

CYBER CONFLICTS AND NEW PATTERNS OF POLITICAL PROPAGANDA ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

Summary

The traditional concept of state sovereignty is shifting towards virtual reality as a result of the development of digitalization and the expansion of cyber warfare techniques and skills, particularly towards the contents of the so-called soft power that are used to attract public support. The case study of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia confirmed to us that, in the current geopolitical landscape, cyberattacks are used as a legal, low-cost strategy to debilitate the opposing side's material and spiritual well-being. Also, this is how a new form of an asymmetric conflict emerges, which enables actors to inflict significant damage on political opponents and technologically and militarily superior enemies, with the potential for widespread impacts on the members of civil society. Fake news, misinformation, rumors, spins and various forms of unverified content are prevalent in the propaganda war between Ukraine and Russia. This paper also demonstrates how the digital revolution, with its sophisticated seduction techniques, is drawing us further into the world of algorithms, encrypted messages and social media with personalized accesses, along with the trends highlighting the growing power of smart filters controlled by artificial intelligence which determine the accuracy of information even before it is visible.

Key words: national sovereignty, cyber conflict, political propaganda, Russia-Ukraine war, algorithms, artificial intelligence, new reality.

INTRODUCTION

A propaganda discourse on a just war and the necessity for the democratic world to support one of the sides in the conflict is the main topic of discussion in the Western mainstream media, as well as in the scientific interpretation of the Ukrainian and Russian conflict. Political scientist John Mearsheimer, one of the leading theorists of realism in international relationships, considering the relations between the two leading nuclear powers (the USA and Russia), as well as the equally important roles of the European Union, China and India, singles out the power of the media as a type of strategic support essential in the repositioning of the geopolitical

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relationships. In his opinion, “liberal hegemony highlighted as a military shield of the American foreign policy is leading to a new rearrangement of the world”, whereby wars aided by media campaigns violate human rights and democratic values (see in Mearsheimer, 2019).

Changes in the scientific paradigm are expected because sociological theories of the social sciences cannot precisely explain what is happening to us, since evolutionism as a continual progress was unable to foresee the scope and depth of the new reality that was emerging. Francis Fukuyama’s glorified theory of the end of history (Fukuyama, 1997) was popular at the time of the collapse of the Eastern Military Alliance, which is why ideas about societies advancing towards modern capitalism with developed technology, political democracy and guaranteed human rights were implemented in a large number of countries.⁵⁸ However, a Chicago sociologist’s claim that “in the global world society there is no more domination, big conflicts and wars” was inaccurate since actual events show the opposite. There have never been more conflicts on various points of the planet, and their number has been minimized by the control of media images.⁵⁹ The transformed political landscape after the end of the Cold War further encouraged “the proliferation of local, ethnic, religious and national conflicts”, while fundamentally altering the meaning of the phrases *sovereignty and territorial integrity* (Drašković, 1999: 11-12). Also, we do not refer only to the physical inviolability of state borders defined by the international law, but the contemporary understanding of communication sovereignty without which the state cannot function and which is increasingly threatened in the Internet era. Theoretical teachings have long been based on the idea that “sovereignty is the absolute and eternal power of a republic” which provides the power “to establish the law and command everyone in general and everyone individually” (Bodin, 1977: 22). Academician Radomir Lukić was among the first to point out the dichotomy in the interpretation of this concept: some perceive sovereignty as nothing more than a right, while others see it as a state’s property. Representing another viewpoint, Lukić emphasized that one can actually act against sovereignty, including by violence, and that is why it is “actually relative”, because that action might restrict power to a certain extent. In addition, “because there are no legal restrictions, sovereignty is legally absolute” (Lukić, 1995: 272). Furthermore, Lukić indicated the three elements of the content of the concept of sovereignty: a) “independence of state power”, b) “supremacy of state power”, c) “legal unlimitedness of state power”, suggesting that the first two elements constitute the basis for the third.

The authors of this paper also point to the sophisticated nuances in

⁵⁸ Yoshihiro Francis Fukuyama is an American political scientist famous for his analyzes of social capital in modern economic life, as well as his predictions of the social consequences of technological changes. He gained world fame after the publication of the book *The End of History and The Last Man*, printed in the USA in 1992.

⁵⁹ In 2022, wars were fought in the following countries: Afghanistan (2,710 victims), Myanmar (13,646), Ethiopia (4,790 victims), Yemen (5,548 victims), Mexico (5,393 victims in the war against the mafia), Israel and Palestine (around 600 victims). However, the war in Ukraine dominates as the topic in the global media, indicating that it is the most important issue on the agenda of all political interests worldwide.

the changes in the international law that create rules aimed at what might be considered a society rather than the international community. The new reality does not imply a unique space with equally sovereign states (members), but a community of interests organized on the spheres of influence that shape the perception of the public opinion. In addition, the end of the 20th century marked the disappearance of the world's bipolar division, along with new asymmetric threats that were the consequence of the processes and actions of numerous non-state actors. Moreover, the collapse of the Soviet empire contributed to the depolarization of the world and established a market for the separation of geo-interest spheres, as history demonstrates. Russia refused to relinquish its centuries-old influence over developing nations in the neighborhood, while simultaneously attempting to combat the Western influence that was noticeable on all sides. By uniting with Crimea, Russia protected its geopolitical aspirations to drive itself out of Europe, while Ukraine served as a testing ground for approaching NATO and Russia's increasingly obvious isolation.

