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## Scientific Letter

# Truth is the first casualty of war: A brief examination of Russian Informational Conflict during the 2014 crisis in Ukraine

## Background

At the request of the Influence Activities Task Forces (IATF), this Scientific Letter (SL) briefly explores and examines the use of Informational Conflict (also known as Informational Warfare)<sup>1</sup> by Russian and pro-Russian forces during the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, with particular attention being paid to key message themes as well as dissemination tactics. This SL is intended to be a limited examination of extant and emergent Russian Informational Conflict capability. As a result, it is particularly concerned with disinformation and propaganda aimed at, or targeting, Western audiences, including (but not limited to) pro-Kiev government forces and civilian populations in the Ukraine. This SL does not examine the use of Informational Conflict aimed at, or directed towards, Russian domestic audiences, nor will it provide a detailed or comprehensive examination of Soviet-era Informational Conflict.<sup>2</sup> This SL is limited to Open Source (OS) information, as well as English and at-source English translated sources.<sup>3 4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Two terms have been used recently to refer to the current Russian approach to soft-power. *Informational Conflict* was used by Valery Gerasimov, the Russian Chief of the General Staff, in a short article published in early 2013 which discussed the character of non-linear warfare (see: Galeotti., M. (2014, July 07). The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War. Retrieved from <http://inmoscowshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war>). More recently, *Informational Warfare* was used by Vadim Soloviev, a member of the Russian parliament, to describe adversary Information Operations in relation to social media exploitation during the 2014 crisis in Ukraine (see: Seddon, M. (2014, July 30). Does this soldier's Instagram account prove Russia is covertly operating in Ukraine? *Buzzfeed*. Retrieved from <http://www.buzzfeed.com/maxseddon/does-this-soldiers-instagram-account-prove-russia-is-covertly>). The two terms are considered to be interchangeable, representing the same conceptual space within the Non-Linear Warfare construct. However, Informational Conflict will be used as it implies the conduct of hostile action outside of a declared state of war (i.e., Operations Other Than War), which best represents the crisis in Ukraine.

<sup>2</sup> Informational Conflict is the contemporary term used by the Russians to conceptually identify and bound the broad set of information-related capabilities applied in a Non-Linear Warfare context. Other than "political and psychological warfare" or "special propaganda," there does not seem to be a Soviet-era equivalent that conceptually encompasses both Active Measures and military deception. For ease of readership, Informational Conflict will be used throughout the paper to refer to both Soviet-era (pre-1991) and Russian (post-1991 / contemporary) information-related capabilities in support of non-linear warfare.

<sup>3</sup> Due to space and time limitations, this report should be considered an initial and limited examination of the problem space. It is recognised that a comprehensive and detailed analysis and assessment of Russian Informational Conflict is required. In order to confirm some English-language sources, a limited number of Russian-language sources were utilised in this study.

<sup>4</sup> Classified information was not used in this analysis in order to allow for broad dissemination of the results to various defence and security partners, including academic partners.



## Statement of results

Based upon the examination of Open Source (OS) information collected between 15 February and 15 September 2014, including primary source data collected via social media, this author makes the following conclusions:

1. Russian / pro-Russian Informational Conflict is largely focused at the strategic-political level (i.e., they qualify as Active Measures), with limited military-specific or focused interventions;
2. Little attention is being paid by Russian / pro-Russian forces to develop the reality, or system of facts, surrounding or underpinning Informational Conflict; and,
3. The current approach is highly decentralised and extensive use of proxies are made, including private and state-sponsored or controlled media outlets as well as non-state actors, such as labour unions and criminal gangs.

## Discussion of results

The 2014 crisis in Ukraine is seen by a number of military and political analysts as a clear demonstration of the level of advancement of Russia's Informational Conflict capabilities, especially as a leading line of effort within a larger Non-Linear or Hybrid Warfare construct.<sup>5 6 7</sup> In addition, many analysts argue that Western governments' Information Operations (Info Ops) capability is comparatively immature, lacking in both theoretical and conceptual development.<sup>8 9 10</sup>

The purpose of this SL is to examine the use of Informational Conflict by Russian and pro-Russian forces during the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. The overall objective of this SL is threefold:

1. To identify and briefly discuss key message themes used by Russian / pro-Russian forces;
2. To identify and briefly discuss methods and approaches, including new or emergent tactics; and,
3. To identify implications for future conflict and to make recommendations in order to better prepare the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to identify and counter adversary Informational Conflict.

To achieve the objective, the discussion will be divided into three sections. The first section is a brief overview of Soviet (i.e., pre-1991) Informational Conflict capability. The second section will be a discussion of the main Informational Conflict activities by Russian / pro-Russian forces

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<sup>5</sup> In this construct, conventional fighting forces are subordinate to, and support, special forces and Informational Conflict capabilities. It should also be noted that there is a blurring between the states / conditions of peace and war. In other words, nations are in a perpetual state of *simmering conflict*.

<sup>6</sup> Pomerantsev, P. (2014, May 05). How Putin is reinventing warfare. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/05/05/how\\_putin\\_is\\_reinventing\\_warfare](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/05/05/how_putin_is_reinventing_warfare).

