

Reflexive Control and Disinformation in Putin's Wars

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## Reflexive Control and Disinformation in Putin's Wars

Thesis directed by Professor Artemi Romanov

The use of reflexive control (RC) and disinformation in the Russian conduct of kinetic and non-kinetic warfare is evident in conflicts from the Second Chechen War to Russian meddling in the U.S. 2016 presidential election. The original Soviet theory of RC has been refined and expanded into new dimensions of warfare including the concepts of information warfare and cyberwarfare, thus becoming a major weapon of the Russian military in its influence campaigns against the West. The technique of feeding disinformation or selecting the information an opponent receives in order to influence his voluntary decisions has been exploited by Russia under Putin in conflicts and in his foreign policy. The skillful use of disinformation has in most cases shaped public discourse, manipulated international understanding of events, and essentially achieved Reflexive Control over Russia's opponents.

## Contents

I.	Introduction .....	1
	V. Slipchenko and 6 <sup>th</sup> Generation Warfare.....	4
II.	Chapter 1: Reflexive Control Theory.....	8
	Soviet Military Planning and Deception.....	8
	Ionov.....	13
	Kirushin.....	13
	Reflexive Control and Information Warfare.....	16
III.	Chapter 2: Case Studies.....	19
	The Second Chechen War (1999-2009) .....	19
	The Georgian War (2008) .....	21
	The War in Ukraine (2014) .....	22
	The Baltics and Poland.....	27
IV.	Conclusion.....	30
V.	Bibliography.....	32

## Introduction

Manipulation and deception have been used by militaries in armed conflict since the beginning of time and Russian military is no exception to this. The art of deception (or *maskirovka*) has played a key role in Russian military strategy and doctrine. The Aesopian fable translated into Russian by Ivan Andreevich Krylov of the Crow and the Fox further illustrates, in a simple way, manipulation by disinformation. The Fox meets the Crow in the wood and the Fox notices that the Crow has some cheese in its beak and wants the Crow to drop the cheese by opening its mouth. By flattery, the Fox convinces the Crow that it has a beautiful voice and it should sing and by opening its beak, the cheese falls to the Fox. In the fable, the cunning and deception of one actor, in this case, the Fox, feeds disinformation to the Crow, which manipulates the decision-making and actions of the Crow.

From the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election in the United States to Russian “malign influence” campaigns across Europe, the Russian methods of manipulation through disinformation and spreading confusion among their opponents are only recently being “appreciated.” These types of manipulation have, in fact, not changed in their principles since their perfection during the height of the Cold War in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The recent use of disinformation to influence political developments in the U.S. and Europe should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the history of the Cold War and Soviet “influence operations” which were the use of covert and overt propaganda, often involving disinformation. These

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<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Schultz and Roy Godsen, *Dezinformatsia* (New York: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1984), 114.

tactics are employed in order to achieve a higher-level manipulation which will effectively direct the decisions of the opposing side without their awareness of the manipulation. That is the aim in achieving reflexive control over an opponent.

The term “reflexive” is meant in the sense that the Soviets would use and model the reflexive image of their opponent to turn the subsequent decision-making of an opponent against himself. One example of the Soviet use of reflexive manipulation was in the case when the Soviet leadership decided to mislead the West about the capabilities and numbers of missiles and warheads.<sup>2</sup> The annual parades of the Soviet Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) in Moscow showcased examples of fake ICBMs throughout the 1960s. The ICBMs displayed nose cones much larger in size than anything that actually existed and suggested greater warhead carrying capability, thus giving the West the false impression of the state of Soviet technology.<sup>3</sup> The GR-1 missile paraded in Red Square in 1965 was a dummy example of project abandoned by the Soviets the year before.<sup>4</sup> In deceiving Western intelligence agencies about their capabilities, the Soviets went even further and planted false corroborating evidence to serve as more misleading input that would lead the West to the desired, erroneous conclusions about the missiles.<sup>5</sup>

The Soviets themselves felt that they had been the victims of an “information weapon” as part of a Reflexive Control or RC (рефлективное управление) operation involving President Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).<sup>6</sup> The SDI program aimed at creating a massive

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy L. Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star*, (Ft. Leavenworth: FMSO, 2011), 119.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Moscow Paraded Dummy Missiles,” *Independent*, November 18, 1998, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/moscow-paraded-dummy-missiles-1185682.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star*, 119.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

missile defense system that could defeat a nuclear attack on the U.S. The program was something that the Soviet military industrial complex tried to emulate and keep up with. It was responsible for drawing resources away from more attainable goals and projects, thus manipulating the military-industrial complex's resource allocations away from needed projects and weakening their defenses overall.<sup>7</sup> Today Russian analysts such as Elena Larina, an influential writer on intelligence matters, who also serves as an expert on psychometrics or the "measuring mental processes" for Russian Interior Ministry, accuses the West of using reflexive control to manipulate and shape the perception of the current tension between the U.S. and Russia, due to the use of the terms "Cold War" and "New Cold War" by the West to put Russia in the category of an ideological enemy.<sup>8</sup> This statement serves as an acknowledgment that an information weapon can influence international perceptions of conflicts and hijack public discourse.

Throughout its history and especially during the Cold War, the Soviet ability to skillfully deceive and mislead the West successfully has frequently exposed the shortcomings of assessments of Soviet intentions and capabilities. The Communist bloc pioneered the concept of political warfare within the ideological framework of Marxism-Leninism, and across the Warsaw Pact intelligence agencies, the very secretive departments "D" for disinformation placed false information into the Western press.<sup>9</sup> With the advent of the Information Age, the internet, and new media platforms, the chances for spreading false information and influencing public

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Elena Larina, "Umnozhayushchie skorb'. Kak vyzhit' v epokhu voyny elit,"Proflib: Elektronnaya Biblioteka, November 3, 2017, <https://profilib.com/chtenie/117501/elena-larina-umnozhayuschie-skorb-kak-vyzhit-v-epokhu-voyny-elit-5.php>

<sup>9</sup> Ion Mihai Pacepa and Ronald J. Rychlak, *Disinformation* (Washington D.C.: WND Books, 2013), 30. and Ladislav Bittman, *The Deception Game* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 6.

discourse and the decision-making of ruling elites has become unbounded. Putin's Russia has utilized the internet for both propaganda and for the spread of disinformation as part of influence operations against his adversaries.

