

CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE
Faculty of Social Sciences
Institute of International Studies

PROTOCOL ON DIPLOMA THESIS ASSESSMENT
(Reviewer)

Name of the student: Mgr. Tomáš Mareš

Title: The Effectiveness of Mass Media Instrumentalization in Offensive Foreign Policy Strategies

Reviewer: Dr.phil. Holger Mölder

1. TOPIC AND OBJECTIVE (short information on the thesis, research objective):

The objective of the thesis is remarkably urgent and relevant. The use of media manipulations is a rising trend in international relations especially in last decades because of intensive digitalization process that encourages the more active use of media technologies for political goals. Trans-border communication and weaponization of information, this thesis has examined, have become essential tools in so-called post-truth environment, in which emotionally motivated beliefs are getting advantages over rational-choice facts. The effective marketing of strategic goals of revisionist actors (including the Russian Federation) through purposefully manufactured disinformation, conspiracy theories, grievances stemming from unsubstantiated accusations, or direct information-based attacks (as it is mentioned in this dissertation) is becoming a widely used political tool.

The choice of case study is justified. In its attempts to restore its status as a great power, the Russian Federation has intensified its influence operations with revisionist strategic goals. In 2016, in his interview to Russian information agency Interfax, President Vladimir Putin mentioned “*We live in the information age and the aphorism ‘one who possess information possesses the world’ of course reflects the present-day reality.*” (Interfax, 2016), which describes well Russia’s grand strategy in the present-day security environment. Therefore, the proposed case study fits with a proposed agenda of studying the role of media technologies in strategic decision-making.

The main theoretical conceptualization relies on 1) assessing effectiveness of mass media instrumentalization in purpose-driven strategies and 2) providing a novel analytical model for examining its efficiency potential. The objective *to generate and test a general analytical model that can be applied to assess the ‘efficiency potential’ of (real or prospective) offensive foreign mass media campaigns* should apply to the novelty element expected by PhD studies.

The model has been tested by the case study of Russia’s media strategies against Ukraine at an early stage of the conflict in 2013/14. It can be understood that a lack of accessible data can influence the results of research to some extent (as mentioned by the author in pp. 10-11), but the research findings convince us, that the effect is pretty close anyway, so the bigger sample hardly would lead us to contrasting results, and if the main purpose is a model-building for further assessment, this does not influence the evaluation process.

It is correctly applied in this dissertation that there are conceptual differences on information challenges as they are understood and followed by the Western tradition (which are more rational-choice-driven) and Russia, which are keeping their offensive character. Various actors may turn to media technologies for increasing their political influence, and „in the Western rationale soft power is regarded rather as a socially-driven process based on attraction and self-identification“ (p.14), so the Russia case study is particular in referring to destructive narratives: „antagonistically distort perceptions of international audiences concerning their domestic political reality and, consequently, to cultivate emerging tensions within societies of target states“ (p.14). Russia is rather using the fear-induced information warfare for destroying others than promoting its own positive image, which makes its turn to media technologies somehow different from the Western understandings of influence campaigns and media marketing. The nature of these contrasting cultures is well-presented through the paper.

The case study refers to a fundamental research of the pre-conflict period and provided „a thorough and evidence-based assessment of the efficiency potential of the Russian state-controlled

mass media network in the Ukrainian media market in the immediate pre-conflict period (2013 and early December 2014) and based on the built model confirms „*the RF was perfectly prepared to launch a highly efficient offensive mass media campaign in the Ukrainian media market.*“ (pp. 162-3), which responds the research questions established, and allows to conclude that research has committed its objectives. Therefore my general assessment to the dissertation is positive – the research has been justified, accomplished and findings proven, which is why I recognize this research as worthy of being awarded a Ph.D.

2. CONTENT (complexity, original approach, argument, structure, theoretical and methodological backing, work with sources, appropriateness of annexes etc.):

All in all, this a profound work done on deciphering the media influences on foreign policy strategies and how purposeful influence operations can support the process. The recognition of cognitive effects on political decision-making could be among the primary assets of this work as the rational-choice theories tend to fail in their prognosis (military escalation of 2022 in Ukraine would be a good example), especially if the environment becomes unstable. There has been a decade to prove assessments on the case of Ukraine based on the proposed model, which was not the research objective of the dissertation and presumes further research but would give an extra value if references to the following processes have been provided.