For some time, military power was hidden under the shadow of the media centric battle with the two opposing sides, with the West gradually entering the conflict more openly and transparently. In such circumstances, information is a key resource because the human senses are bombarded with a bewildering cloud of ideas, images and symbols. New media are transforming the entire structure of society, since depersonalized individuals searching the social media determine which information to trust. In modern political practice, hidden propaganda campaigns are recognized as *soft power*⁶⁰, *soft warfare*⁶¹, *smart power*, etc. During the conflict in Ukraine, the term *hybrid warfare*⁶² appeared among military experts and was used to indicate the combination of armed and unconventional techniques of the Russian side. Throughout history, wars have always involved a combination of actions by military forces, intelligence operations, networks of information that turned the conflict into a propaganda-psychological sphere of battle, in which not only armies, but entire nations and governments have taken part. In the field of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the most visible change is in the usage of new information technologies, which not only affect the forms of war, but also its nature.

⁶⁰ The term was introduced into the academic vocabulary by the American political scientist Joseph Nye, Jr. and under the term power he implied - "the ability to change the behavior of others in order to get what you want". There are three main ways to achieve this: coercion (sticks), payments (carrots) and attraction (soft power)" (Nye, 2006).

⁶¹ The famous Soviet dissident Alexander Zinoviev, in his book *The Collapse of Russian Communism* (Zinoviev, 2003), views the means of public information as a technical apparatus for building mentality "by affecting people's emotions, aiming to persuade individuals to engage in specific behaviors that are desirable to those who produce and disseminate such information". Western strategists only disguised the propaganda from the Cold War, which lasted almost half a century, into a uniform of *soft warfare*.

⁶² It is defined by NATO as "the threat posed by any current or potential adversary including states, non-states and terrorists, with the ability, whether demonstrated or likely, to simultaneously employ conventional and non-conventional means adaptively, in pursuit of their objective."

THE ACCELERATION OF INFORMATION AND RESHAPING OF THE PUBLIC

With the expansion of digitalization and the development of cyberspace, the traditional state has gained a dangerous competitor with a variety of invisible functions in the domain of political influence. In the following section of the paper, through the analysis of events in Ukraine and Russia, some important aspects observed in the usage of propaganda have been indicated. We examine the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis through the model of non-violent communication and organized protests that took place on Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) on November 21, 2013, since we can observe the strategic role and positioning of social media in them.⁶³ The conflict began when the president at the time Victor Yanukovych decided not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. Nikolay Azarov, the prime minister at the time, said that implementing European industrial standards would cost the country 160 billion euros. It is uncertain what the government wanted to achieve with the lengthy negotiations with the EU, but Yanukovych's decision had provoked outrage. After its announcement (November 21), the blogger Mustafa Nayem invited his fellow citizens to oppose the decision via social media: "We shall gather at 10.30 p.m. at the Independence Monument. Dress warmly, bring umbrellas, tea, coffee, good mood and your friends." When various political figures joined the opposition blogger and the students, it soon became clear they were not alone. In a television interview nine days later, MP Irina Gerashchenko claimed that the police had used excessive force on the demonstrators and that some Western journalists had been injured. In reality, the conflict did occur, and political opponents believed it was a deliberate spread of misinformation, whereas the truth was revealed the following day. Since then, however, the attention of the public has shifted towards virtual space. According to the analysis, one of the most prominent media outlets *Hromadske.ua* received \$50,000 from the American embassy in September 2013 as a support for "expanding democratic capacities in information" and another \$95,000 from the Dutch embassy. Alexander Yakimenko, the former head of the Ukrainian Security Service, later admitted that there had been an increase in diplomatic dispatches to Western power centers at the time.⁶⁴

One of the features of the manipulation process, according to theorists, is that it must overcome resistance and opposition, which means the gradual acceptance of what is being persuaded (Breton, 2000). In our example, it was necessary to persuade the Ukrainian public that Russia,

⁶³ Symbolically known as Euromaidan and due to the citizens' desire for stronger European integration of Ukraine, the protest was organized in response to a tweet posted by Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who was the leader of the opposition party "Fatherland" at the time, regarding the alleged refusal of the Ukrainian authorities to sign the "Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU".

