be enough justification for Russian military intervention, Kremlin did not stop there, as both outlets followed by promoting a narrative of a humanitarian catastrophe.

As Russia Today emphasized an image of an enemy, grounds to build crisis narrative were already set up. Subsequently, in a number of articles, both outlets claimed that situation in Tskhinvali already escalated into a humanitarian crisis, leading to more than 30,000 Ossetians leaving for Russia within 36 hours (Russia Today, 2008) (RIA Novosti, 2008). In the following pieces, Russia today argued that the capital was completely ruined and that citizens were sheltering in bunkers, struggling to survive without water, food or electricity. The outlet also reported that "Georgian shelling has destroyed all the hospitals in the South Ossetian capital" and also underlined that more than ten border villages have been burnt to the ground (ibid).

The paper believes that the narratives of dehumanization and humanitarian catastrophe were deliberately and strategically developed by the Russian government and pushed by Kremlin media since they served as a justification for Russian military intervention. Russian normative discourse references the Western one, however, it does this in relation to grey areas of international law, where the standards of behaviour are profoundly contested

(Burai, 2016). For a number of norms such as for the protection of civilians, the boundary between legality and illegality is particularly fluid, therefore, the dynamics of norm contestation are more distinct (Hurd, 2011).

Russian Federation made great use of this particular grey area, as pro-Kremlin media tried to label Russian actions as a humanitarian intervention under the frameworks of responsibility to protect its citizens. Once the ground was set, the outlets first cited Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claiming that Russia was "obliged to keep peace", and later, then President, Dmitry Medvedev stated that Russia had to carry out a "peace enforcement operation" in order to "protect the lives and dignity of its citizens in South Ossetia" (Russia Today, 2008) (Russia Today, 2008). At the same time, RIA published couple pieces claiming that the people of South Ossetia were appealing to the leadership of Russia "to take urgent measures to protect them, since the Georgian side planned the destruction of the entire Ossetian people" (RIA Novosti, 2008).

Numerous times the outlets stressed that 90 per cent of South Ossetians were Russian citizens (while neglecting the fact of Russian 'passportisation' activities held a couple years prior to the conflict), therefore Russia was "obliged to keep peace" and "defend [its] citizens" (Russia Today, 2008) (Russia Today, 2008) (Russia Today, 2008). Above-mentioned two phrases were quite popular as both outlets repeated them over and over again.

Since justification was already put in place, the outlets proudly informed Russian readers that their army interfered into the conflict and managed to liberate the capital of South Ossetia. However, While Russia Today stated that it was 76th Airborne Brigade of the Russian Army which joined the conflict (Russia Today, 2008), RIA argued that it was units of the 58th Army of the North Caucasus Military District (RIA Novosti, 2008).

Similar justification using international law was used in case of Abkhazia as well. The intervention was vindicated by Russia Today as a pre-emptive measure, in order not to let Georgian forces the opportunity to create

another humanitarian catastrophe as in South Ossetia (Russia Today, 2008). In addition to humanitarian intervention narrative, another rhetoric used with Abkhazian intervention was the protection of Russian citizens, as the outlet claimed that "thousands of Russians were on holidays" in Abkhazia and Russia had to defend its people (Russia Today, 2008).

Subsequent deployment of additional 9 thousand soldiers and 350 armoured vehicles, was not aimed at annexation of Georgian territories, but according to RIA "its goal [was] to prevent a repetition of the situation with the Russian peacekeepers in Tskhinvali, prevention of military aggression from the Georgian armed forces on the territory of Abkhazia, protecting civilians, preventing a humanitarian catastrophe and provocations in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict" (RIA Novosti, 2008).

Later the argument of the pre-emptive measures was used in another case as well. While Russian army was dislocated in Senaki, which does not belong neither to Abkhazia nor to South Ossetia, RIA published official statement from Kremlin underlining that the aim was "to prevent the concentration of additional militarized forces" (RIA Novosti, 2008). Accusations from the Georgian government that Russia carried military operations on the Georgian soil and stole Georgian military equipment, were met with the following statement on RIA: "in order to demilitarize the zone adjacent to the conflict area, as well as to ensure the safety of the civilian population, Russian peacekeepers evacuate military equipment and ammunition from Gori" (RIA Novosti, 2008).

Later RIA asserted that Russia's intervention prevented a large-scale operation of Georgian troops in Abkhazia (RIA Novosti, 2008). As if a number of brigades of Georgian military were already deployed to Gali, however, according to the outlet, "the correct forecast and determination of the Russian military allowed them to thwart these plans, disarm the Georgian forces, hinder their activities and cool the hot heads of the Georgian leadership" (ibid).

Subsequently, the outlets used other aspects of international law against Georgian side. Russia Today blamed Georgia for violation of the fundamental principles of the United Charter on non-use of force (Russia Today, 2008) and cited Russian politicians demanding ad hoc tribunal to be set up (Russia Today, 2008) (Russia Today, 2008). At the same time, RIA Novosti was heavily accusing Georgian government of ethnic cleansing and the genocide, again citing Russian officials, including the Russian MFA, PM Putin and President Medvedev (RIA Novosti, 2008) (RIA Novosti, 2008) (RIA Novosti, 2008) (RIA Novosti, 2008).

While using contested Western norms of international law in its favour, pro-Kremlin media also heavily criticized and blamed the West.

In order to avoid blaming Russia and pointing fingers at others, Russia Today has criticized almost all Western institutions. The U.S was heavily held accountable for financial support to Georgia (Russia Today , 2008). The UN inaction was emphasized to fuel military conflict (Russia Today, 2008), NATO was blamed to encourage Georgian government to take such assertive measures (Russia Today, 2008) while EU was deemed to be too weak to help (Russia Today, 2008), portraying Russia as the only side which wanted to end the conflict. It should be noted that, RIA had an accent at criticising the US solely. A different audience of these two outlets might explain this contrast. Since Russia Today's audience is more international, the outlet felt the need to put more effort into covering anti-Western narrative from more perspectives. On the other hand, RIA put all the blame at Americans since it would have been easier to sell to Russian-speaking audience.

It is worth mentioning that, while blaming the US for helping Georgia, one of RIA's headlines proclaimed that "the USA [was] not planning to provide military assistance to Georgia" (RIA Novosti, 2008). The piece stated that this was said by a high-ranking official in the US administration during a non-official talk with the journalists. As no names were cited, this could be just 'dezinformatsiya' from RIA, aimed at sowing distrusts of Georgian people

towards American allies. However, this was only done once and was not emphasized further.

It should be mentioned that, while criticizing the West, Russia Today also tried to show international readers that the West supported Russia and her decisions. the outlet cited Italian Foreign Minister, Franco Frattini, Cuba's President Raul Castro, Moldova's unrecognised republic Transdniester's leadership and Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in support for Russia (Russia Today, 2008). While names of these leaders might not sound that outstanding, Russia Today claimed that Western leaders who supported Saakashvili, such as President Kaczynski, faced a lot of criticism from their governments at home (ibid). Such an action was most likely aimed at showing that the West is divided so public questions the Western values.

It should be noted, that by the end of the war, both outlets once again tried to dehumanize Georgian side, as they followed up with stories about Georgian spies and terrorists, claiming that nine agents of the Georgian special services and one officer were arrested as they were carrying out military intelligence operation and planning terrorist acts on Russian territory (RIA Novosti, 2008) (Russia Today, 2008). Since Kremlin media has already used dehumanization tactics to justify military intervention in early stages of the conflict, this narrative was most likely one more an attempt to spin public opinion in Russian favour as by this stage Georgian side of the story was more accepted.

To sum up, the discourse analysis has demonstrated that both outlets had essentially high volume of consistency as they promoted more or less the same narratives in similar ways. Both outlets started dehumanizing Georgian side, created an image of humanitarian catastrophe all in efforts to later justify Russian military intervention using contested areas of international law. At the same time, outlets highly criticized the West while Russia Today also tried to show the division between Western leaders as the outlet claimed that a number of them supported the Russian government. Dehumanization tactics were once

again used by both outlets at the end of the conflict. It is also worth mentioning, that through all stages of the war, both Russia Today and RIA Novosti were labelling the war as Georgia-Ossetian conflict, without mentioning Russia as a side. Even after Russian army intervened in Georgia, RIA cited Colonel-General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, deputy chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, affirming that Russia was not in a state of war with Georgia, but rather was carrying out a peacekeeping mission (RIA Novosti, 2008). Even when the ceasefire deal was agreed, RIA's wording was following: "Presidents of the Russian Federation and France agreed 6 principles for the regulation of the conflict in Georgia", not admitting Russia as a member of the conflict, but portraying her as the negotiator (RIA Novosti, 2008).