<sup>7</sup> Herszenhorn, D.M. (2014, April 15). Russia is quick to bend truth about Ukraine. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://nytimes.com/2014/04/16/world/europe/russia-is-quick-to-bend-truth-about-ukraine.html?\\_r=0](http://nytimes.com/2014/04/16/world/europe/russia-is-quick-to-bend-truth-about-ukraine.html?_r=0).

<sup>8</sup> Pomerantsev, P.

<sup>9</sup> Goble, P. (2014, August 13). Lies, damned lies and Russian disinformation. *The Jamestown Foundation*. Retrieved from [http://jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=42745#.VEhgWv5FLIQ](http://jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42745#.VEhgWv5FLIQ).

<sup>10</sup> Darczewska, J. (2014, May). The anatomy of Russian information warfare: The Crimean operation, a case study. *Centre for Eastern Studies*, No 42.



employed during the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, specifically the key message themes and tactics. The third section will be a list of implications for future conflict as well as recommendations to the CAF to better identify and counter adversary Informational Conflict.

### **Soviet Active Measures and Maskirovka**

Although going through several stages of development, in particular between the late 1940s and 1970s, the Soviets had a well-formulated and expansive Informational Conflict capability dating back to the Russian Revolution of 1917. Vladimir Lenin recognized the importance of propaganda and deception, and captured these ideas in his writings, which became “required reading for Marxist revolutionaries” and served as the foundation for Soviet Informational Conflict capability development throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Informational Conflict played a central role in Communist ideology throughout this entire period, as it was regarded as a key tactic in the defence of the proletariat in class warfare.

In general, Soviet Informational Conflict was divided into two broad, and overlapping, forms; that of (1) *Aktivnyye Meropriyatiya*, or Active Measures, and (2) *Maskirovka*, or military deception (see Annex A).

Active Measures can be understood or loosely interpreted as a cross between psychological and political warfare. At least historically, this element of Informational Conflict was coordinated by state security intelligence services (i.e., *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*, or KGB, and its predecessors) and functioned at the political-military strategic level. The objective of Active Measures was to focus on, and exploit, an adversary’s vulnerabilities in order to “extend Soviet influence and power around the world.”<sup>12 13</sup>

Active Measures was further divided into three sub-forms; that of (a) *Disinformation*, (b) *Propaganda*, and (c) *Influence Operations*.<sup>14</sup>

Disinformation aimed to deceive the target by providing false information and assumed that the target would reach a specified conclusion, as determined by the initiator.<sup>15</sup> In addition, disinformation could be political, military, economic, intelligence or scientific in nature. However, for disinformation to be successful they were – at the very least – grounded in reality or exploited generally accepted views.

Propaganda was largely designed to exploit a commonly held misperception by providing sensational facts as evidence, usually through a proxy. Essentially, propaganda exploited the notion of the “cult of the published word.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, if the mass media talked about it, then the propaganda activity was considered (for the most part) to be successful. To conduct propaganda activities, Soviet intelligence services would send western newspapers forged or anonymous letters (i.e., they would provide leads), or would co-opt or exploit a proxy to deliver the information.

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<sup>11</sup> Bittman, L. (1985). *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider’s View*. Pergamon-Brassey’s International Defence Publishers, Washington.

<sup>12</sup> Bittman, L. (1972). *The Deception Game: Czechoslovak Intelligence in Soviet Political Warfare*. Syracuse University Research Cooperative, Syracuse.

<sup>13</sup> Bittman, L. (1972). *The Deception Game: Czechoslovak Intelligence in Soviet Political Warfare*. Syracuse University Research Cooperative, Syracuse.

<sup>14</sup> Bittman, L. (1972). *The Deception Game: Czechoslovak Intelligence in Soviet Political Warfare*. Syracuse University Research Cooperative, Syracuse.

<sup>15</sup> Schultz, R.H. & Godson, R. (1986). *Desinformatzia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategy*. Pergamon-Brassey, Washington, D.C.

<sup>16</sup> Bittman, L. (1972).



Influence operations were specifically designed to shape the development of the target's domestic or foreign policy. However, the difference between propaganda / disinformation operations and influence operations is that the latter does not seek publicity or otherwise exploit existing media structures, largely due to the high level of political risk. In essence, influence operations used an agent or sought to exploit or leverage a specific target to shape a particular policy issue. Moreover, influence operations were conducted as "single or long-range" activities - meaning that they were resourced for a specific outcome and are (generally) not designed to have immediate impact.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of the design and execution of Active Measures, several points should be noted:

1. Active Measures were largely planned and executed in a decentralised fashion;
2. All available political, military, social and economic assets were used in the conduct of Active Measures;<sup>18</sup>
3. The Soviets did not recognise a distinction between propaganda and action, political and military action, or overt and covert actions (i.e., they took a holistic perspective);<sup>19</sup>
4. Disinformation, propaganda and influence operations were not conducted as discrete or isolated activities; rather, Informational Conflict combined elements of all three; and,
5. There were no moral or ethical constraints on Active Measures; rather, morality was subordinate to the interests of class war, and anything that could defeat capitalism was considered justified and legitimate.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike Active Measures, which were coordinated and conducted by state security intelligence services and conducted at the political-military strategic level, Soviet military deception (Maskirovka) was conducted by the Main Intelligence Directorate (*Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye*, or GRU) and was applied at all levels of war.<sup>21</sup> In essence, military deception can be understood as the deliberate misleading of the enemy regarding one's intentions or forces in order to cause the enemy to make a wrong or faulty decision, thus compromising his position or forces.<sup>22</sup>