#### V. Slipchenko and 6<sup>th</sup> Generation Warfare

General-Major Vladimir A. Slipchenko wrote several books after the Gulf War based on his observations of what made the U.S. effort successful and on what he predicted would be the characteristics of future conflicts. Slipchenko's work was also heavily influenced by the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA, which concerned modernization, the integration of new technologies and "informatization" or increasing use of information technologies) in Soviet/Russian military thinking, and he forecast future wars as being mostly "non-contact warfare involving deep strikes," which would be "nonlinear," and involve "precision-guided missiles" and the extensive use of information technology for command and control.<sup>10</sup> The demands of noncontact warfare, according to the paradigm of 6th-generation warfare, are such that the commanders and statesmen will need to accurately assess and "model" the behavior of the opponent as the key to success in fighting an "intellectual-informational conflict."<sup>11</sup> Communications systems, data processing, and information systems can be misled (the information-technical aspect of information warfare) by feeding them false information. This, in turn, will assist in misleading humans in the decision-making process (the information-psychological aspect of information warfare) to a greater extent in the 6<sup>th</sup> and future generations of warfare<sup>12</sup>. The nature of future conflicts described by Slipchenko required the Russian military to reform in order to assimilate new technologies and ideas. The Russian military struggled to

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Government, *The Russian Military Today and Tomorrow* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College), 121.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star*, 123.

modernize and reform during the 1990s, performing poorly during the First Chechen War under President Yeltsin. This proved that change was needed and the Russian military would have to become more modern and undergo “informatization” (информатизация) as armies elsewhere had done.<sup>13</sup> The communication failures between forces, the obsolete equipment used to coordinate forces, and the limitation that those shortcomings placed on the abilities of the army to carry out operations in a complex urban environment all necessitated embracing the changes. With the new dimensions of cyber and information warfare, Vladimir Slipchenko’s concept of “6<sup>th</sup> Generation warfare” is becoming fully realized in Russian full spectrum operations.<sup>14</sup> The potential for cyber and information attacks, or non-kinetic attacks, gives countries such as Russia further low-risk options to conduct an asymmetrical strategy against the US and NATO. An asymmetrical strategy disadvantages NATO’s conventional advantages by fighting an unconventional or “hybrid” type conflict instead of a direct engagement while at the same time using subversion and masking its own intervention. Information warfare within these subversion efforts is an integral part of the Russian strategy.

The importance of RC to the Russian approach to conflict has been articulated by many Russian theorists and given a prominent role in operations. According to Major General I.N. Turko, “the most dangerous manifestation” is the preference or the “tendency” to rely solely on military brute force, which is less effective or suboptimal than controlling the decision-making of the enemy: “military power relates not so much to the direct use of the means of armed combat as to the possible results of the use of reflexive control” by the enemy in the realm of information

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely, “Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal After Ukraine,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, January 2015, 28:1, 2.

warfare.<sup>15</sup> Thus Turko stresses that commanders should be utilizing reflexive control and place a primary focus on it, rather than overpowering the enemy by conventional means, because the chance to manipulate includes more than simply the opposing side's military forces, but also social and political factors of larger society. This makes it a powerful tool to impact the "correlation of forces" (which includes not only factors such as military strength but civilian morale and international opinion) or shift the balance of power in conflicts.

There is no distinction between the implementation of tactics, such as reflexive control and disinformation during peacetime and in times of war; they differ only in scope and intensity of effort. Although the concept of tensions and open conflict differ in nuance between the American and Russian perspectives, the operational reality is the existence of low-intensity conflict and "hybrid" or proxy wars on the one hand, and constant cyber-attacks and non-kinetic attacks, on the other. As could be said of the Soviet/Russian conduct of foreign relations, there is no distinction between the activities of diplomacy and the activities of intelligence gathering. Cyber and information warfare do away with a distinction between peace and war in influence operations and propaganda. Strategic deception "implies the deliberate and sustained disguise of fundamental objectives" and is achieved by any means whether "military, political-psychological, or various other non-traditional (or even traditional) means."<sup>16</sup> The current environment of the information society and technology available to exploit for strategic deception make the threat that much greater.

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<sup>15</sup> A.A. Prokhozhev and I.N. Turko, "Osnovy informatsionnoi voini," report at a conference on "Systems Analysis on the Threshold of the 21st Century: Theory and Practice," Moscow, February 1996, 211, quoted in Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star*, 121.

<sup>16</sup> Uri Ra'anan, "Deception in the Political-Military Arena" in *Soviet Strategic Deception* ed. Brian D Daily and Patrick J. Parker (Lexington, MA:1987), 133.

Although the concept of Russian disinformation is slowly being understood and countered in the West (after it was forgotten post-Cold War), how disinformation plays into the concept of Reflexive Control is not generally understood or recognized. In the recent conflicts that Russia has engaged in with its neighbors under President Vladimir Putin, the use of disinformation suggests a greater aim to use Reflexive Control over opponents to subvert and manipulate the opponent's decision-making, rather than to simply confuse and bewilder him. From interfering in elections, playing on internal divisions in societies, or spreading inflammatory lies and half-truths, Russia has successfully manipulated and even hijacked the actions of opposing states.

## Chapter One

### Reflexive Control Theory

#### Soviet Military Planning and Deception

The foundation of the modern Russian army's doctrine for *maskirovka* (deception, camouflage, and concealment) relies heavily upon Soviet thinkers. The role of deception in military planning has not lost its importance since the days of Soviet planners; the means of subversion are part of a larger tendency in Soviet thinking that differed from American thinkers regarding the nature of warfare.<sup>17</sup> This fundamental difference demonstrates the “systemic/strategic” orientation of Soviet/Russian thinkers who believe that warfare can be systematic and determined by mathematical laws with precision. In contrast to the American orientation that warfare is “stochastic” in nature and cannot be scientifically quantified.<sup>18</sup> This distinction partly explains the Russian acceptance of reflexive control theory. The extent to which reflexive control played a role in Soviet thinking was only understood and appreciated by the U.S. in the late 1980s, as influence campaigns against the West were examined and understood as attempts at achieving reflexive responses.<sup>19</sup> The systematic approach to Soviet deception in military planning has been further refined in the current era as the Russian military undergoes reforms and modernizes. The frequent evidence of reflexive control's use in recent conflicts demonstrates its effectiveness in the modern operational environment. As Russia must balance the cost and benefits of engaging in conflicts and the international condemnation

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<sup>17</sup> Diane Chotikul, “The Soviet Theory of Reflexive Control in Historical and Psychocultural Perspective,” (PhD dissertation, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School), 30.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 31.

following cases of direct involvement, the use of reflexive control can allow Russia to mask its activity while influencing outcomes.

### Reflexive Control

Thomas explains that the “reflexive” part of reflexive control occurs when the “motives and reasons” that drive a desired action or behavior are “conveyed” to the object of manipulation without the that object’s awareness of the manipulation.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the actions of the object are “reflected” or turned back on itself, by working against its own objectives or goals. Additionally, the method for imaging or understanding the mental processes of the opposing side have to be reflected, as well, in order to create a reflexive influence on the object.

