

Journalism in Times of Increasing Propaganda

Western Media and Russia's Information Warfare



Master Thesis, International Relations in Historical Perspective

Author:	Koen Geuvers (3700798)
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Tutor:	dr. Christian De Vito
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Abstract

In the early spring of 2014, the world witnessed the full power of Russia's Information Warfare, when Russian troops invaded and annexed Crimea. The incident was preceded by weeks of intensive information campaigns to mislead the Ukrainian population and to subvert the government in Kyiv. But a closer look at these so-called information campaigns shows that they were not exclusively aimed at Ukraine, but also at its Western allies. Journalists were misled by an abundance of fake news and false evidence, and editors were often baffled by inexplicable Russian denials. Therefore, this study explicitly focusses on the relationship between mainstream media in Western countries and the Russian Information Warfare, asking the question: were these media aware of the Russian information campaigns?

In doing so, this study focusses on three case studies to show how the media's perception of Russian propaganda developed over the years. Simultaneously, Russia's information campaigns also evolved towards a more 'offensive' nature, something that most Western media overlooked. This resulted in a growing awareness of the concept of Information Warfare, but a misinterpretation of its objectives and consequently an often counterproductive response.

Introduction

'All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away.'

- Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*¹

In the early spring of 2014, the world was shocked by the sudden military intervention of Russian troops in Eastern Ukraine, and the successive annexation of Crimea. Since the Second World War, no territory of one European sovereign state had been overtaken by another sovereign state. In the eyes of most Western countries, this Russian annexation of Crimea was a direct act of war and a way to provoke the NATO-members.² More important, the world witnessed the full power of Russia's 'Information Warfare', as the military intervention did not happen overnight, but was preceded by weeks of intensive information campaigns to mislead the Ukrainian population and to subvert the government in Kyiv.³ But the concept of Information Warfare was not new, nor was Russia's use of disinformation as part of its information campaigns. In fact, these strategies can be traced back to Soviet times, and even before that.⁴

However, what distinguished Russia's Information War in Ukraine from the Communist propaganda during the Cold War, was that it did not primarily target domestic audiences anymore. Instead, Russian information operations had the overarching goal to undermine the opponent politically, psychologically and economically, even before the actual hostilities broke

¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Chapter 1, Verse 18.

² Jolanta Darczewska, 'The devil is in the details. Information warfare in the light of Russia's military doctrine', *Point of View* 50 (2015) 10.

³ Lawrence Freedman, 'Ukraine and the Art of Limited War', *Survival. Global Politics and Strategy* 56, 6 (2014) 7-38.

⁴ Keir Giles, *Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power* (Chatham House Research Paper, London 2016).

Mark Galeotti, 'Hybrid, ambiguous, and non-linear? How new is Russia's 'new way of war'?', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, 2 (2016) 282-301.



Figure 1

1. From direct destruction to direct influence;
2. From direct annihilation of the opponent to its inner decay;
3. From a war with weapons and technology to a culture war;
4. From a war with conventional forces to specially prepared forces and commercial irregular groupings;
5. From the traditional battleground to information/psychological warfare and war of perceptions;
6. From direct clash to contactless war;
7. From a superficial and compartmented war to a total war, including the enemy's internal side and base;
8. From war in the physical environment to a war in the human consciousness and in cyberspace;
9. From symmetric to asymmetric warfare by a combination of political, economic, information, technological, and ecological campaigns;
10. From war in a defined period of time to a state of permanent war as the natural condition in national life.

'Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for. Latvian Defense Policy' (2014)

out. According to American intelligence analyst Sebastian Gorka the Russian strategy is best outlined in the 2014 report of Latvia's Center for Security and Strategic Research, '*Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy*'.⁵ The report shows that Russia was 'winning the war' without the use of conventional means. This Russian strategy that is described by Russian military thinkers as 'New Generation Warfare', is summarized by the author Janis Berzins as shown in *Figure 1*.

What stands out are many concepts that can be directly linked to Information Warfare. The opponent's 'inner decay', 'culture war' and 'perceptions' can all be influenced, at least to a certain extent, with the use of information campaigns, be it through the distribution of false information among the opponent's population or the control over popular media. Moreover, we can see that Russia was not only trying to avoid the use of direct force, it also used unconventional means to achieve its goals, like 'irregular groupings', as well as economic and ecological campaigns. Direct confrontations made way for psychological subversion through the use of propaganda that was supposed to influence the 'human consciousness'. These strategies were also visible in Russia's campaign to subvert Ukraine, as summarized by Berzins in eight phases that started with eroding the enemy's morale and ended with the opponent's total destruction.⁶ In the light of Information Warfare, there are two phases that deserve some extra attention:

'Phase Two: *special operations to mislead political and military leaders by coordinated measures carried out by diplomatic channels, media, and top government and military agencies by leaking false data, orders, directives, and instructions.'*

⁵ Janis Berzins, 'Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for. Latvian Defense Policy', *Policy Paper No. 2* (Riga, April 2014).

⁶ Berzins, 'Russia's New Generation Warfare', 6.

‘Phase Four: *destabilizing propaganda to increase discontent among the population, boosted by the arrival of Russian bands of militants, escalating subversion.*’⁷

For long the Russian information operations have been perceived as a purely defensive measure, for example its use of censorship and propaganda to glorify the Communist regime. But the developments in Ukraine indicate that Russia’s focus has shifted to a foreign audience. Strategic advantages were achieved through special operations to mislead the government in Kyiv, and the Ukrainian population was demoralized and influenced to promote discontent and rebellion. Most striking is that these special operations were not just carried out through diplomatic channels and government agencies, but also through popular and mainstream media. While these strategies in itself were not new, as many of them have their origins in Cold War times, the combination and focus of different strategies has changed, from an all-out war to warfare that is based primarily on deception and subversion. Gorka calls this redeveloped military theory ‘Reflexive Control’: ‘the science of how to shape the information environment in such a way as to make your enemy make decisions that are preferable to your victory and detrimental to his success’.⁸

Keir Giles, expert on Russia and its armed forces, endorses the view that the Russian subversion campaigns were not new, but merely forgotten Soviet strategies that were adapted to the internet age. He argues that the Russian government invested in three main areas to increase the effectiveness of its information campaigns. The first one is the control and use of mainstream Russian media, of which Russia Today (RT) is the best-known example. Second is the use of social media and third is the improvement of language skills, both to reach a broader audience in a more effective way.⁹ Especially the last two areas are striking, because they indicate that Russia did not only want to influence its own population, or misinform enemy military leaders, but it explicitly aimed to influence foreign, even Western public opinion.

Elaborating on these new insights, this study explicitly focusses on the relationship between mainstream media in Western countries on the one hand and the Russian Information Warfare on the other. Especially in the case of Ukraine, we see that media played a crucial part in the information campaigns. And although these campaigns were often conducted through Russian social media, state-controlled television and news outlets like RT, they were sometimes directly aimed at foreign media, for example with the distribution of disinformation and the use of ‘trolls’ and ‘bots’. A good example thereof came with the completely false news item of a Russian child that was supposedly crucified by Ukrainian soldiers. The story was broadcasted via Russian television and news websites, but was quickly taken over by media in the West, as it endorsed the popular (Russian) narrative that Ukraine had fallen into chaos and anarchy.¹⁰ Researchers in Information Warfare agree that a crucial part of Russia’s contemporary warfare tactics is its tight government control over Russian media, and the close cooperation between the government and media. This is visible in the consistent distribution of the ‘Russian message’ in domestic media that without exception support the Kremlin’s policies. For example, right after the Euromaidan protests in November 2013, Moscow depicted the new Ukrainian government as a fascist regime, and suddenly Russian mainstream media started to devote disproportionate amounts of attention to previously unimportant right-wing extremists in

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sebastian Gorka, ‘How America Will Be Attacked. Irregular Warfare, the Islamic State, Russia, and China’, *Military Review* (Sep-Oct 2016) 38.

⁹ Giles, *Russia’s ‘New’ Tools*, 27-28.

¹⁰ Przemysław Furgacz, ‘Russian Information War in the Ukrainian Conflict’, 209-210. In: Nicolae Iancu, Andrei Fortuna, Cristian Barna and Mihaela Teodor (eds.), ‘Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine’, *NATO Science for Peace and Security Series - E: Human and Societal Dynamics*, Volume 128 (2016).

Ukraine.¹¹ The Kremlin's commitment to information control was even literally described in Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine, where control over the information space through technology and media is listed as one of the government's top priorities, as well as 'the development of forces and means of information warfare'.¹²

This shows that apart from their attempt to target Western audiences, Russian information campaigns were also part of a top-down process where the Kremlin decided what narratives were distributed to which audiences.¹³ Among most European and American media there seems to be a consensus that the West understands and sees through these Russian information campaigns, due to their high implausibility and lack of consistency. The American news website *The Daily Beast* suggested that the Kremlin's propaganda machine used tricks that were easily debunked, stating that: 'No one in Ukraine or in the West doubts that the Russian invasion was provoked by anything other than Putin's desire to reestablish the USSR 2.0. (...) We can only hope the Russians shoot down their own myths and delusions, and not the local population'.¹⁴ An article in *The New Yorker* from 17 July 2014 implied that Russia's information campaigns had 'overheated public opinion and collective political imagination', arguing that Putin had 'fanned a kind of prolonged political frenzy (...) that serves his immediate political needs but that he can no longer easily calibrate and control'.¹⁵ In a report by the IISS, Lawrence Freedman foresaw that the Russian government would get caught in its own 'discourse trap', and called the information campaigns 'largely unsuccessful', arguing that 'few were deceived. Although the starting point for Russian operations was plausible denial, after a while it seemed as though Moscow no longer cared'.¹⁶

But this interpretation of Russia's deceiving efforts is not shared by all. Some experts on Russian warfare, like Timothy Thomas and Keir Giles, have argued that Western media in 2014 were in fact completely unprepared and unable to counter Russia's targeted and consistent information campaigns. Especially at first there was little counterforce from Western media, as they were often stunned by Russia's inexplicable denials, and they were even sometimes reporting Russian disinformation as facts.¹⁷ In his *Reuters* article, Lucian Kim compared Putin's information campaigns to Orwell's novel *1984*, stating that 'the target audience is Western citizens skeptical of their own system of government. The goal is obfuscation'.¹⁸ A report by CEPA's Information Warfare project from August 2016 analyzed the impact of Russia's disinformation on foreign audiences by looking at several case studies. The report concluded that Russian Information War differed from traditional propaganda in the sense that it did not seek to convince, but rather undermine political leadership. 'Instead of agitating audiences into action, it seeks to keep them hooked and distracted, passive and paranoid'.¹⁹ The report also pointed to the lack of research and interest for Russian Information Warfare in the Western world, stating that media quality had to be improved and new agencies and better cooperation were needed to counter the Russian threat. After the Cold War, the West has lost its counter-

¹¹ Furgacz, 'Russian Information War', 210.

¹² Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (26-12-2014), 11. <https://www.offiziere.ch/wp-content/uploads-001/2015/08/Russia-s-2014-Military-Doctrine.pdf>

¹³ Giles, *Russia's 'New' Tools*, 31-32.