Soviet military deception can be divided into four sub-forms; that of (a) *camouflage and concealment*, (b) *imitation*, (c) *demonstration*, and (d) *disinformation*. Although not necessarily limited to tactical level applications, camouflage and concealment were largely concerned with hiding or disguising forces and equipment. Imitation was largely focused on the development and deployment of decoys, but also included the use of electronic signals to create false impressions - such as the existence of (false) units through increased radio traffic. Demonstration was the classic manoeuvre of forces and the use of feints. Lastly, disinformation, while largely applied in or to the military strategic and political realm, was the release of faulty or misleading information.

In terms of the design and employment of military deception, the following should be noted:

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<sup>17</sup> Bittman, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> Hutchinson, W. (2006). Information warfare and deception. *Informing Science*, Vol 9.

<sup>19</sup> Bittman, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> Bittman, 1985.

<sup>21</sup> Bittman, 1985.

<sup>22</sup> Moeller.



1. Military deception was not codified in any single doctrine. Rather, it was considered and applied as a military art.<sup>23</sup> In other words, while Soviet military doctrine may reference military deception, it did not provide a definitive account of the concepts, structure and application of the principles,<sup>24</sup>
2. Several guidelines for the application of military deception were identified, including activeness, plausibility, continuity, timeliness, and diversity;<sup>25</sup> and,
3. Secrecy was paramount for military deception activities to be successful, including the planning and procurement and deployment of assets.<sup>26</sup>

Although the Soviet approach to Informational Conflict was both robust and comprehensive, there were no clear lines between political and military applications. While specific directorates were generally responsible for the planning and execution of Informational Conflict at the various levels of engagement (e.g., KGB at the political-military strategic level, and GRU at all levels of war), there was an overlap in responsibilities in the broader Informational Conflict concept. Coupled with the Soviet total war approach to class struggle and the defence of the proletariat against capitalism, it is reasonable to conclude that this overlap was intentional and designed to bring all available assets to bear to defeat the enemy in the Informational Conflict domain.

### **Russian / pro-Russian use of Information Conflict in Ukraine**

The most significant challenge of examining Russian Informational Conflict is the paucity of primary source material, such as Russian (i.e., post-1991) military doctrine, doctrinal guides, or position papers. As a result, this analysis assumes that Russian Informational Conflict remains the same as it did prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and that responsibility for Active Measures transferred to the Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK) and then to the Federal Security Bureau (FSB), and responsibility for the Military Deception remained with the GRU.

Although it can be argued that Russian Informational Conflict activities directed at the West and the Ukraine started in earnest November / December 2013, in particular with Putin's offer to buy Ukraine's debt and provide cheap energy, this analysis (due to its limited scope) is primarily concerned with Russian Informational Conflict activities conducted between January and September 2014.<sup>27 28</sup>

In total, four (4) general tactics and ten (10) message themes have been identified:<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Butts, G.K. (1999). *Russian deception operations: Another tool for the kit bag* (unpublished dissertation). School of Advanced Military Studies, Leavenworth.

<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that deception does not appear in Soviet military doctrine. However, there does not appear to be a single source or doctrinal guide for its application. Military deception, as a concept, does appear throughout Soviet doctrine, but references appear to be superficial and not provide guidance on 'how to apply' deception to enable military operations.

<sup>25</sup> Butts, G.K.

<sup>26</sup> Butts, G.K.

<sup>27</sup> One could reasonably argue that the current Informational Conflict campaign actually started in 2010 with Russian interference in the Ukraine parliamentary elections.

<sup>28</sup> MacKinnon, M. (2013, December 17). Putin outbids EU with \$15-billion bailout offer to Ukraine. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <http://theglobeandmail.com/news/world/putin-outbids-eu-with-15-billion-bailout-offer-to-ukraine/article16015367/>.

<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive list; rather, it identifies the most prominent tactics and themes. A more comprehensive analysis is recommended as a follow-on activity.



## Tactics:

1. Use of proxy agents or undeclared forces to foment instability or secure or occupy strategic assets. Examples include the use of the Night Wolves (a Russian motorcycle gang linked to Putin) to host anti-Kiev rallies in eastern Ukraine, use of trade unions as protestors / counter-protestors and to occupy government buildings, and the use of “Little Green Men” and other undeclared special forces / paramilitary assets to secure critical infrastructure, such as key government buildings, airports, and military bases.<sup>30 31 32 33 34</sup>
2. Use of proxy agents to facilitate Informational Conflict, in particular through social media. Known as the “Russian Troll Army”, a group of special media activists / contractors have been used to effectively “troll” social media sites and online news media, and post comments legitimising and promoting the Russian position and undermining or attacking NATO and the US.<sup>35</sup> According to several news articles, the social media trolls are employed by a company called the Internet Research Agency, which is based in Saint Petersburg, Russia;<sup>36</sup>
3. Use of state-sponsored / controlled and private media to promote Putin’s message and the Russian narrative.<sup>37</sup> According to news media reports, Anonymous International (which is a hacker collective) released a list of pre-packaged news stories allegedly prepared by the Kremlin for use by Russia’s central TV stations.<sup>38</sup> Direction to the news media included the need to justify the Russian annexation of Crimea, to describe the Kiev government as being under the influence of criminals and fascists, and to laud Putin’s efforts. Other news media outlets, such as RT, have acknowledged that they serve as information disseminators (in essence, propagandists) for the Kremlin; and,<sup>39 40</sup>
4. Use of official voices, largely to reinforce the Russian narrative but also to amplify disinformation initially propagated via unofficial channels (i.e., social media feeds or news media). For example, a Russian political leader or government spokesperson