The concept of reflexive control was developed as researchers in the Soviet Union during the 1950s were studying cybernetics and searching for ways to optimize military decision making using computer technology.<sup>21</sup> The foremost theorists of reflexive control included V.V. Druzhinin, M.D. Ionov, S. Leonenko, D.S. Kontorov, and V. Lefebvre.<sup>22</sup> At the First Computer Center of the Soviet Ministry of Defense (Field Post Number 01168) in Moscow, the young scientist Lefebvre would play a major role in the development of reflexive control and its application in military planning and decision making.<sup>23</sup> Lefebvre had been trained as a mathematician and psychologist and sought to apply theories coming out of the fields of cybernetics and game theory to initially optimize Soviet decision-making. He would become famous for his contribution to the technologies of manipulating and undermining of the decision-

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas, “Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 2004, 17, 241.

<sup>21</sup> Clifford Reid, “Reflexive Control in Soviet Decision Making” in *Soviet Strategic Deception* ed. by Brian D. Dailey and Patrick J. Parker, (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co., 1987) 293.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

making by the opposing force. In 1974, Lefebvre later moved to the US and continued his career in academia at UC Irvine, but his work remained more influential in the Soviet Union than in the U.S. among military theorists.

In Lefebvre and Smolyan's work, *Algebra konfliktov*, the principles and methods of reflexive control are laid out with mathematical precision but the authors acknowledge that the enemy's decision-making process may not be fully comprehensible or knowable to a commander in the field. The concept is heavily based on the science of game theory and Lefebvre calculates the limits of rationality among rational actors as influenced by the outcome of reflexive experiments. Lefebvre and Smolyan define the basic concept of reflexive control as follows:

Controlling the decision of the opponent, ultimately imposing a determined strategy of behavior in the context of a reflexive interaction, is not carried out directly, not by blunt coercion, but by giving him the grounds from which he can logically deduce his own solution, predetermined by the opposing party. The transfer of the bases connecting X to the process of mapping the situation Y, thereby X begins to control the decision-making process.<sup>24</sup>

The decision-making process is defined by Lefebvre as composed of four fundamental aspects. The first is what he labels the "perception of the situation" of the enemy. The second aspect is the goals or military objectives of the opponent. The third is the "solution algorithm" (or

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<sup>24</sup> "Управление решением противника, в конечном итоге навязывание ему определенной стратегии поведения при рефлексивном взаимодействии осуществляется не прямо, не грубым принуждением, а путем передачи ему оснований, из которых тот мог бы логически вывести свое, но предопределенное другой стороной решение. Передача оснований означает подключение X к процессу отображения ситуации Y, тем самым X начинает управлять процессом принятия решения." (V. A. Lefebvre and G.L. Smolyan, *Algebra konflikta*, 1968, ch. 3, Accessed October 4, 2017, [http://sbiblio.com/BIBLIO/archive/lefevr\\_algebra/02.aspx](http://sbiblio.com/BIBLIO/archive/lefevr_algebra/02.aspx)).

doctrine) and the fourth is the decision.<sup>25</sup> The perception of the situation is the target and main focus of manipulation toward which all disinformation and *maskirovka* measures are employed.

Mapping the decision-making process of the opponent is heavily dependent on the concept of the “perception of the situation” which includes: 1) “the size and characteristic of one’s own forces;” 2) the size and characteristic of the opponent’s forces; 3) the physical environment within the which conflict occurs; 4) the history of actions by the two sides; 5) the evolution of events; 6) the objectives and constraints of the opponent.”<sup>26</sup> The activities associated with bringing about the desired effect in the enemy actions can be achieved by *maskirovka* (which encompasses concealment, camouflage and deception).<sup>27</sup> In order to carefully predict the likely courses of actions an opponent might take, a reading of the opponent’s perception of the situation is required, before determining how to direct his decision-making to the outcome desired by the side playing the reflexive game. Generally, Lefebvre demonstrates that the desired enemy actions might be multiple actions, but in illustrations he tends to use a set of possible decisions with two as advantageous to the side using the reflexive technique. He places the choice of an opponent in a representative example where there are six likely choices, with two determined to be favorable to the side orchestrating the reflexive operation against the opponent: “Since the choice by the [opponent] of each output is equally probable, then X selects output 6 since in this case its defeat is least likely - this is the only output that is affected only from one output 4. All other outputs are affected by at least two outlets.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Reid, “Reflexive Control in Military Planning,” 295.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 295.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star*, 296.

<sup>28</sup> V.A. Lefebvre and G.L. Smolyan, *Algebra konfliktov*, 1968, ch.3, Accessed October 4, 217, [http://sbiblio.com/BIBLIO/archive/levefr\\_algebra/02.aspx](http://sbiblio.com/BIBLIO/archive/levefr_algebra/02.aspx).

Lefebvre cites game theory as the basis for his theory of reflexive control. Game theory, he notes, is the “means of developing solutions.”<sup>29</sup> This is accepted as a reliable way to find “optimal solutions, and the player allegedly guarantees himself the planned minimum.”<sup>30</sup> Lefebvre assumes that a rational actor acts in accordance with this “clear doctrine” in his decision making and that this can be determined by the side using the reflexive technique. He also acknowledges that both sides could in reality “become the object of reflexive control.”<sup>31</sup> Game theory is acknowledged as having its limitations, and the potentiality to fail to work if an actor chooses an irrational or unorthodox course of action.<sup>32</sup> Reid notes that controlling the perception of an enemy “requires a detailed understanding of the opponent” and “the factors that influence it, including his policies, ideologies, military doctrine, goals, the status of his forces and organizations, psychology” as well as “the personal qualities of [the opponent’s] leadership, interrelations and emotional makeup.”<sup>33</sup>

For the Russians, the complex interrelationships that characterize coalition forces would make knowing and understanding the enemy’s “perception of the situation” problematic, despite a unified doctrine and training, such as in the case of NATO. The Russian forces would face a coalition of different nationalities, religions, psychological conditions, and cultures, which would make the implementation of Reflexive Control difficult and its effectiveness doubtful.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> “Рефлексивное управление противником, доктриной которого является теория игр. Теория игр — одно из средств выработки решений. По убеждению многих исследователей операций, теория игр дает возможность находить оптимальные решения, и игрок якобы гарантирует себе запланированный минимум. В действительности же игрок, выбравший такую четкую доктрину, может сделаться объектом рефлексивного управления. Теория игр, как и любой математический аппарат, может быть применена лишь тогда, когда действительность отображена на «планшет» и особым образом схематизирована,” (ibid.)

<sup>33</sup> Reid, “Reflexive Control in Soviet Military Planning,” 295.

