COGNITIVE ATTACKS
IN RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE

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Abstract: A cognitive attack aims to change the interpretation of the situation by an individual and in mass consciousness. Cognitive attacks are actively using cognitive biases as automatic shortcuts for the mass consciousness. This article provides analysis of the following media instruments used by the Russian Federation: changing the concepts for describing the situation by adapting older negative images and myths for the current context, creating fake events and objects to help keeping the intended line of attack on the enemy; and organizing various protest actions in Ukraine tailored for Russian TV news.

Keywords: Cognitive attack, cognitive bias, mass consciousness, fake news, hybrid war.

A cognitive attack is aimed at the transformation of understanding and interpretation of the situation by an individual and in mass consciousness. It is using the emotional stress in order to lower the rational thinking of the object of influence. During Russian hybrid warfare, the same events in the physical domain were covered by Ukrainian, Russian and International TV, but in informational and virtual domains they audiences were receiving different interpretations of the same events, leading as a result to different interpretations and conclusions.

We have seen this type of cognitive war before.[1] It is considered a cognitive war, because the main actions, especially at the first steps, are in the information and virtual domains. Russia has a need to make an enemy of Ukraine in order to justify its actions, which is a usual premise for the war.

Hybrid wars are becoming now more and more common on the international scene. As Nadia Shadlow states, "The Chinese, Russian, and Iranian regimes actively pursue their long-term objectives through networks of partners, surrogates, and proxies."[2] And, as Frank Hoffman emphasises, all this becomes possible in the hybrid war as a result of the "blurring nature of war and peace."[3] Despite being an aggressor in

Ukraine, Russia is taking a defensive position stating that the US is the main player in the field of hybrid warfare.[4]

In any type of war, and especially in the case of hybrid warfare, there is a need to predict the actions of your opponent as well as the opponent's reaction to your actions. Hybrid warfare has a goal not only to predict, but also to trigger opponent's actions, to nudge the opponent to a desired state.

The annexation of Crimea has very vividly shown this technique, i.e. the Russian model of information warfare based on the reflexive control of the opponent.[5] We have found examples of such reflexive control at different communication levels and in different domains: physical, informational and virtual. The virtual domain is using strategic products such as religion, ideology, literature, culture. If the information domain is working with facts, the virtual domain is working with trends, rules, and patterns of behaviour.

The main idea behind the actions of the Russian Federation was to block any use of force from the Ukrainian side because the pictures of deaths resulting from the annexation would not be beneficial for Russia. Today all wars have to be just moral wars. So, Russia was working on creating the perception of the voluntary reunion of Crimea with Russia and against the perception of aggression. Similarly, in the case of Donbass, another image was constructed – this was an image of civil war between Ukrainians themselves.

All these perceptions had to be constructed for three types of audiences: the Ukrainian, the Russian, and the international audience. Old Soviet propaganda has been revived, but now it was working with new ideas – cognitive instruments that can be tied with the Russian type of reflexive control, aimed at controlling the perception of events. This was the case not only for the verbal perception, but also for the visual perception, with the main source of propaganda being the television.

In terms of different communication levels, we can distinguish: communication between the leders of Ukraine and Russia, communication between military officers of the two countries, and communication at the family level, or personal communication. On the highest communication level there was a conversation between heads of the Russian and Ukrainian parliaments, where the Russian representative stated that in case Ukraine decides to use force, Russian paratroopers would be in Kyiv in mere two hours. On the level of communication between Russian and Ukrainian military officers, there were prior instances of good relationships, for instance in taking part in joint military parades. So, psychologically, it was not so easy for Ukrainian soldiers to open fire without direct orders from Kyiv. Similar was the situation with communication at the family level.

Russia was trying to show that the war was just for Russian and Ukrainian citizens. Towards this purpose, Russia re-used its old narrative which was used before in the Baltic States and in Georgia. In this narrative, Russia takes the role of the DEFENDER for itself and giving the opposing side the role of AGGRESSOR. In doing so, Russia is repeating the model of the WWII mythology, which till today stands in the centre of Russian official mythology and explains why Stalin still remains on the list of Russia's heroes. In the media Russia was using language from WWII to describe the Ukrainian soldiers as *Nazi*, *fascists*, *chasteners*. This language has highly negative connotations going developed via popular culture, movies and TV-shows. At the same time the concept of DEFENDER also has highly positive religious connotation (i.e. 'Saviour').