Overall, the research design has been well-described in the introductory part and the organization of dissertation paper looks logical, first to build a model and next to test it through the case study. The research questions are properly designed:

- *How should we define the 'effectiveness' in terms of mass media instrumentalization on the information-psychological level in purpose-driven strategies?*
- *What factors directly influence the (level of) effectiveness of mass media instrumentalization on the information-psychological level in offensive foreign policy strategies?*
- *Under what conditions is the instrumentalization of mass media on the information-psychological level in offensive foreign policy strategies feasible?*

My recommendation is to turn to research objectives/questions at the early stage of dissertation (here p. 30), which makes potential reviewers easier to understand the scope of the dissertation from the beginning. The focus of case study has been in the years of 2013/2014 (as stated p. 9, the beginning of the current conflict), but at the meantime the course of the conflict has been prolonged, which may produce some strategic changes in later stages, especially after the escalation of military conflict in 2022.

The use of sources is impressive, in addition probably some work made at the University of Oxford on computational propaganda (e.g. Samuel Woolley and Philip Howard) can be recommended among others. Elliot Borenstein (2019), or Önerfors & Krouwel (2021) on conspiracy theories might give a broader picture of various media technologies used for strategic goals of revisionist actors (including Russia).

3. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE (quality of language, citation style, graphics, formal aspects etc.):

There are no major concerns on language and formatting. The text was well-readable, and all references have been provided in appropriate manner. Figures attached helped to understand the text provided and described the process appropriately.

4. STATEMENT ON THE ORIGINALITY OF THE THESIS

The thesis was checked by the Turnitin/URKUND/Theses anti-plagiarism software.

5. SHORT COMMENTS BY THE REVIEWER (overall impression, strengths and weaknesses, originality of ideas, achievement of the research objective etc.):

The overall impression is good, especially I would appreciate his attempts to examine the Russian case study in the larger strategic context. In the present security environment influence operations are not something peculiar to Russia, even there is their own and particular “Russian way” to conduct

information campaigns. In its reference to media, probably the connection with advantages of digital media/social media can be strengthened by distinguishing specific breakthroughs and their usage on influence activities.

Maybe a subchapter on Russian strategic thinking could have been given extra credit to describe Russia's commitments on their international actions (their foreign policy narrative), at least in justifying the choice of case study, what makes it strategically important even while Russia is increasingly losing its global influence. In the context of war in Ukraine, it would be interesting to study how information operations may support kinetic warfare (i.e. by building powerful images on Mariupol, Izyum, Bahmut, Avdiivka during the course of war) about the strategic relevance of minor achievements even if this does not indicate a major breakthrough.

Somehow the lack of consistency regarding the terminology used on these subjects (when we are speaking on hybrid, cyber, information, influence, cognitive, psychological, knowledge ... warfare/operations, but also "the new wars concept" (Mary Kaldor) may give a vague impression of the conceptual background. However, this is not so much the author's problem, but a general problem for academic community – when and under which conditions we turn to these terms?

However, what concerns the information warfare/operations, the terminology accompanying it was properly applied, and when required, the explanatory notes have been provided (i.e. active measures vs reflexive control p. 22). I don't see obvious weaknesses with this paper, the choice of case and topic in general has been well-elaborated, the only critics it can be presented in more coherent manner. Of course, the current research can be both conceptually and methodologically strengthened, but at least it has a good potential for further research.

6. QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS THAT SHOULD BE ADDRESSED DURING THE DEFENCE:

1. Regarding the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) concept, how would you describe the Russian strategic narratives on international system and politics? Which are their main deviations from the Western tradition followed by the UN concept?
2. How would you characterize the Russian concepts of hybrid warfare, what are its strengths and weaknesses and how information operations relate to this concept?
3. How would you explain the statement „*in the course of the last two decades, Russia has been increasingly willing to give primacy to non-kinetic operations*“ (p. 25)? Whether the actions of Russia in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria still refer to „old wars“ preference (referring to Mary Kaldor) after 2022? Could you identify major strategic changes between 2013/14 and 2022?
4. Do you agree that the media behaviour has been changed during the last decades and how it reflects the Russian information campaigns?
5. Referring to the offensive (if not Hobbesian) characterization of Russia's information campaigns, could these concepts appropriately have characterized in terms of offensive Realism rather than defensive Realism or Liberalism, which is more common in Western strategic thinking?

7. (NON-)RECOMMENDATION AND SUGGESTED GRADE:

YES – C/B (+1 depending on good defence) (on A-F scale)

Date: 01.04.2024

Signature: 