⁶⁴ The Maidan protests were openly supported by Western politicians, while certain diplomats even attended the demonstrators' speeches. One of them was the State Department representative, Victoria Nuland, who later revealed that the U.S. had spent five million dollars on promoting democracy in Ukraine.

which skillfully conceals its conquering aspirations, is their enemy. The digital revolution has enabled the expensive minutes in television contents to be replaced by more aggressive, pervasive and cheaper forms of manipulation on the web, including the advantage of creating and distributing persuasive messages to a precisely filtered target group. Moreover, the overabundance of content is a reality rather than a danger. Thanks to the quick, massive and skillfully generated dissatisfaction, the citizens were led into protests and the conditions for the change of the government were created. Digital media practically affect all of the senses, continually “refreshing” them with more diverse information that is frequently distorted and false, whereas traditional media use to focus the attention on one or two of them. In addition, it once again confirmed the theorists’ assumption that: “What starts in the online world, ends in the real world.” (Holiday, 2012). In a media centric society, public communication is conditioned by political, economic, cultural, religious, security and other actors which secretly exert influence over the media and the digital platforms in order to provoke certain mental reactions by the agenda setting, framing and priming. The Ukrainian crisis ensued as a complex product of historical, identity and geopolitical circumstances and ultimately escalated with an open Russian invasion on February, 24, 2022. Although the conflict was considered to be brief and controlled, it continued to escalate, with various aspects and interpretations depending on the selected level of analysis and the author’s ideological affiliation. In the anarchic structure of the distorted international relations, the mechanisms that prevent major conflicts (economic interdependence, democracy and international institutions) have loosened, proving once more that states resort to aggression when their security is threatened.⁶⁵ The foreign policy reasons for Russian aggression, NATO relations, the occupation of Crimea, mutual fears and threats will not be discussed further in this research paper.⁶⁶ Also, we will not explain in detail the new international relations that have united Europe in an effort to condemn only one party for all that has happened in recent years. The topic is not even an economic blockade and an attempt to isolate Russia, whose current invasion strategy is estimated to have cost at least 100 billion dollars, but may have actually cost as much as 150 billion dollars, according to international financial experts.⁶⁷ A larger decrease in GDP did not occur due to the alternative export of Russian energy products to China and some Asian countries, but the economic consequences will be visible

⁶⁵ The example most comparable to Ukraine is the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. At the time, the installation of nuclear missiles by the Soviet Union only a few hundred kilometers from Florida was perceived as a direct act of aggression in Washington. With the naval blockade of Cuba, while not excluding the possibility of a direct invasion, the USA demonstrated its determination to preserve its vital interests, at the cost of causing the third world war.

⁶⁶ The understandable desire of the former members of the Eastern Bloc to assure their security through the membership in the NATO military alliance caused justified concerns in Moscow. In political theory, a mutual sinister attribution error occurs, according to which each of the conflicting parties interprets the behavior of the other as offensive and threatening.

⁶⁷ It is expected that the gross domestic product in Russia will fall by a third at the end of this year - from 1,700 billion to about 1,100 billion dollars.

for a long time in the future for the entire world. An example illustrating the manipulation campaign is the media coverage in which any possibility of a dialogue with Moscow is compared to an agreement with fascism (in other words, Moscow is regarded as the new “Berlin”). Only when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) revealed that Russia’s growth rate of 0.3% in 2023 was higher than that of Germany (0.1%) and the United Kingdom (-0.6%) did the campaign eventually reach an end (IMF, 2023). Moreover, the Western media do not emphasize this as important information, but shape the public space with propaganda narratives that glorify the opponents of the Kremlin: on January 27, the French newspaper *Le Figaro Magazine* wrote in honor of a battalion of Russian legionnaires in Ukraine whose dream is to assassinate the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin. Furthermore, the public is skillfully reshaped without the audience even noticing it. On March 1, Bruno Le Maire, the French Minister of Economy and an experienced diplomat who became Dominique de Villepin’s advisor in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002 declared that: “We will wage a total economic and financial war against Russia.” and “We will bring the Russian economy to the edge of collapse.” Le Maire had to retract his statement at the request of the French president, although this was never reported in the media. However, as soon as a new topic is introduced into the public domain, another follows, and the audience quickly forgets what was initially discussed. The terminology used in describing the opposing side plays an important role in the audience’s perception - by the Western and Ukrainian media, the opposing side and their actions are labeled as “terrorist and separatist”, while the established Russian rhetoric was that the opposing side consisted of “the Banderites and neo-Nazis.” Social media rapidly accepted the imposed hate speech, which developed into a training ground for the gathering of like-minded people ready to emotionally support their side in the conflict.

