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INFORMATION WAR IN UKRAINE BEFORE AND AFTER THE DONBAS CONFLICT

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Summary

Information is one of the most essential components of the ongoing hybrid war in Ukraine. It is a critical mechanism for perception management which directs the masses for certain goals. This article mainly composed of two parts. The first part concentrates on media discourses in Ukraine in the pre-war period. Understanding this period is a vital issue which shows how narratives about the Donbas territory contributed for isolation of the territory from the rest of Ukraine. The second part focuses on Russia's information war in Ukraine. The research argues that domestic factors (mainly media and political leaders) which constructed a perception about "exclusiveness" of the Donbas region before 2014 are exploited by Russian media during and after the Euromaidan period to support its Hybrid War in Ukraine.

Key Words: Information War, Ukraine Crisis, Hybrid War, Domestic Factors, Russian Federation, Donbas Conflict.

Introduction

According to *Vedomosti* newspaper, Vladimir Putin signed a decree awarding orders and medals to a large group of employees of the Russian media. For *Vedomosti*, Decree No. 269 "On awarding state awards of the Russian Federation", was signed on April 22, but was not publicly announced. According to the decree, media workers were awarded "for high professionalism and objectivity in covering events in the Republic of Crimea," a person who saw this document spoke to *Vedomosti*. According to him, more than 300 people were awarded, including about 90

correspondents. The scale of the awards is unprecedented, the official says. For example, even after the events of 2008 in South Ossetia, President Dmitry Medvedev awarded only 11 journalists.^[1]

In fact, media framing is crucial in guiding readers and shaping their mindsets. In this sense, the importance of the media has increased even more in digital age. According to Tankard et al. media frame can be described as: “the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration.”^[2] Media, which has the power to influence communities and soldiers in wars, emerged as one of the most devastating weapons in the Donbas Conflict too. For, Ulrik Franke, “information warfare is about achieving goals, e.g. annexing another country, by replacing military force and bloodshed with cleverly crafted and credibly supported messages to win over the minds of the belligerents.”^[3] Chief of the Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov describes the information warfare as: “Informational confrontation opens up broad asymmetric possibilities for reducing the enemy’s combat potential.”^[4]

In the light of the above-mentioned explanations, this article aims to get a closer look at the information war in Ukraine. The research particularly examines narratives which Ukrainian media consolidated before the conflict in Donbas erupted and thereby it associates their contributions to the isolation of the Donbas territory from the rest of Ukraine. After that, the paper investigates how Russian media uses the discourses which have already formed by the Ukrainian media before the destabilization of the Donbas territory.

Information War Before the Donbas Conflict

Information war about the Donbas territory existed even before the war began in the region. Since the independence of Ukraine, region-centric discourses prevailed the political landscape of the country. The main discourses were ‘Ukrainian Nationalism’ versus ‘Patriotism of Donbas’ which concentrated on two districts: L’viv and Donetsk respectively. In this context, while ‘Ukrainianization’ policy is welcomed in the former one, it always goes down like a lead balloon in the later one. Writing before the conflict erupted in Donbas, Sergey Pakhomenko and Maria Podybaylo warned how dangerous could be to reconstruct Donbas to ‘general cultural pattern’. The authors pointed out: “one should carefully treat the region’s specificity and reject the very idea of imposing such irritating symbols as Organization of Ukrainian nationalists, Bandera^[5], the Ukrainian Rebellion Army^[6], etc. One should look for the uniting factors in the present time instead of looking for them in the past.”^[7]

The binary characteristics of L’viv and Donetsk also refers two different viewpoints. Representing *Ukrainianness* L’viv usually symbolizes *Europeanness* while Donetsk *patriotism* portrays *Sovietness* and thereby ‘pro-Russian standpoint’. These antipodes also produced several myths about each other. One side presented itself as a region preserving ‘Donbas Soviet identity’ and accused the other side as being ‘fascists’ who forced Ukrainization policy in Donbas. The other side portrayed Donbas elites as ‘Moscow puppets’, ‘bandits’ and ‘mafia’ and Donbas residents as ‘lumpenized’ or ‘marginalized’.^[8] Moreover, this antinomy could also be seen by the fact that people in L’viv speak mainly in Ukrainian, while Donetsk residents prefer to speak in Russian. The distinctiveness between Donetsk and L’viv also reflected in voters’ political preferences. For instance, Viktor Yanukovich, a candidate from Donetsk received 8.6 percent of votes in L’viv district during presidential election in 2010 while the candidate gained more than 90 percent of votes in Donetsk region.^[9]