### Ionov

Major General Ionov, an instructor at the General Staff academy, elaborated on Reflexive theory and applied it to the use of other pressures that can be applied aside from disinformation.

The pressure of power, including the use of superior force, demonstration of strength, psychological attacks, ultimatums, threats of sanctions, threats and risk (manifested through focusing attention on the irrational behavior of management, or delegating authority to an irresponsible person), military intelligence, provocative maneuvers, testing weapons, restricting enemy access<sup>34</sup>

The Russian actions under President Putin exhibit a mixture of Ionov's methods for influencing conflicts and the actions meant to influence opposing states. The Russians used threats and provocative maneuvers by suspending the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), which allowed Russian forces to move military equipment into the Caucasus.<sup>35</sup> This act allowed the Russian military to increase its presence on the Georgian border in order to make good on ultimatums leading up to the conflict with Georgia, as well as demonstrated Russian strength to the secessionist leadership in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

### Kirushin

The concepts of reflexive control and information warfare (or confrontation) are complementary, and, according to A. N. Kirushin, an authority on simulation and virtual reality, central to the way that modern armies are now engaging in conflicts. He writes,

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<sup>34</sup> “Давление власти, включая использование превосходящей силы, демонстрацию силы, психологические атаки, ультиматумы, угрозы санкций, угрозы риска (проявляющиеся через фокусировку внимания на иррациональном поведении руководства, или делегировании полномочий безответственному лицу), военная разведка, провокационные маневры, испытания оружия, ограничение доступа противника,” (Ionov quoted in “Nauka pobezhdat,” Novosti VNK, April 13, 2016, Accessed October 4, 2017, [https://vpk.name/news/153345\\_nauka\\_pobuzhdat.html](https://vpk.name/news/153345_nauka_pobuzhdat.html).)

<sup>35</sup> Marcel H. van Herpen, *Putin's Wars* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 210.

Thus, the phenomenon of reflexive control in the process of information confrontation is involved in the process of reflecting the external reality of an armed conflict in the mind of the commander, where the enemy is in the center; the discovery of intentions and goals is the most important task and the condition for victory-- first in the information, and then in armed struggle the enemy. One should keep in mind that the counter-party can also engage in similar reflexive activities.<sup>36</sup>

Kirushin proposes that “the theoretical basis for all reasoning will be the recognition of processes of reflexive control of a virtual nature,” which results in “a deeper reflexive analysis of the opposing sides, [which in turn] will lead to the immersion of the commander in a virtual reality of a higher order.”<sup>37</sup> The human ability to use intuition to help filter out questionable information into the system is lost as systems become more automated, thus the vulnerability of the opponent becomes even greater.

The potential for reflexive control to disrupt the command and control networks of an opposing force is a major concern as militaries become more network-centric and decision-making systems are relied on in developing a picture of a situation. As command hierarchies become plugged in to information technologies, weaknesses within these hierarchies can be

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<sup>36</sup> “Таким образом, феномен рефлексивного управления в процессе информационного противоборства вовлечен в процесс отражения внешней реальности вооруженного конфликта в сознании командира, где в центре находится противник, обнаружение замыслов и целей которого является наиважнейшей задачей и условием победы сначала в информационной, а затем в вооруженной борьбе с ним. В тоже время следует учитывать, что аналогичной рефлексивной деятельностью может заниматься и противоборствующая сторона” (A. N. Kirushin, “Refleksivnoe upravlenie- perspektivy sovremennogo ispol’zovaniya,” Tsentr Analiza Terroristicheskikh Ugroz, May 2, 2012, Accessed October 5, 2017, <http://catu.su/extensions/235-2012-02-05-14-55-51.html>.)

<sup>37</sup> “Однако, теоретическим основанием для всех рассуждений будет признание за процессами рефлексивного управления виртуального характера, и более глубокий рефлексивный анализ противоборствующих сторон будет приводить к погружению командира в виртуальную реальность более высокого порядка (а если выражаться категориями рефлексивного управления, то командир обращается к рефлексии более высокого уровня),” (Ibid.)

exploited. As Kirushin states, our understanding of the battlefield or our political landscapes are very vulnerable to the creation of “falsified realities” on which we base our decision-making:

We believe that a network-centric war should be based on a specific way of conducting combat operations, involving information and communication technologies, artificial intelligence technologies and knowledge bases, on the basis of which a special technical virtual reality of military operations is formed.<sup>38</sup>

Kirushin believes the further application of the principles of network-centric war can be interpreted as competing interaction of false inputs with genuine inputs which leads to internal confusion. This creates an “antagonistic relationship” between information systems of the opponent and “is the main tool for achieving superiority” over an enemy due to the fact that the opponent’s understanding of a situation is “based on a false conception of reality”.<sup>39</sup> “In general, the concept of reflexive management essentially grows out of the concept of falsehood” which Kirushin states are outside the realm of ethics and the norms of society.<sup>40</sup> The recent fighting in Donbas demonstrates the level of network centrality of the modern Russian army and how this dependence on information systems and data is manifesting itself on the modern battlefield.

Dr. Phillip Karber of the Potomac Foundation provides further examples of how the Russian forces in Ukraine have utilized the information systems at the tactical/operational level in a presentation to the Modern War Institute at West Point. Dr. Karber recounts how he observed the Russian use and integration of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) not just for

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<sup>38</sup> “Мы полагаем, что сетевая война должна базироваться на специфическом способе ведения боевых действий, задействующем информационно-коммуникативные технологии, технологии искусственного интеллекта и базы знаний, на основе которых формируется особая техническая виртуальная реальность боевых действий,”(Ibid.)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star*, 122.

reconnaissance but to acquire targets for coordinated artillery fire by Russian forces.<sup>41</sup> The UAVs or smaller drones fed back data and coordinates for targeting and within minutes multiple weapons systems, including rocket launchers, artillery, aircraft, and to command posts, could quickly act on information received. Furthermore, the Russian integration of anti-aircraft man-portable-air-defense-systems (MANPADS) into the net of defense information systems has increased their effectiveness; by linking the MANPADS to the network, the operators can work in teams of two (increasing their firepower) to bring down enemy aircraft.<sup>42</sup> The MANPADS are fed coordinates and vectors of incoming aircraft beforehand from the network, thus acting as more of an ambush.<sup>43</sup> In one instance recounted by Dr. Karber, an entire Ukrainian battalion was destroyed by a Russian aerial thermobaric bombardment (from a TOS-1A heavier flamethrower rocket launcher) within the span of three minutes.<sup>44</sup> With the airspace dominated by Russian UAVs and aircraft, the Russian forces have the ability to gather, process, and act on the information received to devastating effect on the battlefield.