<sup>30</sup> Rosenberg, S. (2014, April 30). Ukraine crisis: Meeting the little green men. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27231649>.

<sup>31</sup> MacAskill, E. (2014, April 22). Does US evidence prove Russian special forces are in eastern Ukraine. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/22/sp-does-us-evidence-prove-russian-special-forces-are-in-eastern-ukraine>.

<sup>32</sup> Mohammed, A., & Grove, T. (2014, April 08). U.S. accuses Russian agents of stirring eastern Ukraine unrest. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/08/us-ukraine-crisis-idUSBREA370RU20140408>.

<sup>33</sup> Falstead, P. (2014, March 04). OSCE evidence lifts lid on ‘little green men’ in Crimea. *Janes Defence Weekly*. Retrieved from <http://www.janes.com/article/35275/osce-evidence-lifts-lid-on-little-green-men-in-crimea>.

<sup>34</sup> Alsop, H. (2014, March 02). Meet the Night Wolves – Putin’s Hell’s Angels. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/10670244/Meet-the-Night-Wolves-Putins-Hells-Angels.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Sindelar, D. (2014, August 12). The Kremlin’s Troll Army. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/the-kremlins-troll-army/375932/>.

<sup>36</sup> Seddon.

<sup>37</sup> Schrad, M.L. (2014, March 28). Russia’s propaganda war will backfire. *The Moscow Times*. Retrieved from <http://themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/russias-propaganda-war-will-backfire/501100.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Staff writer. (2014, March 28). ‘Anonymous International’ leaks Kremlin’s instructions to Russian TV. *Global Voices*. Retrieved from <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2014/03/28/anonymous-international-leaks-kremlins-instructions-to-russian-tv/>.

<sup>39</sup> Matlack, C. (2014, June 04). Does Russia’s global media empire distort the news? You be the judge. *Business Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2014-06-04/does-russias-global-media-empire-distort-the-news-you-be-the-judge18/38>.

<sup>40</sup> Darczewska.



would reference unsourced or otherwise unverified information from Russian news media outlets, using the information to justify a position or policy.<sup>41</sup>

#### Message Themes:

1. Inflated Ukrainian casualties. Used throughout the conflict, these stories generally report significant Ukrainian casualties, but low pro-Russian force casualties, during specific engagements. These stories, which appear in pro-Russian media or blogs, often utilise an official voice, such as a local politician or pro-Russian force commander. However, the stories tend not to offer any supporting evidence. For example, in a May 2014 article, Vyacheslav Ponomarev, the People's Mayor of Slavyansk, stated that Ukrainian forces suffered 650 killed or wounded during a recent engagement, whereas pro-Russian forces only incurred 8 killed and 3 wounded.<sup>42</sup> These reports are often amplified (e.g., picked-up, repeated and subsequently reinforced) by other media outlets or bloggers;
2. Accusations of US mercenaries and CIA interference. First appearing in late February and early March, Russian bloggers and news media reported that US mercenaries deployed to Ukraine to assist the Kiev-government and conduct counter-terrorism operations.<sup>43</sup> At least two videos appeared on YouTube showing unidentified special forces in eastern Ukraine.<sup>44</sup> <sup>45</sup> The media reports allege the special forces were actually mercenaries from Greystone, a US-based security company (formerly known as Blackwater). Reports of US mercenaries were later "confirmed" by anonymous Russian government sources, which led to subsequent media reports. These media reports were then used as "proof" by high level Russian politicians of US interference.<sup>46</sup> An off-shoot of the original story included a report of several US mercenaries and CIA agents being killed when the helicopter they were traveling in was shot-down by pro-Russian forces. However, no proof (of the US or CIA connection) emerged or was provided to substantiate the story.<sup>47</sup>
3. No Russian forces operating in Ukraine. The Russian government actively countered accusations that it had military forces operating in eastern Ukraine. In some cases, the message was modified in that pro-Russian force leaders admitted to having Russians in their units, but denied they are Russian military. Later in the conflict, the message was changed to say that Russian military members were fighting with pro-Russian forces, but

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<sup>41</sup> Coalson, R. (2014, March 05). Russia wags the dog with Ukraine disinformation campaign, *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-big-lie-ukraine/25286568.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Staff writer. (2014, May 17). 650 Ukrainian soldiers killed, wounded in source of special operation - Slavyansk 'Peoples' Mayor'. *The Voice of Russia*. Retrieved from <http://themoscowtimes.com/news/article/lavrov-lashes-out-at-kyiv-and-u-s-as-violence-persists/498856.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Staff writer. (2014, May 11). 400 US commandos help Kiev in its military offensive in east Ukraine – reports. *The Voice of Russia*. Retrieved from [http://voiceofrussia.com/news/2014\\_05\\_11/400-US-commandos-help-Kiev-in-its-military-offensive-in-east-Ukraine-reports-8880/](http://voiceofrussia.com/news/2014_05_11/400-US-commandos-help-Kiev-in-its-military-offensive-in-east-Ukraine-reports-8880/).