It is also worth mentioning that other Soviet practices such as 'whataboutism' and Nazi rhetoric (both so frequent in Crimea case as seen later) were used only once (Russia Today, 2008).

2. Discourse Analysis: Annexation of Crimea 2014

By 2014, six years after the war with Georgia, Russia has learnt its lessons. Iasiello (2017, p. 55) claims that unlike forceful invasion in Georgia, the accent in Crimea was more on infiltration as Kremlin relied more on non-kinetic options such as "propaganda, disinformation, and denial and deception to influence internal, regional, and global audiences" all within a framework of Russia's reflexive control strategy. Similarly, Giles (2016) characterizes Russian 'weaponisation' of information in Crimea as evolving, developing and adapting.

The change and development in the strategy have directly affected pro-Kremlin outlets. Since 2008 Russia Today has gone under a huge reform, which first of all resulted in a new name. As Russia Today was rebranded into RT one might conclude that the Russian government tried to distance the discourse it is

producing for the international audience from the Russian state. Significant improvements have been made in the quality and volume of publications as the outlet devoted way more attention and time to the coverage of the Crimea situation.

Similarly to RT, RIA Novosti has also been reformed as from 2013 RIA merged into newly created news agency Rossiya Segodnya under the management of Dmitry Kiselev, who is often cited in the West as Russia's chief spin doctor or Putin's main propagandist (Ennis, 2014). The reform resulted in improved coverage with a couple of thousand articles (compared to about 800 pieces from Georgia case) and the complexity of each of the pieces.

While analysing the discourse of RT and RIA during their Crimea coverage, one might be overwhelmed with the feeling of déjà vu, as similarly to Georgian coverage, both outlets promoted narratives of a humanitarian catastrophe, while dehumanizing Ukrainian side. However, analysing the mistakes and failures from Georgian case probably led the Russian government to rethink their mistakes as during Crimea coverage Russia took 'weaponisation' of information on the next level.

First of all, both pro-Kremlin outlets started building the narrative humanitarian catastrophe while dehumanizing peaceful demonstrators.

While covering Maidan demonstrations, RT tried to depict the situation in Kiev as chaos created by the radicals, and extremist groups. RIA too aimed at cultivating anxiety and fear among its readers. The very first article from February 20th describes situation around ongoing demonstrations in Kiev and states that 26 people have been killed and 263 were injured, including 86 policemen and six journalists (RIA Novosti, 2014). The same piece claimed that demonstrations were violent since the beginning as "radicals burst into buildings in the centre of Kiev, burned tires, threw stones and Molotov cocktails to the police" (ibid). RIA also tried to emphasize chaos by publishing articles claiming that the radicals occupied the October Palace, the piece about urgent evacuation due to violence in Ukrainian Parliament, capturing state security

officers accompanying ministers from the EU and shutting down Kiev metro due to terrorist threats (RIA Novosti, 2014) (RIA Novosti, 2014) (RIA Novosti, 2014) (RIA Novosti, 2014).

However, the outlets did not stop at portraying only Maidan situation as chaos, as both, RIA and RT portrayed the economic situation in the same frame. RT claimed that panic and bloodshed had affected Ukrainians so much that many of them fled the country, but who stayed rushed to empty shop shelves, queue for gasoline and make big cash withdrawals as they expect worst yet to come (RT, 2014). In order to further dramatize the situation, the outlet claimed that shops were already running out of the reserves, some of them stopped accepting credit cards. In this turmoil, RT argued that people were leaving for Odessa, Simferopol and Kharkov, pro-government cities, as according to Kremlin-based media outlet, the situation there was stable.

To show that Ukraine was in tough economic position RIA cited various officials saying that "there was no money" and gold reserves would not even last for two months (RIA Novosti, 2014) (RIA Novosti, 2014). In the same vein RT published a piece claiming that "the self-proclaimed government" was about to cut pensions by 50 per cent, claiming Ukraine was on an edge of default, therefore, Ukraine might need loan deal from IMF, which according to outlet would mean "increase in gas bills, frozen government salaries and budget cuts" (RT, 2014).

As seen, by this stage the outlets were almost doing the same job as in Georgia, however this time humanitarian catastrophe narrative covered more topics as the economic crisis was also incorporated and had received bigger coverage by both RIA and RT. Still, there were bigger changes and developments than just diversifying the topic. What would get one's attention is that the articles depicting economic crisis in Ukraine would often end up with a huge piece on RIA explaining 'how Russia provided fraternal help to Ukraine' (RIA Novosti, 2014). Other than that, almost every article published on RIA during first couple days of coverage would end up with short summary entitled

as “how did crisis get there”, once again reminding readers that Ukraine was in chaos with more than 800 people injured. Similarly, RT would remind its readers in different pieces that “the situation in Ukraine [was] close to financial and humanitarian catastrophe, urging mass protests in eastern regional centres against the self-proclaimed government in Kiev” (RT, 2014). While this could be considered as a manner of particular outlet or journalist, the paper believes that this represents one of the carefully evaluated and developed tactics under Kremlin’s strategy of ‘weaponisation’ of information. As Herman and Chomsky (1988) explain how propaganda models work, they claim that if media is broadcasting one side of a story number of times, it could have a significant influence in shaping uniform public opinion. However, if RT and RIA similarly published the same story over and over again, the public might have smelled the state propaganda. Therefore, both outlets provided similar information, with different wording, not as the main article, but rather as a supplementary piece of facts and repeated it a number of times, thus shaping reader’s opinion, without him or her realizing it. This could be seen as internet-era modernization of reflexive control concept. While in Soviet times reflexive control concept meant conveying “specially prepared information to an ally or an opponent incline him to make a voluntarily decision predetermined by the initiator of the initiative”, with this small trick of repeating Kremlin’s favoured narrative RIA and RT were doing the same (Iasiello, 2017, p. 55).

Once the humanitarian catastrophe narrative was set up, both outlets took a huge effort to radicalise and dehumanize the opposition groups in the eyes of their readers. The outlets would frame these ‘bandits’ for beating the ex-speaker of the Verkhovna Rada, Vladimir Rybak and blame them for shooting Yanukovych’s car (RIA Novosti, 2014). The outlets also indirectly blamed escalations in Crimea on the group as one of the articles claimed that a truck carrying almost half a ton of TNT, was stopped at the entrance of the Crimea by self-defence forces (RIA Novosti, 2014) (RIA Novosti, 2014).

As seen from Georgia case, dehumanizing the opposing side was a common tool for pro-Kremlin media, however, as stated before, the information in Crimea coverage was 'weaponised' to the next level, as the outlets did not stop dehumanizing the opposition groups by labels such as 'bandits' and 'radicals', but emphasized the Nazi and Fascist rhetoric.

In order to label Ukrainians as Nazis, the outlets run quite a number of stories, telling the readers how a monument of soldiers "who died liberating Ukraine from Nazis" was toppled down (RT, 2014) or that monument to Russian general who beat Napoleon was demolished (RT, 2014). Later one of the RT's headlines proclaimed "Alarming trend in Ukraine: Historic monuments toppled, Nazi symbols spread", stating that what started as removing of Lenin's statues, moved onto promoting neo-Nazi symbols (RT, 2014). RIA even cited Communist party of Ukraine, claiming that people who were destroying statues of Lenin were neo-Fascists (RIA Novosti, 2014). Later, the outlet mentioned Yanukovych himself calling opposition groups neo-Fascists (RIA Novosti, 2014).

RT labelled the group as 'neo-Nazis' "who [were] smashing up Orthodox churches and synagogues while declaring war on the Russian language" (RT, 2014). The outlet also argued that the Right Sector 'nationalists' were behind deadly shooting in Kharkov (RT, 2014). Other stories include articles such as "Ukrainian nationalist with AK-47 threatens to hang Interior minister 'like a dog'" (RT, 2014). RT also published an article entitled as "'I'll be fighting Jews and Russians till I die': Ukrainian right-wing militants aiming for power", citing quotes from 2007 by Ukraine's Right Sector movement, who was going to restore "order and discipline" "by all means" while involved in "lawlessness and looting" according to the piece (RT, 2014).

