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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUCCESSFUL DISINFORMATION OPERATIONS AND ARMED CONFLICT: CASE STUDY OF RUSSIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

A RELAÇÃO ENTRE O SUCESSO DAS OPERAÇÕES DE DESINFORMAÇÃO E O CONFLITO ARMADO: ESTUDO DE CASO DA RÚSSIA NO SÉCULO XXI

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Abstract

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has sought to regain influence over the former countries of that political union using political, information, economic, energy, ethnic and religious tools. The two cases analysed in this paper – the armed invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014 – are unique in the sense that they are territories which Russia claims are in its area of influence, and over which it has used conventional military means to stake those claims. Rapid execution of military operations and the fulfilment of military and political objectives cannot be separated from other so-called unconventional operations. In this study, we analyse information operations, their impact on the territories in question and the immediate consequences of the conflicts. The findings showed that information operations helped prepare the ground by persuading local populations that the Russian narrative was justified, creating organisations and groups of citizens sympathetic to Russian demands, corrupting political and social structures and demoralising the opposing security and defence forces.

Keywords: Information warfare; Disinformation; Russia; Crimea; Georgia.

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Resumo

A Rússia procurou, desde a queda da União Soviética, recuperar o poder de influência sobre os países que constituíam aquela união política por meio de ferramentas políticas, de informação, económicas, energéticas, étnicas e religiosas. Os dois casos em estudo neste trabalho, as invasões armadas da Geórgia em 2008 e da Crimeia em 2014, constituem-se únicos por serem territórios que a Rússia afirma fazerem parte da sua área de influência e sobre os quais utilizou meios militares convencionais para materializar esta reivindicação. A rápida execução militar e cumprimento dos objetivos militares e políticos não pode ser dissociada das restantes operações, ditas não convencionais. Assim procurámos neste trabalho abordar as operações no domínio da informação, o impacto que tiveram nos territórios em estudo e as consequências imediatamente após os conflitos. Foi possível aferir que as operações de informação tiveram impacto na preparação do terreno pelo convencimento das populações locais da justiça da narrativa russa, criação de organizações e grupos de cidadãos afetos às reivindicações russas, corrupção das estruturas políticas e sociais e desmoralização das forças de segurança e defesa adversárias.

Palavras-Chave*: *Guerra de informação; Desinformação; Rússia; Crimeia; Geórgia.

1. Introduction

The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shattered Russia's relationship with its neighbours, the international balance of power and opened the door to a new discussion (and perhaps a new understanding) about the use of large-scale military force in the 21st century. The images of Russian military columns rapidly advancing on Ukrainian soil, in what was the largest military operation in Europe since the Second World War, shocked global audiences, especially in neighbouring countries and Western democracies. Their perplexity can be explained, in part, simply by the liberal perception that the use of conventional military force to achieve political objectives had become outdated or extinct. This was particularly obvious in European Union (EU) member countries, whose foreign policy responses revealed what was almost indifference or inability to deal with territorial violations of sovereign states with globally recognised borders, as in the case of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

The military operation in eastern and southern Ukraine in 2022 ended weeks of intense diplomatic mediation efforts and led to the need to rethink the European security arrangements that had governed the region since the end of the Cold War. Several authors link the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 with the West's lack of response to Russia's lightning operations in 2008 and 2014, and argue that the timidity of Russia's adversaries may have encouraged Russia to act more aggressively in areas it deemed to be in its area of influence (Thomas, 2015, p. 373; Zinets & Vasovic, 2022). At the same time, other authors assert that the information operations with which Russia targeted these territories, the people living in Russia, the Russian diaspora, especially in Europe, and global audiences, had a significant impact on the operational success of military operations "sensu stricto" (Kivirähk, et al., 2010,

p. 313; Rácz, 2015, p. 82). Therefore, in addition to the effective use of conventional military resources in those conflicts, it is essential and the aim of this research to evaluate the means and strategies employed by Russia to influence the population, the media, the business community, politicians and the armed forces of the target territories before the triggering of armed actions and the possible impact on the course of the military conflict, in order to answer the basic question: what relationship can be established between the success of disinformation actions and success in conventional operations?

The topic of this article was chosen because of the importance of Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008, the unexpected annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and Ukraine's total impotence in responding to that operation, and the influence that these operations, in conjunction with unconventional means, had on the preparation and execution of the invasion in 2022. In order to understand these interventions, it is essential to contextualize Russia's relationship with the target territories and countries affected, to list the vulnerabilities of their social, political, economic and military structures and the capabilities that Russia sought to develop in order to take advantage of these weaknesses in the period leading up to and during the armed interventions. On the other hand, we have tried to evaluate the evolution of public policies and private investments in the media sector in order to assess their potential impact on influencing local public opinion in the affected territories and global opinion aimed at international audiences.

The Russian narrative was carefully selected and propagated, not only in the territories under study, but also in the other former Soviet republics, over decades, by the large expatriate community, the preponderance of Russian media or pro-Russian politicians, associations and interest groups.

We have thus identified the actors and targets on both sides of the dispute in the complex field of information (political-legislative, diplomatic, intelligence, military, social and economic), the role they played in preparing the pre-conflict "media terrain" and on the information battlefield during the execution of conventional military operations.

Using a methodology based on a review of the available literature, we sought to offer a unique comparative approach between two conflicts that are rarely confronted and to evaluate the impact and evolution of information resources on the success of military operations. We begin by presenting the theoretical framework, with emphasis on the concepts of power, information, political and hybrid warfare and disinformation, followed by the methodology used to achieve the research results. We then present information operations in detail and discuss the results obtained on the impact of disinformation operations in the cases under study.

2. Theoretical framework

To analyse a conflict, be it military, political or any other type of sociopolitical dispute, one must examine the power relations between the entities involved in it. Therefore, it is necessary to define what power is, how it is exercised and its impact on the conflicting parties. The traditional and most widely accepted definition of power in sociology is by Max Weber, who defines power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in

a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (Weber, 1978, p. 53). On the other hand, for Gunneriusson & Dov Bachmann (2017), "if one has both the *willingness* and the *capability* to act, then one has actual power in/over a given situation. […]Power requires the capability to make an assessment of the situation based on more or less accurate information." The way that power manifests in practice is especially important in the field of information, as the phenomena it analyses are often invisible.

Finally, we have included a definition based on the concept of property, which holds that power can mean the ability to gain or protect property rights, more specifically, the strategic power of a given country to protect or gain property rights within and outside its borders. Relating the exercise of power to the concept of property is essential to understand how, for Moscow, the *de facto* occupation, even if it is not recognised by international organisations, serves as proof of those rights. Therefore, the perception of power is often as relevant as real power because national will and morale can be more important than material power when a country's leaders translate them into action (Demarest, 2009, p. 230, 232).

To carry out this study, it was necessary to define the most elementary concept analysed here – information. António de Jesus Bispo (2004) describes it as "a set of data contextualised in terms of space, time, and setting". Arquilla & Ronfeldt (1993, p. 25) argue that today, information is becoming a strategic with the same importance as capital and labour during the industrial age. According to Prudnikov, a Russian military theorist, information is the most important military-strategic resource, no less (or even more) important than conventional weapons. António Bispo explains that "Information warfare is warfare in the Information Society, and between information societies; it is always present in societies that are highly dependent on information technologies" (Bispo, 2004, p. 97).

The Russian national security doctrine and political elites have adopted the approach that non-kinetic means, such as information operations, social engineering operations, propaganda, antisocial and violent behavior, military exercises, influence on the media, political sabotage, economic pressure, subversion and other means of influence, become substitutes for force and not its harbinger (Akimenko & Giles, 2020, p. 67; Covington, 2019, p. 98; Darczewska, 2014, p. 30; DeBenedictis, 2022, p. 55; Galleoti, 2019a, p. 2; Levin Jaitner, 2015, p. 88; Lucas, 2019; Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 12; Seely & Jonsson, 2015, p. 4). As Checkinov and Bogdanov (2012, p. 17) point out, the means of influence in the field of information have reached such perfection that their use makes it possible to fulfill strategic functions and that, in the future, any victory in a conflict situation will be achieved through information superiority over the opposing camp.