<sup>44</sup> Notably, one of the videos had an English-language embedded description.

<sup>45</sup> Gayle, D. (2014, March 08). Has Blackwater been deployed to Ukraine? *The Daily Mail Online*. Retrieved from <http://dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2576490/Are-Blackwater-active-Ukraine-Videos-spark-talk-U-S-mercenary-outfit-deployed-Donetsk.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Sukhov, O. (2014, April 23). Lavrov lashes out at Kiev and U.S. as violence persists. *The Moscow Times*. Retrieved from <http://themoscowtimes.com/news/article/lavrov-lashes-out-at-kyiv-and-u-s-as-violence-persists/498856.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Staff writer. (2014, April 08). US contractors Greystone denies its 'mercenaries' in Ukraine. ABC News. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/greystone-firm-accused-disguising-mercenaries-ukrainians/story?id=23243761>.



that these members (i.e., the Russian military) were “on vacation”.<sup>48 49 50</sup> On at least two occasions, Russian soldiers used social media and posted messages that suggested or indicated they were either physically in Ukraine or were participating in military action against Ukraine forces (but from the Russian side of the border). In one incident, a soldier’s social media profile geo-tagged him well inside Ukraine, and in the other the soldier posted a status update saying he was involved in the shelling of Ukraine positions from across the border.<sup>51</sup> In the latter incident, the soldier went on Russian TV and stated that his social media account was hacked, and denied any involvement in attacking Ukraine positions. However, following these incidents, Russian lawmakers introduced legislation that effectively banned soldiers from using social media while on active duty;

4. Denial of Russian casualties. The Russian government continues to publicly deny accusations that Russian soldiers have been killed or wounded fighting in Ukraine, although they admit some casualties were the result of military exercises near the Russia-Ukraine border. Although some reports of Russian casualties have emerged from inside Russia, largely from relatives of the deceased soldiers or from human rights groups, Russian government officials, such as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, have been quick to declare the stories to be Western propaganda and disinformation.<sup>52 53 54</sup> Independent journalists in Russia have tried to investigate stories of Russian casualties, reporting that they discovered several unmarked graves as well as marked graves of Russian soldiers whose (now dormant) social media profiles suggest they were deployed near the border.<sup>55</sup> Journalists have also reported acts of intimidation and have been threatened with violence if they report on the story,<sup>56</sup>
5. Mass desertion by Ukraine soldiers. A number of articles about mass desertion of Ukraine soldiers appeared early-on in, and have re-appeared with some regularity throughout, the conflict. Russian news media reports provide little or no evidence to

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<sup>48</sup> In one incident in which several Russian paratroopers were captured by Ukrainian authorities, the Russian government dismissed the transgression as a simple navigational mistake. See: Oliphant, R. (2014, August 26). Russian paratroopers captured in Ukraine ‘accidentally crossed border’. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/11056312/Russian-paratroopers-captured-in-Ukraine-accidentally-crossed-border.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Staff Writer. (2014, August 28). Serving Russian soldiers on leave fighting Ukraine troops alongside rebels, pro-Russian separatist leader says. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/angela-merkel/11060559/Serving-Russian-soldiers-on-leave-fighting-Ukrainian-troops-alongside-rebels-pro-Russian-separatist-leader-says.html>.

<sup>50</sup> One pro-Russian separatist leader stated that between 3,000 and 4,000 serving Russian soldiers (on leave from the Russian military) were fighting in his units in eastern Ukraine.

<sup>51</sup> Parfitt, T. (2014, July 31). Instagram pictures suggest Russian soldier served in Ukraine. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11003395/Instagram-pictures-suggest-Russian-soldier-served-in-Ukraine.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Staff Writer. (2014, June 28). Donbass separatists told about connections with Russian military. *Ukraine Truth*. <http://ukraine-truth.com/2014/06/donbass-separatists-told-connections-russian-militants/>.

<sup>53</sup> Staff Writer. (2014, June 27). Evidence of paid Russian mercenaries in Donbass mounting. *Ukraine Truth*. <http://ukraine-truth.com/2014/06/evidence-paid-russian-mercenaries-donbass-mounting/>.

<sup>54</sup> Grove, T. (2014, August 28). Over 100 Russian soldiers killed in single Ukraine battle – Russian rights activists. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/08/28/uk-ukraine-crisis-russia-casualties-idUKKBN0GS20H20140828>.