Indeed, political and cultural dichotomy between the West and the East of Ukraine existed

even in 1994 presidential election and reinforced during and after 2004 presidential campaign. During the 1994 presidential election, Leonid Kuchma who promised to increase relations with the Russian Federation was supported mainly by the East of Ukraine while Leonid Kravchuk received major votes from the West of the country due to his anti-Russian campaign. Of course, it is hard to detect where the East or the West of Ukraine start. In this context, Peter Rogers who attempted to deconstruct the generalization of East and West dichotomy in Ukraine emphasized that there is not a rigid 'border' between these two parts of Ukraine. Instead, distinctiveness of East and the West is fluid and complicated.^[10] Nevertheless, a crystal-clear disparity between Donbas and Halytchina (westernmost territory of Ukraine) is obvious. Therefore, it would not be wrong to compare these two regions of Ukraine.

Media discourses are an important factor which contributed to the construction of dichotomy between the West and the East of Ukraine. Mass media from both sides played a significant role in formation of 'Ukrainian Nationalism' versus 'Patriotism of Donbas' discourses. To understand how media deepened the polarisation between the West and The East of Ukrainians, the publications of *Golos Donbass* (one of the Donbas local newspapers) during the 2004 presidential election campaign, can be informative. In general, the newspaper evaluated the presidential competition between Viktor Yanukovich and Viktor Yushchenko as a zero-sum game.

In their article, Ararat and Alexandr drew attention to the publications of *Golos Donbass* (Voice of Donbas) during 2004 election. This local newspaper was very active which used a separatist language to consolidate 'us' and 'other' profiles between the voters. For example, *Golos Donbass* published articles under following titles: "*Ukrainian Fascism-The Terrible Truth, The Second Round: The East against the West, Ukraine Has Split, Who Will Win?... Where Is Your Character, Donbass?*"^[11] The newspaper also insulted Western voters of Ukraine in an article by stating: "You have not expected such a result for the first round, dear reader, have you?... The low political literacy of many western Ukrainians played a role. They answered the question, 'why are you giving your vote to Yushchenko?' by saying, 'Well, everyone does.'"^[12] Local media appealed not to trust 'Orange' channels. Indeed, people in the region already had have a distrust of TV channels such as Channel 5, UT-1, 1+1 or Inter just like the way how supporters of Orange Revolution did not trust TRK Ukraine.^[13]

Indeed, before 2004 presidential election, the tendency for separatism among Donbas people was low. According to a research conducted in 2004, 71 percent of participants from Donetsk agreed with the following statement: "The unity of Ukraine is more important than the needs of separate regions".^[14] Comparing with the year of 1994 (only 44.5 percent of participant agreed) the idea of remaining intact was quite high which started to change again during the Orange Revolution with the help of mass media.^[15]

Throughout the campaign, *Golos Donbassa* newspaper described Yushchenko as a fascist and compared directly with Adolf Hitler. For instance, on the eve of 2004 presidential elections, an article entitled 'Ukrainian Fascism-Terrible Truth' was published in the newspaper *Golos Donbassa*. After describing the activities of the OUN-UPA (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and Ukrainian Insurgent Army) against Polish minority groups between 1943 and 1945, the article drew attention to the current nationalist organizations. The anonymous writer linked the today's fascist groups to Yushchenko.^[16] As shown in the Picture 1, the newspaper identifies Yushchenko with Hitler and asks the readers: 'Does the nation need a new Führer?'^[17]

Golos Donbassa shares another news, that can be seen in Picture 2, with a split map of Ukraine along Dnieper river and asks: 'Where is Your Character Donbass?' The article points out that mainly the low political literacy of Western Ukrainians had played critical role during the first

round of the election. To show the low political literacy of Yushchenko supporters, the article claims that most of the Western Ukrainians answers the question, ‘Why are you supporting Yushchenko?’ by responding, ‘Well, everyone does.’^[18]



Picture 1. Defaced Image of Viktor Yushchenko during 2004 Presidential Election in Ukraine
Source: Денис Казанский, Политическая агитация — 2004. Донбасс., accessed June 15, 2019, <http://deniskazansky.com.ua/политическая-агитация-2004-донбасс/>

After the first-round of 2004 presidential election, another article titled ‘The Second Round: The East against the West’ appeared in Golos Donbassa. The article states:

Voting in the first round confirms the development of the events under the scenario: ‘candidate of the East against the candidate of the West.’ Eastern and most of the central regions of Ukraine gave their votes to Yanukovych while western Ukraine voted for Yushchenko. A clear geographic split takes place based on the principle of distance from Russia and United Europe.^[19]