Russian doctrine divides these information operations into two types: technical operations, which target the technical systems that receive, process and broadcast information during armed conflicts; and psychological operations, in which the goal is to damage information systems and processes in order to weaken the political, economic and social system and manipulate citizens' perceptions to destabilise society, the Armed Forces (AAFF) and the

State, both in wartime and peacetime (Arold, 2016, p. 17; Giles & Seaboyer, 2019, p. 10; Seely & Jonsson, 2015, p. 12).

Western defence doctrines or schools of thought have produced multiple concepts to articulate this complex reality, from political warfare ("the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives", as George Kennan defined it in 1948), to asymmetric warfare, a military strategic idea that provides a cost-effective strategic deterrence solution against a perceived threat (Kennan, 1948) or hybrid warfare, a term coined in Major William Nemeth's thesis (Rácz, 2015, p.28) defined as "the use of military and nonmilitary tools in an integrated campaign, designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative and gain psychological as well as physical advantages utilizing diplomatic means; sophisticated and rapid information, electronic and cyber operations; covert and occasionally overt military and intelligence action; and economic pressure" (Kukkola et al., 2019, p.23).

Finally, the concept of disinformation can be defined, according to the *East StratCom Task Force*, as "false or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm" (European Commission, 2020).

Russian *dezinformatsia* (disinformation) and *aktivniye meropriyatiya* (active measures) operations include denying involvement or participation in an ongoing conflict, even when there is irrefutable evidence to the contrary (DeBenedictis, 2022, p.56; Seely & Jonsson, 2015). When these operations target the general public, they involve the creation and dissemination of multiple and often contradictory narratives about the same event to confuse the (usually foreign) target audience. The aim of these narratives is not to convince, but to spread conspiracy stories and falsehoods, usually based on half-truths and information taken at face value a priori (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 6). The sheer volume of contradictory information creates an atmosphere of confusion which leads some people to give in to cognitive pressure and become indifferent or distance themselves from the situation. The result is an erosion of the foundations of open societies, not only for victims but also for perpetrators. When the latter engage in systematic deception on a large scale and over a long period of time, and optimise their organisational culture to serve this purpose, these actors are undermining the legitimacy of public administration (Rid, 2021, p. 11).

3. Methodology

This research, of a qualitative nature and with a hypothetical-deductive approach, focuses on two specific case studies and was carried out by collecting and analysing information from works, scientific articles and news articles, which allowed us to make observations about the universe of the study and infer initial findings that served as a starting point for the work (Freixo, 2011).

During the investigation, we read articles from sources on both sides of the conflict as well as third-party sources (usually Western). We also consulted pro-Russian sources, including newspapers and an online magazine ¬(RT, Sputnik, Pravda, RIANovosti and Ruptly), a research organisation (Global Research) and a blog and online news outlet founded after

the invasion of Crimea to report on Russian operations in Ukraine (Russian Spring). On the Ukrainian side, we consulted fact-checking platforms such as stopfake.org, Crimean public news websites such as Suspilne Crimea and non-governmental news organisations such as Detector Media, Euromaidan Press or Bellingcat.

The relationship between offensive and defensive information operations on target audiences and the manipulation of public opinion was assessed by measuring public perception of the events under study through surveys and polls:

– Opinion polls and surveys of the Russian population conducted by the Levada Analysis Center (Levada-Center), a non-governmental organisation that monitors Russian public opinion and carries out research projects in partnership with companies, universities, NGOs in Russia and in other countries, as well as international organisations;

– Opinion polls of the Georgian and Ukrainian population (particularly in the Crimean peninsula) conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI);

– The resources of the Caucasus Research Resource Centres (CRRC), a network of research, resource and training centres in the capitals of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia created in 2003 to promote social science research and public policy analysis in the South Caucasus;

– The annual reports of the Razumkov Centre, a Ukrainian non-governmental think-tank that conducts research on public policy and is considered the best think-tank in Eastern Europe and the 32nd best in the world (excluding the United States);

– Opinion polls conducted by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), an institution that surveys the Ukrainian population on a number of social, economic and political indicators and cooperates with Russian and Belarusian research organisations.

4. Data analysis and discussion of results

4.1. Background of the countries involved in the conflict

4.1.1. Georgia: context

The Caucasus is a symbolic and geographic area that serves as a natural barrier between Europe and Asia. It is inhabited by more than 40 different nationalities and ethnicities. According to several authors, the region is the scene of a new geopolitical "big game" between Russia and the US. At the beginning of the 21st century, it was Russia's most volatile and militarised border, and several armed conflicts occurred there during the 1990s, involving Abhkases, Ossetians, Georgians, Russians and Chechens (Craig Nation, 2007, p. 10; Krag & Lunch, 1994; Matsaberidze, 2015, p. 82).

In 1991, South Ossetia declared de facto independence from Georgia, triggering a violent civil conflict that lasted until 1992, when war broke out between Abkhazia and Georgia and Abkhazia seceded after defeating the Georgian army in 1993. These conflicts gave Russia a geopolitical excuse to intervene in the region's affairs, which it did by amputating 20% of Georgia's territory, increasing its dependence on Russia (Amnesty International, 2008, p. 14; Mitchell & Cooley, 2014; Seskuria, 2021; Tikk et al., 2010, p. 67). After the military conflicts between Georgia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in October 1993, the newly inaugurated

president asked for Moscow's assistance in handling the internal rebellion instigated by the former president's supporters. During this period, there was a rapprochement between Tbilisi and Russia, during which the former joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and new Russian military bases were built in Georgia for peacekeeping purposes, mainly in the two territories in question (IIFFMCG, 2009, p. 15).

Table 1 shows the results of the last census of the Georgian population in 1989. The precise figures at the time of the invasion are difficult to obtain, as almost all Georgians and other minorities living in the region left after the wars between Georgia and the secessionist regions, and it is not possible to determine if they returned permanently after the conflict (Kivirähk, et al., 2010, p. 98; Krag & Lunch, 1994, p. 14; Hewitt, 2008, p. 5).

Table 1 – Territorial units and ethnic groups of the Caucasus.

Territory	Size in km2	Number of inhabitants	Capital	Main ethnic groups in %
Abkhazia	8,600	524,000	Sukhum	Georgians: 46; Abkhases: 17 Armenians: 15; Russians: 14
North Ossetia	8,000	632,000	Vladikvakaz	Ossetians: 53; Russians: 30 Ingush: 5
South Ossetia	3,900	99,000	Tskhinval	Ossetians: 66; Georgians: 29

Source: Translated from: The North Caucasus: Minorities at a Crossroads (1994)

4.1.2. Crimea: context

From the Crimean peninsula, one can control the Sea of Azov and part of the Black Sea, and Russia has navy ships stationed in the ports of Sevastopol to protect the gas and oil transport infrastructure. The territory was annexed by Catherine II in 1783, and the Russian Black Sea Fleet has been based in Sevastopol since then, alongside the peninsula. The stretch of Black Sea coast between Transnistria and Odessa and, until 1917, Mariupol was considered a separate Russian administrative region called Novorossiya (Blockmans, 2014, p.2), a name that would be used in the narrative Russia spread during the conflict to justify its claims over a significant area of eastern Ukraine.

In 2001, the population of the Crimean Peninsula was 60% Russian, 24% Ukrainian and 12% Tatar (Wood, 2016, p. 5; *All-Ukrainian population Census' 2001*, 2001). In a survey carried out in Crimea in 2013 by the International Republican Institute, 82% of respondents said they spoke Russian as their first language, while 2% of the population spoke only Ukrainian and 3% spoke both languages (Baltic Surveys & Gallup Organisation, 2013; Maigre, 2008, p. 3).