<sup>55</sup> Kovensky, J. (2014, August 28). Russia is burying soldiers in unmarked graves just to conceal their role in Ukraine. *New Republic*. <http://newrepublic.com/article/119262/russia-burying-soldiers-unmarked-graves-hide-invasion>

<sup>56</sup> Staff Writer. (2014, August 27). Russian reporters ‘attacked at secret soldier burials’. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://bbc.com/news/world-europe-28949582>.



support the allegation of desertion, surrendering soldiers are reported as deserters, or numbers are inflated;<sup>57 58 59</sup>

6. Accusations of ethno-linguistic genocide, anti-Semitism and rampant fascism in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. One of the key aspects of the Russian narrative on Ukraine is that the Kiev government and pro-Kiev forces perpetrate systemic human rights abuses against ethnic Russians in Ukraine, as well as perpetrating acts of intimidation against other minorities, including the Ukrainian Jewish population.<sup>60 61</sup> The Russian narrative portrays the Russian and pro-Russian forces as “defenders of innocent”.<sup>62</sup> Although Russian news media often amplifies the Kremlin narrative, they have not provided any evidence to support the accusations of systematic persecution of ethnic Russians or the Jewish population, including (but not limited to) accusations of genocide;
7. Malaysian MH17 was shot-down by Ukrainian forces. In an attempt to counter accusations that pro-Russian or Russian forces shot-down MH17, Russian government officials have promoted a number of counter-narratives, including a mysterious / unknown intercept aircraft as well as Ukrainian anti-aircraft systems. As a corollary, Russian government officials released information that Putin may have been the actual target, and the MH17 was accidentally shot-down;<sup>63 64 65</sup>
8. Ukraine government involved in human organ harvesting and trafficking. Starting in June 2014, several blogs, social network accounts (Twitter and Facebook) and Russian news media reported that the Ukraine and US governments were involved in a human organ harvesting and trafficking conspiracy. The stories reported several incidents of mass murder and organ harvesting from the deceased. One Russian news media site reported that pro-Russian forces in Slavyansk found “hundreds of bodies” with the organs removed.<sup>66</sup> The article also stated that ‘unnamed sources’ working at international airports reported a number of small aircraft equipped with specialised refrigeration units, and that these aircraft were privately chartered to fly to the US. In another version of the story, Russian bloggers reported that Polish snipers killed civilians and abducted children, who were then flown to the US to have their organs removed, and that Ukrainian forces helped cover-up the incident by killing escaping refugees.<sup>67</sup> Other than reports from various unnamed sources, the Russian news media did not provide any

<sup>57</sup> Staff Writer. (2014, March 02). *The mass escape of the military forces on the side of the “Crimean government.”* <http://stopfake.org/en/the-mass-escape-of-the-military-forces-on-the-side-of-the-crimean-government/>.

<sup>58</sup> Staff Writer. (2014, August 28). Over 60 Ukrainian troops cross into Russia seeking refuge. *RT*. <http://rt.com/news/183240-ukraine-troops-russia-border/>.

<sup>59</sup> Mills, L. (2014, August 04). Russian official claims more than 400 Ukrainian soldiers sought refuge after deserting Kyiv government. *National Post*. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/08/04/russian-official-claims-more-than-400-ukrainian-soldiers-sought-refuge-after-deserting-kyiv-government/>.

<sup>60</sup> Coalson.

<sup>61</sup> Schrad.

<sup>62</sup> Schrad.

<sup>63</sup> Staff Writer. (2014, July 21). Russian Defence Ministry publishes data regarding Malaysian Boeing crash. *ITAR-TASS New Agency*. Retrieved from <http://en.itar-tass.com/world/741669>.

<sup>64</sup> McGrath, T. (2014, July 22). Here’s all the evidence (so far) that pro-Russian separatists shot down MH17. *Global Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/europe/russia/140721/evidence-russian-separatists-shot-mh17>.

<sup>65</sup> Staff Writer. (2014, July 17). Reports that Putin flew similar route as MH17, presidential airport says ‘hasn’t overflowed Ukraine for long time’. *RT*. <http://rt.com/news/173672-malaysia-plane-crash-putin/>.

<sup>66</sup> Nosovsky, Y. (2014, June 11). In Ukraine, human organs don’t stink. *Pravda*. Retrieved from [http://english.pravda.ru/society/stories/11-06-2014/127777-ukraine\\_human\\_organs\\_trafficking-0/](http://english.pravda.ru/society/stories/11-06-2014/127777-ukraine_human_organs_trafficking-0/).

<sup>67</sup> Cartalucci, T. (2014, July 10). Organ harvesting in Ukraine goes unreported. *New Eastern Outlook*. Retrieved from <http://journal-neo.org/2014/07/09/organ-harvesting-in-ukraine-go-unreported/>.



evidence of the incidents. However, in an effort to substantiate and provide credibility to the stories, bloggers and social media activists cited the original Russian news media sources (i.e., a clear example circular reporting);

9. Ukraine refugee crisis. Stories about a refugee crisis and mass movement of displaced Ukrainians seeking shelter in Russia appeared early on and were often repeated by Russian news media and bloggers throughout the conflict. However, many of the stories used fraudulent photos as evidence (i.e., photos of refugees, but from another conflict).<sup>68</sup> For example, in late March 2014, Russian news media reported that a refugee crisis was underway with 140,000 Ukrainian refugees attempting to enter Russia. As proof of the mass exodus, Russian news media provided a photo of a long line of cars at a border crossing. However, close inspection of the photo reveals that it was taken at the Ukraine-Poland border crossing and not of the Russian border, as reported by the Russian news media; and,<sup>69</sup>
10. Character assassination. Possibly more of a technique rather than a distinct message theme. However, a recurring theme throughout the conflict, especially on social media forums, is accusations of seemingly disreputable or otherwise questionable conduct by pro-Kiev political, military or social leaders. For example, in an effort to undermine his credibility, pro-Russian bloggers and social media activists disseminated rumours about Oleksandr Turchynov, the speaker of the Ukraine Parliament, regarding his sexual orientation. The story was also covered by Russian news media sites, which served to amplify and legitimise the rumour. Other attempts at character assassination included linking a Ukraine militia leader and the former president to a human organ harvesting conspiracy.<sup>70</sup>