BATTLES IN THE VIRTUAL SPACE

Cyber warfare takes place in the virtual spaces of internet portals and social media, with the aim of imposing an agenda and obtaining the support of the recipients, which theoretically leads to the application of Wilbur Schramm’s model of persuasive communication (Schramm, 1973). Its importance is reflected in the efficiency of a massive, significant and rapid mediation of messages and ideas to small groups by individual recipients, which results in capturing the audience’s attention. On social media, Schramm’s model is taught on the example of the options *share* and *retweet*, which allow an emotionally and interest-targeted user to transmit a post, or quote a source of information, with just one click. In this manner, a certain message gains visibility through other users, without checking its authenticity and accuracy, which is important for manipulative purposes in times of crisis and war situations.

At the beginning of this century, cyberattacks (also known as denial-of-service attacks) were part of the conflictological arsenal of unconventional actions, but the first examples were documented in the case of

Estonia in 2007 when the hackers targeted the websites of the government, ruling parties, major banks, pro-government media and influential corporations. In the same year, it was discovered that the United States Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) and Israel's Unit 8200 carried out an operation in which they infected multiple Iranian computers with the Stuxnet virus. Since new weapons have the advantage of being invisible, the virus did not immediately destroy the computer software it invaded, but used them to sabotage the information system of Iran's Natanz nuclear power plant. Similar attacks on information systems (telecommunications, the government website, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense) in Georgia in 2008 preceded the beginnings of the military conflict in South Ossetia. Additionally, Russia had reported on the Stuxnet attack on one of its nuclear power facilities in 2013, but the international public did not accept that it happened. In the introductory section of this paper, we have already noted that cyber conflicts precede the use of armed force, which is confirmed by the example of the Ukraine-Russia conflict. In their report for 2022, experts from the specialized cyber agency Kaspersky analyzed the activities in cyberspace.⁶⁸ Unusual cyber activity was immediately noticeable in the days and weeks leading up to the military conflict. Following that, on February 24, a major wave of ransomware and wiper attacks occurred, randomly targeting a variety of military, security and civilian entities across Ukraine. Some were very sophisticated, but their scope was quickly reduced, so that the attacked country did not realize it was being targeted. The general impression was insignificant, as if someone was trying unsuccessfully to play in the digital space, because ideologically motivated groups that had previously been active, did not make a statement this time.

Experts in the field of cyber activity could detect that something unusual had occurred. For example, Europeans who receive the signal via the ViaSat satellite, noticed that on the same day, there were multiple interruptions in the Internet access that lasted for a considerable amount of time. It may seem like a coincidence that this "cyber event" started less than two hours after the Russian Federation announced the beginning of a "special military operation" in Ukraine to the world community. Targeted attacks on satellite communications demonstrate that cyber attacks are the main course of action in modern military conflicts and serve as centers for armed turning points in military operations. Numerous self-(organized) cyber groups were formed immediately after Ukraine became involved in the armed conflict, with the goal of breaking into enemy organizations, publishing their confidential data in order to ideologically undermine and label them as the "enemies of democracy." As a result, a media image of the Manichean background of the conflict emerged, in which the collision of good and evil (black and white) illustrated identity theft, the purposeful creation of fake websites and the deluge of misinformation that obscured the essence of the conflict. In addition, the extreme side of this action was reflected in the complete deletion and destruction of enemy data.

⁶⁸ The report is part of the Kaspersky Security Bulletin (KSB) which provides predictions and analysis of key changes every year in the field of cyber security.

Networks enable everyone to interact with everyone and share multimedia messages, making such media more “social” than traditional media, which only allow a one-way communication flow. Another important component for our research paper is the theorists’ assertion that “online communication affects not only the imposing of certain topics on the public’s attention and the shaping of the public opinion, but also the relationship between the representative and the represented, the audience and the broadcaster” (Kamps, 2011). As shown in the graph, hackers have increased the number of attacks, which became daily and randomly targeted. Some organizations, such as the *IT Army of Ukraine* or *Killnet*, are officially sponsored by the government (financially, organizationally, technologically, reinforced by personnel and propaganda teams), which enabled their *Telegram* channels to attract millions of followers worldwide. According to Kaspersky analysts, the average DDoS attack lasted 18.5 hours during that year, almost 40 times longer compared to 2021 (approximately 28 minutes).⁶⁹



Graph: Total duration of DDoS attacks detected by Kaspersky Protection, measured in seconds per week in 2021 compared to 2022 (Diagram: Kaspersky/Promo).

⁶⁹ A distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack disrupts network services by consuming application resources, causing websites and services to crash. Hackers overload the site with enormous amounts of data, causing it to perform poorly or go entirely offline. The goal is to break into the database and obtain all security-sensitive data.

We assume that both sides, particularly the Russian side, expected the military conflict to be short-lived, so they used quick and effective methods of intrusion into other people's IT territories at the beginning of the cyber war. However, as the war progressed, programmers and hackers began using programs, the so-called open source that targeted significantly more than the software, using Trojans and similar viruses to entirely destroy and obtain other people's content. Trolls created a special field of conflict by attempting to expand their sphere of influence through the use of various misinformation techniques on social media. Therefore, fueled by the activism of propaganda experts, the cyber conflict intensified on both sides, with the West putting technological and media infrastructure at Ukraine's disposal.