And yet, another survey conducted in December 2013 found that in the southern region of Ukraine, including Crimea, revealed that 87.9% of respondents considered Ukraine their motherland, but only 30.8% identified as dedicated patriots, which illustrates the dichotomy of simultaneously considering Ukraine to be their motherland while not being especially committed to it (Shanghina et al., 2014, p. 29). Russians have been asked how they feel about the

peninsula historically belonging to Russia on several occasions. In May 1998, approximately 77% of Russians believed that the peninsula should be returned to Russia (Volkov, 2015). In March 2002, 80% of the surveyed population had the same opinion, while in 2008 this figure rose to 85%, with 67% supporting the use of political and economic pressure on Ukraine (Levada Center, 2015).

Like many Russophile authors, Vladimir Putin cannot imagine a restoration of the Russian empire without Ukraine, either through a diplomatic rapprochement or annexation. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian president and elites continue to view Russia as having ethnic, cultural and even psychological sovereignty over Ukraine. This mindset is described in Russia as *Derzhavnost*, or the belief in the superiority and greatness of Russia, which is almost like a secular religion (Merry, 2016, p. 29 and 37; Snyder, 2014; Thomas, 2015, p. 373).

4.2. Georgia and Ukraine: defence and economic context

Georgia and Ukraine have viewed NATO membership as essential to ensure the security and defence of their territories and have access to shared military capabilities. However, their requests to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP) were rejected at the 2008 Bucharest Summit. As an alternative, NATO formed the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which included both countries, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus and Moldova. Its aim was to promote freedom of movement and strengthen cooperation in the economy and energy sectors (Bychenko et al., 2021, p. 311; IIFFMCG, 2009; Tseluiko, 2010, p. 13).

Moscow views a hypothetical enlargement of NATO to the countries of the now-extinct U.S.S.R. (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) as a hostile act that encroaches on its sphere of influence, which no doubt influenced the decision to reject Ukraine and Georgia's membership. As Matsaberidze points out, Russia's ability to use pressure and the West's indecision gives Moscow informal veto power over against accessions by former U.S.S.R. countries (Chicky, 2009, p. 14; S. F. Jones, 2010; Matsaberidze, 2015, p. 86; Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 1; Seskuria, 2021, p. 2; Thomas, 2015, p. 386).

In 2005, Sergey Lavrov warned that arms supplies to Caucasus countries by NATO states would have consequences for the stability of the region, with Putin stating that Ukraine's accession to NATO would lead to the country's destruction. What the Russians were "offering" was "military non-alignment" (the Swiss model of neutrality) which, albeit tempting, would only leave Georgia more isolated in the international arena. In 2010, Ukraine enshrined this political-military neutrality in its constitution, ruling out once and for all the possibility of joining any alliance (Cecire, 2014; Chicky, 2009, p. 16; Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 2; Service, 2020, p. 560).

From a strategic perspective, it is worth remembering that, in 2008, Russia had two military bases on Georgian territory, Akhalkalaki and Batumi, with around 3,000 Russian soldiers, and Russian peacekeepers were stationed in the two secessionist territories. These soldiers were supposed to leave their bases before the end of 2008, as agreed with Russia in 2005, but the Russian government unilaterally decided to keep them in the territory after Saakashvili's election. According to Georgian officials, the troops in South Ossetia are led by a commander

appointed by Moscow, with the locals having very little say in the matter (German, 2006, p. 4 and 11; *The August War South Ossetia 2008. How it all happened*, 2021).

Russia continues to keep significant forces in Crimea: in 2008, about 14,000 Russian soldiers were stationed with the Black Sea Fleet. After the Kharkiv agreements of 2010 the fleet was authorised to remain on the peninsula until 2042 and the number of troops to increase to 25,000 (this included special forces, 132 armed combat vehicles and 24 artillery pieces) (Bychenko et al., 2021, p. 101; Maigre, 2008, p. 7).

With regards to their economies, both countries have a strong expatriate community in Russia. In 2005, about 23% of the Georgian population and 13% of the Ukrainian population lived in Russian territory, which made emigrant remittances an important contribution to their national economies (approximately 6.3% of Georgia's GDP and 0.8% of Ukraine's GDP (Jonavicius, 2009, p. 29). Not only were they economically relevant, these social and linguistic ties meant that people were more exposed to the Russian CSOs (media) and shared that information with family and friends in their countries of origin.

Additionally, both countries, along with other former U.S.S.R. republics, are highly economically dependent on Russia. One of the tools used by Moscow against Georgia was the imposition of customs duties or bans on the import of products, such as the ban on the import of water, juices, fruit, vegetables and wine from 2006 until 2013. Ukrainian products imported by Russia were subjected to fastidious customs inspections, while high customs duties were imposed on chocolate (produced by the factories of pro-European Ukrainian businessman Poroshenko), glass and coal in retaliation for the ongoing negotiations for EU membership. In response to complaints from Ukrainian employers' associations about these retaliatory practices, Russian officials explained that joining the customs union headed by Russia would expedite customs procedures (Daisy, 2013; Dawn, 2013; Jankowicz, 2020, p. 56 e 59).

Russia is also Ukraine's main supplier of gas and oil and one of Georgia's main suppliers, a tool that it was able to use to cut off supplies to both countries in 2006 or hiking prices to gain leverage to negotiate in 2013, on the eve of signing a new agreement with Ukraine (Ruchel, 2014; Umbach, 2013).

4.3. Mass media in the conflicting countries

4.3.1. Georgian mass media

The media environment in Georgia changed radically after the Rose Revolution in November 2003. Freedom of the press increased substantially in news programmes, entertainment and original content. This was naturally due to the newfound independence from the Russian media, as well as to cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences. Saakashvili's election as president was followed by the approval of new measures to limit Russian influence on the national press (Jonavicius, 2009, p. 32).

In addition to bringing the media into the sphere of the government through the total or partial acquisition of channels and publications, there were also retaliatory practices: interrupting or preventing broadcasting, threatening to suspend broadcasting rights, inspections to the offices of the targeted media outlets, withholding public funding and

limiting free access to public information. These actions result in the standardisation of the information broadcast on the country's three main television channels, as they are controlled by the government, thus undermining freedom of information in the country. Several assessments by international media monitoring organisations found that press freedom declined significantly in the years leading up to the 2008 invasion (TI Georgia, 2009, p. 4-5; S. Jones, 2013, p. 124).

In 2008, in a survey of the Georgian population, 96% of participants said that they obtained their political information from television. Over 71% of the Georgian population watched the news on the government-controlled television stations, while around 23% consulted Russian sources on a daily or weekly basis (Freedom of the Press 2009, 2010, p. 102; Georgian National Study, 2008).

Internet use was low in Georgia. At the time of the invasion, only 7 out of every 100 Georgians were Internet users, and Georgia was 74th in the world rank of countries with the highest number of websites. These two factors may have contributed to limit the impact of disinformation, especially when compared to more technologically integrated nations (Markoff, 2008; Tikk et al., 2010, p. 68).

These statistics and findings are not applicable to the secessionist regions, as in these regions, the media are controlled by the local authorities and broadcast content that aligns with local and Russian propaganda. Thus, illegal broadcasts of Russian radio or television programmes in Georgian territory, particularly in the secessionist areas, has been frequent since the occupation of those territories (Kivirähk, et al., 2010, 135-137).

4.3.2. Ukrainian mass media

Since the country's founding, the Ukrainian media have been intrinsically dependent on Russian sources of information due to cultural and linguistic ties and financial constraints or disinvestment in national journalism (Jonavicius, 2009, p. 31).

The country's financial-industrial sector, which was partly backed by Russian capital, gained control of the main television channels between 2006 and 2013 and consistently used them to advertise and support its candidates for public office, defend its agenda and influence local and national politics (Bychenko et al., 2021, p. 246).

Since 2004, the public television station UT-1 has broadcast the narrative imposed by Kuchma's government, and since 2010 Yanukovych has tightened his control over information. In addition to controlling free-to-air channels, Yanukovych's term in office has been accompanied by a significant increase in the number of Russian cable channels available, especially in eastern Ukraine and Crimea (Genté, 2008, p. 45; Lukichev, 2022, p. 17; Szostek, 2014, p. 5).