The Nazi rhetoric was seen even on higher levels, as Russia publicly slammed Ukraine's UN envoy for justifying Nazi collaborations (RT, 2014). Later, Russia's UN envoy once again emphasized the Nazi rhetoric and claimed

that followers of Bandera were encouraging "nationalist ideology, extremism and intolerance" (RT, 2014).

It should be noted that emphasizing a Nazi narrative was quite a smart move by the Russian outlets. Kremlin managed to generate images of an ideological and existential threat coming from the biggest enemy both for Russians and Ukrainians. The narrative of a dominant neo-Nazi groups in Ukraine revives the cultural memory of Soviet human loss, and therefore, sows fear and confusion, which in propaganda is more important than truth (Yuhas, 2014). The fear of existential ideological enemy would have been especially the case for the Crimea and Soviet "hero city" of Sevastopol, as scared by "Ukrainian fascist" they would see Russia as a rescuer (Biersack & O'Lear, 2014). Therefore, once again using the concept of reflexive control, Russian media amplified fear and made the Russian audience together with Crimeans buy her narrative.

However, discrediting Ukrainian side did not stop at narratives of dehumanization, as both outlets also tried to 'play according to the law' and delegitimize Kiev's new interim government.

As on February 22nd the Ukrainian parliament stripped President Yanukovych of his powers, and appointed an interim government, Russian media discourse switched its attention on the Kiev's illegitimacy. RT quickly labelled the action as a coup d'état, while RIA devoted quite a number of articles to the topic, citing Russian politicians (RT, 2014). First, leader of Liberal Democrats of Russia, Zhirinovsky claimed that acting President Oleksandr Turchynov was an impostor, and Yanukovych was the only legitimate president of Ukraine who could have ensured his security by inviting the Russian army to defend him (RIA Novosti, 2014). Later that day, the speaker of the Federation Council, Valentina Matviyenko, had the same message as she believed that what happened in Ukraine was a "violent seizure of power" (RIA Novosti, 2014). A statement even harsher came from the Russian MFA, stating that the new government planned to suppress people in regions who disagree with them using

dictatorial and even terrorist methods (RIA Novosti, 2014). Later, the head of the International Relations committee of State Duma, Pushkov called new government anti-Russian (RIA Novosti, 2014). Slutsky, head of the CIS committee of State Duma stated that Russia still regarded Yanukovych as a legitimate president and questioned Rada's decisions (RIA Novosti, 2014). Medvedev too called Yanukovych a legitimate President, while the situation in Ukraine he described as a seizure of power (RIA Novosti, 2014). Putin joined the narrative, as he labelled the situation as an unconstitutional coup and seizure of power (RIA Novosti, 2014). Similar statements were made by other Russian politicians and the situation was even characterised as a catastrophe of legitimacy (RIA Novosti, 2014) (RIA Novosti, 2014).

RIA regularly referred to demonstrators as 'insurgents' while also emphasizing their right wing and anti-Russian nature. RT was heavily involved in dehumanising first opposition and then an interim government, as the outlet used twelve different terms while talking about them. Terms include: armed extremists, gangsters, radical nationalist opposition group, vandals, bandits, armed gangs, junta, coup-appointed government, ultra-nationalists, coup-imposed minister, followers of Bandera and ultranationalist forces.

While dehumanizing and delegitimizing Kiev's interim government, the outlets emphasized that people in the East of the country were not satisfied with stripping Yanukovych's rights and release of former PM Tymoshenko and instead of accepting edicts from Kiev's "illegitimate" new government, they have decided to create their own, alternative one (RT, 2014). The outlet initially called them Yanukovych loyalists and stressed that their actions were not aimed at separation of the country, but at saving it. However, one would find early warnings regarding secession as by February 20th RIA cited Speaker of Crimean Parliament, Vladimir Konstantinov. Konstantinov claimed that Crimea would raise the issue of secession if a legitimate government would be overthrown. According to him, if the country would be gone, so would be the

agreements it had with the region, therefore, secession would be the only option for Crimea (RIA Novosti, 2014).

While describing an ongoing situation in the East of the country, RT would often remind its readers that the east, where about half of countries citizens lived, used Russian as an everyday language and was "more wary of ties with Europe" (RT, 2014).

RIA and RT became way more active once Ukrainian Rada stripped the Russian language of its status as it gave the outlets the opportunity to emphasize Russophobia (RT, 2014). RT underlined that this was one of the first actions of the new government (RT, 2014), therefore, it allowed Kremlin media to add an anti-Russian brand to their already nationalistic radical labels. To emphasize the situation, the same article also stated that Rada was working on the bill to ban all Russian media in the country. Russia was quick to voice concerns as they claimed that new authorities of Ukraine "influenced by radical nationalist forces" were putting under threat not only Russia's interest but also interests of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. According to RT, it was not only the Russian government who was worried but tens of thousands of people rallied against new challenges in the Eastern Ukraine.

To show how Eastern Ukrainian population was unhappy with recent events, RT would publish articles claiming that protest against 'self-proclaimed government in Kiev' continue in eastern regions of Ukraine with thousands rallying in support of Russian language and referendum (RT, 2014). Wherever protests would be smaller, RT would justify it by the "heavy presence of the riot police at rally sites". At the same time, RIA noted that Crimeans held a demonstration in order to object change of the government which they regarded as illegitimate and demanded from the representatives of the Autonomous Republic not to comply with ultimatums from Kiev (RIA Novosti, 2014). According to RIA, people also demanded to hold a referendum in order to decide the future of the region.

Almost every RIA article during this coverage had a piece headlined as "how is Crimea different from other regions of Ukraine" reminding the readers that Crimea was a part of Russian SSR and was given to Ukraine in 1954. The part was followed by over-repeated "What is happening in Ukraine" piece, stating a number of dead and injured and also wrongdoings of an interim government (RIA Novosti, 2014). What is also worth mentioning, RIA which is mainly occupied with real-time reporting, published an article just under the title "Autonomous Republic of Crimea" giving facts about the region, mentioning that Russians were the biggest ethnic group there and that it was part of Russian Empire since 1783. The piece also reminded everyone that Crimea entered the Soviet Union under Russia and was gifted to Ukrainian SSR in 1954 (RIA Novosti, 2014). On February 21st, RIA published the same type of article about the City of Sevastopol. Once again mentioning facts and underlining the role of Russia, such as founding a port and Ekaterina II renaming the city (RIA Novosti, 2014). Thus, repeating the tactics tested before in Georgia coverage, but on the bigger and more sophisticated scale for Crimea. Invisibly shaping the reader's mind and opinion within the above-mentioned concept of reflexive control.

By this stage, Kremlin media had created a chain of narratives, as RT and RIA depicted an ongoing situation in Kiev as a humanitarian catastrophe created by Fascist opposition groups. This was followed by promoting the narrative of illegitimate and Russophobic interim government which seized the Russian language its regional language status as the first ever decision in order to oppose the Russian-speaking population of Crimea. All of these narratives were used as a foundation for the following steps, so Russian discourse could justify referendum and right for self-determination with unbearable conditions created by the interim government.

On February 27th, RT stated that "as a result of the unconstitutional seizure of power in Ukraine by radical nationalists supported by armed gangs, Crimea's peace and order was under threat". Amid this turmoil in the country

Crimean parliament announced the referendum as the "only possible way out of the situation" (RT, 2014). The same article claimed that announcing a referendum was demanded by hundreds of protesters who have gathered near Crimean parliament. According to the outlet protesters held banners reading "Crimea for peace!" and "Crimea for a referendum!". However, at the same time, RT slipped pro-Russian stance as well, as the next line stressed that "Some of the demonstrators openly demanded Crimea be returned to Russia, from which it was separated in 1954" (ibid).

History was used as a justification way more often than in Georgian case. The same article which first published the referendum story claimed that "Crimea's Russian majority has been hoping to hold a regional referendum ever since 1991". The piece also argued that right before the Soviet Union collapsed, 93.26 per cent of Crimeans voted to establish "Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic" as a new state in the Union, however, they were not allowed to decide whether they wanted to be with Ukraine or with Russia (RT, 2014).

Articles about the demand for a referendum was dominating RIA's news cycle as well, as the outlet cited Russian politicians justifying Crimea's desire for self-determination. First was Zhirinovsky, uttering that if people of Crimea wanted to secede from Ukraine, that was their right (RIA Novosti, 2014). At the same time, RIA Novosti hinted news about the possible changes in Russian legislation which would not only smooth process of getting Russian passport for Ukrainians, but also make it easier for other subjects to join the Russian Federation, as long as that was the declared will of people in various ways, such as referendum (RIA Novosti, 2014).