BOT ACTIVITIES AS A CRISIS-INFLUENCING SKILL

Every day, the classic media (the press, radio, television) publish a series of propaganda content in order to attract as many followers as possible through positive publicity. With digitalization, we experienced changes in all phases of the communication process: sources of information (open and less controlled access, collection, sorting and processing of information); information (combination of all multimedia components – text, graphics, animation, sound and video, links, hashtags); the transmitter; the channel and the receiver (technically improved, less noise); and the recipients (a simplified access to content, filtering, technically supported selection and more opportunities for personal involvement). Nevertheless, the power of social media has evolved into a new kind of persuasion. *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *YouTube* and *Tik Tok* have all become the platforms of continuous misinformation campaigns, with the goal of portraying their side as the one fighting a just war, while also mobilizing new sympathizers. The audience, fascinated with the opportunity to post content themselves and believing they have a chance for the truth, becomes even louder, larger, faster and more expressive. Bots (trolls, spammers) take advantage of this, integrating with civilian forces that actively participate in the conflicts. It is common for them to post their own messages less frequently and comment on other people's posts more often, discrediting the authors or diverting attention from the topic to other matters. In the example of Russia, a state agency pays "spammers" to write thousands of pro-Kremlin comments per day. "Spammers then go to large group chats, such as forums on various social media, to instruct thousands of trolls which platforms and articles to target. The group selects certain content, such as news concerning Russian crimes, and then sends trolls to cover that content with falsehood and pro-Kremlin viewpoints, using both real and fake accounts", as stated on the *Twitter* account of the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Also, the norms of professional processing of information are increasingly being violated, with potentially enormous consequences in the public opinion. Social media and portals directly depend on the popularity – on the number of clicks, likes, comments, shares and reactions.

“It indicates a peculiar form of web dictatorship in which the data on the number of clicks affects the work in the newsrooms (rooms for selection and editing). *Clickstream* shapes the content on social portals, but also increasingly in traditional media, while the editor easily identifies a popular or a breaking story that can generate a large number of visitors, including the influence and marketing” (Milašinović i Jevtović, 2017). From the perspective of international politics, truth is a value that is fundamentally exploited and described in interpretatively different ways, depending on the views and interests of power centers from which the information is received. We have already pointed out that the British government was among the first to officially declare that social media posts are a highly dangerous propaganda instrument. According to a scientific study requested by the government itself, at least one third of social media users saw at least one Russian propaganda video during 2022, and many respondents stated that almost half of their “wall” on social media consisted of posts concerning Russian propaganda or conspiracy theories justifying the aggression against Ukraine. In addition, the research indicated that the Kremlin employs *troll farms*, which are specially organized technological complexes with thousands of computers and servers that, using a special software, can create thousands of new accounts on social media and upload the previously selected video clips and photos every day. In this manner, numerous bans and limitations introduced by *Meta*, *Twitter* and *Snapchat* to prevent the spread of propaganda content are efficiently avoided.⁷⁰

The Russian encrypted messaging application *Telegram* has launched a channel “Cyber Front Z” (the letter Z represents the support for the invasion of Ukraine), and behind the patriotic rhetoric is a well-organized propaganda influence that should spread support around the world. Moreover, the new media which should be a stronghold of civil society and democracy, can easily become the hidden instruments of surveillance in the hands of the powerful, the holders of capital and military dominance.

MEDIA IMAGES OF THE CONFLICT AND THE RECRUITMENT OF FOLLOWERS

Media images, persuasion, and military actions are all intertwined in the synthesis of armed conflicts. A proactive example of the Russian propaganda demonstrates how the process unfolds in practice: even as members of the Russian mercenary group Wagner participated in the battles for Bakhmut (a city in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas), one of Wagner's closest associates, Yevgeny Prigozhin, was assigned a specific task - using propaganda to gain public support in the areas under the Russian control behind the front lines. Alexander Malkevich was strategically prepared for this type of action: from the beginning of the war at the end

⁷⁰ One of the largest “troll farms” is located in the small town of Gachina (near St. Petersburg) and has more than 15,000 servers and almost 1,200 full-time administrators. By producing and distributing online propaganda content, they actively post images on the *Telegram* messaging application, through which they find new “collaborators” (sympathizers), who further spread such content on their pages and social media.