In the private sector, around 75% of television audiences and a significant part of the press were controlled by media groups owned by four oligarchs close to the regime: Akhmetov, Firtash, Pinchuk and Kolomoisky (Rybak, 2018). The only news sources that criticised the government were seemingly innocuous printed newspapers and internet publications tolerated by the government (Szostek, 2014, p. 5).

A survey of the Ukrainian population carried out in February and March 2012 found that 95% of respondents obtained their political information from television programmes, 36% and 30%, respectively, from newspaper articles and 34% and 40% from radio programmes (Baltic Surveys & Gallup Organisation, 2012). In May 2013, a similar study found that 40% of the population of the Crimean Peninsula has never used the internet, while 19% use it daily (Baltic Surveys & Gallup Organisation, 2013).

The constant pressure on journalists, threats of suspending broadcast licences and the fact that most media outlets were controlled by the government led Freedom House to assert that Ukrainian media outlets were under the control of the country's political and economic elites. This was reflected in the country's drop from 89th to 126th place in the Reporters Without Borders ranking from 2009 to 2013 (Genté, 2008, p. 57).

In Crimea, access to and dependence on Russian media was even clearer, as the presence of an ethnic Russian majority meant that Russian content was more likely to be consulted. Illegal broadcasts by Russian radio stations (Mayak and Voice of Russia) increased (since 2006) and by television channels with licences suspended by order of the Ukrainian authorities (since 2008) (First Channel, World Net, Ren TV, RTR Planeta and TVCI) (Bychenko et al., 2021, p. 296 and 313).

In addition to media control, the collaboration and acquiescence of Yanukovych's executive and the so-called Donetsk clan to Russian priorities can be justified by the country's high dependence on Russia in its economic relationship, with particular emphasis on the strategic sectors of communications and telecommunications, energy and fuel and part of the Ukrainian banking sector (Bychenko et al., 2021, p. 320; Gusev, 2015, p. 131; Szostek, 2014, p. 4). In Russia, Vladimir Putin's popularity reached an all-time low in 2013, leading him to make significant reforms to the Russian media sector by revising the narratives of state television and radio stations, dissolving *Ria Novosti* (a historic news agency that had been founded in the Soviet era) and *Voice of Russia* (the main state radio station) and integrating them into *Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today)*. In the public sector, Putin increased the number and variety of publications (which were always pro-government) while supporting oligarchs with funding or threatening them with fabricated accusations to pressure them into acquiring private channels and adapt the editorial line to paint the government in a favourable light (DeBenedictis, 2022, p. 62 e 64; Global Engagement Center, 2022, p. 21; Yuhas, 2014).

4.4. Information operations

4.4.1. Information operations in Georgia

The armed intervention in Georgia marked the beginning of the structural use of information in military operations and put an end to the idea that the Russian military would not intervene in neighbouring countries. This was the first conflict in which all conventional conflict domains (air, land and sea) were used in combination with attacks in cyberspace and disinformation operations (Cohen & Hamilton, 2011, p. 57; Hedenskog, 2008, p. 4; Hollis, 2011, p. 5; Keating, 2013; Iasiello, 2017, p. 51 e 52; Markoff, 2008).

Russia used military exercises as part of its political interactions with Georgia . It conducted unplanned training exercises when Tbilisi made political decisions that were hostile to Moscow, as well as large-scale planned military exercises, such as "Caucasus Frontier 2006", "Caucasus Frontier 2007" and "Caucasus 2008", to exert strong military and psychological pressure on the Georgian population and army. During the last exercise, which ended five days before the start of the military conflict, leaflets about Georgian troops were distributed, road accesses were studied and training sessions were held. After Caucasus 2008, some troops remained in reserve near the access to the Roki Tunnel, the main road between North and South Ossetia (Barker et al., 2013, p. 7; German, 2006, p. 8 e 9; Lavrov, 2010, p. 42; Thomas, 2015, p. 16).

According to Georgian military officials, Russian operations in cyberspace began three weeks before the start of the conventional conflict with attacks against Georgian websites. However, the nature of these operations makes it difficult to find definitive evidence linking the attacks to Russian actors. Moscow ensured that it controlled the media coverage of the events by paying for the trips of about 50 reporters to Georgia in the days leading up to the invasion, while the separatist forces kept Georgian journalists from reporting on the events (Cohen & Hamilton, 2011, p. 47; Freedom of the Press 2009, 2010, p. 101; Schachtman, 2009).

The involvement of people from different origins and without any formal relationship between them except their support of the Russian cause (Russia, Ukraine and Lithuania), who used software distributed online to attack Georgian websites, reduced the cost of the attacks while maintaining operational effectiveness. In addition to the use of civilians, there is evidence, also for the first time, of the participation of hacker groups APT 28 and *Sandworm*, who carried out DDoS and phishing attacks and distributed malware. These cyberspace operations have been classified by many authors as the first open act of cyber-warfare (Baezner, 2018, p. 14 e 17, p. 37-39; Harris, 2014; John & Scott, 2009, p. 2).

The first recorded cyber-attack took place on 19 July when the president's official website was blocked due to excessive traffic (DDoS). On 5 August, three days before the invasion of Georgia, there was a cyber-attack against the BTC oil pipeline (Baku-Tbilisi, Ceyhan) that resulted in an alarm being deactivated, increasing pressure inside the pipelines and causing an explosion. The operation was claimed by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), but the level of sophistication and planning suggest that it may have been carried out by another actor, with circumstantial evidence pointing to Russia, which attempted to dissociate itself from the event and feed the narrative that the PKK had been behind the attack (Kucera, 2014).

The offensive campaign in the main cyberspace began with the Russian invasion on 8 August, with 38 attacks against Georgian and Western websites, including the official websites of the Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Bank, the Parliament, the Georgian Constitutional Court, and the UK and US Embassies in Georgia. These attacks appear to have been organised and coordinated, as they occurred within 30 minutes of each other, between 17h15 on 8 August and the ceasefire at 12h45 on 11 August (Cohen & Hamilton, 2011; Cornell & Starr, 2009; IIFFMCG, 2009, p. 19; Lavrov, 2010, p. 47; Tikk et al., 2010, p. 69).

Georgia's most important commercial bank, the largest Georgian hacker forum and several transport companies were also targeted by cyber attacks, and Georgia's communications infrastructure (the routers through which data was sent to Georgia via Turkey) was disrupted by the Russian Business Network hacker group (Markoff, 2008; Tikk et al., 2010, p. 72; Zuckerman, 2008).

In the first days of the invasion, a time when communications were vital to keep the State functioning and to transmit information domestically and abroad, Russian forces managed to limit or prevent the flow of information. In addition to the immediate consequences (rendering dozens of websites and thousands of online services unavailable), the attacks also had a perverse effect on Georgian public morale and trust (Harris, 2014; John & Scott, 2009, p. 6; Tikk et al., 2010, p. 78). An information dissemination service funded by the US, *Voice of America*, broadcast information in the Georgian language to keep the population informed about the conflict, an action labelled by some as humanitarian cyber support (Korns & Kastenberg, 2008, p. 70).

In response to the attacks on Georgian government websites, the CEO of TSHost (a private American web hosting company based in the US state of Atlanta, Georgia) contacted Georgian expatriate Nino Doijashvili, who relocated some Georgian websites to American servers to protect them from DDoS attacks. After the pages were relocated to US servers, they were targeted by cyber attacks that caused collateral damage in American cyberspace (Korns & Kastenberg, 2008, p. 9; Tikk et al., 2010, p. 70).

Georgia also relocated its critical websites to Estonia and Poland and republished some as Google blogs to protect them against cyber-attacks. In both these cases, Russia was unable or unwilling to attack. The relocation led to an increase in the number of blogs shifted the focus from personal publications to political information. Georgia blocked access to Russian websites and television channels in an attempt to stop or reduce the flow of Russian content into the country and to increase the bandwidth available in Georgian servers (Cohen & Hamilton, 2011, p. 59; Cornell & Starr, 2009, p. 190-191; Korns & Kastenberg, 2008, p. 2; Tikk et al., 2010,p. 76 e 82).