### Reflexive Control and Information Warfare

A noted expert in the field of Russian information warfare doctrine is Major General Turko, who frequently contributes to the journal *Voennaya mysl'* [Military Thought].<sup>45</sup> Turko has also elaborated on the connection between information warfare, the reflexive control theory, and geopolitics, stating that the concept of reflexive control can have a geopolitical aspect and that it can be used against “groupings” or powerful blocs of nations by targeting the group's

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<sup>41</sup> Dr. Phillip A. Karber, “Dr. Phillip Karber Explains Russian Operations in Ukraine,” YouTube video, 54:40, presentation posted by Modern War Institute, West Point, NY, April 13, 2017, Accessed November 16, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14LMmBsDw-g>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star*, 120.

information systems and inflicting heavy damage to “information resources.”<sup>46</sup> Thomas notes that Turko defines an information resource as a “transmitter of information” that is the “method of conveying, gathering, accumulating, processing, storing, and exploiting” data or information; “infrastructure, such as automation means, switchboard communications” and the “administrative and organizations” including workers, scientists, database managers who “service the means of *informatizatsiya*.”<sup>47</sup> This can be achieved, according to Turko, by targeting a specific information resource that serves as a conduit to others<sup>48</sup>. The geopolitical nature of reflexive operations is most useful to the Russian leadership in dealing with the threat posed by the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania. While the Soviets during the post-war period had the more difficult task of downplaying the regional and ethnic rivalries between their Warsaw Pact armies, now the Russian leadership has the much easier task of playing on the weakness of networks and driving wedges between Eastern European countries to focus their attention elsewhere.

Colonel-General Nogovitsyn defined information warfare as “inflicting damage on information systems, processes, and resources” or “critically important structures” and furthermore “massively brainwashing troops and the population with the objective of destabilizing society...as a whole.”<sup>49</sup> Nogovitsyn also states that the distinction between open war and “confrontation” are nonexistent in the realm of information war although he notes that, within the framework of 6<sup>th</sup> generation warfare, cyber and information confrontation can precede

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

the opening of hostilities.<sup>50</sup> “information struggle” (борьба) and “information confrontation (противоборство)” within the context of information war (война)” are essentially the same.<sup>51</sup>

Col-Gen Nogovitsyn’s ideas seem to have influenced both the Russian General Staff and the ways in which Russian aggression against the Baltic states and Ukraine have deployed these “methods of gaining advantages without a declaration of war.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Two

### Case Studies

#### The Second Chechen War (1999-2009)

Whereas the First Chechen War (1994-96) was simply presented to the public as an action against separatists, the Second Chechen War began in 1999 as a response to an act of terrorism and as a fight against “international Islamic terrorism.”<sup>53</sup> The average Russian was not reminded of the Chechen deportations under Stalin in 1944, nor were motivations for Chechen independence put into the context of Chechen nationalism. Rather, the war was presented as the result of religious extremism. The mysterious circumstances around the 1999 Moscow apartment bombings and the uncovering of what was explained as an FSB training exercise gave rise to many conspiracy theories regarding manipulation of public opinion leading up to the conflict.<sup>54</sup> *RIA Novosti* reported that the bombings were carried out in a very professional way and underscored the presence of the agent hexogen (which is a component of explosives not easily acquired.)<sup>55</sup> Numerous articles appeared questioning the strange leaks of documents to the press, the explosive material (not sugar as claimed by the operatives planting the sack of hexogen in the apartment basement) in the supposed FSB training exercise, and the premature note to Duma representative Gennady Seleznev regarding the explosion in Volgogradsk (the note was dated three days before the event occurred.)<sup>56</sup> All these mysterious incidents seem to indicate that the

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<sup>53</sup> van Herpen, *Putin's Wars*, 171.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

<sup>55</sup> “По результатам экспертизы, проведенной сотрудниками ФСБ РФ, взрыв такой мощности являлся профессионально подготовленным и мог произойти при детонации 300-400 килограмм тротила (или эквивалентного количества какого-либо другого взрывчатого вещества). Позже выяснилось, что в качестве взрывчатки террористами был использован циклотриметилен-тринитроамин (гексоген).” (“Vzryv zhilogo doma v Moskve na ul. Gur'yanova v 1999 godu,” *RIA Novosti*, Accessed November 8, 2017, <https://ria.ru/spravka/20140909/1023295992.html>.)

<sup>56</sup> van Herpen, *Putin's Wars*, 178.

Russian government was creating the psychological conditions to go to war with Chechnya before any Chechens crossed into Dagestan on August 8, 1999.<sup>57</sup>

The participation of Wahhabists from abroad was widely cited to bolster the point that the conflict was with Islamic extremism, and the public largely accepted this metanarrative of the Second Chechen War.<sup>58</sup> At the federal level, the war seemed a success and the military demonstrated remarkable improvement. The change in political leadership helped pushed the needed reforms within the Russian military, but the change was still slow. As Thomas notes, the Russian leadership seemed to learn from the mistakes made during the first war and simply compensated the second time around by attempting less complex operations or in essence “repeating the siege of Stalingrad” on Grozny.<sup>59</sup> This type of large-scale offensive operation reminiscent of WWII does not rely on finesse or nuance; the Russian Army simply avoided the issue by shelling the city into rubble.<sup>60</sup> The role that disinformation and reflexive control operations played in the Second Chechen War was mostly tactical but proved effective.<sup>61</sup> In his autobiography *Moia voina* [ My War], cited by Thomas, Gennady Troshev recounts how as part of a Combined Forces Group disinformation was used to reflexively control the enemy. False radio traffic between Russian commanders along with faked intelligence reports were fed to Chechen forces to give them the impression that a gap existed in a minefield, thereby giving them an escape route from a surrounded city.<sup>62</sup> The reports were made to look as if they were prepared by the Chechens themselves, giving the false impression that the analysis of the situation was their

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<sup>57</sup> “Kontrterroristicheskaya operatsiya v Chechne 1999-2009 gg,” Spravka, RIA Novosti, Accessed October 15, 2017, [https://ria.ru/defense\\_safety/20090326/166106234.html](https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20090326/166106234.html)

<sup>58</sup> Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star*, 130.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 134.

own. In reality they had been concocted to be fed into the "information/analysis" of the Chechen forces to act in accordance with the Russian's desired outcome: the Chechens fell for the deception and went into the minefield, which resulted in what the Russians termed the killing of an estimated "1700 terrorists."<sup>63</sup> Additionally, the quick turnover to pro-Russian Chechens in 2000 was meant to quickly remove federal forces from the conflict to reduce the conflict to the level of a local matter. This was a subtle way to take the focus off of the fighting, allowing the president a public victory while the nation turned its focus elsewhere. Although the government would declare the operation as complete in 2009, the "Chechenization" in 2000 removed more Russian and non-local forces from the struggle and saved the government from bad public relations early on. The conflict that to many began with an act of disinformation in the apartment bombings ended with a clever management of media coverage as the Kremlin passed off the conflict to the pro-Russian local elites to finish.