¹⁴ Oleg Shynkarenko, 'Putin's Crimea Propaganda Machine', *The Daily Beast* (03-03-2014). <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/03/03/putin-s-crimea-propaganda-machine.html>

¹⁵ David Remnick, 'After the Crash', *The New Yorker* (17-07-2014). <http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/after-the-crash>

¹⁶ Freedman, 'Ukraine and the Art of Limited War', 18.

¹⁷ Giles, *Russia's 'New' Tools*, 31-32.

¹⁸ Lucian Kim, 'Putin waging information war in Ukraine worthy of George Orwell', *Reuters* (14-11-2014). <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/11/14/putin-wages-information-war-in-ukraine-worthy-of-george-orwell/>

¹⁹ Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, *Winning the Information War: Techniques and Counter-Strategies in Russian Propaganda* (CEPA Report, Washington 2016) 5.

propaganda infrastructure, like the US Information Agency. ‘But if Europe and North America do not promptly respond to this challenge, the result may be dramatic’.²⁰

This shows a striking contradiction between on the one hand mainstream media in Western countries that responded to Russia’s Information War by reporting its disinformation and interpreting its goals, while on the other hand experts and official NATO reports²¹ concluded that Western media had ‘failed’ to oppose Russia’s highly coordinated campaigns sufficiently. Therefore, this study takes a closer look at the coverage of Russian actions in Western newspapers during three international conflicts that involved Russia. On the basis thereof, I will show to what extent these newspapers were aware that they were being targeted by Russian information campaigns, and how their responses corresponded with the Kremlin’s objectives.

Information Warfare, what does it mean?

Information Warfare (from now on referred to as ‘IW’) is an element of Unconventional Warfare, which can either refer to ‘non-traditional forms of warfare’ or to forms of warfare that are not compatible with the ‘ethical’ and ‘legal’ parts of war.²² In contrast to conventional or traditional forms of war, Unconventional Warfare is not primarily fought out on the battlefield between two or more armies, but involves many other elements like psychological warfare, cyberwarfare or the use of nuclear weapons. We see that in the 20th century, and especially since the end of the Second World War, non-traditional forms of war have become increasingly important. In fact, empirical data shows that most wars nowadays are ‘unconventional’.²³ IW, which is often linked to psychological warfare or cyberwarfare, is not a rectilinear, invariable concept and is therefore very difficult to define. Most times, it aims to influence, intimidate or change the opponent’s attitude or actions in the advantage of one’s own policy goals, for example through the use of false information, propaganda or manipulation.²⁴ However, the focus of IW can vary from offensive to defensive operations, from domestic audiences to foreign enemies, and from traditional media to the internet (cyberspace). It is therefore important to define the actors, means and goals with each different situation.

In the case of Russia, it would not suffice to rely on the American or British definition of IW, because their understandings and aims of the concept are too different. Whereas the Western definition of IW leans more towards cyberwarfare and military operations, Russian military theorists have divided the concept into two distinct fields. Whenever information operations are aimed at machine driven data processors like computers or satellites, as is often the case in military operations, it is considered ‘information-technical’ warfare. If however the target is a human based data processor, in other words the human brain, this is considered ‘information-psychological’ warfare.²⁵ The distinction between the two fields is clearly visible in Russia’s own understanding of its ‘*informatsionnoye protivoborstvo*’ (information struggle), as defined by instructors at the Russian General Staff Academy in 1995:

‘Information warfare is a means of resolving a conflict between opposing sides. The goal is for one side to gain and hold an information advantage over the other. This is

²⁰ Lucas and Pomerantsev, *Winning the Information War*, 3.

²¹ Niculae Iancu, Andrei Fortuna, Cristian Barna and Mihaela Teodor (eds.), ‘Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine’, *NATO Science for Peace and Security Series - E: Human and Societal Dynamics*, Volume 128 (2016).

Keir Giles, *The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare* (NATO Research Paper, 2016).

²² Yves Boyer and Julian Lindley-French (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of War* (Oxford, 2012) 185.

²³ Gorka, ‘How America Will Be Attacked’, 39.

²⁴ Boyer and Lindley-French, *The Oxford Handbook of War*, 190.

²⁵ Timothy Thomas, ‘Information Warfare in the Second (1999-Present) Chechen War: Motivator for Military Reform’, *Foreign Military Studies Office* (2002). <http://fms.o.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/iwchechen.htm>

*achieved by exerting a specific information/psychological and information/technical influence on a nation's decision-making system, on the nation's populace, and on its information resource structures, as well as by defeating the enemy's control system and his information resource structures with the help of additional means, such as nuclear assets, weapons and electronic assets.*²⁶

Despite the fact that these two are often intertwined, this research will tend to focus foremost on the psychological aspect of Russian IW, as it seeks to investigate Russia's information campaigns that are specifically designed to influence the human consciousness.

A useful perspective that is closely linked to the Russian definition of IW is that of the OODA loop. 'OODA' stands for Observe, Orient, Decide, Act and embodies the four main phases that two opposing sides go through over and over again during a conflict. If one of them is slower than the other he will continue to fall further behind, up to the point that his decisions are made too late and his command and control capabilities become useless.²⁷ Although this is a key concept in maneuver warfare, it can also be applied to psychological warfare. The distribution of false information could have the same effect on one's ability to observe as the destruction of the opponent's information structures, and negative public opinion might be more devastating for one's ability to act than the threat of nuclear weapons. In short, the concept shows that IW is mostly about decelerating the opponent's progression while accelerating one's own.²⁸ I will elaborate more on this concept further on in the thesis.

Another important aspect of Information Warfare is information control, which practically means the knowledge of what people think, but also the control over what they *should* think. The concept can be subdivided into four different ways to control: propaganda (what information should be distributed?), censorship (what information should be suppressed?), 'information operations' (which people should target or be targeted?), and control of populations (for example through the use of bank, cell phone and/or internet data).²⁹ Although the control over information is generally propagated as a means to protect the state and its population, in practice information control is often abused by totalitarian rulers to protect their government and its national and foreign interests. The Soviet regime is only one example of this practice, along with other historical cases like the absolutist regime of Louis XIV in France and Hitler's Nazi-regime in Germany. But even in some Western countries, like the United States, it is debatable whether information control is exclusively applied to serve the population's interest. Alexandre Vautravers therefore states: 'In (...) conflict there is not necessarily an identifiable force, frontlines or attacks. And for this reason, more often than not, official action takes place over one's own territory, among its inhabitants and, often as well, against its own citizens'.³⁰

But although there are other countries that put considerable efforts into IW, among whom many NATO members, most experts on the subject agree that Russia stands out in its consistent and daily use of information campaigns in nearly all of its political-related activities, both at home and abroad.³¹ In her recent studies on the Russian campaign in Ukraine, Jolanta Darczewska argued that Russia is unmatched in the financial, organizational and intellectual resources that it put in its IW. According to her, the Kremlin's information campaigns are both

²⁶ Thomas, 'Information Warfare', see footnote 1 in the article.

²⁷ Jan Ångström and Jerker Widén, *Militärteorins grunder [Foundations of military theory]* (Försvarsmakten [Swedish Armed Forces], Stockholm 2005) 185.

²⁸ Ulrik Franke, *War by non-military means. Understanding Russian information warfare* (FOI Report, Stockholm 2015) 46.

²⁹ Alexandre Vautravers and Daniel Donovan (eds.), *Information Warfare* (Geneva, 2012) 10.

³⁰ Vautravers and Donovan, *Information Warfare*, 10.

³¹ Furgacz, 'Russian Information War', 209.

systematic and necessary for the continuity of the regime.³² Stephen Hutchings and Joanna Szostek claimed in their analysis of the Russian political and media discourse that in the eyes of the Russian government mass media is a ‘key arena of world politics’, in which Moscow fights for power and influence at the cost of other nations.³³ In brief, the Russian information strategy as described by IW theoreticians can be subdivided into four main elements that are essential to its success. These are: a large-scale, constant and durable character of propaganda; simplistic imaging that builds on prejudices; instigation of strong emotions like suspicion, racism or anti-Western sentiments; and the emphasis on Russian culture and common values.³⁴

Methodology

Because the scholarly literature on Russian IW is endless, and the debate whether the information campaigns have been successful or not is both subject to perspective and extremely difficult to measure, I will not elaborate too much on these issues. Instead, this research will focus purely on the effect that Russia’s IW has had on Western media, and specifically how these news agencies at their turn have responded to the Russian information campaigns. So far, most of the academic research has focused on the direct effect that Russia’s information campaigns had on its political actions, how the campaigns were conducted and what Russia desired to achieve with them. But despite the fact that much of Russia’s IW is targeting Western audiences through Western media, there are only little studies that address the reaction of these media. Are they aware that they are deliberately being targeted by Russian information campaigns? And if so, how have they assessed these campaigns and in which ways have they reported them to their audiences?

By looking at the reports of four mainstream newspapers, this study will try to give an assessment of the Western media’s reaction to Russia’s information campaigns. Arguing that the newspapers with the most readers are usually the most influential, I have chosen to conduct my research around the newspapers with the largest international or national circulation, namely two ‘quality’ papers; *New York Times* (US) and *The Guardian* (UK), and two tabloids; *The Sun* (UK) and the *Telegraaf* (Netherlands). The distinction between quality newspapers and tabloids may be especially interesting here, given the fact that articles in the latter are relatively less based on thorough research and more on prejudice, as I will show in the upcoming chapters. This leads to the assumption that ‘quality’ papers and tabloids may respond differently to information warfare, for example in the degree to which their perceptions are based on sources and facts rather than bias.

Moreover, an important note when investigating the Western media’s reaction to Russia’s information campaigns, is that just like IW in general, Russian IW is not a consistent and invariable concept. Instead it is a constantly changing process that has rapidly developed since the end of the Cold War, both in the amount of resources that were invested and in the targeted audiences. Consequently, the Russian conflict with Ukraine was not the first one where the Kremlin used information-psychological tactics as part of its warfare. These were in fact the product of a long-term development that was accelerated after the First Chechen War (1994-1996), which was perceived as a Russian failure.³⁵ Another important ‘breaking point’ in

³² Darczewska, ‘The devil is in the details’, 5-39.

Jolanta Darczewska, ‘The anatomy of Russian information warfare. The Crimean operation, a case study’, *Point of View* 42 (2014) 5-36.

³³ Stephen Hutchings and Joanna Szostek, ‘Dominant Narratives in Russian Political and Media Discourse during the Ukraine Crisis’, 183-196. In: Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakw (eds.), *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives* (Bristol 2015).

³⁴ Furgacz, ‘Russian Information War’, 209.

³⁵ Giles, *Russia’s ‘New’ Tools*, 28-30.

Russia's IW was the conflict with Georgia in 2008, where most Russian military experts agreed that they had lost the Information War because Russia was insufficiently prepared. Russian IW specialist Igor Panarin stated that 'the Caucasus demonstrated our utter inability to champion our goals and interests in the world information arena'³⁶, and Colonel Anatoliy Tsyganok argued that every Russian agency was unprepared to conduct IW against Georgia and that IW reforms were crucial to secure Russia's policy goals in the future.³⁷ This realization contributed for an important part to Russia's military reforms after 2008 and the development of its information campaigns.