The offensive cyberspace campaign aimed to support the invasion of Georgia and the cyber attacks fit into the invasion plan, as Russia gained some military advantage from most of these attacks. During the conflict in Georgia in 2008, Russia's understanding of the technical and psychological dimensions of the information domain combined with military offensives turned the conflict into a training ground for future information operations (Iasiello, 2017, p.53; Jankowicz, 2020, p. 57; John & Scott, 2009, p. 6).

In addition to the cyber¬ warfare against Georgia, Russia tried to seize the initiative in the information war by ensuring that the narrative it had prepared before the conflict dominated the discussion about the causes and outcomes of the conflict (Cohen & Hamilton, 2011, p. 48). The fact that this conflict was so difficult to analyse led the European Union (EU) to create, for the first time in history, an International Fact-Finding Mission on the Georgian Conflict (IIFFMCG). (IIFFMCG, 2009, p.5). In response to the report's findings, Emilio Iasello stated

that the Russian disinformation strategy had been successful inasmuch as the document focused too much on the US' support to Georgia, while Batashivili remarks that the report lacks accuracy, as it does not mention that there were already Russian troops on the Georgian side of the border on 7 August (before the invasion). During the conflict, the problem become even worse on the Russian side, partly due to the 24-hour news cycle, which transmitted conflicting information explained beforehand or obtained from other media outlets, both public and private (Iasiello, 2017, p. 54; IIFFMCG, 2009, p. 5).

Russia clearly won the conventional warfare part of the conflict, but with regards to the information aspects, some authors argue that there were victories on both sides, while others say that Russia lost the information war, which, according to most authors, forced it to quickly reform its military structure and resources (Barker et al., 2013, p. 22; Galleoti, 2019b, p. 36; Giles, 2015b; Iasiello, 2017, p. 48-54; Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 12).

Saakashvili remained president of Georgia until 2013. In October 2012, Bidzina Ivanishvili won the parliamentary elections and became the country's prime minister. Ivanishvili is the wealthiest man in Georgia. He made his fortune after the collapse of the USSR by investing in metallurgy, new technologies, banking, transportation and real estate in Moscow (where the oligarch was based) during the 1990s and 2000s. Analysts have found that he was the de facto political decision-maker in Georgia from the date of his election until 2021, even at times when he did not hold a public office, and his views were pro-Moscow and against NATO (AFP, 2012; Ranvier, 2012; Vincent, 2021).

4.5. Pro-Moscow associations in Crimea

In the 2000s, following Vladimir Putin's rise to power, there was an increase in new pro-Russian associations in Crimea. With the support of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the Russian Federation Intelligence Service (GRU) and a special unit of the FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation) known as 18th Centre in attacks on mobile communications and social networks, Russian nationalism and the emergence of youth groups reached the Crimean peninsula (Andrew, 2014; Bychenko et al., 2021; Mizrokhi, 2009, p. 14 e 15; Popescu & Wilson, 2009, p. 47).

The main narratives of these organisations created in the 2000s focused on opposing NATO and US presence and exercises, opposing and denying the "Ukrainisation" of society, defending Russian patriotism and unification (in the form of annexation or federalism), supporting the use of the Russian language in Ukraine and claiming Russian and Ukrainian cultures as one, promoting the unity of the East Slavic Orthodox civilisation and its messianic role in the modern world, supporting the Russian Black Sea Fleet and disseminating anti-Tatar views, which include the denial of property rights and historical compensation and Islamophobic discrimination. The most important pro-Russian organisations on the Crimean peninsula were:

- The "Russian Community of Crimea" (ROK), linked to the pro-Russian faction in the Crimean parliament. One of its most prominent members, Sergei Aksyonov, became head of the Republic of Crimea after the occupation in 2014. Despite its lack of popular support

in terms of votes, the ROK and the "United Russia" party provided a platform for Russia to distribute funds, exert influence and establish links with Crimean politicians (DeBenedictis, 2022, p. 121-124; Carbonnel, 2014; Maigre, 2008, p. 15);

– The political youth movement called *Nashi*, created in 2005, claimed the Talinn cyber-attack in 2007, promoted anti-NATO demonstrations and harassed Putin's political opponents. After it was dissolved in 2012, some members remained active and continued to carry out patriotically motivated cyber-attacks (Baezner, 2018, p. 12; Hedenskog, 2008, p. 24);

– The paramilitary organisation "Union of Eurasian Youth" organised anti-NATO demonstrations, youth indoctrination rallies, called for the withdrawal of the Ukrainian navy from Sevastopol (which led to the cancellation of Ukrainian military exercises) and denounced actions by Ukrainian politicians in Crimea (Darczewska, 2014, p. 28; Kivirähk, et al., 2010, p. 261; Wood et al., 2016, p. 8-11). *Netwar portal*, the "Union of Eurasian Youth" website, was used in March 2014 to provide information to sympathisers on how to deal with "internal enemies, Russians or Ukrainians with views that were deemed pro-Western, unpatriotic or against the annexation of Crimea" (Darczewska, 2014, p. 27-28; Rossbach, 2018);

– The Cossacks, a paramilitary structure registered as an NGO, has been instrumental in defending Russia's interests in the region and maintains close ties with the Russian Cossacks, with whom they conduct joint military exercises in Crimea. The paramilitary group known as "Battle Gnomes" was established in Crimea in 2010 to teach young Cossacks how to handle firearms. This group was under the patronage of the Synod Committee of the Russian Orthodox Church, an organisation directly supported by Putin and oligarch Vadim Novinsky (Grytsenko, 2016; Hedenskog, 2008; Maigre, 2008, p. 9; Novitchkova et al., 2015, p. 8);

– The "Night Wolves", an illegal motorcycle club founded in 1989, has volunteer members from all corners of the now-extinct USSR. The group acts wherever they see threats to Russian Orthodoxy and their motto is "Wherever we are, that's Russia". In 2013 and 2014, the "Night Wolves" received more public funding than any other philanthropic organisation in Russia (Llobet & Popov, 2014; Shuster, 2014; Wood et al., 2016, p. 15 and 114-116).

4.6. Information operations in Maidan Square

The event that was the catalyst for the demonstrations that would lead to Yanukovych's downfall was the suspension and refusal to sign the association agreement with the EU in November 2013, in the following days , thousands of people took to the streets in several Ukrainian cities for a variety of reasons: protesting the failure to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, more economic security, more opportunities for future generations and exhaustion due to the number and scale of the injustices they endured over the years; nevertheless, there were never calls to remove the Ukrainian president from office (Onuch, 2014; Wood et al., 2016, p. 12).

The Ukrainian government tried to control the demonstrations early on, deploying a large number of security forces, including the Berkut special forces, which led to violent clashes with demonstrators and an upsurge in protests, and hiring titushkis, groups of young people linked to and funded by the government who participate in pro-government demonstrations,

disrupt peaceful protests and intimidate and assault journalists (Kivirähk, et al., 2010, p. 313; Moore & Butorin, 2013; Pakharenko, 2015, p. 60).

The importance of social networks and mobile phones to film and share the events on the ground with contacts and to organising demonstrations marked the Maydan Square events (83.7% of Ukrainians in urban areas were informed about the protests through the internet and social networks). As a result, Yanukovych's government did not have complete control over the coverage of the events and was forced to compete with the new means of communication available to the population for media space (Onuch, 2014; Szostek, 2014, p. 7). The following media outlets were created spontaneously as civic responses from Ukrainian society:

– The creation of new television channels such as hromadske.tv (which was funded by the European Commission, Canada and Sweden and had an editorial team of 30 people), smaller channels such as Espreso.tv, Ukrstram.tv and Radio Svoboda (which were funded by the United States) and 24th, 5th and ZIK, which live streamed the protests in Maidan Square without censorship or comments, keeping the population informed on the events on the ground (Bateson, 2016; Bigus et al., 2014; Кузякин, 2014);

– The creation of Facebook pages (Euro-Maydan and Crimea-SOS) with up-to-date information on events on the ground (Freedom of the Net 2014, 2015, p. 834).