of February 2022, he assisted in the establishment of pro-Russian TV stations in the crucial areas occupied by Russia. Prior to that, he collaborated with Prigozhin on media-propaganda actions of the Russian influence from Africa to the United States, which is why he was very quickly sanctioned by the West (for spreading misinformation).⁷¹ Malkevich's job was to run a state-funded television in Prigozhin's hometown of St. Petersburg, but in the summer of 2022 he relocated to the occupied regions of Ukraine. In addition, his primary task was to establish a network of pro-Russian television stations in the conquered regions in order to obtain the support of the local population. In a short period, he launched *Tavriya TV* in Kherson, as well as television stations in Melitopol and Mariupol, for exchanging news and other (mis)information. Also, the reporting of those channels was based on the pre-selected Kremlin propaganda narratives. Another major obstacle Malkevich encountered was the lack of people willing and able to work for his channels. In order to educate new employees, he established a "media school" in Kherson, appointing himself the head of the journalism department at the local university and even wrote a textbook *Real Russian Journalism for New Regions* for future media professionals in the Russia-occupied parts of Ukraine. The goal was simple - to influence young people, justify the military intervention and recruit new supporters for the war option.

Furthermore, neither side adheres to impartial and truthful journalism. For example, two months later, journalist Ruth Elkrief interviewed the former Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine about "two Russian missiles that probably fell on Poland" (LCI, November 15, 2022), wanting to "find out if it was Putin's conscious decision".

Although the interlocutor diplomatically suggested to her on several occasions to "check the information first", she did not. When it was revealed that the news was spread by Ukrainian sources and was false, no Western media mentioned it again. The fear of ruining Ukraine's image as a victim sometimes borders on self-censorship: when *The New York Times* published an article titled "Scandal. Corruption in Ukraine fuels American fears about the use of its aid" (January 27, 2023), after a few moments the text was corrected to: "U.S. Officials Overseeing Aid Say Ukrainian Leaders Are Tackling Corruption"... An image of the fairness of Ukraine's struggle for freedom must not be damaged, so that all negativity is silenced or distorted, so that the audience's perception remains undisputed. In the spotlight is the glorification of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has become the most famous influencer on the planet, gaining access to all important world events. As a result, his video address introduces every major political summit, economic forum, book fair, film festival and American football game. Also, the global media reports on all of his statements, emphasizing the importance of his words, even when there is no

⁷¹ Malkevich rose to prominence in 2018 after launching *USA Really* – a website set up in the United States by RIA FAN, which employed associates from Prigozhin's "troll factory" that promoted pro-Kremlin views via social media and the Internet from the offices in St. Petersburg. They are active on eight social media platforms, support Putin and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and target the Western media and the social media accounts of Western politicians.

justification for it. When on February 25, 2022 he replied to the American rescue offer with a famous sentence: “I need ammunition, not a ride.”, the *Associated Press* journalists concluded that this message reflected “the full weight of the war waged by the people of this suffering country”. Although there is no evidence that the sentence was ever spoken, it was enthusiastically received by the West's mainstream intellectual community (Bernard-Henri Lévy, Raphael Glucksmann, Léa Salamé, Edwy Plenel, etc.). The glorification of the personality is such that the chief controller of *The Washington Post*, once the most widely read and trusted American newspaper, stated that: “The answer is so strongly associated with Zelensky’s courage that, at this point, fact-checking will have no impact.”

Western media is causing a chain reaction all over the world and across all communication platforms. Its initial message (Zelensky’s statement), becomes the most important message every day, leading to the general mobilization of the public, so the message itself abandons the strict domain of information and pervades all means of fast communication, from news programs to social media. It then enters a chaotic phase in which the leaders of the most diverse political organizations, non-governmental organizations, civil forums, and similar organizations make public announcements, competing with each other in astonishing statements and harsh condemnation of the Russian side.

THE STATE AND THE PROPAGANDA APPARATUS

The social, conflictological and propaganda changes that are the subject of our research are not visible to the wider community since the use of social media and the Internet occurs simultaneously in the online and offline sphere. Nowadays, cyber conflicts have become a typical component of military actions, but in many respects they are far more dangerous because they are invisible, broad and multidimensional, with devastating consequences for the civilian population. For example, the day before the armed attack on Ukraine, several important Ukrainian websites were blocked - the parliament, the government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, security and other state institutions.

Hackers carried out the “DDos” (Distributed Denial of Service) attacks on computer services aimed at denying access to users. In addition, the service becomes overloaded with a large number of specially created accounts which causes congestion and a system’s slowdown, preventing it from being used at crucial moments. The threat is also spreading on the energy infrastructure, the financial sector, hospitals and universities, with the goal of causing unrest and insecurity in the society. Also, the so-called Wiper – a program that silently destroys large amounts of data was identified on Ukrainian computers. In addition to mobilizing its army in the conflicts, Ukraine immediately appointed its IT experts trained to combat Russian hacker attacks, while also preparing attacks on the Russian IT infrastructure. Given that it maximally used the help of the West, the global hacker group, *Anonymous*, which declared the digital war against the Kremlin, had joined the information battle. Several websites of the Russian government were targeted by the blockade, as well as the most impor-

tant national media, the portal of the Russian state television *rt.com* and *Sputnik*.