Hence, this research focusses on three international conflicts that received major worldwide attention and where IW played an important role: Chechnya (1999), Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). Not only do these case studies show that there has been a development in the way that Russia conducted its information campaigns, but they may also explain *if* and *why* the response of Western media has changed over the years. Just as media coverage and public opinion have an effect on the outcome of a conflict, so can targeted information campaigns influence the reaction of mainstream media. Because of this mutual influence it is not only important to look purely at the content in Western newspapers, but also briefly at the nature of Russia's IW during each conflict. The first chapter deals with the case studies of Chechnya and Georgia, showing the mainstream newspaper's reaction to conflicts that were increasingly influenced by IW, although not yet on the same scale as during the annexation of Crimea. In the second chapter we will see that the Kremlin's state-led information campaigns during the Ukraine conflict were much better organized and planned, which consequently had its effect on the Western perception of the events. The third chapter will take a look at the bigger picture and shows how the reports of Western media have changed over the years, and how this compares to Russia's efforts and objectives. In the conclusion I will give a short assessment of the growing importance of IW in general, the 'effectiveness' of Russia's information campaigns on Western media, and some recommendations to counter Russian disinformation in the future.

Lastly, there are some limitations to this research that need to be mentioned before we get deeper into the subject. A first and important note is that even though the idea of information warfare has been extensively covered in academic research, the concept is still very vague, or at least ambiguous. As I explained before, there is not one clear and overarching definition for the concept and therefore each author that deals with the subject may perceive it differently, whether the focus is more military, technological or psychological. For this study I have chosen to use the Russian definition of information-psychological warfare, as it assumes that Russia is the initiator and the human brain is the target. This is however not the only 'true' interpretation of the concept.

Second, as this thesis focusses in the first place on the reaction of Western media to the Russian IW, I shall not give an in-depth analyses on the nature of the Russian IW itself. Therefore I would refer the reader to academics that already studied this phenomenon extensively. Russia expert Keir Giles wrote a comprehensive research paper for Chatham House³⁸, in which he identified the Russian armed forces and the state's capacity for information war as two important tools to confront the West. Timothy Thomas, former director of Soviet Studies at the USARI³⁹, studied Russia's IW since the First Chechen War, mainly

Timothy Thomas, 'Russian Information Warfare Theory: The Consequences of August 2008'. In: Stephen J. Blank and Richard Weitz (eds), *The Russian Military Today and Tomorrow: Essays In Memory of Mary Fitzgerald* (US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2010) 265–299.

³⁶ Igor Panarin, 'The Information Warfare System: the Mechanism for Foreign Propaganda Requires Renewal', *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer* (October 2008).

³⁷ Thomas, 'Russian Information Warfare Theory', 282.

³⁸ Giles, *Russia's 'New' Tools*, 1-71.

³⁹ United States Army Russian Institute in Garmisch, Germany

from a military perspective and described its developments over the years.⁴⁰ And Jolanta Darczewska wrote two extensive papers on the anatomy of the Russian Information Warfare in Ukraine.⁴¹ What these authors agree upon, is that the Russian propaganda machine had to be drastically improved after the events of 2008, which led to information campaigns that were organized at the highest political levels and carried out through a state-controlled information structure that included most mainstream and popular media agencies. I will elaborate further on several specific aspects of Russian IW in each chapter, based on these authors along with other academic and security studies that addressed the matter.

Finally, not all of Russia's IW went through mainstream media like television and newspapers. A considerable part of these campaigns took place in the cyberspace, for example on discussion boards or through social media like Twitter and *Vkontakte*. However, the limited resources and timeframe keep me from elaborating too much on this 'cyber' part of Russian IW. Instead this research focusses on the more 'visible' mainstream media, because here there is a certain degree of interaction (Russia acts, Western media react) while in the case of social media there is mostly just one-sided influence, which also makes it more difficult to measure its effects.

⁴⁰ Timothy Thomas, 'Manipulating the Mass Consciousness: Russian & Chechen Information War Tactics in the Second Chechen-Russian Conflict'. In: Anne Aldis (ed.), *The Second Chechen War* (Conflict Studies Research Centre, June 2000). <http://fms0.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/chechiw.htm>
Thomas, 'Russian Information Warfare Theory'.

⁴¹ Darczewska, 'The devil is in the details', 5-39.

Darczewska, 'The anatomy of Russian information warfare', 5-36.

Chapter 1: Russian IW in Chechnya and Georgia

On 1 October 1999, three years after the First Chechen War had ended, Russian troops invaded Chechnya and ended its independence. The Russian attack was a direct reaction to the seemingly unprovoked invasion of Dagestan by the Chechnya-based Islamic International Brigade (IIB). However, in the months leading up to the Second Chechen War, relations between the two countries had already worsened. Since the first war, Chechnya had increasingly fallen into political and economic chaos as separatist groups and warlords ruled large parts of the country. Tensions were further fueled by pro-Chechen terrorist bombings in Russia and several border conflicts in the weeks leading up to the invasion. According to Russian officials, the invasion of Chechnya was necessary to ‘free’ the country from terrorist groups, but NATO sources mentioned other motives that could have led to the invasion, like feelings of revenge from the First Chechen War, and the fact that Chechnya was an oil-rich area.⁴²

As for IW, there were some important lessons that the Russian leaders had learnt from their first campaign in Chechnya between 1994 and 1996. The most important one was that for the war to be a success, they did not only need to win the military war on the ground, but also the psychological war for public opinion. During the first conflict, the Chechen government had masterfully created an image of itself being a helpless victim and Russia being the cruel and aggressive invader that violated Chechnya’s sovereignty. Through internet and regular media, this image was broadcasted to both the international and the Russian public, which led to international pressure on Russia to end the war and also to a massive loss of support for the war in Russia itself.⁴³ The Chechens used two important ‘tools’ to get the public opinion on their side. First, they repeatedly applied the narrative of justification, emphasizing their sovereign rights and the illegal Russian invasion. Second, they won the favor of the global media by being ‘open’ and ‘hospitable’ towards foreign journalists. For example, Russian journalists would get free taxi rides into Chechnya where they could freely interview Chechen citizens, while the Russian authorities would mostly avoid the press. As a result, less than five percent of the reports from Chechnya was handled by official Russian war media, and the Russian people mainly saw the war from a Chechen perspective, as every journalist could write his own truth.⁴⁴

Russian Major General Zolotarev said about the First Chechen War that ‘by military definition [the war] was three-quarters won by the Russian army by August 1996, but by that time it had lost 100 per cent in infospace’.⁴⁵ Moreover, after 1996 the internet as a whole was characterized as a threat to Russian security by Vladimir Markomenko, first deputy director of the FAPSI⁴⁶, and many others who argued that government control over the information space had to be improved.⁴⁷ As a result, Russian officials put considerably more effort in the information control during the Second Chechen War, which was especially visible in the growing regulation of domestic media. The new Russian media policy in the Second Chechen War was nicely summarized by an article in the *New York Times* from 4 February 2000, titled ‘Muzzle Chafes Chechen War Media’, in which the war reporters explained how the Russian high command controlled and regulated Russian journalists that tried to report the war. An

⁴² Brian Glyn Williams, ‘Shattering the al-Qaeda-Chechen Myth’, *Jamestown Foundation* (23-04-2013). <https://jamestown.org/program/shattering-the-al-qaeda-chechen-myth/#.VpjSncuFOM8>

⁴³ Fayutkin Dan, ‘Russian-Chechen information warfare 1994–2006’, *The RUSI Journal* 151, 5 (2006) 53.

⁴⁴ Thomas, ‘Information Warfare’, 209–233.

⁴⁵ V.A. Zolotarev (ed.), *Rossiya (SSSR) v Lokal’nykh Voynakh I Voyennykh Konfliktakh Vtoroy Poloviny XX Veka* (Kuchkovo Pole Publishing, Moscow 2000) 317.

⁴⁶ Federal Agency of Government Communications and Information (FAPSI), the security body at the time responsible for cyber affairs.

⁴⁷ Giles, *Russia’s ‘New’ Tools*, 28-29.

independent military correspondent was cited who argued that ‘the main preoccupation of the military press service is not to organize press coverage of the war but to limit journalists’ access’.⁴⁸ An article in the *Washington Times* a few weeks later articulated the concern of Western and Russian journalists that Putin was reviving policies from Soviet times when the media was docile. ‘Many reporters say the message is clear: be careful what you write or there may be a midnight knock at your door.’⁴⁹ The author described the case of Andrei Babitsky, a Russian journalist who was kidnapped by the Russian authorities because he reported news from the rebel side in Chechnya that contradicted the official Kremlin’s version of the events. The arrest was part of a larger agenda of manipulation that was supposed to ‘intimidate journalists into less independent reporting habits’.⁵⁰

However, the official Russian media policies during the Second Chechen war were mainly aimed at domestic news outlets. We see that although Western journalists’ access to these war regions and Chechen sources became restricted, Russian authorities had little influence on the Western media’s narrative of the war, and Western journalists were generally still well informed. Alexander Voloshin, Putin’s chief of staff who was also responsible for the external news control, had warned the foreign press ‘not to draw up and implement any information agenda different from the Kremlin’s’⁵¹, but still media coverage of the Second Chechen War in Western countries was extremely negative towards Russia. It is striking that in nearly all newspaper articles between 1999 and 2002, not only is Russia depicted as a foreign invader, but its claims that the war is justified as a war against terrorism is almost every time debunked and countered with reports of Russian atrocities. The sentiment of Western newspapers is best summarized by an opinion piece in the *New York Times* from 22 October 1999, when the invasion had just started. The author described the ‘gruesome’ bombing of a marketplace and maternity hospital in Chechnya’s capital Grozny, calling the war ‘another tragedy’ and stating that ‘the second war will not only devastate Chechnya, it will also paint a portrait of the new Russia that looks ominously like the old’.⁵²

The fact that Western media could still get their information from Chechnya relatively easily might be explained by the internal power struggle that was developing in Russia at the same time. On 31 December 1999 Boris Yeltsin, who was among other things held responsible for the ‘military disaster’ and a ‘national humiliation’⁵³ of the First Chechen War, resigned under internal pressure. Many Western journalists, as well as former prime minister Sergei Stepashin, claimed that his chosen successor Vladimir Putin had used the Second Chechen War to gain the support of the Russian people, and his decision to move on the capital of Chechnya had ‘elevated Mr. Putin to high popularity and an almost certain succession to the Russian presidency in elections in March.’⁵⁴ This might explain why the focus of the Russian government was primarily aimed at the Russian news agencies, because they could shape the Russian narrative of the war and restore faith in its political leaders, while the public opinion in the West was of less importance at the time.

⁴⁸ Michael R. Gordon, ‘Muzzle Chafes Chechen War Media’, *New York Times* (04-02-2000).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/04/world/muzzle-chafes-chechen-war-media.html>

⁴⁹ Jamie Dettmer, ‘Putin Revives Soviet-Style Media Curbs in Russia’, *Washington Times* (27-02-2000).

<http://olegpanfilov.com/?p=4959>

⁵⁰ Thomas, ‘Manipulating the Mass Consciousness: Russian & Chechen “Information War” Tactics in the Second Chechen-Russian Conflict’, in Anne Aldis (ed.), *The Second Chechen War* (Conflict Studies Research Centre, June 2000).