DEFENDER	VICTIM	AGGRESSOR
Russia	Ossetian population	The authorities of Georgia
Russia	Russian speaking population of Ukraine	The authorities of Ukraine
Russia	Russian speaking population of Estonia (Latvia, Lithuania)	The authorities of Estonia (Latvia, Lithuania)

Cognitive attacks are actively using cognitive biases as a technique because they provide automatic shortcuts for mass consciousness. For example, such bias as cognitive dissonance, prevented people of Ukraine from perceiving Russia as an enemy. In the Soviet times there existed a mythology of the "two Slavonic people-brothers," so one could not frame Russian as an enemy. Similarly, Russia divided Ukraine into two competing entities: the bad authorities and the good people, and Russia was said to save the 'good' Ukrainian people from 'bad' Ukrainian power.[6]

Day after day, hour after hour, Russian TV perpetrated this mythology of the enemy in news and political talk-shows. It was not possible to hear opposing voices in this regard.

The following media instruments of this hybrid warfare were used:

- change in the language for describing the situation, borrowing from a sample of older negative situations;
- making up fake events and objects in order to keep the selected line of attack on the opponent;

- organizing different protest actions on the Ukrainian territory for Russian TV-news consumption.

Russia was also using old Soviet propaganda tools:

- only one interpretation for an event could be seen on TV, drowning any dangerous counter-information that can appear;
- inviting biased journalists and experts;
- military actions are justified solely by noble, just motives; the enemy is portrayed as coming out of hell.

All this was aimed to support Russia's main goal – the legitimization of their military actions in the eyes of Russian population, the enemy's population and the international world. This victory was also needed for Putin's election campaign, elaborated under the slogan "Make Russia Great Again."

Ukraine began to limit the influence of such propaganda by Russian TV, when it stopped broadcasting Russian channels on its territory. However, the interest towards Russian content continued for a while, especially for political talk-shows, and for those interested it was easy to find the same content through the Internet. Nevertheless, with time this interest was significantly reduced, to the point of disappearing.

Russia preferred to remain invisible in the physical space at the first stage, as was demonstrated by the involvement of Russian military in uniforms without identifiable insignia. That is, the action becomes noticeable only at the completion of the operation, and while it is being run several conflicting interpretations can be construed. All this makes it impossible to adequately respond to Russia's actions.

In the infamous "little green men" example, soldiers were carrying machine guns while wearing uniforms without badges. They were speaking the same language as the local Ukrainian population. The latter would be impossible in case of Russian interference in any other country, for example, Estonia, where a foreigner would be immediately recognized as such because of the language used. Only in one known case, during a city attack in Donbass, the language issue appeared when one of the soldiers used the word 'porebrik,' which is unknown in Ukraine. It means 'border,' 'skirting' or 'edging', e.g. of a sidewalk, and is used only in Saint-Petersburg's Russian, so this soldier was from that region. It was heard when seizures of administrative buildings in the Donbass were going on. Allegedly, they were led by local civilians and intended to demonstrate that the local, Ukrainian citizens reject the power of Ukrainian authorities.

The actions of Russia in the operation for annexing Crimea in the Spring of 2014 followed an order presented on the figure below.

People's self-defence	⇒	Soldiers without badges	⇒	Capture of self-government bodies	⇒	Quasi-referendum

Figure 1: Order of Russia's actions in Crimea in 2014.

Furthermore, some of the sociological surveys in Crimea have been likely fake. For example, one of the crucial polls was conducted on rather strange dates: December 31, 2015 and January 1, 2016.[7]

In the era of the 24/7 television, used as the main source of information for Putin's voters, one can do nothing without a video. For instance, the infamous TV anchor Kiselev demonstrated on the screen the SS certificate issued to a man with a Ukrainian-sounding last name, while the SS certificate was written taking into account modern German spelling that did not correspond to the one used at the time of World War II. Another TV channel aired a story about a crucified boy, which later was also proved to be fake.

Returning to the cognitive biases utilised by Russia, we can add the following:

- *anchoring bias* – the interpretation that comes first is not so easy to change, and the Russian TV was the first to interpret the situation;

- *selective perception* – we see what we want to see: Russian journalists were looking for and giving negative view of the Ukrainian situation;

- *availability heuristic* – overestimation of the importance of information available: with all four Russian channels speaking from one governing centre, the viewers were thinking that they know the whole truth;

- *bandwagon effect* – groupthink doesn't allow room for individual view, which contradicts the central view of the events;

- *blind spot bias* – we see mistakes only in others' words and arguments: Russian journalist and viewers many times were saying that Ukrainian citizens are turned into zombies by their TV.