### The Georgian War (2008)

The short five-day war between Russia and Georgia demonstrates how Mikhail Saakashvili might have possibly fallen into a reflexive control operation, which aimed to make him overestimate his chances of receiving U.S. and NATO support for a conflict he could have avoided. According to the Russians, the war started on August 7, 2008, when Georgian forces invaded the capital Tskhinvali of the unrecognized, breakaway province of South Ossetia and killed two Russian peacekeepers in the process.<sup>64</sup> The Russian response was swift, and the operation to retake South Ossetia and invade Georgia was uncharacteristically smooth, supporting the idea that the operation was not an impromptu response to Georgian actions but the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>64</sup> van Herpen, *Putin's Wars*, 205

execution of a plan that the Russians had been working on “for months, possibly years.”<sup>65</sup> Immediately after the opening of hostilities, Russia launched a major cyber-attack on Georgia in an attempt to disrupt both military communication and impose a media blackout on the country.<sup>66</sup> The fact that the Georgians did initiate the hostilities was not in denial, but what a report by the EU’s “Tagliavini Report” confirms is that the Georgians were responding in part to the illegal presence of Russian forces not associated with the peacekeeping contingent.<sup>67</sup> The presence of Russian railway repair troops sent to fix the track from South Ossetia and Georgia to Sochi was discovered and was clearly done in preparation for transporting troops by rail from Russia.<sup>68</sup> Georgian President Saakashvili had also been goaded into acting by the issuing of Russian Federation passports to citizens of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, a move which was interpreted as an act of “slow annexation.”<sup>69</sup> In the eyes of world, Georgia had acted recklessly and seemed to throw its weight around, anticipating NATO backing in order to re-incorporate a separatist region. Based on the evidence of careful advanced planning on the part of the Russian forces, it is more likely that Georgia became the unwitting victim of reflexive control. By extension the Western press was duped and manipulated as well, considering the fact that Russian disinformation became the basis for forming international opinion as events unfolded.

### The War in Ukraine (2014)

The threat of a Color Revolution overturning a pro-Russian administration in Ukraine precipitated Putin’s response to the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. In the official film about the annexation of Crimea, Putin portrays the mission of Russian forces as follows: to save the life of

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<sup>65</sup> Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star*, 264.

<sup>66</sup> van Herpen, *Putin’s Wars*, 205.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 214.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 208.

the ousted Ukrainian President Yanukovich, to protect the rights of minorities and Russian speakers, and to liberate Crimea and “bring it back to the homeland.”<sup>70</sup> Russia was able to use “energy diplomacy” against Western Europe and to influence Ukrainian domestic policy through coercion. By withholding energy and forcing Ukraine to pay market prices for the oil and gas received from Russia, Russia had leverage over Ukraine including the debt Ukraine owed to Russia.<sup>71</sup> With the fall of Yanukovich, Russia employed a similar strategy as that used against Georgia leading up to 2008. As in the war with Georgia, the Russians “tightened control of information online” in the wake of the occupation of Crimea.<sup>72</sup> The integration of Ukraine into the EU and NATO would have been a geostrategic disaster for Russia, therefore the response by the Kremlin was to ruin Ukraine’s admissibility to both. In this way, Russia was able to exploit the historical memory of the Soviet Union and Ukrainian nationalist figures such as Stepan Bandera and the presence of Ukrainian “fascists” at the Maidan protests by focusing on the groups using imagery associated both with Bandera and Ukrainian nationalism: the red and black flag, the trident of Bandera, along with patches worn by Ukrainian nationalist partisans.<sup>73</sup> The media coverage given to Ukrainian “ultra-nationalists” is having its intended effect on the West’s perception of the situation in Ukraine. Liberal voices are now echoing the concerns of Russian state media that the Ukrainian nationalists are really neo-Nazis.<sup>74</sup> Once the Maidan protests and divisions within Ukraine between its Western and Eastern regions became a full-

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<sup>70</sup> Krym: Put’ na Rodinu, dir. by Andrei Kondrashov, Rossiia 24, March 15, 2015, Accessed October 23, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t42-71RpRgI>.

<sup>71</sup> van Herpen, *Putin’s Wars*, 242.

<sup>72</sup> Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 260.

<sup>73</sup> van Herpen, *Putin’s Propaganda Machine*, 168.

<sup>74</sup> George Eliason, “Ukraine’s Neo-Nazis. Stepan Bandera and the Legacy of World War II,” Global Research, March 17, 2014, Accessed September 18, 2017, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/ukraines-neo-nazis-stepan-bandera-and-the-legacy-of-world-war-ii/5373773>

fledged civil war, rumors of Russian direct interventions were officially denied by Russia.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore the appearance of “green men” soldiers, or “polite people,” on Crimea showed the use of *maskirovka* despite the fact that there was little doubt the soldiers were from the Russian Federation. This demonstrated the principle that to bewilder the local population and conceal the movement of troops, one principle of *maskirovka* within the framework of Reflexive Control, is to apply psychological pressure and conceal unit markers to sow confusion. Much of the information campaign was carried out by Russian news outlets and the information war in Ukraine took on what Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews describe as a “firehose of falsehood:” the persistent barrage of half-truths and fabricated information coming from multiple sources.<sup>76</sup>

By repeating the same disinformation stories over and over, Russian media and diplomats succeeded in having their message carried into the targeted nations’ media, subsequently overwhelming the narrative of domestic media outlets. Fabricated stories such as Poland’s contemplation of taking advantage of the disorder to settle territorial claims on Ukraine, that Islamist fighters were participating on the side of Ukrainian nationalists, and the overthrow of Yanukovich as a CIA or Western-backed coup flooded the press, creating competing narratives and explanations for developments.<sup>77</sup> An article on the Chechens fighting in Ukraine on *Korrespondent.net* portrayed the Islamic fighters as supporters of Islamic State (ISIS) who went

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<sup>75</sup> Karoun Demirjian, “Putin denies Russian troops are in Ukraine, decrees certain deaths secret,” The Washington Post, May 28, 2015, Accessed October 4, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/putin-denies-russian-troops-are-in-ukraine-decrees-certain-deaths-secret/2015/05/28/9bb15092-0543-11e5-93f4-f24d4af7f97d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.fb7e8da46db8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/putin-denies-russian-troops-are-in-ukraine-decrees-certain-deaths-secret/2015/05/28/9bb15092-0543-11e5-93f4-f24d4af7f97d_story.html?utm_term=.fb7e8da46db8).