⁵¹ Thomas, ‘Manipulating the Mass Consciousness’.

⁵² ‘Bombings in Chechnya’, *New York Times* (22-10-1999).

<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/22/opinion/bombings-in-chechnya.html>

⁵³ Graeme Herd, ‘The ‘counter-terrorist operation’ in Chechnya: ‘Information warfare’ aspects’, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 13, 4 (2000) 58.

⁵⁴ Michael R. Gordon, ‘A Look at How the Kremlin Slid Into the Chechen War’, *New York Times* (01-02-2000).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/01/world/a-look-at-how-the-kremlin-slid-into-the-chechen-war.html>

Furthermore, the Western public opinion was already in favor of the Chechens before the war started. This somewhat biased journalism is visible in most of the quality papers, where atrocities that were committed by Russian troops were one of the most highlighted topics. A *New York Times* article from 3 June 2000 gave notice of Russian servicemen who went on a rampage near Grozny and killed at least 60 civilians.⁵⁵ The author criticized the Russian government for not undertaking any serious investigation, despite Putin's repeated promise to pursue reports of war crimes. This article also shows that Russia's information campaigns were not as well organized as they were in recent years, as different Russian officials could either not be reached for a comment or gave divergent statements. In December 2002, former Russia reporter for *The Guardian* James Meek wrote an emotional article about atrocities that were committed by Russian troops, describing the shame and sadness he felt over 'Russia's state murder of its own people'.⁵⁶ An analysis of the war that was published two years later even called Russia's rule over Chechnya a 'reign of terror'.⁵⁷ These are only a few of the many articles that were published about the Second Chechen War, but what stands out is that there was barely any report that 'objectively' discussed the events of the war. Even more striking is that terrorist attacks by Chechen fighters, although far more frequent than Russian atrocities, were mostly only mentioned in passing, and always in combination with Russian criticism. In an article by Ian Traynor, the rebel forces were even depicted as a sort of freedom fighters when describing the killing of 85 Russian paratroopers.⁵⁸ The fact that Western newspapers used the term 'rebels', whereas Russian officials spoke of 'terrorists', presumes a certain degree of predilection from the Western press.

The five day Russian war with Georgia in August 2008 showed an almost identical image of the Western press: most articles were in favor of the Georgian government, and described Russia's invasion as an 'illegal' and 'excessive' action. An editorial in the *New York Times* on the fourth day of the invasion harshly criticized Russia's actions, arguing that 'there is no imaginable excuse for Russia's invasion of Georgia' and that Georgia's president Saakashvili 'foolishly fell into Moscow's trap'.⁵⁹ The Russo-Georgian War was preceded by multiple violent conflicts in and around the partially recognized state of South Ossetia, a former part of Georgia that had declared independence in 1991. Since Putin's rise to power in 2000 and Georgia's pro-Western political shift in 2003, relations between the two countries had already worsened. And when pro-Russian separatist groups from South Ossetia started to attack Georgian villages, Georgia decided to send in its army on 7 August 2008, supposedly for peacekeeping reasons and in a response to Russian troops moving into the region. Russia on its turn declared war on Georgia and together with Ossetian forces pushed back the Georgian army. Even though the war eventually lasted for only five days, it was extensively covered in

⁵⁵ 'Putin Rebuked Over Chechnya Atrocity', *New York Times* (03-06-2000).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/03/world/putin-rebuked-over-chechnya-atrocity.html>

⁵⁶ James Meek, 'Opinion & letters: Silent screams: Our self-righteous prime minister is complicit in the endless atrocities in Chechnya', *The Guardian* (14-12-2002). <http://academic.lexisnexis.eu.ru.idm.oclc.org/??lni=47FD-8HR0-00VR-R14P&csi=138620&oc=00240&perma=true>

⁵⁷ Ahmed Zakaev, 'Comment & Analysis: Our dead and injured children: Beslan was barbaric - so has been Russia's reign of terror in Chechnya', *The Guardian* (07-09-2004).

<http://academic.lexisnexis.eu.ru.idm.oclc.org/??lni=4D8F-4B90-00VR-R566&csi=138620&oc=00240&perma=true>

⁵⁸ Ian Traynor, 'No way back: Refugees stranded as Chechnya declares all-out war', *The Guardian* (11-03-2000). <http://academic.lexisnexis.eu.ru.idm.oclc.org/?lni=3YTR-J3M0-0051-43JK&csi=138620&oc=00240&perma=true>

⁵⁹ 'The West's response to Russia's war of ambition', *New York Times* (12-08-2008). <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/12/opinion/12iht-edrussia.1.15208100.html>

international media as the first European war of the 21st century, as well as one of the first conflicts where military actions coincided with cyberwarfare and information warfare.⁶⁰

Remarkably, even though from a neutral perspective Georgia was the aggressor of the war, in almost every Western newspaper article it was depicted as the victim. This almost prepossessed stance of the media might be explained by two factors. First of all, the relationship that the Kremlin had with the Western press was much worse than the relationship of that same press with Chechnya and Georgia. Russian IW was (and still is) foremost based on secrecy, censorship and control, whereas the information campaigns of Chechnya and Georgia on the other hand were reliant upon 'openness' and 'transparency'. However biased their stories may have been, these countries used the Western press to broadcast their own narratives to the rest of the world, and as there often was no Russian alternative (apart from official government statements) these were also the stories that ended up in the newspapers. Secondly, Russia started both conflicts with a great backlog in international support, as most people still clearly remembered the events of the First and Second Chechen War. Despite the elapsed period of time, we see that in many newspaper articles Russia was still easily linked to the Soviet Union and the Communist regime⁶¹, which were generally associated with negative sentiments.

When we compare the articles on the two conflicts in the 'quality' papers with those in the tabloids, there are two distinctions that stand out. Although the general tone of the articles was the same, namely anti-Russian and based on liberal values, the tabloid papers tended to be more 'objective' in their reports. This does not mean that they supported the Kremlin's actions, but Russia's opponents were often portrayed in the same negative way as Russia itself. However, most times these articles did not even give their opinion about the war at all, as they were mostly just pieces of no more than a hundred words that limited themselves to a short summary of events. In *The Sun* from 26 October 2002, there was an article of exactly a hundred words that simply answered six, apparently frequently asked, questions like 'Where is the republic of Chechnya?' and 'Do the rebels have links with al-Qa'ida?'.⁶² Although there is no false information in the article, the answers are often oversimplified and do not cover the entire context of the war. Moreover, in contrast to the quality newspapers, tabloids were more inclined to base their reports on Russian sources. A brief report in *The Sun* from 3 January 2000 made the serious claim that 'rebel fighters are using chemical warfare', but based this assertion entirely on an undisclosed Russian news agency.⁶³ This seemingly blind trust in Russian sources indicates that there was still little awareness of concepts like 'fake news' or state-controlled propaganda.

After the Russo-Georgian conflict, *de Telegraaf* even dedicated an entire article to the perception of a recent EU-conference in the Russian media. In the article 'Media Rusland vieren 'overwinning' na EU-top', several Russian mainstream newspapers were literally cited, like the *Tvoi Den* that claimed that 'Europe has not given in to the hysteric attacks' of the British prime-minister and the Polish president, and the *Kommersant* that argued the result of the conference was a 'victory for the Russian diplomacy'.⁶⁴ This is a perfect example of the Russian narrative that was spread through Western media. The fact that these media literally took over the words

⁶⁰ Roy Allison, 'Russia resurgent? Moscow's campaign to 'coerce Georgia to peace'', *International Affairs* 84, 6 (2008) 1145-1171.

⁶¹ 'Bombings in Chechnya', *New York Times* (22-10-1999).

<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/22/opinion/bombings-in-chechnya.html>

⁶² 'Questions and Answers; Moscow Theatre Siege', *The Sun* (26-10-2002).

<http://academic.lexisnexis.eu.ru.id.m.oclc.org/??lni=4734-8K00-00VP-B0SN&csi=234674&oc=00240&perma=true>

⁶³ 'Rebel 'gas'', *The Sun* (03-01-2000). <http://academic.lexisnexis.eu.ru.id.m.oclc.org/??lni=40GY-K4D0-00VP-B0RC&csi=234674&oc=00240&perma=true>

⁶⁴ 'Media Rusland vieren 'overwinning' na EU-top', *de Telegraaf* (02-09-2008).

http://www.telegraaf.nl/buitenland/20656754/_Media_Rusland_vieren__overwinning___.html

without a thorough explanation of the bigger context, suggests that they were not aware of possible deceptions or information campaigns. The general tone in most official Russian statements does however indicate that there was already an information war going on. The Russian NATO-envoy Rogozin for example, stated shortly after the war that Georgian president Saakashvili had an ethnic cleansing in mind in South Ossetia that would have overshadowed Hitler's actions.⁶⁵ That these words were directly copied in Western newspapers like *de Telegraaf*, without the side note that it were in fact the South Ossetian separatists who held an ethnic cleansing among Georgian inhabitants, perfectly suited the Russian propagandists.

If we want to make a general assessment of the Russian IW in Chechnya and Georgia, it is first necessary to divide the Russian tactics into internal (defensive) and external (offensive) measures. As for the first one, we see a strong tendency towards defensive IW in Russia after the First Chechen War that led to a tight government control over nearly all popular and mainstream media. Offensive measures that aimed to influence international public opinion or mislead external observers, including Western media, were far less developed during both conflicts. Whenever offensive measures were involved in Chechnya or Georgia, these were mostly part of information-technological warfare, as they were involved in military operations to mislead the opposing forces. Information control in the sense of propaganda and censorship was mainly restricted to image-making of the war in Russia itself. This explains why Western journalists could still relatively easily create a clear picture of the events, even if they were not aware that there was an information war going on.

And yet, there are some elements of present-day Russian IW that were already visible in Chechnya and especially in Georgia. One of them was the repeated accusation by Moscow that the West was hypocrite and constantly 'trying to undermine Russia'.⁶⁶ This seems however partly justified when we look at the biased framing of many events in Western newspapers. Another one was the structural denial of involvement or blame, and the distribution of false or one-sided information through Russian sources to support the own version of events. Although these tactics were applied on a much larger and coordinated scale during the conflict in Ukraine, we can already see some examples of external information-psychological warfare before that time, like the story about 'rebel gas'.⁶⁷ That these stories were sometimes copied by Western media, mostly tabloids, may be due to the fact that information-psychological warfare aimed at foreign audiences was still relatively new at the time. But overall, the effect of Russian IW on Western media was limited.

⁶⁵ 'Rusland trekt overleg met NAVO in', *de Telegraaf* (18-08-2008).

http://www.telegraaf.nl/buitenland/20652835/___Rusland_trekt_overleg_met_NAVO_in___html

⁶⁶ "The defence minister, Igor Sergeyev, accused Nato countries of trying to dictate policy to Russia". In: Ian Traynor, 'US accuses Russia of flouting international law in Chechnya', *The Guardian* (24-12-1999).

<http://academic.lexisnexis.eu.ru.idm.oclc.org/??lni=3Y5T-B9X0-0051-44RB&csi=138620&oc=00240&perma=true>

⁶⁷ See previously mentioned article: 'Rebel 'gas'', *The Sun* (03-01-2000).