In fact, though the presidential polls revealed that the people from both regions see the other as adversaries and try to impose their own order on each other, the both regions’ people acquire knowledge about the other mostly through local media.^[20]



Picture 2. A Provocative Headline in Golos Donbassa

Source: Денис Казанский, “Политическая Агитация-2004. Донбасс.,” Блог Дениса Казанского, 2011., accessed June 15, 2019, <http://deniskazansky.com.ua/политическая-агитация-2004-донбасс/>

Writing in the website *Obkom*, journalist Alexey Mironov claims that local elites and journalists contribute in formation of Donbas identity.^[21] In his speech Viktor Yanukovych stated:

Donetsk region, its wonderful people have long become the embodiment of the best in Ukraine, a brilliant symbol of what we, as a people, are able to achieve...Together we want to see the Donetsk region ... where we are free to celebrate our holidays and celebrate our history, as we understand it, and not in the way that someone dictates.^[22]

Obviously, Yanukovych’s emphasize on separate holidays and history was merely contributing the exclusiveness of Donbas region. Another Donetsk journalist, Oleg Izmaylov had an interview with editor-in-chief of the ‘Newspapers in Donetsk’ Yevgeny Yasenov in 2008. Yasenov is one of the most prominent local historians of Donetsk. Comparing people from two regions of Ukraine, Yasenov states:

I was in L’viv last year - people are completely different there. Evil, caustic, though more intelligent. But you don’t get the pleasure of communicating with them. There are, of course, exceptions - but we are talking about average values. If we compare it with L’viv, only ‘warm’ people live in Donetsk. But, for example, in Dnepropetrovsk or Odessa - the same ‘warm’, if not better.^[23]

Mironov, the *Obkom* correspondent quotes an article of Rimma Fil, a Donetsk journalist who was an editor-in-chief of *The Donetsk News*. In her article Fil writes about her impressions of meeting Western Ukrainians in 2003. According to *Obkom* correspondent, Fil concludes her article as: “And the country is small but the difference between us, as the classic used to say, is of enormous size. All the power of anger and hatred for us, the Donbas people, I felt every second and every hour. They, intelligent people, just spewed anger when they themselves started talking about you and me.”^[24] Mironov also takes another quotation from the Donetsk journalist: “We are workers. We need deeds ... Our Donbas, where people mine heat by their sweat and blood for the entire country, where people gnaw out the future for themselves and their children. Calm. Peaceful. Where people are used to work hard, but not to reap someone’s harvest.”^[25]

The *Obkom* correspondent, Alexey Mironov, draws attention to the texts of Yevgeny Yasenov and Rimma Fil to show how journalists and historians contribute the stereotypes about Donbas people. As seen in the quotation, Yasenov emphasizes how different L’viv and Donetsk

people are from each other. According to him the former is 'evil', 'caustic' and 'intelligent' while the latter is 'warm', 'hard working' and 'not reaping someone's harvest' for Rimma Fil. Moreover, Ms. Fil points out that how much Western Ukrainians are hateful to the inhabitants of Donbas. In fact, Rimma Fil is merely one of the journalists who wrote such highly manipulative article about Donetsk people. Nevertheless, it should be noted that during the interview with Yevgeny Yasenov, Izmaylov tries his best to receive a confirmation of 'Donbas exclusiveness'. Yasenov, on the other hand, tries not to be part of or not to reinforce the local myths about Donbas. At the end, Donetsk journalist, Oleg Izmaylov had to admit Yasenov's realist view about Donetsk. Yasenov concludes the interview as: "I want Donetsk to be a world city, and not the capital of Donbas. This is my dream."^[26]

The Donetsk journalist, Oleg Izmaylov, also asked several Donetsk people including journalists and scientists if they consider Donetsk (Donbas) as a special place. Igor Farmazyan, one of the Donetsk journalists who answered Izmaylov's question, said: "With Ukraine's independence, Donetsk (Donbas) did receive the status of a special place. This status was imposed on us, first of all, by Kyiv and Galicia, and then the rest of Ukraine accepted. They began to tell the myths about us and then the creators themselves then willingly believed. In this mythology, the Donbass was the land of 'scared billionaires,' and the land of 'depressed miners,' and the nest of 'domestic separatism,' and, of course, the 'gangster hangout'.^[27] Alexander Naumov, a resident of Donetsk answers Izmaylov's question conspicuously:

Territorially, the Donbass as a partial autonomy should be part of the Russian Federation. Even for historian Orest Subtelny, the Donbas was not a part of the history of Ukraine. I would advise the New Nazi-Ukrainian 'historians' to reflect on this in their attempts to create a common national idea. There will never be a revolution here, because people are used to thinking in terms of money and family, and not the ethnic community. Therefore, yes, I consider Donbass a special place.^[28]