– The creation of fact-checking websites such as StopFake.org, FakeControl and Information Resistance, which aimed to ensure that reports on events were accurate, refute misinformation and combat Russian disinformation and propaganda spread by trolls or pro-Russian activists (Cain, 2019; Ries, 2014; Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2015, p. 25; Levin Jaitner, 2015, p. 92; Lokot, 2014).

Since the conflicts in the square began, the Russian narrative tried to associate the protesters with far-right Nazi figures like Stepan Bandera, labelling them "Banderovtsy", nationalists, fascists, insurgents, anarchists, Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites who wanted to attack the rights of non-Ukrainians living in the country, and especially the ethnic Russian minority, through physical threats (Fischer, 2014, p. 1; Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2015; Wood et al., 2016, p. 121; Yuhas, 2014; Santos Pereira, 2014, p. 345). The message resonated with Crimean citizens, who were more exposed to Russian sources of information. To reinforce the message, these media outlets used sensationalist language and themes, presenting images and videos that were often manipulated or without context so it would fit the narrative that the propaganda machine wanted to convey (Gaspar Jorge, 2014, p.50; Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2015, p. 13; Ryzhkov, 2014; Thomas, 2015, p. 381 e 385).

The second most disseminated narrative was the accusations that the West was collaborating with Ukrainian insurgents to organise the demonstrations. This argument resembled the Russian discourse during the "Colour Revolutions" in Ukraine during the 2000s, or, as Moscow called them in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, the "orange plague", claiming that its goal was to weaken Russia's sphere of influence (Darczewska, 2014, p. 20; Fischer, 2014, p. 1; Menon & Rumer, 2015, p. 81; S. F. Jones, 2010, p. 130). As proof of this collaboration, Russian politicians cite the private communications between the Estonian foreign minister

and the EU released by WikiLeaks or the conversations between US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt released by hacker group CyberBerkut (DeBenedictis, 2022, p. 36, 40 and 79; Sakkov, 2015).

The third narrative involves a recurring theme in Russian diplomacy: the obligation to defend the rights of fellow Russians, even abroad, is set out in the military doctrine of 2010, which tries to project the idea of a protective state with similarities to Soviet propaganda and interventionism (Bruusgaard, 2014, p. 88; Gasparyan, 2014; Moser, 2023; Wood et al., 2016, p. 13). In the case of Crimea, the argument includes the need to protect the Russian minority living in the peninsula and the interests of the fleet, its crew and respective families, who are stationed there, as set out in the international treaty with Ukraine. (DeBenedictis, 2022, p. 76; Lukichev, 2022, p. 32).

From the start, the Russian media tried to convey these narratives in a unified way, while Ukrainian television stations covered the events from different perspectives. When the protests in Maidan Square began, much to the surprise of analysts, all television stations owned by oligarchs covered the events with objectivity, with the exception of state television, which did not cover part of the protests or did so in a way that portrayed the government in a favourable light. However, the lack of concrete results from the protests, the signing of the assistance agreement with Russia and the possibility of receiving state funding led the media owned by oligarchs to begin portraying the government more favourably from 17 December onwards (Aslund, 2013 ; Szostek, 2014, p. 2, 9 e 10; Vorobiov, 2014).

Not long after the agreement was signed, clashes intensified in several urban centres and self-defence units such as the "night wolves" and Cossacks began to appear in the eastern and southern parts of the country, forming a "Slavic shield" in Crimea against a possible attack from Kiev (Bychenko et al., 2021, p. 320; Ukrainska Pravda, 2014).

On 16 January, the government enacted eleven anti-protest laws (which the opposition called "dictatorship laws"). From then onwards, images of police violence began to appear in international news programmes, including the first deaths in the demonstrations, caused by the Berkut intervention force, whose members came mainly from Crimea and the southern and eastern parts of the country. Several authors agree that the passing of these laws, which would be repealed two weeks later, was the watershed moment that led to the radicalisation of the protests in Kiev. By banning peaceful political opposition activities, the demonstrators had no other way to express their discontentment, which led some to engage in more radical forms of protest (Bychenko et al., 2021, p. 210; Саруханов, 2015; Кузякин, 2014; Moser, 2023; Thomas, 2015, p. 303).

4.7. Information operations in Crimea

The information operations in Crimea were part of a series of manoeuvres on the ground, on the Crimean Peninsula, and in cyberspace, throughout Ukrainian territory, particularly on the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk in preparation for the upcoming conflict (Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2015, p. 22; Novitchkova et al., 2015, p. 4).

The most original innovation in the cyberspace information campaign on the Crimean peninsula was the use of trolls who shared disinformation through fake profiles, webpages and social media platforms (DeBenedictis, 2022, p. 56). Campaigns such as 'polite people', a term for the paramilitary forces that occupied the targets of interest on the Crimean peninsula, paint Russian soldiers in a favourable light (although at the time Russia denied that they were Russian soldiers) and gain widespread support on social media and networks (Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2015, p. 30; Volkov, 2015).

At the beginning of the invasion of Crimea, Russian forces managed to disrupt the communications of all Ukrainian governmental and military organisations that could hinder Russian military operations, either by interfering with them physically or through more sophisticated cybernetic means (by cutting off or controlling communications or using telephone or internet surveillance). These methods included the seizure of an internet exchange point (IXP) by the special forces to disrupt traffic with the rest of the country, the installation of jamming equipment in the Kerch Strait to prevent sailors from contacting the new government, the occupation of television stations, radio stations and the written press (Geers, 2015, p. 8; Levin Jaitner, 2015, p. 91; Seely & Jonsson, 2015; Tsipis, 2014).

Paramilitary forces and militias on the ground, including Cossacks and "Night Wolves", blocked accesses to main roads and set up checkpoints all over the peninsula, and helicopters and combat boats were brought to the peninsula to block any forms of transport and combat (air, sea and land). The fact that civilian and military objectives were achieved swiftly and peacefully was due, on the one hand, to the high degree of preparedness of the Russian special forces, who had held 6 military exercises in the previous year alone and, on the other hand, by the major weakening of the intelligence services, with a special focus on counterintelligence and the navy (justified by the Ukrainian defence budget being less than 1% of GDP, a historically low figure) (Lukichev, 2022, p. 20 e 21; Wood et al., 2016, p. 16).

The moral compromise of the local police, who sabotaged orders from the central government, the political and social structures that actively cooperated with the Russian militias and paramilitaries, the desertion of about half of the Ukrainian navy stationed on the peninsula and the remaining soldiers in the days that followed caused the chain of command to collapse and helped Russia achieve its objectives (Rácz, 2015, p. 74 e 77; Shanghina et al., 2015, p. 31; United States Department of State, 2016, p. 61). Between 27 February and 2 March, almost all of those objectives were achieved and the newly elected Prime Minister of the Peninsula sent a request for military assistance to Russia.

On 9 March, Russian forces took control of the main television broadcasting tower in Crimea and replaced the Ukrainian television channels with Russian ones shortly before the referendum. As soon as the public consultation took place, the territory was integrated into the Russian Federation and media outlets were force to register by 1 January, a deadline that was later extended to 1 April, after which publication or broadcasting licences would be revoked. Newspapers, publications, television channels or radio stations seen as detractors of Moscow had their licences revoked, with Tatar media outlets being specifically targeted and

replaced by Russian content (DeBenedictis, 2022, p. 73; United States Department of State, 2016, p. 65).

A referendum on the political future of the peninsula was held on 16 March, without any international scrutiny, and two days later Putin signed the decree recognising Crimea as Russian territory.

5. Impact of intelligence operations in Crimea

To evaluate the impact of information operations on the Ukrainian population, it is necessary to analyse how people were exposed to it and the means used to influence and persuade them.

Peisakhin and Rozenas studied the impact of Russian television coverage on Ukrainian territory and found that in places where information channels of Russian origin are broadcast, the likelihood of voting for pro-Russian candidates in presidential and parliamentary elections increased 7.5% on average. On the other hand, the availability of Russian entertainment channels has no impact on voting behaviour, suggesting that the influence on voters is through news programmes. Despite this, in 2015 the National Broadcasting Council of Ukraine called for a ban on programmes by Russian government owned companies and films and soap operas glorifying Russian security and defence agencies in Ukrainian television stations (Peisakhin & Rozenas, 2018, p. 542; Shanghina et al., 2015, p. 41).