Chapter 2: Russian IW in Ukraine

During the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, NATO's top military commander Philip Breedlove described Russia's invasion of Crimea as 'the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare'.⁶⁸ Many observers were surprised by Russia's sudden and irregular means of warfare, where it used its armed forces in several 'unconventional' ways. Initially to threaten Ukraine and to divert the opponent from what was really going on, and later also to support the local separatists and to occupy Crimea.⁶⁹ But until the fighting in Eastern-Ukraine started several weeks later, they were never involved in traditional combat. Mikael Tofvesson of the Swedish Ministry of Defence stated that the Russian invasion of Crimea was an eye-opener, not only because it was unexpected but also because the invasion was accompanied by large scale information campaigns that made it difficult to distinguish facts from disinformation. 'We can now see that the Kremlin's information warfare machinery has increased interest in Sweden and other European countries. EU and NATO expansion are two major issues that come under attack by state-sponsored Russian media. We also see interplay between Russian state-sponsored media and groups or individuals outside Russia that perceive themselves as being marginalized'.⁷⁰

When we take a look at the earlier mentioned OODA loop principle (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act - see introduction), we can see that regarding the information sphere in Crimea, Russia has always been one step ahead of its opponents. During the observation phase, active measures were taken to deceive the rest of the world from what was going on. An example is the structural denial that the 'little green men' - professional soldiers in uniforms without markings - were Russian forces, wasting precious time and effort to dismantle Russian lies. In the orientation phase, Russian military exercises near the Ukrainian border took the attention away from Crimea and made it difficult to predict what was going to happen, while in the deciding phase, the Kremlin made it perfectly clear that the annexation of Crimea was irreversible, which together with the relatively 'peaceful' invasion made it very difficult for the Ukrainian government to respond with aggressive measures.⁷¹

Hence, most foreign observers agreed that Russia's IW in Ukraine was prepared and organized at the highest political levels, with the main focus not being territory, but Ukraine's will to resist. In a report that was ordered by the Swedish Ministry of Defence, Ulrik Franke concluded that 'the measures taken internally in Russia and externally towards Ukraine and Western countries are best understood as a single, unified information warfare campaign'.⁷² Furthermore, in contrast to the earlier conflicts with Chechnya and Georgia we see that the Russian information campaigns were focused more on the external information sphere, aiming to influence global public opinion. But to what extent were the Western mainstream media aware of this shift in focus, and moreover, how have they assessed these developed Russian information strategies? In this chapter I will try to answer these questions by looking at several key events before, during and after the Crimea annexation, and how these events were reported and interpreted in Western newspapers.

⁶⁸ John Vandiver, 'SACEUR: Allies Must Prepare for Russia "Hybrid War"', *Stars and Stripes* (04-09-2014). <http://www.stripes.com/news/saceur-allies-must-prepare-for-russia-hybrid-war-1.301464>

⁶⁹ Franke, *War by non-military means*, 44.

⁷⁰ Mikael Tofvesson, 'Identifying and Countering Information Influence Activities Using a Comprehensive Society Approach', 82-83. In: Alessandro Niglia (ed.), 'NATO Advanced Research Workshop on Critical Infrastructure Protection Against Hybrid Warfare Security Relates Challenges', *NATO Science for Peace and Security Series - D: Information and Communication Security*, Volume 46 (Stockholm, 2016).

⁷¹ Franke, *War by non-military means*, 46.

⁷² *Ibid*, 47

What stands out in contrast to the reports on Chechnya and Georgia, is that the quality papers for the first time identified the concept of ‘Information Warfare’, and that the term was used in several articles that described Russia’s actions in Ukraine. In a *Guardian* article from 31 July 2014 it was argued that the annexation of Crimea showed Russia’s ability to ‘effectively paralyze an opponent in the pursuit of its interests with a range of tools including psychological operations, information warfare and intimidation’.⁷³ A *New York Times* article that was published a day after the Malaysia Airline disaster also made mention of ‘an information war, in which each side is maneuvering constantly for a public relations advantage and the moral upper hand’.⁷⁴ Even though there were official denials from both sides, the author strongly suggested that the plane was shot down by pro-Russian forces. These articles show that there was a certain shift in journalists’ interpretation of the Russian deception efforts, which were no longer simply seen as standard denials, but rather as organized information campaigns. Beyond that, the general tone in Western newspaper articles was comparable to that during the Chechnya and Georgia conflicts: the Russian annexation of Crimea was illegal, and ‘the West’ had the moral duty to take action.⁷⁵

So how is it that many observers still argued that the Western media had ‘failed’ to properly counter the Russian information campaigns in Ukraine? According to Keir Giles, the Western newspapers were not prepared for an IW on such a large scale, and therefore editors were often ‘baffled by the inexplicable Russian denials’.⁷⁶ ICDS director Matthew Bryza even said that although the West should be able to defeat Russia in the IW, it decided not to fight at all.⁷⁷ Three important aspects in Western media coverage of the Ukraine conflict that I will elaborate on below may support this harsh media critique. These are: the timing (or absence) of critical analyses; the lack of consistency in Western media reports; and the misinterpretation of Russia’s information campaigns.

To start with the first one, a good way to test the Western newspapers’ awareness of the Russian information campaigns, is to look at the extent to which Russian information was copied, or actually debunked by these newspapers. A thorough search through all the relevant articles between the start of the conflict and now, shows that there were actually numerous critical analyses that appeared in the quality papers, of which most were clear about Russia’s intentions. An opinion piece in the *New York Times* by Peter Pomerantsev, a British television producer who worked in Moscow, explained how the Kremlin controls all the information traffic inside Russia, and how it deliberately produced multiple narratives ‘so that politics become one great scripted reality show’.⁷⁸ In fact, most of the newspaper articles that assessed Russia’s actions in Ukraine seemed to agree that the Kremlin used deception and denial on a large scale. However, with the exception of a few reports, all these critical analyses were published several weeks or even months after the annexation of Crimea. In the weeks leading

⁷³ Richard Norton-Taylor and Julian Borger, ‘Strategy: Nato can’t cope with Russian threat - MPs’, *The Guardian* (31-07-2014). <http://academic.lexisnexis.eu.ru.id.m.oclc.org/??lni=5CT3-G4V1-DYRX-X3GN&csi=138620&oc=00240&perma=true>

⁷⁴ Sabrina Tavernise and David M. Herszenhorn, ‘Rebels in Ukraine Crowded of Past Attacks, but Deny This One’, *New York Times* (18-07-2014). https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/world/europe/rebels-in-ukraine-crowded-of-past-attacks-but-deny-this-one.html?_r=0

⁷⁵ Luke Harding and Shaun Walker, ‘Ukraine crisis: US and EU reject result after Crimea votes to join Russia: 95.5% of ballots in favour of leaving Kiev’s control: Short truce gives respite to Ukrainian troops in bases’, *The Guardian* (17-03-2014). <http://academic.lexisnexis.eu.ru.id.m.oclc.org/??lni=5BS3-RHR1-JC8W-63TX&csi=138620&oc=00240&perma=true>

⁷⁶ Giles, *Russia’s ‘New’ Tools*, 31.

⁷⁷ Matthew Bryza, ‘ICDS Director Bryza on Why The West Is Losing The Information War with Russia — for PISM in Warsaw’, *ICDS media* (27-02-2015). <https://www.icds.ee/icds-in-media/article/icds-director-bryza-on-why-the-west-is-losing-the-information-war-with-russia-for-pism-in-warsaw/>

⁷⁸ Peter Pomerantsev, ‘Russia’s Ideology: There Is no Truth’, *New York Times* (11-12-2014). <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/12/opinion/russias-ideology-there-is-no-truth.html>

up to the invasion, nearly all the big newspapers shared in the confusion and ambiguity that surrounded Russia's involvement. Concerning the 'little green men' in Eastern-Ukraine that turned out to be Russian troops, The *Guardian* spoke of 'fighters wearing mismatched camouflage' of whom the most did not appear to be professional soldiers while others 'were reportedly Ukrainian paratroopers from the neighboring Dnipropetrovsk region'.⁷⁹ In another article from the *New York Times* concerning the death of a Russian photojournalist in Eastern-Ukraine, the Russian news agency Sputnik and Foreign Ministry were even literally cited as the main sources, articulating their concerns that the death was 'yet another barbarous crime committed by the Ukrainian military and National Guard'.⁸⁰ It is understandable that these newspapers could not write their in-depth analysis of the conflict in one or two days, because the complete picture only became clear after some time had passed. Nor is it strange that they used Russian sources when no other sources were available. However, this kind of confusion is exactly what Russia wanted to achieve with its information campaigns, especially during times when the international community had to decide whether it would fight back.

Another aspect of Western media reporting that was highly profitable to the Russian IW was the lack of consistency. In Russia there was one narrative (or sometimes several) that was controlled by the Kremlin. Each Russian or foreign news agency that told a different story was accused of telling lies or conspiring against Russia. In most Western societies the opposite was true, as each journalist had the freedom to write his or her own story. For one thing, this freedom of interpretation led to the presence of multiple viewpoints and moreover, the desire to practice 'objective' journalism most times resulted in two sides to each story.⁸¹ And that is exactly what we see in most reports on the Russian conflict with Ukraine. Because events were often shrouded in haziness, only few authors dared to take a definite stance against Russia. Although the general tone in most Western reports was skeptical of Russia's actions, Russian officials or separatist leaders were cited to create an appearance of objectivity, hence spreading the Russian message. This is perfectly exemplified by several articles that reported on the Kremlin's anger towards the Eurovision Song Contest in May 2016 that was won by Ukraine. In a *New York Times* article, multiple Russian officials claimed that the contest was part of a 'propaganda and information war that was waged against Russia', and even the Kremlin's main propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov was cited, who saw 'the dark arts of the United States everywhere in the world, and the Eurovision contest was no exception'.⁸² No matter how ridiculous some of these allegations may seem, the fact that they were mentioned in mainstream media automatically gave them a broader audience.

Thirdly, a popular thought in most newspaper articles was that the Russian information campaigns had failed to influence the public opinion outside of Russia, due to the fact that most Russian stories were easily debunked and denials were often transparent to the well-informed observer. In a lot of these articles, the Russian deception efforts were even discussed with a certain degree of disdain, or optimism, that Western journalists and audiences easily saw through Russia's false narratives. However, this might have been a misinterpretation of the Russian information campaigns. Russian experts like Jolanta Darczewska and Timothy Thomas have argued that the concept of 'truth' only played a marginal role in Russia's information

⁷⁹ Alec Luhn, 'Who are the men rolling into eastern Ukraine on tanks?', *The Guardian* (16-04-2014). <http://academic.lexisnexis.eu.ru.idm.oclc.org/??lni=5C0G-0W71-DYN2-30C7&csi=138620&oc=00240&perma=true>

⁸⁰ Robert Mackey, 'Missing Russian Photographer Was Killed in Ukraine', *New York Times* (03-09-2014). <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/04/world/europe/missing-russian-photographer-was-killed-in-ukraine.html>

⁸¹ Giles, *Russia's 'New' Tools*, 33.