Alexander Chalenko, a journalist who left Donetsk and worked in Kyiv before immigrating to Russia, also responds Izmaylov's question in a very radical way. In this context, Chalenko responds as:

Donetsk is the capital of 'alternative Ukraine', 'another Ukraine', 'Russian Ukraine'... In Donetsk, you need to change everything - first of all, the architectural appearance... It is necessary to sponsor the local culture - writers, artists, philosophers, architects, musicians, and so on. We must create our own mythology, write a story of Donbas.^[29]

These are among the other respondents of Oleg Izmaylov's question: 'Do they consider Donetsk (Donbas) a special place? And if so, why?' After evaluating the respondents' comments, Izmaylov came up with the conclusion of Donbas's exclusiveness. He emphasizes that respondents "confirmed the reputation of Donbas people, as people accustomed to think critically and somewhere even with healthy European skepticism. Probably, after all, the mining and industrial culture, in the midst of which we all grew up, has a peculiar influence."^[30] To show how regional media contribute to the polarization of Ukrainians, Pakhomenko and Podybaylo present some quotations from local newspapers:

The nationalist propaganda very well prints in Galitchina residents' mentality, which hates half-carved hints, in the mentality which sees things black and white: the friends are all here and the enemies are all there. It is They who is to blame for our poor living standards. Eliminate them! And your life will become better.' 'Galitchina residents direct their energy towards 'national upbringing' of the Ukrainians. They want to see Ukraine as 'a big Galitsia'. They convince others that hate for the Muscovites and for the Russians is the distinctive feature of 'the truly Ukrainian citizen'. They explain to 'the eastern pseudo-Ukrainians' that

they are also Ukrainian, spoilt by Russification.^[31]

In order to understand historical identity of the West and East Ukrainians, Viktoria Sereda analyses two local news newspapers: *Vysokyi Zamok* and *Donetskiie Novosti*. Sereda investigates articles *Vysokyi Zamok* and *Donetskiie Novosti* published during the period of 1994-2004 focusing on following notions: holidays, personalities, main periods and events and the image of Other.^[32] In her research, Sereda finds out huge gap between L'viv and Donetsk people and claims that this difference is unlikely to be closed in the near future. For instance, the newspaper interpreted Soviet holidays from two opposed perspective. The articles published in *Donetskiie Novosti* mostly praised the Victory Day while publications of *Vysokyi Zamok* proclaimed the Victory Day as the day of Soviet occupation. One of the articles of *Vysokyi Zamok* comments about the Victory Day as:

For twenty years, from 1945 to 1965, during Stalin's and Khrushchov's rule 9 May was an average working day. It was not by chance. There was nothing to celebrate. The USSR was heavily defeated and doomed to ruination. Victory Day should be proclaimed a mourning day in memory of the victims of the bloodiest war in a history.^[33]

In this context, *Donetskiie Novosti* published articles focusing on the veterans' memories describing the horrors of Nazis while *Vysokyi Zamok* published articles titled 'Liberators or occupiers?', 'I remember not fights in L'viv, but screams of nuns'.^[34] Thus, Sereda's research also shows us how regional media reproduce the discourse about historical identity of two regions of Ukraine.

Apart from regional level, it is also interesting how the discourses about Donbas presented at the national media. In this regard, Yulia Abibok compares articles from three newspapers written in 2010, after the presidential election in Ukraine. Abibok elaborates articles from *Ukrayinska Pravda*, *Obkom* and *Zerkalo Nedeli* and claims that for all of these newspapers, Donbas people have a special definition. For instance, 'donetskiye' for *Ukrayinska Pravda* means people who are pro-Russian or anti-Ukrainian. Some of correspondents from *Zerkalo Nedeli* agree with these definitions. However, for *Obkom* journalists, 'donetskiye' means people who involved in criminal affairs and have mafia style behavior and habits.^[35]

In general, Donbas regional media adopted myths and stereotypes about Donbas. Abibok claims that there are Soviet ('hard-working people', 'positive exclusiveness of Donbas identity', 'feeding the entire Ukraine') and modern (mafia or bandit-style) stereotypes connected to Donbas people and local media goes along with these. The website *Obkom* clarified the frequently used words in order to describe Donbas people. Those words are: 'super suit-Adidas', 'brazing torch', 'yoot', 'gang', 'dons', 'thug', 'tough guy'. The *Obkom* also drew attention to the Yanukovych's criminal past by referring Donbas characteristic.^[36]