In terms of the design and execution of Russian / pro-Russian Informational Conflict in the Ukraine, several key points should be noted:

1. While some of the physical activities in the battlespace may be tactically important, such as unidentified soldiers or non-state actors securing a military base, airport or government building, these activities are loaded with and (this author argues) are primarily conducted for, their symbolic value (i.e., they are first-and-foremost an Informational Conflict activity),<sup>71</sup>
2. Almost all of the Informational Conflict activities fall into the category of Active Measures, primarily disinformation and propaganda activities. Only one incident of pure or focused operational-level military deception was identified, and that was the surprise attack in late August 2014 in which Russian / pro-Russian forces opened up a new front near the Azov Sea;<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Staff Writer. (2014, July 12). One photo manipulation: From refugees in Rostov to filtration camps. Retrieved from <http://stopfake.org/en/one-photo-manipulation-from-refugees-in-rostov-to-filtration-camps/>.

<sup>69</sup> Novick, R. (2014, March 05). Is Russia inventing a Ukrainian refugee crisis? *The Huffington Post*. Retrived from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rebecca-novick/post\\_7028\\_b\\_4895567.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rebecca-novick/post_7028_b_4895567.html)

<sup>70</sup> Staff Writer. (2014, July 12). The former Tymoshenko's lawyer traded in organs of wounded soldiers. Retrieved from <http://stopfake.org/en/the-lie-the-former-tymoshenko-s-lawyer-traded-in-organs-of-wounded-soldiers/>.

<sup>71</sup> Berzins, J. (2014, April). Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defence Policy. *National Defence Academy of Latvia, Centre for Security and Strategic Research*, Policy Paper Number 02.

<sup>72</sup> Kramer, A.E. & Gordon, M.R. (2014, August 27). Ukraine reports Russian invasion on a new front. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://nytimes.com/2014/08/28/world/europe/ukraine-russia-novoazovsk-crimea.html?\\_r=0](http://nytimes.com/2014/08/28/world/europe/ukraine-russia-novoazovsk-crimea.html?_r=0).



3. Informational Conflict is proactive and offensive rather than defensive and responsive, and it appears to take primacy over kinetic operations (at least within the conduct of Non-Linear Warfare);<sup>73</sup>
4. In Informational Conflict, disinformation is no longer the simple manipulation of facts (i.e., something grounded in or held together by reality); rather, it is the complete fabrication of truth;<sup>74</sup>
5. The current approach to Informational Conflict appears to emphasise quantity over quality. In other words, the current approach is about creating a multitude of falsehoods and to see what resonates (i.e., is cognitively "sticky") with a target audience;<sup>75</sup>
6. The current approach to Informational Conflict seems to be highly decentralised, and all available state and non-state assets are used to facilitate Informational Conflict, in particular non-state actors / proxies; and,
7. The current approach to Informational Conflict appears to have a two-fold objective. First to shape and manage the strategic socio-political discussion space. Second to psychologically distract, overwhelm and disrupt the adversary with as much disinformation and propaganda as possible.<sup>76</sup>

## Implications

This author posits that, based upon recent successes in eastern Europe (e.g., Georgia and Ukraine), Russia will continue to conduct Informational Conflict (at least in near-future conflicts)<sup>77</sup> in the same or similar fashion as the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. The following implications have been identified:

1. Russia will continue to employ Informational Conflict in an offensive and pro-active manner, and as a main line of effort;
2. Russia will continue to utilise undeclared assets and special forces to conduct Irregular / Non-Linear Warfare (i.e., to foment dissent and create instability), likely through or with indigenous or Diaspora-based populations in support. Military action taken by the host country in response to an uprising will also be used as a justification for Russian military intervention;
3. Russia will continue to utilise all state and non-state assets, including state-controlled and private media, to dominate the information environment;
4. Russia will continue to exploit emergent technology to dominate the information environment, in particular (but not limited to) social media, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and computer-neural networks;<sup>78</sup>
5. Russia will opt to utilise an approach of permanent or prolonged state of simmering / low-intensity conflict as opposed to direct, symmetric military action;
6. Russia will continue to utilise a decentralised and networked approach to conduct Informational Conflict;

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<sup>73</sup> Goble.

<sup>74</sup> Pomerantsev, P.

<sup>75</sup> Goble.

<sup>76</sup> Pomerantsev, P.

<sup>77</sup> Near-future is defined as the next five to 10 years.

<sup>78</sup> Berzins.