⁸² Ivan Nechepurenko, 'Ukraine's Eurovision Win Rouses a Chorus of Anger and Suspicion in Russia', *New York Times* (16-05-2016). <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/17/world/europe/ukraines-eurovision-win-rouses-a-chorus-of-anger-and-suspicion-in-russia.html>

war.⁸³ The above-mentioned Russian accusations concerning the Eurovision Song Contest are one of the many examples of seemingly obvious and unbelievable propaganda. But for Russian propagandists the main goal was not to come up with a plausible truth, but to produce an alternative to the Western narrative. In fact, the Russian propaganda machine perhaps even profited from Western newspaper articles that aimed to debunk Russia's lies. For one thing, it showed the general public that the West was just as much involved in IW as the Russian government, and on top of that, it supported Putin's claim that the Western leaders were no better than him.⁸⁴ Moreover, these articles helped to spread and repeat the Russian message. Although these efforts probably had little effect on most Western audiences, they did influence the opinion of those that were already skeptical of the media, think for example about Russian minorities and marginalized groups that were mentioned by Mikael Tofvesson.⁸⁵

Whereas in the case of the 'quality' media we see a growing awareness of IW during the Ukraine conflict, this was still largely absent in the tabloid papers. As budget for thorough investigative journalism is limited in comparison to the quality newspapers, we see that similar to the first two case studies, stories were generally very concise (no more than 200 words), most times they were based on information from other media, and conclusions were frequently drawn without a real argumentation. And yet, especially in the case of *The Sun* the overall tone of the articles became more hostile towards Russia. Whether this was the result of a lack of violence from the Ukrainian side (at least not on Russian soil), the absence of Islamic extremist groups or a general shift in perception is not clear. But it is remarkable that in contrast to the earlier conflicts, nearly every article in *The Sun* clearly took a stance against Russia. One of the longer articles entitled 'Vlad to Worse' described a Ukrainian stand-off against Russian troops, which were clearly depicted as 'the bad guys', while the author portrayed the Ukrainian forces as a sort of national heroes.⁸⁶

In most tabloid reports however, background information was still largely absent and the articles were brief enumerations of events, describing military clashes or international reactions rather than the author's opinion. This major distinction in comparison to quality newspapers makes that tabloids were likely to fulfill a different role with respect to IW, which could either be positive or negative for Russian propagandists. Because articles were often just brief summaries of events there was less room for the Russian narrative, and this made them a less suitable distributor for the Russian message. On the other hand, tabloid papers rarely had journalists on the spot, so they had to rely on other (sometimes Russian) sources. This is perfectly illustrated by an article in the *Telegraaf* from 17 March 2014⁸⁷, which claimed that over 96 percent of the Crimean inhabitants want to be Russian, referring to the debatable outcome of a referendum and a Russian voting commissioner as the only sources. The lack of thorough research and the unsupported claims that were often made in these tabloid articles suggest that they were hardly aware of Russia's IW, which made them a perfect target for fake information campaigns.

Overall, when we divide the Russian IW in Ukraine again in defensive and offensive measures, there is a remarkable shift in focus to the latter. Although defensive information

⁸³ Thomas, 'Manipulating the Mass Consciousness'.
Darczewska, 'The devil is in the details'.

⁸⁴ Mark Galeotti, 'Putin Is Waging Information Warfare. Here's How To Fight Back.', *New York Times* (14-12-2016). https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/14/opinion/putin-is-waging-information-warfare-heres-how-to-fight-back.html?_r=0

⁸⁵ Tofvesson, 'Identifying and Countering Information Influence Activities', 82-83.

⁸⁶ James Beal and Tom Newton Dunn, 'Stand-off in Ukraine is Going from Vlad To Worse', *The Sun* (03-03-2014). <http://academic.lexisnexis.eu.ru.id.m.oclc.org/??lni=5BN2-5YN1-JBVM-Y3YR&csi=234674&oc=00240&perma=true>

⁸⁷ '96,6 procent voor aansluiting met Rusland', *Telegraaf* (17-03-2014).

http://www.telegraaf.nl/buitenland/oekraine Crisis/22392363/_96_6_procent_wil_bij_Rusland_.html

campaigns still played a significant role in Russian IW, domestic support for the government and its (foreign) policies was higher than ever before.⁸⁸ This is mainly due to the fact that Russia's leadership has been stable since Putin came to power in 2000, while state control over nearly all media steadily increased since about the same time. What stands out are Moscow's comprehensive efforts to improve its offensive IW. Information control was for the first time foremost aimed at the international community, where not only Ukraine's political leaders but also Western journalists were deceived by vague military exercises and unmarked soldiers. The Kremlin's efforts to support its allegations with, mostly fake, classified information can be perceived as forms of external propaganda. And especially its improved information operations that specifically tailored multiple narratives for different audiences is remarkable.

The Western media's reaction to this improved IW was characterized by a resolve to debunk the Russian lies, but often without the resources or the knowledge to do that properly. Although some journalists went through great lengths to refute Moscow's statements, like the investigation of a rifle cartridge to prove Russia's involvement in Ukraine⁸⁹, we often see that confusion abounded. This was especially the case when situations had happened recently, and articles in mainstream newspapers told divergent stories in an attempt to assess the events correctly. However, the effect of disinformation on Western media should not be overestimated either. In most cases there already was a certain skepticism towards Russia's motives, and even if its intentions were not clear at first, most journalists were alerted by the possibility of a Russian invasion. What is perhaps more important are the objectives of Russia's IW that were not directly visible, as I will further explain in the next chapter.

⁸⁸ Freedman, 'Ukraine and the Art of Limited War', 23.

⁸⁹ C. J. Chivers, 'In Ukraine, Spent Cartridges Offer Clues to Violence Fueled by Soviet Surplus', *New York Times* (24-07-2014). <https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/07/24/in-ukraine-spent-cartridges-offer-clues-to-violence-fueled-by-soviet-surplus/>

Chapter 3: Western media and the Russian Information War

‘Truth. It has no alternative.’

- *New York Times*⁹⁰

The above is the slogan for a subscription campaign that is currently running on the website of the *New York Times*. And although many journalists may believe that there is indeed no alternative to the truth, Russia’s propagandists would probably argue otherwise. In fact, if there is one thing that the three case studies of Chechnya, Georgia and foremost Ukraine have shown, it is that the Kremlin did everything in its power to produce as many alternatives to the truth as possible, and that the idea of what is ‘true’ is at least dependent on the actor that produces the information and the audience that perceives it.

But before we get deeper into the value of truth and the general perceptions that Western media had of Russia’s information campaigns, it is first important to note that IW and Russia’s use of disinformation were not something new. As I mentioned in the introduction, many of the Russian deception tactics were adopted from Soviet times and redeveloped to suit the internet era. In fact, deception and lies are not exclusively accessories of totalitarian states, but seem to have become routine mechanisms in times of warfare and political struggle. In that light, the fact that the Kremlin used lies and deception to cover up its real intentions only seems natural, as openly admitting to hacking Ukrainian government websites or distributing stolen and classified documents would have constituted an open act of war. Disinformation on the other hand allowed Russia to actively undermine and destabilize its opponents without having to openly admit to it.⁹¹ But Russia’s information campaigns have gone a lot further than the simple distribution of alternative facts. It is therefore important for Western journalists to not only report on Russian disinformation, but also to *understand* what the Kremlin tries to achieve with it.

When we take a look at the Russian side of the information war, we can roughly distinguish three phases in the development of Russia’s information campaigns. During the Second Chechen War, the Kremlin’s information campaigns were mainly targeting Russian audiences, because the first Chechen conflict had shown that domestic support for the war could quickly vanish when public opinion shifted, and the war was used as one of Putin’s focal points to gain political support. The war with Georgia for the first time showed Russia’s resolve to influence international public opinion on a larger scale, although the success of these campaigns was debatable as the efforts and resources invested to delude international audiences were still lacking in comparison to 2014. Russia’s external oriented IW in Ukraine on the other hand was generally perceived as a bigger success. Primarily because most Western media were taken by surprise when Russia ‘suddenly’ annexed Crimea while it simultaneously flooded the information space with disinformation and alternative facts. But also because for the first time the Russian IW was carried out by one consistent and organized propaganda machinery, reaching from the highest political ranks to the everyday journalist and television producer.⁹²

⁹⁰ New York Times subscription ad. See: <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/2b/fa/57/2bfa578b975745c56f86699b686d4555.jpg>

⁹¹ John Haines, ‘Russia’s Use of Disinformation in the Ukraine Conflict’, *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (February 2015).

⁹² The development of Moscow’s propaganda machine is extensively covered in several academic studies. Noteworthy is Margarita Jaitner and Peter Mattsson, ‘Russian Information Warfare of 2014’, *International Conference on Cyber Conflict* (CYCON 2015) 39-52, which describes the close collaboration between the Russian government and ‘hactivist’ groups. More general studies are: Keir Giles, *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare* (2016) and ‘The anatomy of Russian information warfare’ by Jolanta Darczewska.

So how did the mainstream media in Western countries perceive this development? At least up to and including the conflict with Georgia in 2008 most Western newspapers seemed to have a clear idea of what was going on. Especially articles in *The Guardian*, *New York Times* and other quality papers were mostly written by reporters on the spot, who based their stories on interviews with the local people and events that they had witnessed with their own eyes. Notably, this still led to divergent stories, as some journalists would highlight Russian atrocities while others focused more on the refugee crisis. But the general perception of Western media in both Chechnya and Georgia was that of a fairly transparent war between two countries, in which the motives and actions of both sides were visible to the whole world. This was however not necessarily due to exceptional journalist investigative efforts, as Russia often did not even try to hide its intentions. At the end of August 2008 for example, President Dmitri Medvedev publicly said that Russian foreign policy would aim for a more 'privileged' sphere of influence in the world, and as usual the Western newspapers were eager to report on this fact.⁹³ Therefore, the relatively transparent reporting of the first two conflicts is perhaps better attributed to the lack of effective IW on the Russian side.

Despite the fact that journalists had a lot more trouble with distinguishing facts from disinformation during the Ukraine conflict, it is worth mentioning that the concept of 'information war' was reported early on. Many newspapers perceived the Russian statements and denials as efforts to deceive, and reported the war in Eastern Ukraine as a war on information, rather than a conventional war on the ground. There was even an article in *The Guardian* as early as September 2008 that first took notice of Russians distributing passports in Crimea, and the Ukrainian government fearing that they tried to stir up separatist sentiments.⁹⁴ Reports like these show that Western media were alerted early on by the Russian efforts to wage an information war. But still, this awareness came relatively late when compared to the academic debate on IW. Already after the First Chechen War, and increasingly during the two conflicts thereafter, international academics like Timothy Thomas⁹⁵ and Graeme Herd⁹⁶ discussed the efforts of Russia and its opponents to influence the information space. The fact that this awareness in mainstream media is only noticeable after 2008 either implies that journalists were not aware of the information campaigns before that time, or that the concept was not deemed important enough to be reported.