The manner in which the conflicts are represented also has an impact on how they are perceived, both in the state and around the world. Additionally, the narratives are divided, depending on the perspective of the observer explaining them. For the political elite of the West, Ukraine is fighting for freedom and democracy, so it must be supported. On the other hand, for Russia, the war is a response to Western imperialism and NATO's unrestricted expansion. The black and white image is further mediated by the official media, but even more and faster by social media spreading the kinetic war, which symbolizes a new dimension of the conflict. We can already assert that the largest digital propaganda conflict in the history of society is unfolding in front of us, with all parties, regardless of whether they participate in armed operations, contributing entirely to this field. The Center for Information Resilience, an American independent and non-profit organization based in London, has been given the task of verifying and geolocating incidents and attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure. Similarly, Russia has established special cyber units and propaganda teams with the goal of creating dominant media impressions of the conflict.

This indicates the process of change: security discourses continue to be defined within state borders, concepts, policies, and strategies of national security are developed, but at the same time, a propaganda framework is developed in the cyber environment that explains the development of activities on the ground, generates a conflictological narrative, and provides support for further military, security, diplomatic, economic, and international interventions. Both countries recognize the importance of media images depicting the nature of the conflicts that arise in the sphere of international action, so they strive to influence their own and the global opinion by documenting their activities as widely and rapidly as possible. For instance, along *Twitter*, Russian propaganda is particularly present on the social media *TikTok*, where a huge number of Russian politicians, journalists, and propagandists created accounts after the start of the invasion of Ukraine. They considered this social media more reliable for their propaganda activities because it originated from friendly China. Also, the majority of clips they upload are skillfully produced inserts of Vladimir Putin's statements and the footage of Russian officers and soldiers on the ground. The traditional concept of state sovereignty has begun to disappear from the geopolitical environment, implying that the state-centric approach to security has to change in accordance with the changes in digital practices. A similar situation occurs in foreign policy, where propaganda targets neutral states and their citizens. This can be illustrated by the coverage of the official media in China, the country with a strict censorship policy and a noticeable friendly attitude towards one of the warring parties. Already at the end of February 2022, the Chinese state television CCTV and the newspaper *Global Times* cited Russian officials' claims that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had fled Kyiv. The video and its content, which was later confirmed as fake, received over 510 million views within days on the influential Chinese platform *Weibo*, and the material was downloaded and reproduced in 163 media outlets across the state. Also, the state-funded

newspaper *Global Times* reported that dozens of Ukrainian soldiers had surrendered on the first day of the invasion, citing only one source (Russia's state-run RT network).

In the age of *Google*, *WikiLeaks*, *Facebook*, and other social media and portals, information can have different purposes, depending on the creator's needs. They are used to inform, question, provoke, encourage, persuade, influence or provide knowledge, which means that the echo (effect) in the public depends on the functionality. By one-sided reporting, Western media create an atmosphere of an uncompromising commitment to the side conducting a "just" war, prompting French journalists to release the following statement: "Whether they report from the war zone or from Paris, from the epicenter of reporting, journalists, presenters, columnists, and reporters are all united and in solidarity with Ukraine." This announcement by the French public broadcaster (France Télévisions, on March 4, 2022) is a brief summary of the media coverage in France at the beginning of the war. It is evident from the content that, instead of neutral and impartial information, the public broadcaster is mobilizing the public by openly supporting one of the participants.

A similar situation is also noticeable in the diplomatic environment. Following the statements of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Ukrainian President Zelensky, the second part of the joint press conference had begun. However, at one point, the BBC's correspondent in Ukraine said: "Welcome, Mr President. I would like to hug you so much, but I'm not allowed." Ignoring the advice of the security, Zelensky steps down from the platform and hugs the journalist, followed by the applause of the colleagues and Sunak. Then, neglecting professional independence and objectivity, the journalist asks the British Prime Minister: "You know that Ukrainian soldiers die every day. Don't you think that the decision on fighter aircrafts has taken too long?"⁷² Through a strategically organized leader campaign, Zelensky turns into an ideal person identified with the image of the good, so that every normal person should support him.

Furthermore, in France, the founder of the renowned daily newspaper *Le Monde*'s code of conduct, which included the "contact and distance" was also disregarded. At least when it refers to the media's portrayal of the Ukrainian president: "Actually, he's likable, pretty cool, often funny, and doesn't look at the time," said Isabelle Lasserre, a diplomatic correspondent for *Le Figaro*. Also, she is a favorite of other media, especially of *France Inter* and the *LCI* channel, ever since she expressed strong views on Ukraine: "His leadership style is incredible, his charisma is very strong, he gets right to the point and always speaks with confidence" ("C politique", *France 5*, February 12, 2023).