Subsequently, RT published an article "facts you need to know about Crimea and why it is in turmoil", showing historical roots to Russia, underlining 58.3 per cent of the populations being ethnic Russians and stressing that absolute majority of Crimeans, up to 97 per cent used Russian as their main language (RT, 2014). The same piece blamed a turmoil on the first decision of the interim Kiev government to revoke law about the minority languages,

including Russian. All of this, according to outlet resulted in mass rallies and chaos. In order to save peace and order, people started creating self-defence units, as claimed by the pro-Kremlin outlet. Consequently, the article would go back to history and state that Crimea was separated from Russian in 1954 as Khrushchev's (of course the outlet would not forget to underline his Ukrainian ethnicity) controversial present. The piece did not forget to remind the readers about the previous referendum in the 90s. In a number of following articles, the outlet used the tactic already mentioned before, as RT would include the link with this piece to direct readers from other articles to this one and once again remind them the facts they wanted readers to remember.

While justifying the actions with historical facts, both outlets also tried to show the readers that everything was done under the law. RIA declared that Sergey Aksyonov, leader of "Russian Unity" movement, became a new head of the Crimean government, who quickly reassigned the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Emergency Situations and the fleet of Crimea and demanded all commanders to carry out only his orders (RIA Novosti, 2014). However, both RIA and RT 'forgot' to mention that Aksyonov, who was a key player in the referendum, was 'elected' during hastily-convened parliamentary session, with no quorum, while "pro-Russian gunmen stood in the wings with rocket launchers" (Shuster, 2014, p. 1). It was the same Aksyonov who decided to fasten the process of the referendum and changed the date from May 25th to March 30th (RIA Novosti, 2014). Later vice-Speaker Temirgaliev announced that referendum would take place on March 16th (RIA Novosti, 2014). However, according to Kremlin media Crimean government could not wait even that long and by March 6th they asked Putin and the Russian Parliament to start procedures regarding them joining the Federation (RIA Novosti, 2014). They even started preparing the plan to switch from Ukrainian Hrivna to Russian Rubles before the referendum (RIA Novosti, 2014).

While the whole narrative around the referendum was before formulated as deciding future of Crimean autonomy, on March 6th, RT let their readers

know that Crimean parliament voted to join Russia and will hold a referendum in 10 days on ratifying (RT, 2014). The outlet claimed that decision was met with public support and the parliament was so sure about the upcoming referendum results, that they even asked Russian leadership to "launch a procedure of Crimea becoming part of Russia". Once again Russian media 'forgot' to mention that journalists were not granted access to the parliament and local MPs had their phones confiscated during the session (Carbonnel, 2014).

Prior to the referendum, Russian discourse has also considered military intervention. RIA stressed that State Duma asked President Putin to take all the necessary means in order to protect Crimeans (RIA Novosti, 2014). One of the articles cited Speaker of Duma, Matviyenko stating that Russia should take into consideration the appeal of Crimean government and in order to protect Russian citizens and Russian fleet in Crimea, they should have sent troops (RIA Novosti, 2014). Subsequently, according to RIA, Russian President made an appeal to the Council of the Federation on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine prior to the normalization of the social and political situation (RIA Novosti, 2014). Amid these discussions, RIA also mentioned Churkin stating in the UN that Yanukovych officially asked Putin to send troops in Ukraine (RIA Novosti, 2014). However, later it was stated by Duma Speaker that there was no need for troops to be deployed yet (RIA Novosti, 2014). This is a significant change from Georgian case, on the one hand, military intervention might have made Russian population proud and boosted regimes popularity at home, but on the other hand, as seen from Georgian case, direct military intervention would have denied Kremlin plausible deniability. Therefore, Moscow decided to once again use contested areas of international law. If in Georgian case Russia used civilian protection norm to justify its actions, in Crimea, it was coupled with secession and right for self-determination norms, all of which are highly contested and could be leveraged in a different manner.

Consequently, other than just justifying referendum by history, RT tried to use international law as well, as the outlet mentioned Churkin arguing that referendum opponents manipulated detached norms of international law, while he believed that principles of territorial integrity and the right for self-determination should have been balanced (RT, 2014). The outlet claimed that President Putin made top-level calls to German Chancellor Merkel and UK PM Cameron, telling them upcoming referendum reflected the legitimate interests of Crimeans (RT, 2014). Later Lavrov also underlined that "no one [had] cancelled people's right to self-determination" (RT, 2014).

RIA also put quite an effort in order to portray it as legitimate as possible. The outlet would publish articles claiming that there were international observers from 21 countries and more than 50 politicians (RIA Novosti, 2014). The outlet cited member of European Parliament, Bela Kovacs saying Crimean people had the right for self-determination and the referendum is legitimate (RIA Novosti, 2014). Another article would mention observer from Belgium, Sergey Petrosov (clearly Russian ethnicity, at the same time being director of European-Russian alliance) stating that situation before the referendum was festive (RIA Novosti, 2014). RIA also declared that Russia blocked UN resolution which labelled Crimean referendum as illegitimate, arguing that resolution had no basis and blamed the US for a politicising situation for its own geopolitical interests (RIA Novosti, 2014).

Right after results came in, RIA published numerous articles, first noting that more than 95 per cent of voters voted in favour of joining Russia, later specifying the number to be 95,7 per cent and in the end, announcing final 96.77 per cent (RIA Novosti, 2014) (RIA Novosti, 2014) (RIA Novosti, 2014). Almost all alternative voting suggest that voter turnout was between 30 and 40 per cent, which would mean that only 29 to 38.7 per cent of the Crimean population voted in favour of joining Russia (Rotaru, 2016). However, both RT and RIA Novosti once again preferred not to mention this, as it was against the official pro-Kremlin narrative.

The announcement of results of the referendum was followed by another wave of articles by RIA citing politicians claiming that referendum was legitimate and according to standards of international law. First was Putin (RIA Novosti, 2014), followed by observers from EU countries (RIA Novosti, 2014) and Marine Le Pen of Frances National Front (RIA Novosti, 2014). RT mentioned heavily cited Polish MP Piskorski to prove that referendum was an act of freely expressing the right to self-determination of Crimean people (RT, 2014). Subsequently, the outlet published another article claiming that "Crimean referendum at gunpoint" was a myth and cited international observers to prove the point. Often cited Piskorski was once again mentioned together with Ewald Stadler, member of the European Parliament, both claiming situation was quite with no pressure. The piece asserted that there were 135 international observers from 23 different countries with following part 'the referendum is legitimate' (RT, 2014). The same day, RT published one more article, justifying the legitimacy of the referendum, citing Russian President Putin saying that the "referendum in Crimea was fully consistent with international law and UN Charter" (RT, 2014).

On March 17th, the outlet already mentioned the region as "the Republic of Crimea" and stated that it declared independence and called on Russia to integrate it into the Federation (RT, 2014). While RIA published another article about Crimea similar to the one they did on February 20th, however, the headline now was just Republic of Crimea, without mentioning Autonomous in the title. All the facts were identical to the previous article, but it had new pieces of history now, which included coup in Ukraine in 2014, referendum and Crimea becoming part of Russia (RIA Novosti, 2014).

The day after the referendum, RT dedicated a number of articles with different narratives to justify the legality of the referendum. The outlet devoted a piece to former Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who claimed that Crimea was merged with Ukraine under Soviet laws, without asking the people, and now the Soviet-era mistake was corrected (RT, 2014). The same article once

again mentioned international observers and claimed the referendum conformed to international standards.

On March 18th, RT notified its readers that treaty to accept Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation was signed (RT, 2014). The outlet cited President Putin, who underlined that as more than 96 per cent voted for re-joining Russia, there was no room for equivocation. He also blamed Soviet leader Khrushchev for violating wishes of Crimeans at the time and promised to adopt political, and legal measures to rehabilitate Crimean Tatars. President once again claimed that the referendum was conducted "in strict accordance with democratic principles and international law" (ibid).

RIA also made an effort to show how happy Crimeans were with the results. First, they claimed that citizens of Simferopol exuberantly celebrated results of the referendum all night long (RIA Novosti, 2014). The outlet also showed how quick the Crimean government was to officially shift towards Russia. Right as results were announced RIA notified readers that official currency of Crimea became Russian Ruble, the region switched to Russian time (RIA Novosti, 2014) (RIA Novosti, 2014), border between Crimea and Ukraine became official border of Russia (RIA Novosti, 2014) and Mail.ru and Yandex, two biggest Russian web-sites updated their maps to include Crimea as part of Russia (RIA Novosti, 2014). RIA also did not forget to show how happy Russians were with the results, as the outlet cited a study according to which more than 91 per cent of Russians welcomed the decision about Crimea (RIA Novosti, 2014).