The study found that citizens who obtain their information from Russian channels are more likely to see the post-Maidan revolution government as illegitimate and have more trust in Vladimir Putin. The effect of Russian television on people with pro-Russian attitudes tends to reinforce pre-established beliefs, such as distrust in the legitimacy of the protests, while it has the opposite effect on people with pro-Western beliefs after a certain level of media exposure (Peisakhin & Rozenas, 2018, p. 542-546; Levin Jaitner, 2015, p. 93).

As Figure 1 shows, over 65% of respondents from the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine fully or partially support the president's actions, as opposed to the rest of the country. In those areas, the perception of political repression (see figure 2) is also radically different, although the gap is smaller. This perception is fuelled by the media coverage by Russian media outlets and by the official narrative in regions that have especially close ties to the government.

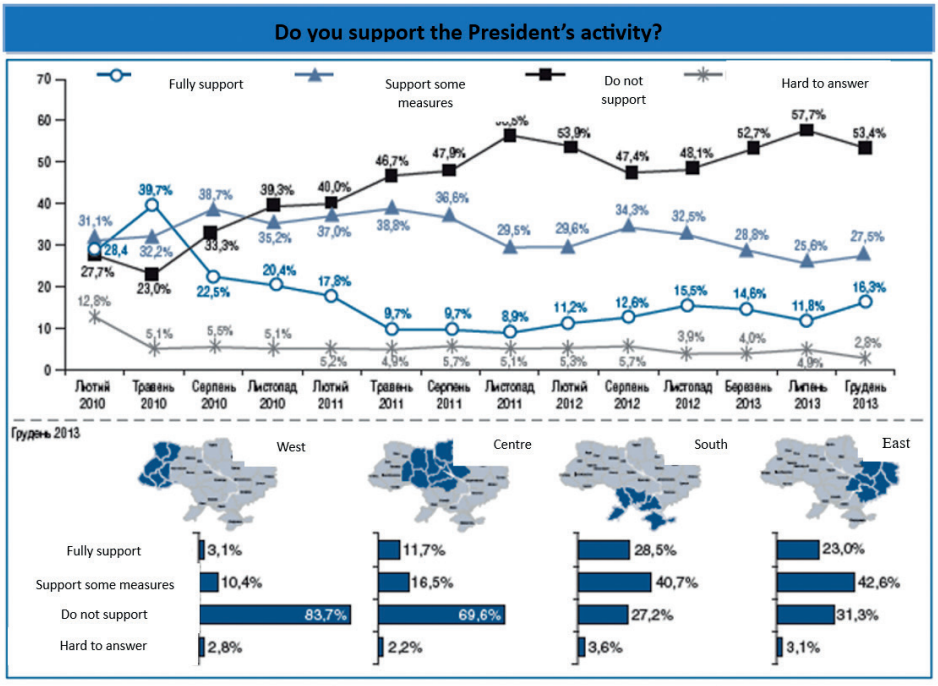

Figure 1 – Do you support the president's activity?
Adapted and translated from: Ukraine-2013: New perspectives and new threats, Razumkov Centre, Kyiv (2013).

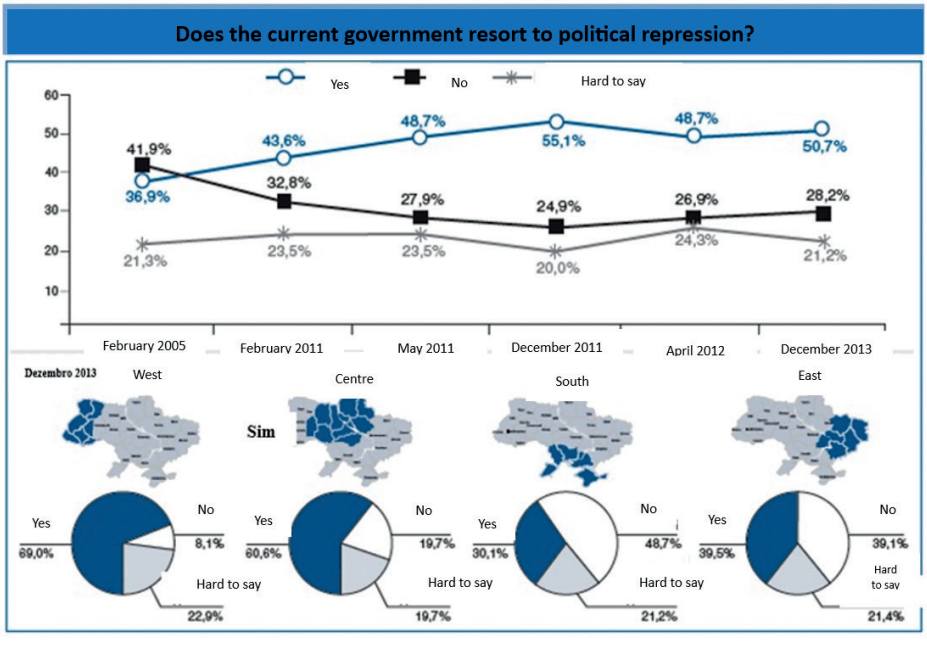

Figure 2 – Does the current government resort to political repression?
Adapted and translated from: Ukraine-2013: New perspectives and new threats, Razumkov Centre, Kyiv (2013).

Two studies by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), one conducted between 9 and 20 November 2013, two weeks before the refusal to sign the association agreement with the EU, and the other between 24 January and 1 February, two weeks after the violent clashes between the demonstrators and law enforcement, Victor Yanukovych was still the candidate with the highest voting intentions in the first round, especially in the East and South. The future president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, was only in third place at the time, showing how a considerable part of the population still considered his actions to be legitimate *(Ukraine, Russia, Belarus - Mutual Assessments of the Population*, 2014).

On the other hand, the willingness to participate in different forms of protest in the south and east of Ukraine is marginal compared to respondents in the west. Contrary to the image conveyed by Russian media, which included television coverage of popular uprisings in Donetsk and Donbas, the majority of the population in those regions proved to be passive in the face of protests and uprisings, similar to what happened during Soviet rule (Rácz, 2015, p. 73).

As illustrated in Table 2, the most significant difference between the two surveys in this respect is in the willingness to participate in protests between respondents in the southern and eastern parts of the country: while in November 2013 about 64% of people living in southern Ukraine said they did not wish to participate in protests, after the protests began, this number dropped to 50%. On the other hand, in eastern Ukraine, the population's willingness to participate decreased: in November 52.4% said they were unwilling to take part in demonstrations, while in December this figure rose to 61.1%.

Table 2 – Willingness to participate in protest actions in Ukraine.

	Regions				
Forms of protest:	**West**	**Central**	**South**	**East**	**Ukraine**
	%	%	%	%	%
Collecting signatures (demands, resources)	14.6	10.9	15.9	12.7	13.4
Authorised meetings and demonstrations	16.5	14.2	10.4	8.0	12.3
Threatening to strike	2.6	3.9	1.7	1.7	2.3
Boycott (refusing to implement the decisions of the government / authorities)	5.8	2.9	2.1	0.7	2.8
Unauthorised meetings and demonstrations	4.9	5.9	1.1	0.9	3.4
Participating in strikes	5.8	6.4	4.0	1.4	4.5
Protesting by going on hunger strike	2.1	0	0.2	0.2	0.6
Picketing state institutions	4	0.7	1.7	0.9	1.7
Seizing buildings	2.3	0	0.2	0	0.5
Creating armed militias independent of official forces	0.9	0.2	0.4	0	0.4
I'm not ready participate in mass protests.	47.8	57.5	63.8	52.4	55.8

Source: Adapted and translated from: Ukraine-2013: New perspectives and new threats, Razumkov Centre, Kyiv (2013).