7. Russia will seek not just to shape / manage but rather to control both the message and the means, in particular as it relates to domestic audiences (i.e., implement policy restricting freedom of the press and independent journalism);
8. Russia will continue to aggressively target and message its domestic audience (i.e., conduct Informational Conflict against its own people);
9. Russia will continue to fabricate reality and dismiss the need for ethical or moral limitations on Informational Conflict; and,
10. Russia will continue to saturate the information environment in order to psychologically overwhelm the target.

## **Recommendations**

The following three recommendations are made:

1. The IATF, with assistance from the defence scientific community, should conduct a deeper and more comprehensive examination of Soviet and Russian Informational Conflict capabilities, which would incorporate both classified and extensive Russian-language information. In order to gain a holistic perspective, the follow-on study should incorporate other information-related capabilities, such as computer network operations (CNO), electronic warfare (EW), and signals intelligence capabilities. The follow-on examination should attempt to identify possible ways and means to identify and counter or defend against Informational Conflict;
2. The IATF should incorporate findings from this report, as well as any follow-on activities, into appropriate Influence Activities and Info Ops training and professional development; and,
3. The IATF should incorporate findings from this report, as well as any follow-on activities, into Influence Operations and Info Ops doctrine, doctrinal guides, and related policy.

## **Conclusion**

This SL is in response to a request made by the IATF to briefly examine the use of Informational Conflict by Russian and pro-Russian forces during the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. Based upon this analysis, this author posits that Russian and pro-Russian forces have a highly robust, comprehensive and holistic Informational Conflict capability. Although the antecedents of the Russian capability clearly reside in the Soviet-era (i.e., the Cold War) approach, and many similarities exist (e.g., decentralised, utilisation of state and non-state assets, no moral constraints, etc.), there are two key differences. First, that the current Informational Conflict approach largely focuses on disinformation and propaganda; with the vast majority of these activities facilitated by (and one could argue, dependent upon) social media. Second, that the new approach of Information Conflict is far less concerned about developing the ground-truth to support activities in the information environment. Rather than building the truth to maintain the activities over time, the new Russian approach seeks to overwhelm and inundate the adversary / target with a multitude of falsehoods (i.e., to see what sticks). Although this is a rather simplistic and seemingly superficial approach, it is far less resource intensive than



building a system of truth around the lie. As a result, truth has become “utterly irrelevant” in Russia’s new approach to Informational Conflict.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Pomerantsev, P.



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# Attachments

## Annex A

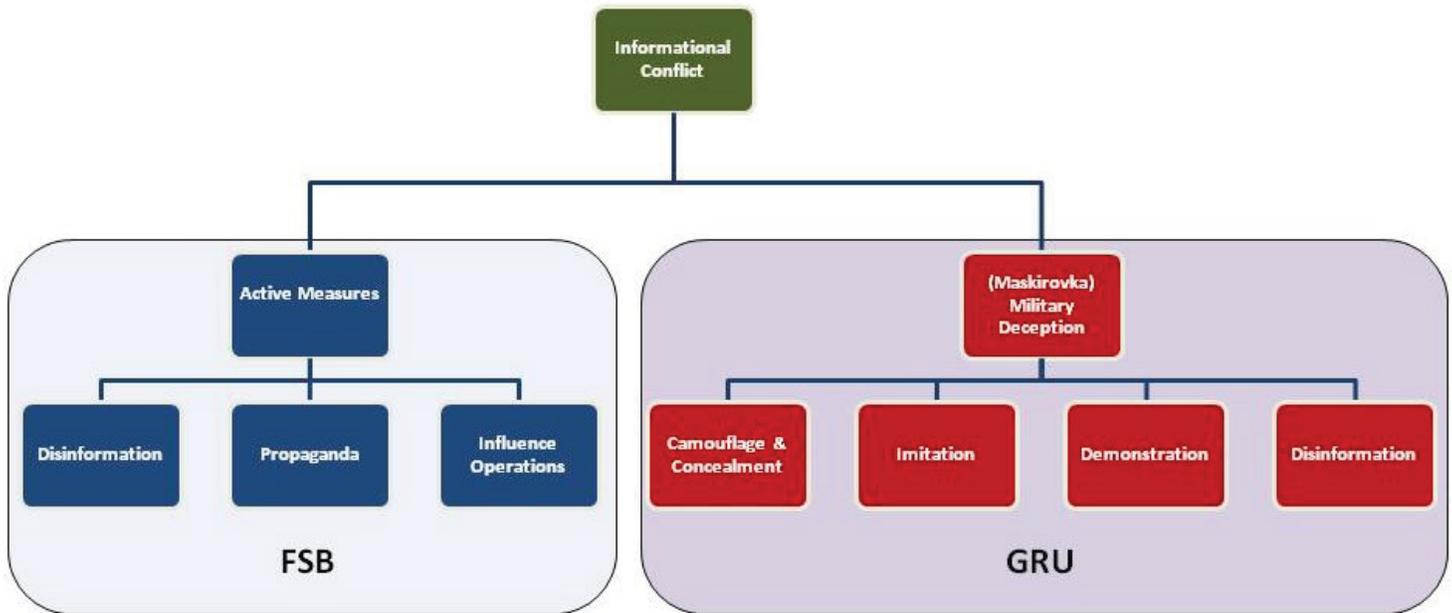


Figure 1: Russian Informational Conflict Construct