Moreover, mentioning the existence of Russian information campaigns is only one thing, realizing that you are a possible target of those campaigns is quite another. Concerning this last point it is doubtful whether Western newspapers have correctly valued the full power and reach of Russia's information war. During the conflict in Ukraine both the quality papers and the tabloids not once mentioned the possibility that the Russian propaganda machine might also target Western media agencies. The rare exception comes from a *New York Times* opinion piece from December 2016 that covered Putin's Information Warfare against the West⁹⁷, but even there the Russian IW is mostly portrayed as a war that is fought on the internet. The majority of articles that covered the propaganda war saw this solely as an effort to control public

⁹³ Andrew E. Kramer, 'Russia Claims Its Sphere of Influence in the World', *New York Times* (31-08-2008). <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/01/world/europe/01russia.html>

⁹⁴ Luke Harding, 'International: Crimea: Divided peninsula plays host to Russian warships and Ukrainian pride: Tensions have risen since the war in Georgia and Kiev's plans to join Nato', *The Guardian* (16-09-2008). <http://academic.lexisnexis.eu.ru.idm.oclc.org/??lni=4TFX-3YV0-TX37-GOP1&csi=138620&oc=00240&perma=true>

⁹⁵ Thomas, 'Manipulating the Mass Consciousness'.

⁹⁶ Graeme Herd, 'The 'counter-terrorist operation' in Chechnya: 'Information warfare' aspects', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 13, 4 (2000) 57-83.

⁹⁷ Mark Galeotti, 'Putin Is Waging Information Warfare. Here's How To Fight Back.', *New York Times* (14-12-2016). https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/14/opinion/putin-is-waging-information-warfare-heres-how-to-fight-back.html?_r=0

opinion in Russia and to deceive direct political enemies. This is somewhat ironic, seen as many Western newspapers were among the first to fall for the Kremlin's tricks during the first weeks of the conflict in Ukraine.

In fact, mainstream media were not just targeted by Russia. They were perhaps even more openly targeted by the information campaigns of Russia's direct opponents, which were militarily inferior and therefore largely dependent on international (media) support. The case of Western journalists getting free taxi rides into Chechnya is just one example of this fact. Another example came from a *New York Times* article from 15 September 2008 that reported on Russia and Georgia accusing each other of being the aggressor of the war.⁹⁸ The author described new evidence released by the Georgian government that indicated Russian armored vehicles moved into separatist territory one day before the hostilities broke out. Georgia argued that 'as a tiny and vulnerable nation allied with the West, it deserves extensive military and political support'.⁹⁹ This example perfectly shows an effort from the Georgian government to persuade its Western allies that they were under attack, distributing their message through Western media to influence public opinion. Especially in the Chechnya and Georgia conflicts this was a recurring pattern. Government officials and military leaders would gladly talk to the Western press to voice their concerns over Russian aggression, and Western journalists on their turn were eager to use this exclusive first-hand information, however biased the sources would be, to give their articles a sense of depth.

Surely, this is one aspect of IW that Russia hugely improved during the conflict in Ukraine. Whereas before nearly all the Russian comments were channeled through two or three official spokespersons, by 2014 many military and separatist leaders would gladly speak to the press, and all their statements supported the Kremlin's narrative. An article in the *New York Times* that was published just after the Malaysia Airlines plane crash perfectly demonstrated the far reach of Moscow's propaganda machine, but at the same time that it was never a flawless entity. Although most rebels claimed that they did not possess the technical ability to shoot down passenger airliners, one separatist commander apparently 'veered off-script' and told *Reuters* that they did in fact have a sophisticated antiaircraft missile system.¹⁰⁰ Right after the interview, the commander suddenly changed his story to correspond with the Kremlin's version of events, and on top of that some high-ranking officials among whom Alexander Borodai claimed that the footage was falsified and used as part of an information war against Russia. The incident showed Moscow's resolve to control even the smallest components of its information machinery.

Russian objectives versus Western naivety?

But the reach of Russia's information campaigns was not the only aspect that developed over the years. When we observe the Russian narratives in both domestic and international media, these indicate that their goals have changed as well. Whereas during the Second Chechen War there were mainly two different narratives that were used by the Kremlin, namely that of the 'justified war' and the 'Russia versus the West' narrative, in the Ukraine conflict there were a lot more narratives, each tailored for a different audience and with a different goal.¹⁰¹ In Chechnya, securing the support of domestic audiences seemed to be the main objective, while the war was explained to the rest of the world as a defensive measure, probably well aware of the fact that the international community would not support that claim. In Ukraine, other

⁹⁸ C. J. Chivers, 'Georgia Offers Fresh Evidence on War's Start', *New York Times* (15-09-2008).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/16/world/europe/16georgia.html>

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Mackey and Andrew Roth, 'A Ukrainian Rebel Commander Veers Off-Script', *New York Times* (25-07-2014). <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/26/world/europe/ukrainian-rebel-commander-veers-off-script.html>

¹⁰¹ Giles, *Russia's 'New' Tools*, 30.

audiences were targeted through new media (chatrooms, social media, and even discussion boards on mainstream newspapers' websites¹⁰²) with the use of a whole new array of narratives. This indicates that Russian propagandists were no longer solely aiming to delude the enemy, but also to reach specific groups within Western societies. Sometimes Russian information was spread through social media and picked up by Western newspapers, like the Swedish *Svenska Dagbladet* that reprinted a map of alleged protests against the Ukrainian government. Other times allegations of the Russian political leadership would 'by chance' coincide with leaked phone calls of alleged American or Estonian diplomats that were reported by the BBC and Reuters, all perfectly timed actions to sow confusion in the West.¹⁰³

When we take a look at the information that was distributed around the Ukraine conflict via Russian media and official statements we can distinguish two, partly overlapping, narratives or tactics that were new or further developed in comparison to Chechnya and Georgia. The most visible one, and also the one that Western newspapers seemed to be first aware of, is that of denial and disinformation. This is of course a ploy that was used by the Russians before, but never on such a large and well-organized scale. Whenever Russia was accused to be involved in the conflict in any negative way, the first reaction from the Russian government was always a combination of denial and alternative facts. Apart from that, false information was also often used in subversive ways. In February 2015 for example, Russian hackers group CyberBerkut published false leaked documents that suggested the Ukrainian military top was secretly selling American arms shipments to the Assad regime.¹⁰⁴ However debatable this information may seem, it was impossible to disprove on the basis of public sources. And even if that would have been the possible, the idea of truth in this matter was often irrelevant. As John Haines argued: 'The objective of disinformation is to impose a pattern on experience. It is a lens used to distort and pervert our understanding of facts. It is telling Ukrainians that their government is corrupt and has betrayed the forces fighting in eastern Ukraine'.¹⁰⁵ In this case it reinforced the recurrent narrative that the Ukrainian troops were being sacrificed by their criminal leaders.

The natural reaction to this 'fake news', at least from many Western news agencies, was to report and try to debunk the information. The effect of these 'fact-checking' reports was however somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, journalists have the responsibility to inform their readers of what is happening in the world, and to distinguish facts from lies. On the other hand, disinformation thrives on repetition, and each medium that reports the news, even in a negative way, works as a sort of 'echo-chamber' to enforce and spread the narrative.¹⁰⁶ The *New York Times* for example was eager to report on CyberBerkut in January 2015 when the group had just hacked three official German websites. While the article did portray the group as pro-Russian, it also repeated the group's message, namely that Ukraine is currently controlled by a 'criminal government' that is supported by the West.¹⁰⁷ Even if the reader had no pro-Russian sympathies, it may have negatively influenced his image of the Ukrainian leaders that were repeatedly depicted as criminal, corrupt and fascist.

Another difficulty with reporting disinformation is the sheer quantity of fake news. Research by the Open Estonia Foundation showed that Russian-speaking audiences who followed both Russian and Estonian media, ended up disbelieving both, or were more drawn towards the Kremlin's version because it was more emotional and entertaining.¹⁰⁸ A similar

¹⁰² Ibid, 32.

¹⁰³ Franke, *War by non-military means*, 45-46.

¹⁰⁴ Haines, 'Russia's Use of Disinformation', 2.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Lucas and Pomerantsev, *Winning the Information War*, 8.

¹⁰⁷ Alison Smale, 'Cyberattack in Germany Shuts Down Official Sites', *New York Times* (07-01-2015). <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/08/world/europe/german-government-websites-shut-down-and-ukraine-group-claims-responsibility.html>

¹⁰⁸ "Current Events and Different Sources of Information," Tallinn: Open Estonia Foundation, September 2014.

research in Latvia came up with the same result, as most respondents were numbed by the quantity of different stories, and some called Russian TV channels ‘emotionally attractive, because some news you watch as an exciting movie. You don’t trust it, but watch it gladly’.¹⁰⁹ When mainstream media assess the Russian information campaigns they should therefore not simply measure their success on the degree of credibility, because the most successful narrative is often the one that is least constrained by the truth.¹¹⁰

The second recurring narrative that we see in Ukraine is that of justification and anti-Western skepticism. In this narrative, the United States was accused of selfish imperialism, and anything that Russia could do to resist was justified. NATO enlargement was seen as a direct attack on Russian interests and the CEE countries were portrayed as US puppets with corrupt governments.¹¹¹ This might explain why some international policies, like economic sanctions against Russia, could to some extent achieve counterproductive results, as they reinforced the image of ‘Russia versus the rest’ and the Western countries putting their nose where it does not belong. In contrast to the earlier justification narrative, this one no longer solely legitimized the Russian involvement in Ukraine as a defensive measure or as a humanitarian measure, but rather as a way to protect Russian civilians and sympathizers both inside and outside of Russia. In this image, Russia was not only portrayed as a champion of the Russian people, but also as a victim of the Western conspiracy. One of the most repeated stories in Russian media was that the Euromaidan protests were a ‘coup d’état’, sponsored by the West, to install a fascist regime in place of the rightful rulers.¹¹² Just like disinformation and alternative facts, narratives like these profited from repetition in the international press. This was especially the case when they were supported by other unrelated information, like the *Telegraaf* article that reported on the Crimea referendum.¹¹³ It gave Russia’s actions a sort of democratic justification and told the reader that in hindsight the annexation of Crimea was perhaps not so bad after all.

Again, reporting these stories in Western media had paradoxical results. For one thing, journalists had the obligation to perceive the events in Ukraine critically, and assess them within a political and historical context. Especially in the tabloids, but also to a lesser extent in the quality newspapers, this context was based on a very Western viewpoint, in which everything that Russia claimed was unreliable while Western governments acted on the basis of ‘true’ facts and liberal values. At the same time, and here it gets complicated, this supported the Russian viewpoint that the West, including Western media, was conspiring against them. In short, there is an interplay between on one side the Russian propaganda machine and on the other the Western press. Whenever Russia produced false information, Western journalists responded by reporting an in their eyes objective and true series of events, which Russia on its turn translated into an effort by the West to impose its liberal values on the rest of the world. It is difficult to determine whether the Western prejudice is exclusively a reaction to Russia’s use of IW or also, as the Kremlin argues, based on a certain degree of Russophobia. In newspapers we can actually distinguish both aspects. During the Ukraine conflict many articles were written in a direct reaction to Russian fake news, but during the first two conflicts where IW was applied on a much smaller scale, the tone in Western media was already very negative and often based on anti-Russia sentiments from Soviet times.¹¹⁴ These accusations back and forth are part of an

¹⁰⁹ Vardamatski focus groups for EED, February-April 2015.

¹¹⁰ Lucas and Pomerantsev, *Winning the Information War*, 9.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid, 15.

¹¹³ See chapter 2: ‘Bevolking Krim wil bij Rusland horen’, *de Telegraaf* (17-03-2014).