In their articles, journalists from *Ukrayinska Pravda* mainly focused on the pro-Russian elites and the division of Ukraine as West and East. The correspondents point out that the elites from both sides deliberately contribute further polarization of the regions. An article from *Zerkalo Nedeli* newspaper directly remarks the characteristics of Donbas inhabitants by pointing Yanukovych. The article states:

Yanukovych is not afraid of violent motions because they are natural for him. People of this temper, men descending from this region do not engage in self-reflection. Many of them have behind them a rough and fairly specific experience of a primitive capital accumulation.^[37]

Paraphrasing Yulia Abibok, it can be said that not only regional media promoted 'Donbas exclusiveness' but also national media contributed it along with the politicians and other elites. Donbas regional media adopted myths and stereotypes about Donbas and reproduced them.

Under these circumstances, it can be concluded that the information war about Donbas

existed in Ukraine before the Donbas conflict erupted. Since the independence of Ukraine, politicians and elites along with the local and national media reinforced the myths related Donbas people and Donbas region itself. All these efforts contributed in formation of Donbas exclusiveness. Analyses of pre-Donbas conflict discourses in Ukraine shows us that Information War before the Donbas Conflict based mainly on the comparison of the West and the East of Ukraine.

The next section explores the information war that began with the eruption of the war in the Donbas region. The main difference between these two periods in terms of information war is that in the latter one, the war does not occur between the West and the East of Ukrainians. Instead, Russia took the position of the East Ukrainians in the post-2014 period and utilized the narratives which were composed within Ukraine before 2014.

Russia's Information War against Ukraine

Russian Media

As mentioned in previous section, an informational war existed in Ukraine before the conflict erupted in Donbas. Historical myths about Donbas and the Western Ukraine reproduced and even the polarization between these two camps was deepened particularly during presidential elections by politicians, elites and local and national media. In this sense, Russian media adopted and reinforced the narratives about the West and the East of Ukraine which have already formed in Ukraine. Olexandr Osipian summarizes the argument which Russian mass media used to describe the situation in Ukraine after Euromaidan as:

Since 'neo-Nazis' and 'Russophobes' had seized power in Kyiv, the rights and indeed the lives of Russians in Ukraine were now under threat, and since Ukrainian statehood had ceased to exist, the Russian state and Russian people (both individually and collectively) must do everything possible to defend ethnic Russians, Russian-speakers and 'compatriots', defined in the broadest possible terms, from Ukrainian 'neo-Nazis' ('banderites', 'Right Sector').^[38]

Russian media emphasizes a number of different myths and narratives that are mostly related to the Second World War, the Ukrainian nationalists of the 1940s, particularly Stepan Bandera. On the contrary, they magnify the images of Soviet period as the 'glorious' years. It should be noted that such propaganda became very common in the Russian media since Vladimir Putin came to power. Russian media aimed particularly to disparage the Kyiv authorities after the ousting of Yanukovich and presented them as illegal, corrupt, and fascist junta.^[39] Besides, the Ukrainian military forces and its volunteer troops are "often compared to *Einsatztruppen* (executions squads), Nazis, killers, terrorists, bandits, and servants of the Kyiv junta. Ukraine is portrayed as a failed state, or a puppet of NATO and Western countries."^[40] Concepts related to World War II constantly were produced by Russian media. In order to humiliate Ukrainians, they used terms such as *Maidanjugend*, which is a reformulation of the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth).^[41]

In fact, Russian media goes hand in hand with the discourses of the Russian authorities. For example, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov called the Euromaidan demonstrators as Nazis. For Lavrov, they were Nazis who were marching in Kyiv as well as other Ukrainian cities.^[42] Moreover, President Putin defined the Ukrainian military operation in Donbas as: "Sadly, this reminds me of the events of the Second World War, when the fascist German troops surrounded our cities, in particular Leningrad, and fired directly on the settlements and their inhabitants."^[43] Apart from calling the Euromaidan demonstrators 'fascists', the mainstream Russian media links the Ukrainian Crisis with the external threats. Russian media calls both the USA and the EU as

aggressors and fascists. Additionally, Russian media has used the Orthodox Church as a part of information campaign against Ukraine. Articles about how Ukrainian army looting churches, killing priests, and civilians appeared in Russian media.^[44] Moreover, the Ukrainian government is depicted as Satanists or servants of evil.^[45]

As a matter of fact, Russian leadership is well aware of the power of mass media. In this regard, Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 emphasized the significance of information war. Kremlin declared that it must “create instruments for influencing how it is perceived in the world, develop its own effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad and counteract information threats to its sovereignty and security.”^[46] In order to convey its perspective to other countries, Russian government heavily supports media resources.