It should be noted that while the outlets had a main focus around building above-mentioned narratives, RIA also tried to portray as if Russia still cared about Ukraine and wanted to help. One of the articles cited PM Medvedev giving assurances that Russia would still be cooperating with Ukraine as planned, however, at the same time he implied that it was important that their counterparts in Kiev were legitimate. The same article, had sub-part entitled as "How Russia provided fraternal assistance to Ukraine", as RIA tried to show

that Russian government decided to help Ukraine with an amount of 15 billion USD and lowered the price for gas (RIA Novosti, 2014). In the same vein RT published an article implying that Russia was still doing everything possible to resolve the Ukrainian crisis, as the Kremlin proposed creating international 'support group' (RT, 2014). However, demands within this framework included recognition of the Crimean referendum and other hard lines for Kiev, which Kremlin knew would never happen.

In order to deal with criticism coming from the Western institutions, Kremlin media used the proven tactic of counter-attacking and blamed the West instead. Since RT operated in English, mainly working on the international audience, the outlet put more effort into criticising the West compared to RIA.

At first, RT promoted Lavrov's view, who stressed that instead of punishing "radical extremists" who took the power through the coup the West was having a "Cold War" rhetoric. Washington and its allies were blamed for turning a blind eye to the "Russophobic" and anti-Semitic forces in Kiev (RT, 2014). Later RT would claim that Washington's decision to provide financial help to the 'coup-appointed government of Ukraine' was against the US laws (RT, 2014).

While Russia was heavily criticized for its military presence in Crimea, RT decided to counter-attack and blamed the US for "ramping up its military presence in the region", claiming that US Navy destroyer, the USS Truxtun entered the Black Sea (RT, 2014). Similar accusations were made about NATO, as the outlet claimed that the alliance started wargames in Poland, near Ukraine's borders (ibid).

While the evidence shows that around 6000 Russian soldiers had been transferred to Crimea and together with the so called Crimean self-defence units occupied strategic infrastructure on the peninsula (Wilk, 2014), this was once again ignored by the pro-Kremlin media. In fact, RT mentioned self-defence forces just a couple of times, while RIA almost never brought it up. This was probably done in order to avoid their linkage to Russia. In rare articles when the

group was mentioned, RT justifying the presence of Russian forces in Crimea with historical roots as the outlet published an article "Russia's 25,000-troop allowance & other facts you may not know about Crimea" (RT, 2014). It was stated that the Black Sea fleet was neutral and any connection of the 'little green men' to Moscow was neglected (Rotaru, 2016). By denying any military involvement in the region, Kremlin media continued claiming that Russia wanted to de-escalate the crisis, while at the same time increasing the chaos and playing with norms of international law.

In order to prove that there were no Russian troops in Crimea, RT published an article 'international journalists refute claims of Russian forces in Crimea', citing just two 'international journalists' (RT, 2014).

The EU and UN were targeted as well as RT joined Kremlin in calling EU resolution on Ukraine anti-Russian and its tone "unacceptable and unjust" (RT, 2014). While Kremlin also vetoed UN resolution declaring Crimea vote invalid, calling it US-Sponsored (RT, 2014).

As explained by Hutchings and Szostek (2015) Kremlin used negative narratives about the West to diminish the credibility of the Western criticism and at the same time legitimise Russian behaviour for the public.

While counter-criticizing the West, Kremlin media used the Soviet-time tactics of 'whatabaoutism' and heavily emphasized the precedent of Kosovo. RT accused the West in double standards naming NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, recognition of Kosovo as an independent state and installing anti-missile shield over Europe as further proof (RT, 2014).

President Putin too has applied the tactics of 'whataboutism' himself, as he asked if the right to determine their future was granted to the Albanians in Kosovo, why could not Crimeans used the same right (RT, 2014). After the referendum was carried, Putin once again compared the situation to the Kosovo case. He claimed that "Crimea's secession was just like Kosovo's secession from Serbia" and blamed the West for rewriting its own rule book (RT, 2014), Putin also mentioned Yugoslavia case of 1999 and "orchestrated coloured

revolutions". In the same article RT even claimed that it was Russia that defended international law while the West has been diminishing it. Similarly, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that if the west was calling Kosovo special case, then Crimea was even more special (RIA Novosti, 2014).

However, without any doubts the best case of 'whataboutism' was the article published by RT under the title '5 referendums that the West has not taken issue with'. The piece claimed that, While Moscow maintained that there was no invasion and the referendum represented Crimeans' right to self-determination, it has been criticised by the West, but at the same time they had no protest with Kosovo, South Sudan, The Falklands, Scotland and Catalonia referendums (RT, 2014). In a couple of days, a similar piece was published entitled as 'Crimea? No, Venice! Independence referendum in EU goes almost unnoticed', underlining that "while the Crimean referendum tops world media headlines" no one cares about Veneto, Italy as "people in Europe are hardly aware what's happening next door" (RT, 2014).

Similar to the 2008 case, RT felt the need to show their international readers that the West is not unified in its position, as some Western leaders, experts and analytics supported Russian position. Therefore, a number of times the outlet would find Westerners who share pro-Kremlin point, to justify their actions. In the same vein, one could find articles such as claiming that "voiding Ukraine's minority languages law 'wrong' – Luxembourg FM" (RT, 2014), citing Polish Foreign Minister Sikorski saying that Kiev was wrong to cancel the law (RT, 2014), or mentioning well-known pro-Russian politician, Tallinn Mayor Edgar Savisaar, stating that "self-proclaimed Ukrainian government was put into power by people with baseball bats" (RT, 2014). Similarly, RIA mentioned former PM of France, François Fillon stating that American actions were the ones worsening the situation and Russia should not have been deemed as an enemy (RIA Novosti, 2014). This was followed by Cuban MFA condemning the US for interfering with internal affairs and politics of Ukraine and extending NATO to Russian borders (RIA Novosti, 2014). While former

Chancellor of Germany, Gerhard Schröder called EU policy towards Ukraine a mistake (RIA Novosti, 2014).

As stated before, Polish MP, Mateush Piskorski was mentioned quite a number of times. He first stated that Ukraine's 'coup-appointed government' violated human rights, mainly the rights of national minorities. Piskorski also claimed that the main political powers of Maidan would've been called "neo-Nazi or neo-Fascist in any mainstream civilized European state" (RT, 2014). The same person, Piskorski was later cited in the article "Crimea calm ahead of referendum – intl observers" in order to show the readers that even Western journalists confirm there are no Russian troops in Crimea during the referendum (RT, 2014).

While mentioning Western politicians with views similar to Russia may not convince critical-minded reader, this narrative is mainly emphasised in order to show that the West is divided and therefore, their values should be questioned. However, this tactic is poorly executed, as both RT and RIA Novosti usually rely on a small group of 'experts' who either lack academic qualifications or have specific linkage to the Russian government. As for example, within 60 articles analysed on RT, one foreigner, Polish MP, Mateusz Piskorski was mentioned nine times. Mentioning the same person so frequently might transform him from reliable random Western expert to an exasperating name which one would want to double check. In doing so, one would easily find his Russian connections, or even a fact that he was arrested in 2014 with allegations of being Russian spy, therefore, put his credibility under the question (Woźnicki, 2019).

What is worth also mentioning is that throughout whole coverage, RIA would write at Ukraine (на Украине) instead of in Ukraine (в Украине). While this might just seem a bad grammar for some, in reality it is quite a big issue between two countries, which shows RIA's attitude. While talking about any foreign country, in Russian language 'in' preposition is used instead of 'at', with the exception being only Ukraine. This linguistic difference had a historical

explanation, since Russia considered Ukraine as a subordinate region at some point in history, the language used the preposition ‘at’, not used in regards to independent countries. However, since regaining independence, in 1993 the Ukrainian government officially asked Russia to use the same form while addressing the country as used with all other independent countries. But, as seen by discourse analysis, RIA did not use correct form, therefore, denying Ukraine a linguistic form used towards independent countries, still regarding it as subordinate to Russia. The paper believes that this could be done deliberately as to once again shape readers opinion using the concept of reflexive control.