<sup>76</sup> Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood,’” RAND (blog) Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

to Ukraine to wage “jihad” (войны джихада).<sup>78</sup> The number of foreign Muslim fighters in Ukraine cannot be known for sure, but based on the number of articles on the subject we see that they are being disproportionately covered by the media. The portrayal, however, has been disproportionate in showing the small number of Muslim fighters. The legitimate rationale for the Ukrainian fight against separatists is changed to a very polarizing frame of the fight against Islamic extremism. Another article in *The New York Times* about the Muslim fighters reported that the motivation of the Chechens was a love for fighting against the Russians but the *Korrespondent.net* article’s main focus is the ties that groups have to ISIS or affiliated groups. Although based in fact, the stories of the presence of Muslim fighters in Ukraine intends to drown out the Ukrainian narrative and associate the Kyiv government as a willing collaborator of ISIS.

One incident, now famous because of its audacity, was the use of a photo from the film *Brest Fortress* that was doctored and presented as proof of atrocities committed during the fighting in the Donbass.<sup>79</sup> Even more concerning than this are the provocations that have been apparent acts of war committed by Ukraine over the Crimea.<sup>80</sup> The continuing provocation by Russian intelligence services has gone so far as to frequently show news reports on state Russian TV channels showing the captures of “saboteurs” (диверсантки) who allegedly have been caught in the act of raids against the Crimea.<sup>81</sup> In some cases the Ukrainian wives of the captured saboteurs have come out and claimed that their husbands were kidnapped. The arrests

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<sup>78</sup> See “Voiny dzhikhada. Kak voiuut i zarabatyvaut islamisty v Ukraine”, *Korrespondent.net*. <https://korrespondent.net/ukraine/politics/3484971-voyny-dzhykhada-kak-voiuut-y-zarabatyvaut-yislamisty-v-ukrayne>.

<sup>79</sup> Soldatov and Borogan, *The Red Web*, 284.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>81</sup> “Zaderzhannyy v Krymu ukrainskii diversant nazval imena kuratorov,” NTV, August 8, 2017, Accessed October 8, 2017, <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1904658/>.

of Ukrainian spies in Crimea who were sent over to spy on the Russian Black Sea Fleet was an underlying rationale for the Crimea's annexation, and the threat to the fleet serves to project the defensive nature of Russian annexation of the Crimea.<sup>82</sup> Despite the exposure to disinformation and the public awareness of the possibility of fabrication in the news, Russian information warfare tactics have skillfully played on internal divisions in Ukrainian society to achieve their objectives.

The downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH 17 over the Donbass region of Ukraine serves as yet another an example where Russian disinformation has heightened tensions in the conflict and aims to discredit the Ukrainian government and the media coverage by the Western press. Despite an international team of investigators' conclusion that the plane was shot down by pro-Russian separatists with the use of a rocket of Russian manufacture, the Russian media was quick to suggest the guilt of the pro-Ukrainian forces.<sup>83</sup> *Pravda* reported that top secret documents were discovered that included orders and plans instructing the Ukrainian SBU to destroy evidence that did not corroborate the official Ukrainian chronology of events.<sup>84</sup> The documents described "a special operation by military aircraft on a mission 17<sup>th</sup> July 2014" which might have shot down the civilian airliner- all suggesting that the SBU was engaged in a massive cover-up ordered by President Poroshenko that would help support the Russian version of events.<sup>85</sup> *TVZvezda* accuses the West of "pretending to believe Kyiv" and states that the evidence that the plane was shot down by a "Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile" is more than

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<sup>82</sup> "Razyskivaemogo ukraintsa zaderzhali pri popytke pokinut' Krym," *Gazeta.ru*. October 3, 2017, Accessed, October 7, 2017, [https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2017/10/03/n\\_10644404.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2017/10/03/n_10644404.shtml).

<sup>83</sup> "MH17 Ukraine plane crash: What we know," *BBC*, September 28, 2016, Accessed November 13, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28357880>.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>85</sup> Sergei Sokolov, "O rassledovanii raskryvaem tainu gibeli 'Boinga-MH17,'" (*Pravda.ru*, Accessed November 13, 2017, <https://www.pravda.ru/news/expert/22-05-2017/1334845-dokumenti-0/>.)

justified.<sup>86</sup> The spreading of disinformation in Ukraine has been effective in creating conditions favorable for the bloodless annexation of the Crimea by Russian forces, as well as putting off the accession of the Ukraine to NATO and the EU indefinitely.

### The Baltics and Poland

The Baltic states --Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia-- are a thorn in the side of Russia. The fact that these nations are active members of the NATO alliance make them a target for Influence Operations rather than direct conflict. Estonia has become heavily reliant on the internet for administration and “e-governance” as well as a strong center for the information technology industry, making it particularly vulnerable to influence operations. The Russian media has developed tactics to spread disinformation through the local Baltic media outlets. The Russian media campaign against Estonia in 2008 was launched along with Russia’s hacking attacks that year targeted banking, government websites, and newspapers, among others. These attacks were direct responses to Estonia’s removal of a bronze Red Army soldier statue in Tallinn.<sup>87</sup> The Russian media campaign has been directed at painting Estonia internationally as proud of its cooperation with the German occupation highlighting anything that glorifies Estonians who fought with Germany against the Soviet Union during WWII.<sup>88</sup> As in Ukraine, the historical

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<sup>86</sup>“ Фактов, свидетельствующих в пользу того, рейс MH17, выполнявший 17 июля 2014 года рейс Амстердам – Куала-Лумпур, был сбит именно украинской зенитной ракетой, более чем предостаточно. Есть научные доказательства, полученные во время натурных экспериментов, проведенных российским концерном «Алмаз-Антей», из которых следует, что лайнер был сбит ракетой, снятой с вооружения российской армии. Однако Украина бездоказательно, но упорно твердит: «Це не мы». На Западе делают вид, что верят Киеву и даже сведения, невольно «добытые» украинским капелланом, стараются не замечать. Может, хватит уже валять дурака и расставить акценты в этой катастрофе?” (“Kiev priperli k stenke: pochemu Zapad namerknul na ukrainskii sled v sbitom Boeing MH17,” TV Zvezda, April 4, 2017, Accessed October 30, 2017, [https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane\\_i\\_mire/content/201704060758-drk3.htm](https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201704060758-drk3.htm).)

<sup>87</sup> “Russia Accused of Unleashing Cyberwar to Disable Estonia,” The Guardian, May 16, 2007, Accessed October 30, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/may/17/topstories3.russia>.