Yevhen Fedchenko, Director of the Mohyla School of Journalism in Kyiv, describes Russia’s view on information war:

For the Kremlin, propaganda has become an integral part of information warfare. Throughout the past decade the Russian propaganda machine has been structured and effectively implemented, reaching a climax during the occupation of Crimea and the subsequent devastating war in Eastern Ukraine. It started in 2005 with the creation of Russia Today (subsequently RT) and every year more ‘media’ outlets are added to this global network. According to Sputnik International, “Sputnik points the way to a multipolar world that respects every country’s national interests, culture, history and traditions” ...In reality, their aim is to influence global public opinion, distort reality and act as a mouthpiece for the Kremlin.^[47]

In order to weaken Ukrainian influence, first, all the Ukrainian TV channels were stopped in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea on March 9, 2014. Instead, Russian TV channels began broadcasting in the peninsula. The inhabitants of Crimea were allowed to watch programs of the *First Channel*, *Russia 24*, *NTV*, *TNT*, *STS* and *Russia 1* along with local channels.^[48] Following the annexation of Crimea in conjunction with the Euromaidan events, Donbas became prime target of Russian media. In this case, one of the first acts of militants in Donbas was to restore the broadcast of Russian TV channels.^[49]

Kristiina Müür et al. analyze the publications of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Regnum*, and *TV Zvezda*, online news channels, to reveal how they contribute to Russian information campaign in construction of negative image of Ukraine. As known, Moscow officials reject the claims that Russia is a party in the Donbas War. In this sense, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* refers to the Donbas crisis as a local insurgence against post-Euromaidan Ukrainian government. On the other hand, *Regnum*, and *TV Zvezda* treat the conflict with geopolitical references. The news channels frequently blamed the USA, NATO, the West and Ukraine for the conflict in Donbas.^[50]



Picture 3. Stop Fascism! Everybody to Referendum!

Source: The Guardian, accessed June 25, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/17/crimea-crisis-russia-propaganda-media>

The study of Kristiina Müür et al. also present which groups in Ukraine were the main target of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Regnum*, and *TV Zvezda*. According to the research, *Regnum*, and *TV Zvezda* focus on Ukrainian government and compare it with Nazis. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, on the other hand, not only associate Ukrainian government with Nazis but also Ukrainian armed forces. The newspaper frequently emphasized violence and terror of Ukrainian government against its people. Furthermore, Ukrainian government was accused of conducting a genocide against Russian-speaking population.^[51] The journalists of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* depicted Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers as rapist and children killers as well as drug addicts, criminals, robbers, cowards and alcoholics. Moreover, they often portrayed Ukrainian forces as homosexuals or incapable of fighting. In contrast, the newspaper gushes over Igor Girkin and Alexander Zakharchenko, the former leaders of the self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. They are portrayed as heroes, fighting against 'fascists Ukrainian forces'.^[52]

Sputnik is another influential news agency which contribute Russia's information war against Ukraine. Just like *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Sputnik* also aims to discredit Ukrainian soldiers and calls them neo-Nazis in its publications. For example, some of the headlines of *Sputnik* newspaper are as follows: 'Drunk Ukrainian Soldier Shot His Colleagues in Donbas',^[53] 'Ukrainian Soldiers Who Refused to Fight Killed Their Commanders',^[54] 'Neo-Nazi Right Sector Connects to the Ukrainian Army',^[55] 'The Neo-Nazi Azov Battalion Now Gives the Children a Gun'.^[56] As can be seen in the headlines, *Sputnik* not only relates Ukrainian soldiers with fascists or Nazis but also emphasizes how the Kyiv officials uses children as soldiers in the Donbas Conflict. Moreover, the newspaper belittles the Ukrainian army by pointing out that Ukrainian soldiers are drunk and killing each other.

Along with *Sputnik*, *Russia Today* is another tool of Russian Federation to use as a propaganda means against Ukraine. *Russia Today* also frequently matches Ukrainian army with Nazis. Similar to the news of *Sputnik*, the publications of *Russia Today* also refers Ukrainian soldiers or Euromaidan supporters as fascists and a simple puppet of the West. In its articles, the newspaper also emphasizes the failure of Euromaidan event. Particularly during the anniversaries of Euromaidan event, *Russia Today* draws attention to widespread corruption in Ukraine. In this regard, one of its news headlines appeared as: 'Four years after 'Euromaidan,' Corruption is Still King in Ukraine'.^[57]



Picture 4. “Make Your Choice”