To sum up, while similar to the 2008 case, both outlets still promoted pro-Kremlin narratives in a very akin manner, improvements were obviously present. While in Georgian case the main justification for military involvement was based on the notions of humanitarian intervention and responsibility to protect, in Crimean case contested norms of international law were further emphasized via more thematically diverse and sophisticated ‘weaponised’ media. The Kremlin outlets developed a whole chain of narratives based on Russian interpretation of international law incorporating norms of a humanitarian catastrophe, accusations of the illegitimacy of the interim government, fascist allegations and right for self-determination. Instead of openly admitting the presence of Russian troops in the conflict like it was done in Georgian case, the outlets preferred to distorts the facts in order to hide the connection of self-defence forces to Moscow. At the same time, Western criticism was replied by counter-arguments within the tactics of ‘whataboutism’ mainly naming Kosovo as a precedent. All of these, allowed Kremlin media to the depict situation in Crimea to be in full compliance with democratic procedures.

Chapter III: Quantitative Analysis

After having qualitative data, the paper aims at delivering quantitative findings. The paper believes that quantitative data could play an essential part in order to see the development in Russian information strategy from Georgian case to Crimean.

Through quantitative content analysis, the paper evaluates three factors: (1) thematic consistency, (2) keyword volume, and (3) sophistication.

Initially, the paper analyses the case of Georgia under all three factors. This is subsequently followed by a similar study of Ukrainian case in conjunction with the comparison of these two.

1. Russo-Georgian War 2008

Thematic consistency

As already stated in the methodology section, thematic consistency refers to the extent to which Russia Today and RIA Novosti promoted the same topics. If the outlets promoted more or less same themes, then thematic consistency could be regarded as high, while low thematic consistency would indicate that these two outlets covered the event from different thematic perspectives.

While looking at the 2008 case, thematic consistency looks quite high, as both, Russia Today and RIA Novosti had prioritised more or less same topics. Within both outlets, the chaotic/aggressive theme was the most popular, followed by the humanitarian thematic, while the historical/cultural theme was the least popular in both cases. Legal, Western, and order and safety topics are in middle ranking for both outlets, with a slight difference as the Western theme was number three by popularity for Russia Today, then followed by legal, and order and safety topics, respectively number four and five. While for RIA

Novosti, order and safety was the one in the top three, then followed by legal and western themes respectively.

The full thematic rankings for both outlets are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Themes ranked by the volume and priority on each outlet for the case of 2008.

	Russia Today	RIA Novosti
1	Chaotic/Aggressive (372)	Chaotic/Aggressive (573)
2	Humanitarian (237)	Humanitarian (246)
3	Western (81)	Order and Safety (59)
4	Legal (80)	Legal (48)
5	Order and Safety (64)	Western (27)
6	Historical/Cultural (7)	Historical/Cultural (2)

Keyword Volume

Keyword volume counts a number of pro-Russian keywords used in articles published by Russia Today and RIA Novosti. The paper calculated the number of keywords separately by the topics alone and then in proportion to the total word count. After analysing Ukrainian case as well, the data will be used to see the keyword percentage change over time and, therefore, see whether there is a substantial increase from Georgian case to Crimean case in terms of pro-Kremlin bias in digital media coverage.

Table 2 depicts the raw keyword counts for Russia Today, Table 3 illustrates the raw keyword counts for RIA Novosti, while Table 4 shows the percentage of pro-Russian keywords adjusted for word count for both outlets.

Table 2

Keyword count for Russia Today. The case of 2008.

Category	Example key words	Total number of key words
Humanitarian	peacekeeper, refugee, civilians, humanitarian, aid, help	237
Legal	international law, genocide, ethnic cleansing, negotiations, tribunal, resolution	80
Chaotic/Aggressive	military, killed, wounded, troops, violence, ruined, destroyed	372
Historical/Cultural	Nazi, Hussein, Yugoslavia	7
Western	US, NATO, EU, UN	81
Order and Safety	stability, safety, ceasefire	64

Table 3

Keyword count for RIA Novosti. The case of 2008.

Category	Example key words	Total number of key words
Humanitarian	миротворец (peacekeeper), беженец (refugee), мирное население (civilians), гуманитарная помощь (humanitarian aid)	246
Legal	международное право (international law), геноцид (genocide), этническая чистка (ethnic cleansing), переговоры (negotiations), трибунал (tribunal)	48
Chaotic/Aggressive	военные (military), убитые (killed), раненые (wounded), войска (troops), насилие (violence), разрушены (ruined), уничтожены (destroyed)	573
Historical/Cultural	Нацист (Nazi), фашист (fascist), история (history)	2
Western	США (US), НАТО (NATO), ЕС (EU), ООН (UN), запад (the West)	27
Order and Safety	стабильность (stability), безопасность (safety),	59

	прекращение огня (ceasefire), освобождение (liberation)	

Table 4

Percentage of the thematic keywords for both outlets. The case of 2008.

Category	Russia Today	RIA Novosti
Humanitarian	2.20	2.04
Legal	0.74	0.39
Chaotic/Aggressive	3.45	4.75
Historical/Cultural	0.06	0.01
Western	0.75	0.22
Order and Safety	0.59	0.49

Sophistication

Within the frameworks of the study sophistication expresses the volume to which outlets covered the event from various pro-Russian narratives at the same time. Therefore, the outlet which pushes more narratives per report has a greater sophistication, while the ones that promote only one topic have lower sophistication.

The initial glance at the articles left an impression that Russia Today might have had higher sophistication as judged by the length of their articles compared to RIA Novosti. 30 articles from Russia Today had almost the same total word count as 60 articles from RIA. Average word count for Russia Today articles was 325 words, while for RIA the same number was 205. Almost 40 per cent of articles by Russia Today were more than 400 words, while the number for RIA was less than 7 per cent. Some of the articles from RIA were as short as 18 words only. This shows that RIA had an accent on shorter reporting, promoted mainly one topic at the time and, therefore, had less sophistication.

As seen after analysing keywords, the chaotic/aggressive topic was dominating reports of both outlets. The Table 1 shows that in total both outlets

used keywords related to this topic 945 times, which is more than the total number (851) of all other keywords. Only the total number of keywords related to the humanitarian topic is worth mentioning, which being 483 is slightly less than half of the number of chaotic/aggressive keywords, but still more than the sum number of all the other keywords from the rest four groups. As already seen in discourse analyses, chaotic/aggressive and humanitarian topics were both mainly used together, in order to create an image of crisis and enemy, and then justify Russian intervention and portray Russia as a rescuer. Therefore, this means that both outlets were mainly promoting one topic, while others were comparatively underrepresented.

Analysis of quantitative data from the Georgian case leads the paper to the conclusion that Kremlin-backed media in 2008 demonstrated high thematic consistency and low sophistication. This could be one of the reasons for less success on the informational battlefield in 2008 as according to Lupion (2018), single theme alignment and low level of sophistication results in the less effective 'weaponisation' of information.

2. Annexation of Crimea 2014

Thematic consistency

While Russia Today and RIA Novosti have prioritised almost same topics during 2008 case, therefore had a high level of thematic consistency, the same would be only partially true in their 2014 coverage. As seen from Table 1, during Georgia case same two topics (Chaotic/aggressive and humanitarian) were dominating in both outlets, at the same time, a historical/cultural narrative was the least popular for both of them. While looking at Table 5, which shows thematic rankings for RT and RIA Novosti during 2014 coverage, one might think that pattern is similar. Both media outlets tried to portray the interim

government as illegitimate and Crimea referendum legitimate, therefore, for both of them legal topic was the most popular with almost identical amounts of keywords used. Both RT and RIA devoted quite some time to portray the situation in Kiev as chaotic as possible, therefore, the chaotic theme is second most popular for both outlets, however, RT had almost twice as many keywords for this topic compared to RIA. After this two narratives, the priorities of both outlets are drastically different, with the only humanitarian topic being equally unimportant for RT and RIA, as for both of them it was second from the last by popularity. However, despite having three topics with the same rankings, similar to the rankings shown by Table 1 for 2008 case, one can still not call thematic consistency for Crimea case as high as it was during Georgia case. The consistency is still high, however, while in 2008 case two narratives were absolutely dominating the coverage, same could not be said about 2014, as the other non-prioritised four topics still have a huge number of keywords in a different sequence for both outlets. Therefore, if thematic consistency for Georgian case was considered as high, in 2014 it could be labelled as a medium.