¹¹⁴ An example hereof is the earlier mentioned article from the New York Times called ‘Bombings in Chechnya’ from 22-10-1999, where the author says the Second Chechen War ‘will also paint a portrait of the new Russia that looks ominously like the old’. This is a recurring sentiment, especially in opinion pieces, where many authors seem to base their opinion on suspicion and incidents from the past instead of factual proof.

endless cycle that sustains itself, in which people who favor one side grow increasingly skeptical of the other.

According to Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev ‘modern Kremlin propaganda has subverted and appropriated the Western concept of liberal values, meaning that it can present its propaganda not in terms of proletarian internationalism (always a hard sell) but as a minority point of view, particularly deserving of attention because of presumed marginalization or even persecution by the political and media establishment’.¹¹⁵ This is exemplified by the Russian government-controlled news website *Sputnik* that is entirely geared towards foreign audiences. It claims on its website that it ‘points the way to a multipolar world that respects every country’s national interests, culture, history and traditions’¹¹⁶ Even though Russia’s opponents would probably argue that in practice the opposite is true, the Kremlin has created an image in which it is in fact Russia that has fallen victim to the Western information campaigns, and every negative story that is published in the Western press supports this claim.

The target audience for this anti-Western narrative were not just the Russian people and Ukrainian inhabitants with Russian sympathies, but also Western audiences that were skeptical of their own governments and their own media. Russian information campaigns in Ukraine have aimed to promote Western skepticism, erode Euro-Atlantic values and consequently increase their own power.¹¹⁷ This objective of Russian IW was often overlooked by the Western press that mostly perceived the information war in Ukraine as a ‘far away’ issue. Although these newspapers may not have been the main target of the Russian propaganda their articles did support the Russian narratives, and whenever possible the Kremlin’s propaganda machine was eager to exploit their mistakes. The *New York Times* article ‘Behind the Masks in Ukraine, Many Faces of Rebellion’ for instance, was retweeted by *Russia Today* and many other state-run outlets to support the claim that there were no Russian influences or arms within the unit’s ranks of Ukrainian separatist groups.¹¹⁸ And while many Western audiences were probably not effected by the Kremlin’s propaganda because they already had a prejudiced stance towards Russia, bias works both ways. To borrow from British novelist C. S. Lewis, ‘suspicion often creates what it expects’¹¹⁹, and audiences with a predilection for complot theories or those who were skeptical of their leaders in the first place would most likely dismiss any evidence that tells a different story.

¹¹⁵ Lucas and Pomerantsev, *Winning the Information War*, 8.

¹¹⁶ *Sputnik* website ‘About Us’. <https://sputniknews.com/docs/about/index.html>

¹¹⁷ Lucas and Pomerantsev, *Winning the Information War*, 2.

¹¹⁸ C. J. Chivers and Noah Snejder, ‘Behind the Masks in Ukraine, Many Faces of Rebellion’, *New York Times* (03-05-2014). https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/world/europe/behind-the-masks-in-ukraine-many-faces-of-rebellion.html?_r=0

¹¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*.

Conclusion

The Russian campaign in Ukraine shows why IW might very well become the warfare of the future, because nothing is more beneficial to one's chance of victory than an opponent who does not fight back. As we can see from the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the fact that Russia controlled and regulated nearly all the important information, meant that they could secretly undermine their enemy, and when the government in Kyiv did notice what was going on it was already too late to fight back. The same goes for the Malaysia plane crash incident a few months later. Even though most of the Western observers were convinced that Russia was connected to the attack, and proof of that fact seemed irrefutable, the sheer quantity of fake evidence and counterproof made that Western media found it difficult to reconstruct a clear picture, and until this day the perpetrators of the crash were never prosecuted. An important side note is that Russia would have probably never succeeded without the financial and military dominance over Ukraine. But even the NATO member states that in theory 'should be able to defeat Russia decisively in the so-called information war'¹²⁰, never really managed to take effective countermeasures.

In his sixteenth century book *The Prince*¹²¹, Niccolò Machiavelli already put a lot of emphasis on the importance of psychological warfare, and on several aspects like the distribution of false information and intimidation through atrocities that have turned out to be still relevant today. As I discussed in the introduction, data shows that the majority of wars in the twentieth and twenty-first century were unconventional wars and hence information operations became increasingly important, if not indispensable. Hitler's 'war on nerves' was part of a larger plan to divide and undermine the opponent before he attacked. And even the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive in 1968 can be perceived as psychological warfare, as it was not intended to deal the decisive blow, but to show the American population that their army would never win the war.¹²² In that light, the Russian campaign to subvert Ukraine only fits a prolonged development where direct physical war gradually made way for contactless psychological war. The only major new thing here is the development of the internet as the most important intermediate to spread and consume information.

But just like the huge expansion of the mass media in the twentieth century, the internet is only a medium that highly accelerated and intensified information operations. It has not however changed the nature or the objectives of IW. Hence it is foremost important for Western media to understand the Russian objectives whenever they try to assess or counter Moscow's information campaigns. If we take another look at *Figure 1*, we see that most of the Russian tactics were based on contactless war and direct political influence ('From direct annihilation of the opponent to its inner decay').¹²³ Similarly, Sebastian Gorka argued that Russia's 'Reflexive Control' foremost aimed to influence the enemy's decision-making process. These are all offensive measures to deliberately weaken the opponent. In most Western newspaper articles however, we have seen that these campaigns were perceived as defensive precautions. Moscow's lies were frequently debunked to prove Russia's involvement in the war, while efforts to divide or to undermine were often overlooked.

In addition, mainstream media should recognize their own shortcomings, like the realization that democracy and free-speech also have their weak spots, especially when facing a highly organized state-controlled propaganda machine. In his study on unconventional forms

¹²⁰ Matthew Bryza, 'ICDS Director Bryza on Why The West Is Losing The Information War with Russia — for PISM in Warsaw', *ICDS media* (27-02-2015). <https://www.icds.ee/icds-in-media/article/icds-director-bryza-on-why-the-west-is-losing-the-information-war-with-russia-for-pis-m-in-warsaw/>

¹²¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (1532).

¹²² Boyer and Lindley-French, *The Oxford Handbook of War*, 190-191.

¹²³ See Figure 1.

of war, Christian Malis explains that a distinctive feature of today's world is the 'Western hyper-media-reactive government'. An example hereof came with the 9/11 terrorist attacks that aimed to provoke an 'overreaction' by the American government, which simultaneously triggered discredit of the US and anti-Western sentiments in the Muslim world.¹²⁴ Broadly this is also what often happened during the conflict in Ukraine. Whenever the Kremlin did something to provoke the West, many political leaders (often influenced by media pressure and popular opinion) felt the need to respond. And this was then used by the Russian government to show its people the Western world was working against them.

Therefore the current Western response to the Russian information campaigns is not sufficient. When confronting Russia's IW, Mark Galeotti claims that 'as with nuclear weapons, deterrence is better than confrontation.'¹²⁵ However, this will not work if the West tries to rely on Russian tactics and tricks. For one thing, the Russian media is mostly controlled by the government, excessive resources are spent on cybersecurity and perhaps most important for Western media, the Russian people have little illusions about their political leaders. This became clear when the 'Panama Papers' linked several high-ranked Russian officials to secret bank accounts, but few Russians reacted upset, or even surprised.¹²⁶ Galeotti therefore argues that Western countries and their media should primarily focus on their own resistance to IW. Because Putin's popularity is largely based on the image that he can outmaneuver the West whenever he wants, Western countries should not retaliate with counterattacks and accusations, but by making sure his campaigns will fail. This means that newspapers and other media, with the help of governments, should increase their cybersecurity defences.¹²⁷ Furthermore, mainstream media from different countries should work closer together in their efforts to identify and counter Russian information campaigns.

As Russian IW is two-sided (on one hand it exploits the fractured Western media environment while on the other it tries to break trust and increase polarization) the media's reaction to the Kremlin's propaganda should also be two-sided. For one thing they need to increase the quality and consistency of their news, while at the same time they must restore the overall trust of polarized groups in Western media.¹²⁸ In practice this could result in the establishment of a special European media commission that would monitor media quality, and if necessary sanction news agencies that support hate-speech and fake news. As for the problem of polarized groups, there is already a plan to establish a 'neutral' Russian-language news channel to counter Moscow's IW.¹²⁹ The channel should be broadcasted in Russia's neighboring countries to reach Russian-speaking audiences and pose an alternative to the 'attractive' and 'entertaining' Kremlin propaganda.¹³⁰ The emergence of blogs and social media means that mainstream media can no longer reach an entire audience, but Western newspapers could still increase their reach for example by providing their articles in more different languages.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 191.

¹²⁵ Mark Galeotti, 'Putin Is Waging Information Warfare. Here's How To Fight Back.', *New York Times* (14-12-2016). https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/14/opinion/putin-is-waging-information-warfare-heres-how-to-fight-back.html?_r=0

¹²⁶ Michael Schmidt and Steven Lee Myers, 'Panama Law Firm's Leaked Files Detail Offshore Accounts Tied to World Leaders', *New York Times* (03-04-2016). <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/04/us/politics/leaked-documents-offshore-accounts-putin.html>

¹²⁷ Galeotti, 'Putin Is Waging Information Warfare'.

¹²⁸ Lucas and Pomerantsev, *Winning the Information War*, 43.

¹²⁹ Kavitha Surana and Reid Standish, 'New Russian-Language Channel Seeks to Counter Kremlin Spin', *Foreign Policy* (09-02-2017). <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/09/new-russian-language-channel-seeks-to-counter-kremlin-spin-current-time-putin/>

¹³⁰ Lucas and Pomerantsev, *Winning the Information War*, 50.

To conclude, on the question whether Western mainstream media were aware of the Russian information campaigns, the answer is somewhat ambiguous. In the case of the tabloid papers we see little to no awareness of the existence of IW. Despite the fact that *The Sun* and the *Telegraaf* were mostly critical of Russia's motives, they still used Russian sources and statements to support their articles. In the *New York Times* and *The Guardian* on the other hand, there is a growing awareness of the Russian information campaigns after the conflict with Georgia in 2008. Nonetheless, their efforts to dismiss Russian lies by reporting each story individually indicates that the Kremlin's objectives were often misinterpreted and hence the response often had paradoxical effects. The general perception of Russian IW in the Western media is that of a consistent but transparent effort by the Kremlin to delude the Ukrainian population. But that these campaigns have a far broader reach became once again clear with the recent US presidential election of Donald Trump who is currently under investigation for possible secret ties to Russia¹³¹, and the even more recent French elections where Emmanuel Macron accused the Russian media of spreading fake news about him.¹³² It is only a matter of time before Western newspapers realize that they are just as much a part of Moscow's Information Warfare as anyone else.

¹³¹ Sally Persons, 'Trump sons deny discussing Comey, Russia in meeting with FBI agents', *Washington Times* (06-06-2017). <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/jun/6/trump-sons-deny-discussing-james-comey-russia-meet/>

¹³² Michel Rose and Denis Dyomkin, 'After talks, France's Macron hits out at Russian media, Putin denies hacking', *Reuters* (29-05-2017). <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-russia-idUSKBN18P030>

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