In a survey carried out in April 2014, 91% of respondents in western Ukraine supported the demands on Maidan Square, while 63% in the south and 68% in the east were against the protests. Participants were also asked about the impact of the actions of different political actors, as can be seen in Figures 3 and 4: residents of Crimea attribute a positive role to Russia, in total opposition to the rest of the country (Shanghina et al., 2014; Baltic Surveys & Gallup Organization, 2014).

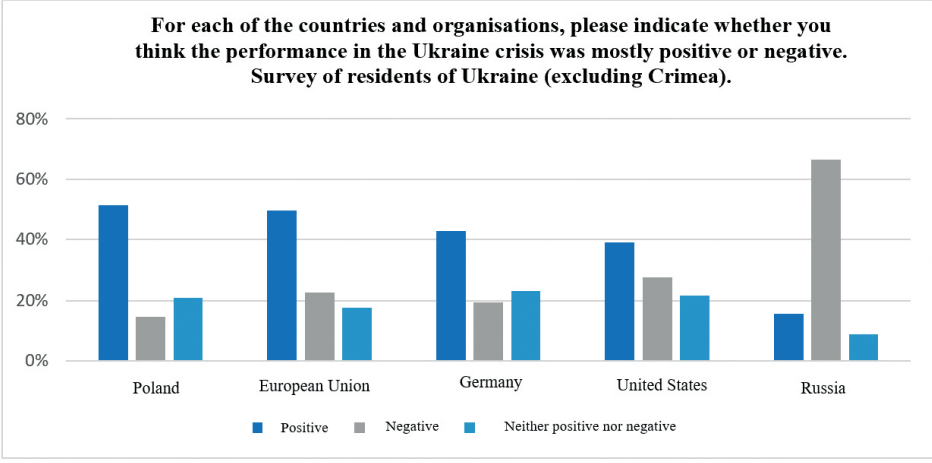

Figure 3 – Perceptions about the role of external agents in the Crimean crisis - Residents of Ukraine (excluding the population of Crimea).
Source: Media and News During the Crisis in Ukraine, Gallup (2014).

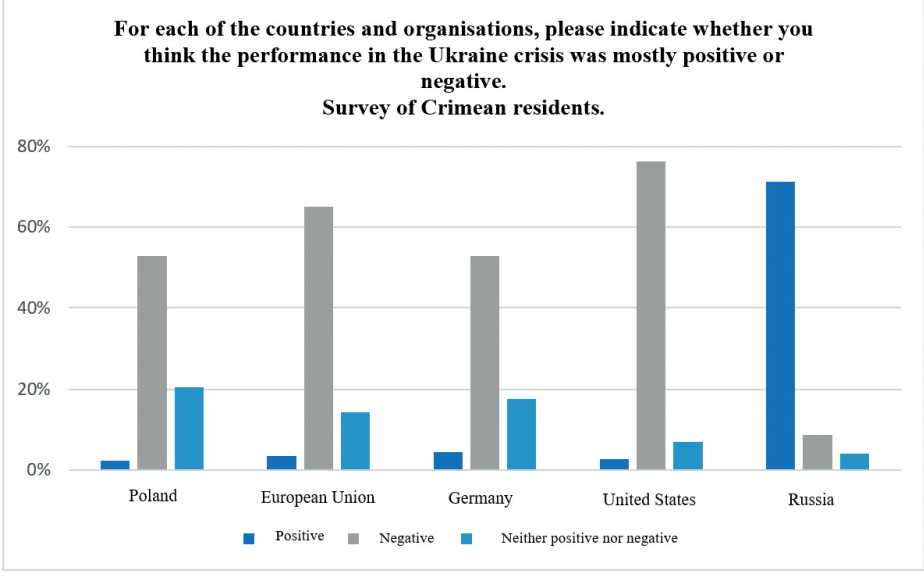

Figure 4 – Perceptions about the role of external agents in the Crimean crisis - Crimean population.
Source: Media and News During the Crisis in Ukraine, Gallup (2014).

The conclusions of the aforementioned studies and surveys, combined with the high exposure of the population of eastern Ukraine and Crimea, suggest that the pro-Moscow attitudes of the populations of those regions have been reinforced, justifying their pre-established beliefs with the events unfolding on the ground and the respective media coverage.

6. Conclusions

This work has demonstrated Russia's willingness and ability to act to defend its interests in its sphere of influence through a wide range of effective tools in various domains, military and non-military conflict (socio-cultural, economic, religious, legal, diplomatic, intelligence and information, criminal, energy and infrastructure).

The context and structures of the affected countries and regions have proved important in preparing and adapting operations, executing them, capitalising on the results and managing the local and global consequences. The response and reaction to these operations before, during and after the clashes also allows us to draw lessons from each conflict.

On a social and demographic level, pro-Russian groups were particularly active in organising and putting into practice the demands of pro-Russian communities in the regions analysed in this study by expressing their desire for autonomy or independence, refusing to accept the alignment of their territories with Western blocs (NATO and the EU) and the violation of their rights as a political, religious, linguistic or ethnic community.

In the media sector, Russia and its secessionist partners (in the case of Georgia) maintained control over the local media and were able to influence the local population. In Crimea, Russia was able to control newspapers, radio and television stations, both in the public and private sectors, to broadcast the official narrative, including through illegal broadcasts in both territories. On the other hand, the population of Georgia and of central and western Ukraine had access to uncompromised sources of information and were able to put Russian disinformation into context. Even so, Russian propaganda was effective in creating two opposing camps with irreconcilable opinions, which increased the isolation of the population that Russia wanted to "protect" and helped make its narrative a reality.

On the political level, the destabilisation it created in Georgia did not lead to the immediate downfall of the president, but the economic difficulties in the aftermath of the invasion created the conditions for the election of a pro-Russian prime minister in 2013. In Ukraine, the interim government was unable to deal with the political challenges (public administration, political posts, defence and security forces were dominated by pro-Russian groups) and technical difficulties that the occupation operation created, and the new elections resulted in the victory of Yanukovych's main political opponent, Petro Poroshenko. In the east and south, a significant part of the population continued to vote for candidates affiliated with Moscow because of economic incentives or a sense of belonging to the Russian world.

Russia used economic and energy policies as pressure tools against both countries. In Georgia, it did so in a retaliatory manner by imposing high tariffs or banning the import of various products, while in Ukraine these policies were more varied, such as imposing

retaliatory tariffs and hiking or lowering gas prices, the allocation of state funds and investment in strategic companies.

In the military domain, in both situations Russia held planned and surprise military exercises as a means of military and psychological pressure. The presence of military bases in the territories under study was also relevant in persuading the population and in the ability to conduct military operations.

With regard to cyber operations and attacks on communications infrastructures, several similarities can be identified: in both cases the targeted territories suffered DDoS attacks and attacks on servers hosting institutional pages, websites and private services, such as access to bank accounts, while in Ukraine several newspapers, people taking part in demonstrations, servers and pages of opposition parties were also targeted. In both cases, the attacks were successful in totally or partially preventing governments and armed forces from accessing vital information by limiting or eliminating their ability to communicate, creating significant difficulties in coordinating the defence of the territory and contributing to the success of Russian operations.

The operations analysed here cannot be studied separately; on the contrary, their planning and execution was carried out gradually, successively and with constant operational improvements. The war in Georgia in 2008 showed the military effectiveness of Russian troops in achieving their political objectives without causing significant damage to Russia's socioeconomic structures. The mistakes made during this operation were assessed and corrected before the occupation of Crimea where, once again, the short-term consequences for Russia encouraged its leadership to continue planning and executing other long-term operations.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine again and attempted to apply all the lessons and experience it had acquired. However, due to the magnitude and complexity of the operations, the resistance of the Ukrainian army, population and government and corruption within Russian military structures, the conflict is still ongoing, posing a challenge that the Russian army has not been able to overcome so far. The new conflict also brought changes to information operations: Putin and the Russian media are trying to discredit the Ukrainian nation by arguing that the country's history, culture, religion and language are intrinsically associated with Russia and therefore do not exist outside it. This narrative is significantly more extreme compared to the ones that were disseminated during the information operations analysed here, and opened a new chapter in the information conflict between Russia and its adversaries in its area of influence.

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