Table 5

Themes ranked by the volume and priority on each outlet for 2014 coverage

	RT	RIA Novosti
1	Legal (1686)	Legal (1593)
2	Chaotic (1461)	Chaotic (761)
3	Order and Safety (646)	Western (427)
4	Western (564)	Historical/Cultural (410)
5	Humanitarian (547)	Humanitarian (332)
6	Historical/Cultural (378)	Order and Safety (278)

Keyword Volume

While counting a number of pro-Russian keywords used in articles, the paper first calculated the number of keywords according to their groupings and then compared it to the proportion of the total word count.

Table 6 depicts the raw pro-Russian keyword counts for RT, as Table 7 illustrates the raw keyword counts for RIA Novosti, while Table 8 shows the percentage of pro-Russian keywords adjusted for word count for both outlets.

Table 6

Keyword count for RT for 2014 coverage

Category	Example key words	Total number of key words
Humanitarian	refugee, civilians, humanitarian, aid, help	547
Legal	referendum, coup, coup-imposed, constitutional, illegal	1686
Chaotic/Aggressive	Turmoil, radicals, bandits, military, crisis, rioters, protest, Kalashnikov, wounds, seized, Maidan	1461
Historical/Cultural	Nazi, Bandera, neo-Nazi, Jews, Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Soviet Union	378
Western	US, NATO, EU, UN, Western, European, American	564
Order and Safety	self-defence, stability, safety, order, peace	646

Table 7

Keyword count for RIA Novosti for 2014 coverage

Category	Example key words	Total number of key words
Humanitarian	гражданское население (civilians), помощь (aid)	332
Legal	референдум (referendum), международное право (international law), переворот (coup), легитимность (legitimacy), закон (law)	1593
Chaotic/Aggressive	кризиса (crisis), радикалы (radicals) убитые (killed),	761

	раненые (wounded), насилие (violence), Коктейль Молотова (Molotov Cocktail)	
Historical/Cultural	Нацист (Nazi), фашист (fascist), Бандера (Bandera)	410
Western	США (US), НАТО (NATO), ЕС (EU), ООН (UN), запад (the West)	427
Order and Safety	стабильность (stability), безопасность (safety),	278

Table 8

Percentage of the thematic keywords for both outlets

Category	RT	RIA Novosti
Humanitarian	1.43	1.12
Legal	4.42	5.36
Chaotic/Aggressive	3.83	2.56
Historical/Cultural	0.99	1.38
Western	1.48	1.43
Order and Safety	1.69	0.93

While even a glance at Table 8 implies an increase in keyword volume, Table 9 makes the picture more clear and accurate. As seen from the thematic keyword percentage comparison, there has been a substantial increase from Georgian case to Crimean case in terms of pro-Kremlin bias in digital media coverage. Table 9 depicts that the usage of pro-Moscow keywords has increased for both outlets. For Russia Today/RT percentage of specific keywords compared to a word count of articles has almost doubled from 7.79 per cent to 13.84 per cent, this difference of 6.05 per cent accounts for 77.66 per cent increase. While comparing keyword usage for RIA articles from 2008 to 2014, keyword percentage growth is 4.88 per cent as it grew from 7.9 per cent in 2008 to 12.78 per cent in 2014, accounting for 61.77 per cent increase.

Table 9

Comparison of thematic keywords percentage for both articles during Georgia and Crimea cases

Category	Russia Today 2008	RT 2014	RIA Novosti 2008	RIA Novosti 2014
Humanitarian	2.20	1.43	2.04	1.12
Legal	0.74	4.42	0.39	5.36
Chaotic/Aggressive	3.45	3.83	4.75	2.56
Historical/Cultural	0.06	0.99	0.01	1.38
Western	0.75	1.48	0.22	1.43
Order and Safety	0.59	1.69	0.49	0.93
Total sum of keyword percentage	**7.79**	**13.84**	**7.9**	**12.78**

Sophistication

While Georgia case was characterised by low-level of sophistication, Crimea coverage is drastically different.

First, as seen from keyword volume, both outlets increased usage of pro-Russian keywords in their articles by more than 50 per cent which could lead one to think that outlets have also increased their article length. Indeed, while covering the Crimea case, both outlets have put more effort and increased the amount of words in each article. While in 2008 during Georgia case average word count for Russia Today articles was 325 words, in 2014 the average length increased by 95 per cent, as the average length of RT articles for Crimea case was 635 words. At the same time, RIA has also seen an increase from 205 words on average in 2008 to 306 words, accounting for 49 per cent growth.

Increased article length did not only result in an increased number of pro-Russian keywords but also let outlets to promote more topics within each article. In 2008, one topic, chaotic/aggressive was dominating reports for both outlets so much it basically hijacked the whole news cycle and shadowed other narratives. As seen from table 1, both outlets used keywords from this thematic

grouping more than keywords from any other topics combined. Keyword volume is drastically different in the 2014 case. Despite both articles prioritising the same topic, the legal narrative did not monopolise the news cycle. The situation was almost the exact opposite of 2008 case, as a total number of keywords from legal thematic (3279) was almost half of sum (5804) of keywords from other groupings.

Obviously, both outlets have learnt the lesson that, the less effective 'weaponisation' of information which occurred during 2008, might have been a result of low sophistication and single theme alignment. Therefore, in 2014 one could witness higher thematic sophistication as both outlets devoted significant attention to all the topics and promoted a couple of narratives at the same time.

While the increased length of pieces was crucial to achieve higher sophistication, the increase in a total number of articles also played its role. In 2008 Russia Today had only around 50 articles devoted to Georgia while for RIA number was around 800. On the other hand, in 2014 RT published a couple hundred pieces, while RIA Novosti had more than five thousand articles covering Ukraine. It should also be mentioned that the coverage period for Georgia was only a week, while for Ukraine it was a month, however, the increase in articles is still very noticeable.

More articles clearly led to a more diverse news cycle and more topics covered. However, even in one article, both outlets would try to put a piece from other narratives. It is also worth mentioning that this was first done by RIA Novosti in 2008. The outlet would end quite a number of articles, no matter of their thematic (humanitarian, legal or any other narrative) with the same copy/pasted text stating that "On the night of August 8, Georgian troops invaded the territory of the unrecognized republic and fired, including from the Grad volley fire, the capital of the Republic of Tskhinvali. The city is destroyed, nurseries, schools, the only hospital are broken. More than 34 thousand refugees left the republic. The authorities of South Ossetia reported 1.6 thousand dead. During the conflict, 18 Russian peacekeepers were killed, more than 150 were

injured" (RIA Novosti, 2008). The text has been repeated word after word in 9 articles out of 60 that have been analysed for the paper. However, RIA just did this with one narrative and one copy-pasted text. Russia Today did not use the tactic back in 2008.

In 2014, both outlets used this strategy more often and in a more sophisticated way. During the first stages of coverage, RIA would end up almost every article with a special piece entitled as "how has the situation in Ukraine worsened". The text under this piece was being repeated word after word, blamed the escalation on the opposition while portraying them as radicals and would end up with a number of deaths and injured to emphasize the chaos narrative. A bit late, RIA would end up articles with "what is happening in Ukraine" section using the same narratives. However, the outlet was not limited to this one narrative only. Articles published a bit later would tell the reader the story and in addition explain "how [was] Crimea different from other regions of country" once again reminding about Crimea's Russian population and the region being part of Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. In a number of cases, articles ended up with "how was the government in Ukraine changed" section, once again portraying the interim government as illegitimate, labelling revolution as the violent seizure of power and underlining that Crimea was against the new illegitimate government. Before the referendum one would see the different section, entitled as "how did the situation on the Crimean Peninsula escalate", telling the reader about protests in Crimea and demand for the referendum. There was a number of articles, where all of these three ending sections would be put all together in one article. Other ending sections included ones about "how can Russia use its armed forces outside the country" and "how did Russia provide fraternal help to Ukraine". After the referendum, RIA switched back at labelling change of government in Kiev as a coup and added new end section about Crimea referendum, reminding the readers that 96.77 per cent of Crimeans have voted in favour of Russia.