<sup>88</sup> “Geroizatsiya natsistov v Estonii,” Vosprosnik.net Accessed November 5, 2017, <http://voprosik.net/geroizaciya-nacistov-v-estonii/>.

memory of the nationalist collaboration with the German forces, has been used to impugn the motives of these countries' participation in NATO as an aggressive posturing on their part. *TASS* objected to the Estonian sporting event "Hike Erna" which was allegedly held in honor of Estonian saboteur groups who were formed by the German *Abwehr*, or military intelligence during WWII.<sup>89</sup> *The Baltic Times* retorted by stating that the Russian campaign to spread lies about the origins and nature of the hike were false and rejected the claims by Russian news altogether.<sup>90</sup> The war memorials to local Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians who fought with the German forces during WWII have been the subject of visual material used as the backdrop for the Baltic states in Russian media.<sup>91</sup> The independence struggle is not put into context by the Russian media, nor is the fact that the three small countries were briefly independent prior to re-annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940. Only the debt that the Baltic people owe to the Red Army is stressed in Russian media stories on the topic of WWII in the Baltics.<sup>92</sup> In 2014 the region saw an increase in NATO presence to send a message to Russia after the Ukraine conflict and Crimean invasion.

The presence of an armored Stryker brigade (Abrams tanks) from the US and exercises in Poland became the target of Russian disinformation campaign to create the illusion that the presence of Americans, Brits, and French in the region were unwelcome. In one instance, an American Chinook helicopter became lost during a training exercise and landed near a Polish

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<sup>89</sup> "Rossiia osuzhdaet provedenie igry v Estonii, proslavliaushchei natsizm," TASS, August 17, 2017, Accessed November 12, 2017. <http://tass.ru/politika/4488663>.

<sup>90</sup> "Estonia Accuses Russia of Spreading Lies Over its Scout Hike," *The Baltic Times*, August 13, 2013, Accessed November 12, 2017, <https://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/35357/>.

<sup>91</sup> "Estoniia otkryto podderzhivaet fashistov," RT (video) on Rossiia segodnya, August 2, 2011, Accessed November 13, 2017, <http://inosmi.ru/video/20110802/172789815.html>.

<sup>92</sup> Paul and Matthews, "The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood," 5. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.

village to ask for directions and check their location.<sup>93</sup> The incident was cleverly edited on *RT* (formerly *Russian Today* news) to portray the intimidating presence of the American military when in reality the Poles were shown smiling and being very hospitable and welcoming once they learned the national identity of the soldiers.<sup>94</sup> Across the Baltic states and Poland, the growing movements to remove monuments to the Red Army in those countries were easily portrayed as “Russophobia” and sympathy for fascism rather than blowback from Russia’s actions in Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>95</sup> The staunch opposition to Russia in Poland made the reports about anti-NATO presence very suspect, but the possible arguments against NATO presence in Latvia and Lithuania played on realistic fears the local population might have had.

In Lithuania, a disinformation story about an alleged rape of a Lithuanian girl was reported and spread successfully by local Lithuanian news outlets until it was finally fact-checked by journalists.<sup>96</sup> The story was traced back to the original source by Lithuanian police and determined to have come from an address “outside the EU.”<sup>97</sup> Scare tactics, including the rumors that NATO troops would be allowed to “roam around the country with loaded weapons,” and other scare tactics against the allied presence were calculated to have more impact given the large Russian minority in Latvia.<sup>98</sup> Due to the constant barrage of “fake news” or disinformation stories, the public has become accustomed to scrutinizing the sourcing of the news. The Baltic

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<sup>93</sup> “US Army Helicopters Surprise Polish Villagers (In a Good Way),” fox6now, September 11, 2014, Accessed October 30, 2017, <http://fox6now.com/2014/09/11/pictures-u-s-army-helicopters-surprise-polish-villagers-in-a-good-way/>.

<sup>94</sup> Marta Kepe, “NATO Prepared for Countering Disinformation Operations,” RAND (blog), June 7, 2017, accessed October 30, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/06/nato-prepared-for-countering-disinformation-operations.html>.

<sup>95</sup> “Rusofobiia stala doktrinoi Pol’shi, zaiavil byvshii prem’er Miller,” RIA Novosti. October 20, 2017, Accessed October 30, 2017, <https://ria.ru/world/20171020/1507253758.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Agneshka Filipiak, “V Litvu vozvpashchautsia “natsisty,” Rossiia segodnia, May 30, 2017, Accessed October 23, 2017, <http://inosmi.ru/politic/20170530/239475871.html>.

<sup>97</sup> Kepe, “NATO Prepared for Countering Disinformation Operations,” 5.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

states have become “hardened” against disinformation attacks and the presence of NATO is widely supported by the local population despite the Russian information war.

### Conclusion

Disinformation and subversion are components of reflexive control, and the end goal is to influence covertly the decision-making of the enemy, not simply to confuse them or play on internal divisions within societies. This is demonstrated by the presence of Russian news articles meant to shape domestic and international opinion, perception, and reflexively guide public discourse in the targeted countries. The necessary condition for reflexive control to have maximum impact would be that the opponent remains unaware that the disinformation being fed is a deliberate effort at influence and controlling the perceived reality of the situation. Russia has been successful in achieving this end until the sources of disinformation have been exposed, but the effects still linger in the public discourse years after, feeding internal divisions and advancing conspiracy theories such as in Ukraine and the U.S. The efficacy of reflexive control in the context of strategic deception will have to rely on more sophisticated and nuanced methods against some targets; still, history has shown that even the most blatant forgeries have been successful. If a polity is extremely divided against itself, any piece of disinformation will be gladly used by the various sides to intensify political conflicts. Now that NATO and the U.S. are developing counter-measures and forces specifically tasked with identifying disinformation and attempts at influence operations, success in strategic deception operations may become harder to achieve. However, within the context of the battlefield, the types of reflexive deception can still be effective since decisions are made at a rapid pace and the ruse only has to work for a short period of time to be of use. Information warfare and attacks on “information resources” such as networks are the fertile grounds for next-generation types of subversion aimed at information

system dependent forces since network-centric warfare has become dominant in NATO and now the Russian army. The conduct of Putin's wars shows an ever-increasing role for deception and subversion using tactics of manipulation. These methods have been employed to achieve Russia's foreign and domestic policy objectives offering either "conquest without war" in some cases, or the maintenance of "frozen conflicts."

The connection between disinformation and the overarching strategy to achieve reflexive control over opponents is evident in the conflicts Russia has engaged in since the Second Chechen War in 1999 and up to the war in Ukraine to 2016. The importance that military theorists and analysts give to reflexive control theory has now been elevated and is undergoing refinement for use in many fields outside the military. The Russian military considers reflexive control an applicable tool on the modern battlefield that will continue play an influential role as armies become more network-centric and reliant on information systems.

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