Source: “Референдумы в ЛДНР: Как уплывал Донбасс,” Корреспондент.net, 2016, accessed August 30, 2019, <https://korrespondent.net/ukraine/3681653-referendумы-v-ldnr-kak-uplyval-donbass>

As it is seen, Russian media not only named the Euromaidan as ‘fascist movement’ but also it frequently connected it with the ‘Great Patriotic War’. Hence, Russia presents itself as struggler against ‘fascist’ or ‘junta’ regime in Ukraine and thereby positions itself as a true defender of ‘Western values’ or ‘liberator of Europe’. In general, ‘fascism’ was a common term for Russian media to describe Euromaidan movement. Another term was *karateli* which Russian media frequently referred to describe Ukrainian forces. *Karateli* is a term used for describing Nazis atrocities against civilians. This is another way of Russian media to portrait Ukrainian army. In contrast, the Russian mass media praises pro-Russian militants in Donbas by using the term ‘militia’ which is preferred by the insurgents as well.^[58]

Social Media

Apart from mainstream news channels, Russia also uses social media as an effective tool for perception management. The most effective social networks used to shape public opinion in Russia are: *Livejournal*, *Vkontakte*, *Twitter* and *Facebook*. These are social networks which are used by people to share their stories, exchange ideas etc. Therefore, it should be clarified how people can contribute Russia’s information war against Ukraine. In fact, spreading news in digital world is faster than ever. However, not always people decide what to share in social networks. In today’s world, the *trolls* mostly perform this task. In general, *troll* is a person who raises a certain event on social media and directs it to a specified request.^[59]

Describing trolling as: “posting of incendiary comments with the intent of provoking others into conflict”^[60] is common among scholars. However, it is not easy to distinguish a troll from ordinary social network users because the abovementioned definition can fit any internet user. According to Robert Szwed, the most distinctive characteristics of trolls are that “these are people acting to order, obtaining remuneration for work done, which, in the case of organized trolling, is posting messages and comments portraying certain people and events in a particular light, using selected, modified facts in, to them, suitable contexts.”^[61]

Szwed separates trolls activities into three phases: *luring*, *taking the bait* and *hauling in*. In the first stage, the troll makes a controversial comment in order to draw the audience’s attention. In the second stage, a person is anticipated to response the first comment which is mostly done by

another troll. At the last stage, the trolls distort the content of the article and thus the first post, commenting on individual statements, which makes the discussion antagonistic.^[62] These are the general characteristics of trolls and their working methods.

Although it is hard to detect who involve in trolling activity who is not, there are strong arguments that Russia uses trolls to manage public perception. According to Alexandra Garmazhapova, a correspondent of *Novaya Gazeta*, internet trolls are operating in specially equipped offices in St. Petersburg and Moscow, who praise Vladimir Putin and discredit certain leaders or their counters.^[63] For Garmazhapova, following announcement appeared in social networks in late August 2013:

Internet operators are required! Work in a luxurious office in OLGINO!!!! (m. Old Village), payment 25 960 per month. Task: posting comments on specialized Internet sites, writing thematic posts, blogs, social networks. Screenshots reports. Work schedule is selected individually < ... >. Payment is weekly, 1180 per shift (from 8.00 to 16.00, from 10.30 to 18.30, from 14.00 to 22.00). PAYMENTS WEEKLY AND FREE FOOD!!! Employment official or under the contract (at will). Learning is possible!"^[64]

Viktor Rezunkov, a correspondent of *Radio Liberty*, explains where Kremlin trolls are sitting and what they are doing. For Rezunkov, in St. Petersburg, in the village of Olgina, and also in the city itself, on Savushkin's street, there is a mysterious organization in the building number 55, which is officially called the Internet Research Limited Company, and is unofficially nicknamed by its employees, the so-called 'Kremlin trolls', 'the Ministry of Truth'.^[65]

In the 'Truth Ministry', there are about 400 people who write in social networks such as 'Live Journal' or 'VKontakte' to create a positive image of Vladimir Putin or other Russian officials and discredit Ukraine, the USA, the EU and the Russian opposition.^[66] The Kremlin Trolls became overwhelmingly active in July-August 2014. Hashtags such as '#fascism', '#novorossia', '#junta' or '#SaveDonbassFromUkrainianArmy' were used the most in the context of the crisis in Ukraine. Disinformation was widespread in social networks particularly in 2014-2015. For example, in May 2014, a photo (see Picture 5) allegedly from Donbas portraying a crying girl sitting in front of her murdered mother was popular in Twitter and VKontakte. In fact, the photo was stolen from a movie titled *The Brest Fortress*, co-produced by Belarus and Russia in 2010.^[67]