RT was also using the same tactic however in a slightly different way. In a number of articles the outlet would have different sub-sections about "ethnic controversy" or "how was Crimea separated from Russia" to give the reader another story as well. The outlet also repeated a couple stories about the status of Sevastopol being subject of debates in 1990s and about Crimeans protesting about the illegitimate government in Kiev. A number of times RT ended articles with reminding the readers that the majority of the population in Crimea was Russian and used this language for communication. However, this was done in less volume compared to RIA. On February 27th the outlet published an article "facts you need to know about Crimea and why it is in turmoil". After this, in a number of other articles, after two-three sentences, the outlet would put a link and direct you to the article with the facts about Crimea. Later the same was done with the article entitled as "Russia's 25,000-troop allowance & other facts you may not know about Crimea". In a number of articles, the outlet put links for the both pieces at the same time.

This paper believes that this strategy was most likely aimed at reminding Russian readers all the narratives at the same time. And in addition, by providing the same information quite a number of times, Kremlin-media tried to portray it as a fact to its readers and shape their opinion in favour of Moscow.

To conclude Crimea coverage, one could say that by 2014 Russian strategy of 'weaponisation' of information have become more complex and sophisticated.

Chapter IV: Conclusion

To sum up, when it comes to Russian assertive actions, scholars use quite a number of different terms and concepts. However, as seen, most of them do not represent an accurate framework for explaining Kremlin's behaviour. I.e. so-called 'Gerasimov Doctrine' which is heavily mentioned by Western

scholars, is not even an official doctrine, but an analysis of 'Arab Spring' from the Russian perspective. Therefore, one cannot simply try to understand Russian actions within a framework of non-existing doctrine.

In this absence of adequate term, a number of scholars thought that Russia was waging a completely new type of war, which some labelled as 'hybrid warfare'. However, even the biggest proponents of the term cannot conceptualise it properly and admit various flaws within the concept. Most of the definitions of the 'hybrid warfare' are either too broad, as they incorporate both, violent and non-violent features, or too narrow, as they use regular and irregular wars either simultaneously or sequentially in the theatre of operations. However, this is not always true about Russian actions. While one group of concepts fail as they neglect violence, 'hybrid warfare' fails to conceptualise non-violent measures, which represent if not the main pillar, one of the crucial factors in certain Kremlin strategies. Other than that, while 'hybrid warfare' proponents focus on incorporating 'unconventional' methods with the traditional military, it does not indeed imply on any novelty in warfare. All wars in the past have used 'unconventional' methods, therefore had some elements of 'hybridity'. Thus, it would be a misleading mistake to label Russian actions as a new form of warfare and put them into frameworks of ill-defined concept.

While there are certain similarities to Soviet time tactics, it would be still incorrect to assume that concepts 'maskirovka' or 'active measures' would provide a full understanding of Russian actions either, as Kremlin's tactics have seen drastic evolution since Soviet times.

In fact, this paper believes that novelty of Russian actions is not in terms of its military, but rather the specific nature of operations in Georgia and later in Crimea had to do more with the way military was integrated with other instruments, mostly state-run and coordinated information operations.

As seen in the latest military doctrine, from 2014 Russia considers herself to be engaged in full-scale information warfare and, thus, puts a whole new emphasis on information operations. While in certain cases Moscow still

uses conventional military, Kremlin's new plan is to achieve goals through information online in the first place, rather than fight the enemy on the battlefield.

Therefore, all things considered, the paper has focused on information as the main 'weapon' in the hands of the Russian government. However, while identifying the exact framework of Russian information operations one might come across to abundance in terms and concepts once again.

While looking for concepts to explain Russian use of information, the paper repudiated quite a handful of them. Neither 'soft power' nor 'public diplomacy' occurred to be an adequate label for Kremlin's assertive behaviour as Russian means rarely rely on 'attraction' which represents a key pillar for both of these concepts. Terms such as 'fake news' and 'misinformation' did not prove to be the most suited ones either. Therefore, looking for a framework once again took the research to Soviet times. The paper concluded that current Russian information tactics represent a combination of Soviet 'dezinformatsiya', propaganda and reflexive control combined with new strategies of information control and management in order to neutralize opposing views and set its own narratives through an array of false messages.

Nowadays Moscow does not regard information operations as a short-term strategy limited to use in the wartime, but rather considers information confrontation as a constant feature of international relations. Therefore, the Russian Federation is not engaging in information warfare, but is waging the war on information instead. Under the coordination of several government agencies, Kremlin actively uses modern technologies to reach to the broader audience online and engage in state-to-people and people-to-people interaction on domestic and international levels. However, unlike the Soviet times, Kremlin does not openly push 'us' vs. 'them' narrative anymore, rather then it tries to muddy the waters and sow confusion to erode the Western values.

However, while conducted content and discourse analyses of two Kremlin outlets during two different cases once again ascertained theoretical

findings, it also led the paper to assert that Russian actions have a tendency to evolve from case to case.

In 2008, Russian media devoted extremely few articles to the coverage of the conflict. At the same time, both Russian language RIA Novosti and English Russia Today promoted mainly same narratives for the international and domestic audiences. Both outlets prioritised the same 'chaotic/aggressive' and 'humanitarian' topics while heavily relying on official Kremlin statements. Thus, the coverage resembled a state-orchestrated propaganda, which the public usually tends not to trust.

Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from the Georgian case led the paper to conclude that single theme alignment and low level of sophistication demonstrated by Kremlin media in 2008 resulted in the less 'weaponised' information.

A number of reforms carried out by both outlets since 2008 was quite noticeable in terms of their work in 2014. In contrast to 2008 coverage, evolved Russian information tactics for 2014 devoted a great deal of attention to Crimea as seen by the amount of articles. In conjunction with numbers, the length of articles was also increased by 49 per cent on RIA and by 95 per cent on RT. This subsequently resulted in an astonishingly increased number of thematic keywords as both outlets seen growth by more than 60 per cent.

Together with quantity, the quality was enriched as well. A huge number of thematic keywords resulted in more pro-Kremlin narratives to be covered. Unlike 2008, where the main accent was cultivating anxiety and fear through portraying the situation as a chaotic humanitarian crisis, 2014 coverage resulted in a more balanced news cycle, with all other groups of narratives getting the same attention. At the same time, almost every article contained a reference from the different thematic group as outlets repeated facts in order to shape readers opinions, without them realising it.

One of the major developments in strategy was devoting way more attention to legal factors in order to justify Russian actions in 2014. Unlike

Georgian case when Russian media tried to emphasize a sense of pride towards Russian army, as they openly admitted their military intervention, in 2014 both RIA and RT tried to avoid mentioning Russian army or self-defence forces. Instead, RT and RIA build the whole chain of narratives in relation to grey areas of international law, such as humanitarian catastrophe, protection of civilians, secession and right for self-determination, where standards of behaviour are profoundly contested and the boundary between legality and illegality is particularly fluid.

At the same time, Kremlin media used historical narratives quite well too, which they almost ignored during 2008. On the one hand, both outlets portrayed Ukraine's new government as Nazis, Russian's worse enemy through history. And on the other hand, history was used from positive sides as well, as both outlets underlined historical roots of Crimeans and Russians, therefore, emphasizing sympathy within the Russian audience.

As a result, 'weaponised' media distorted the facts and built the narratives which allowed Kremlin to attest full compliance with democratic procedures and international law.

More diverse news cycle denied any particular topic to hijack all the attention, therefore, 2014 coverage saw less thematic consistency between articles but a high level of sophistication as journalists could promote a variety of thematic perspectives into a single article. This increased flow of information created an illusion of diverse opinions, challenge the Western values and mislead audience in their pursuit for objective truth.

On various stages of the Crimea coverage, Nimmo's (2015) all 4D's were present, as outlets tried to dismiss the critics with accusations of Russophobia, distort the facts by presenting alternative realities, distract from the main issue by accusing other actors and dismaying the audience with possible military intervention.

All things considered, this paper concludes that Russian assertive actions cannot be described with buzzwords like 'hybrid warfare' or

‘Gerasimov doctrine’. Instead, all attention should be devoted to the Russian use of information for strategic purposes. The research showed that Kremlin regards information warfare to be an ongoing daily process, therefore, using a combination of Soviet ‘dezinformatsiya’, propaganda and reflexive control with new strategies of information control, Moscow ‘weaponises’ information in order to mislead the audience, challenge the notion of objective truth and set an array of her own narratives. The research of Georgian and Crimean case has disclosed that Russian skills of ‘weaponisation’ media have gone under huge improvement and became more sophisticated and complex. Additional research on other elements of Russian use of information (such as ‘grey’ and ‘black’ measures) is needed. However, one cannot ignore the fact Kremlin’s use of information for strategic purposes is evolving into a powerful weapon and tomorrow Russian keyboard might be worse than an AK47 bullet.

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