So, we can go through the whole list of biases and they will work for understanding the Russian situation. It is highly connected with the usual totalitarian propaganda tool – repetition. During this period of time, Russian television was mainly discussing Ukraine and not their own problems.

Russian hybrid war provides an interesting example with the case of Ukraine: in today's society, the TV can overwhelm the power of the Internet (where one can find diverse views), by utilizing simple methods of repetition in the news, loud voices, and numerous fights on Russian political TV shows that emphasize emotions and deemphasize rationality.

The massive use of cognitive weapons creates a new reality, in particular by influencing mass consciousness. One can examine through the same lenses also the Russian meddling in US presidential elections. Russian propaganda, often hidden behind seemingly western views, aimed to produce chaos in the minds of American voters and to increase the polarization in the US society.

After Crimea and Donbass, Russian information interventions were detected in presidential elections (USA, France) and in referenda (Brexit, Catalonia[8]) with widespread view that such interventions have not been so influential. However, the opposite view also exists, namely that "the effect of social transmission was greater than the direct effect of the messages themselves. Notably, the voter persuasion rate in that study was around 0.39 %, which seems really small, but it actually translates into 282,000 extra votes cast. If you think about major elections, such as Brexit (51.9 % vs. 48.1 %) or the fact that Hillary ultimately lost the election by about 77,000 votes, contextually, such small effects suddenly matter a great deal."[9]

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

In conclusion, Ukraine's experience since the spring of 2014, along with other examples (nor examined in detail here) demonstrates that the cognitive instruments of hybrid warfare can be very effective. They influence directly a person's mind which, unlike the case of the body, has no physical walls to provide protection.

Notes

[1] Georgii Pocheptsov, "The First Cognitive War in the World (Ukraine, Crimea, Russia)," www.academia.edu/10057232/first_cognitive_war (accessed 12 May 2018).

[2] Nadia Schadlow, "Competitive Engagement: Upgrading America's Influence," *Small Wars Journal* (11 May 2012), http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/competitive-engagement-upgrading-america%E2%80%99s-influence (accessed 12 May 2018).

[3] Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007), www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf (accessed 12 May 2018).

[4] Leonid Ivashov, "Gibridnye voinyi [Hybrid Wars]," *Izborskiy Klub*, 30 March 2018, https://izborsk-club.ru/14997 (accessed 13 May 2018); Aleksandr Bartosh, "Rossii ne izbezhat gibridnyih voin [Russia Will not Avoid the Hybrid Wars]," *Nezavisiomoe Voennoe Obozrenie* (9 March 2018), http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2018-03-09/1_987_hybridwar.html (accessed 13 May 2018).

[5] Timothy Thomas, "Russia's 21st Century Information War: Working to Undermine and Destabilize Populations," *Defence Strategic Communications* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 10-25,

www.stratcomcoe.org/timothy-thomas-russias-21st-century-information-war-working-undermine-and-destabilize-populations (accessed 12 May 2018).

[6] For additional information of the cognitive dissonance and possibilities of its corrections the reader may refer to Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (June 2010): 303-330.

[7] Kirill Kalinin, Vladimir Paniotto, Denis Volkov, Roman Mogilevskiy, and Aleksey Kuprianov, "Krimskiy opros kak zerkalo rossiyskoi sociologii [The Crimean Survey as a Mirror of Russian Sociology]," *Troitskiy variant* 195 (12 January 2016): 1-3, https://trv-science.ru/2016/01/12/krymskij-opros-kak-zerkalo-rossijskoj-sociologii/ (accessed 13 May 2018).

[8] Georgii Pocheptsov, "Catalan Special Operation: The Consequences of Information Attacks as a Lesson for Ukraine," www.academia.edu/35491801/catalan_special_operation_the_consequences_of_information_attacks_as_a_lesson_for_ukraine (accessed 13 May 2018).

[9] Robert M. Bond, Christopher J. Fariss, Jason J. Jones, Adam D. I. Kramer, Cameron Marlow, Jaime E. Settle, and James H. Fowler, "A 61-million-person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization," *Nature* 489 (13 September 2012): 295–298, https://www.nature.com/articles/nature11421; Sander van der Linden, "Psychological Weapons of Mass Persuasion," *Scientific American* (10 April 2018), www.scientificamerican.com/article/psychological-weapons-of-mass-persuasion (accessed 13 May 2018).

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