When pro-Russian activists died in a fire at the Trade Unions House in Odesa, Igor Rozovskiy who claimed to be doctor, posted on Facebook claiming that Ukrainian nationalist groups disallow him to help the wounded people. Rozovskiy's post shared on Facebook more than two thousand times and also was translated into different languages. However, the Facebook account belong to Igor Rozovskiy was created just before the post was shared. Such fake accounts were prevalence during 2014-2015 due to the escalation of the war. It is clear that the mobility of troll accounts changes according to the course of the war. Therefore, Russian trolls published most of their tweets in 2014-2015.^[68]

The record of 900 thousand tweets in the second quarter of 2014 coincided with the escalation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Russian trolls were particularly active during the disaster of the Malaysian Airlines Boeing-777, which performed the MH17 flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. The flight was shot down on July 17, 2014 in Donbas. On board there were 298 people, all of them died. According to a study by the Dutch magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer* after the analysis of nine million tweets posted by employees of St. Petersburg 'troll factory', which is officially called 'Internet Research Agency', two days after the MH17 flight was shot down, the Russian 'troll factory' has published more than 65 thousand tweets accusing Ukraine due to the catastrophe.^[69]

The study shows that right after the crash, troll factory published 40,931 tweets using hashtags such as #KyivSibilBoying, #KyivProvokatsiya and #KyivKkazhiPravdu. Most of the posts were in Russian. According to the magazine, the campaign lasted less than 24 hours.^[70]



Picture 5. A Photograph Used by Russian Trolls as A Propaganda Tool

Source: Eric Zuesse, “Ukraine government admits to targeting civilians in Donbass region,” accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.sott.net/article/292240-Ukraine-government-admits-to-targeting-civilians-in-Donbass-region>

Euromaidan Press divides the tactics of Russia’s information war into two camps: Raising the morale of Russians and demoralizing Russia’s opponents.^[71] In first case, pro-Kremlin mass media and the ‘troll factory’ emphasize the strength of Russian army while ridiculing the enemy. For example, on one hand, they were emphasizing the superiority of Russian army or Russia’s role in security of Ukraine to show the capacity of Russian army and its protective role in Ukraine’s sovereignty. On the other hand, they were publishing news about weakness of Ukrainian army or incapability of Ukraine as an independent country to discredit the country. In second case, Russian information tools aim to convince the ‘enemy’ that it is doomed to fail. Publications with the headlines showing some crisis in the relations between Ukraine and the EU or the failure of Eastern Partnership program for Ukraine were the samples of the latter case.^[72]

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that ‘information war’ as one of the components of the hybrid war which Russia conducts against Ukraine was not totally a new phenomenon in post-Maidan period in Ukraine. In other word, the information war before the destabilization of Donbas territory was taking place within Ukraine. Hence, the process was contributing in polarization of the East and the West of Ukraine which was reproducing the myths about Donbas exclusiveness. In this sense, both national and local media along the politicians and elites played ‘quite well’ to strength or accelerate the isolation of Donbas people from the rest of Ukraine. On one side, local media of Donbas region used terms such as ‘fascists’, ‘Nazis’ or ‘the puppets of the West’ who force Ukrainization policy in Donbas. On the other side, media in the West of Ukraine described the Donbas as ‘bandits’, ‘mafia’ or ‘Moscow puppets’. After all, both sides did nothing but reciprocatively contribute to the region’s isolation.

In this sense, the article also analyzed how Russia conducts information war against Ukraine. First, it showed that Kremlin backed Russian mass media plays critical role in information war. News

channels and newspapers such as *Sputnik*, *Russia Today*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Russia 24*, or *Russia 1* are among the other information tools of Russia. Besides, Moscow also uses social networks effectively in order to manage public perception or to discredit Ukraine. Russia began to use its 'troll army' particularly after Euromaidan event to justify both its annexation of Crimea and involvement in Donbas though Moscow officially denies its involvement in the war. However, as the article detailed, the concepts such as 'fascist', 'Nazis', 'Bandera', 'the puppet of the West', 'Bandits', 'Mafia', 'Moscow puppets' and etc. were common before and after the conflict in Donbas. The main difference between these two periods are that the first part took place within Ukraine and consolidated those concepts while the second period occurred between Ukraine and Russia. Thus, this article showed that the rhetoric which Russian media utilized overwhelmingly during the conflict in Donbas were in fact formed before the conflict started. Therefore, this research concludes that domestic factors constructed conditions which are exploited by Russian media during and after the Euromaidan period in Ukraine.

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^[6]Armed band of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, during the Second World War and the first decade of postwar period.

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