States appear to have abandoned the concept of sovereignty, but the difficulty is that the same can be said for the independence of media policy. In the Western world, reporting is a justification of a foreign policy led

⁷² During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the practice of "embedded" journalism with American soldiers caused widespread outrage in the journalistic community. Twenty years later, "hug" journalism won the Ukrainian war, without voices calling for professional neutrality in reporting.

by the U.S. State Department and Europe, which was summarized in the statement of Germany's foreign minister on January 25: "We are waging war against Russia." Due to the absence of pluralism, which is more and more evident, the potential leftist opponents or pacifists are either silent or hiding. During war and times of crisis people retreat, as propaganda theorists have noticed a long time ago: "The human being, male or female, is a herd animal", wrote Edward Bernays in his 1923 book *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, stating that: "A man is fearful of solitude. He is more sensitive to the voice of the herd than to any other influence." (Bernays, 1923)

CONCLUSION

When analyzing the screen media, communicologists identified the phenomenon of attracting attention with sensationalist and provocative information, which is becoming increasingly important with the development of the digital media and portals. Shane Bowman and Chris Willis explain it using the model of unlimited surfing the infinite oceans of information, in search of the truth and understanding the situation: "We are witnessing an increased number of experts on the news trying to explain market fluctuations, political maneuvers and medical advances,...However, this fails to entirely satisfy the audience, bloggers, forum users, Internet users and other social media forms that have become sources for discovering meaning on any topic with the help of like-minded groups in real time." (Bowman and Willis, 2003).

Prior to and throughout the state of war, both Russia and Ukraine have developed close connections with the media, with the purpose of gaining an advantage in creating an image of their own role, using a proactive approach. Propaganda is an unavoidable companion in military conflicts, although it is skillfully concealed in the explanations. By analyzing the typical narratives, we easily identified multiple examples of spins, misinformation, rumors, the use of stereotypes and generalizations as distinctive techniques utilized by various media actors. The Crimean conflict will be remembered as one of the first wars fought primarily on the Internet rather than on the classic battlefield. Since the "relocation" of the battlefield to Donbas, in addition to the official information channels (traditional press, radio, television), bloggers from both sides of the "truth" have taken on the role of informers, distributing the selected images of crimes. Posts, blogs and video clips caused even more noise and congestion in the public space, making it difficult for the official media to deliver the desired message without hindrance, particularly regarding the referendum's purpose - the annexation or unity. The war has shifted from information transmitted by small screens to commenting on the news concerning Crimea, with extensive use of "bots" (internet trolls), so that numerous portals around the world have reported a sudden increase in pro-Russian comments. It is believed that media outlets in the countries of the former USSR still have modest capacities, with inadequately trained crisis management, and were indifferent in joining the condemnation, and that was one of the goals of this conflict - to weaken Russia's position in the neighboring countries. The

cyber conflict has demonstrated the advantage in military actions owned by states that have developed a set of propaganda actions. Additionally, the expansion of internet access points, mobile technology, and the ever-expanding spectrum of devices available in cyberspace has given Ukraine, through the US and NATO allies, a significant advantage in all aspects of the digital war. It is clear that future propaganda warfare will incorporate substantially more artificial intelligence and new information technologies, while man will organize all of this from a more secure position.

All three participants in the Ukrainian conflict (Ukraine, Russia, the West) believe they are confronted with existential threats, which implies the far-reaching consequences on the geopolitical architecture of power. The defeat of Russia would strategically mean its disappearance as a world power, which is why it has the imperative to win, while turning Ukraine into a dysfunctional state; The US and NATO allies are deeply involved in all forms of the military conflict, with an open advocacy for a propaganda image of a collision between autocracy and democracy for which “security and international peace depend on the victory of Ukraine” (118th Congress, 2023), while the attacked country, forced to defend itself against the imminent disintegration, views the outcome through a potential membership in the EU and NATO, as an integral part of the West. Taking into account the level of intolerance and potential obstacles (ideological, historical, ethnic, economic, religious, cultural, security, etc.), reaching peace, so far, seems challenging. Growing nationalism, additionally fueled by the media, has only increased mistrust towards others, contempt and hatred as stereotypes tearing all spiritual ties apart, including the relationship between the Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox Church. Also, the motivational power of social media and digital platforms has rekindled the fire of hatred, creating a new reality in which a lasting peace remains an unlikely possibility.

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САЈБЕР КОНФЛИКТИ И НОВИ ОБРАСЦИ ПОЛИТИЧКЕ ПРОПАГАНДЕ НА ПРИМЕРУ СУКОБА У УКРАЈИНИ

Резиме

Ширењем дигитализације и све бројнијих техника и вештина сајбер ратовања традиционални концепт суверенитета државе сели се ка виралној стварности, посебно садржајима тзв. меке моћи којима се придобија подршка јавног мњења. Студија случаја украјинско-руског конфликта потврдила нам је да се у актуелном геополитичком позиционирању сајбер напади користе као легитимна нискобуџетна операција која материјално и духовно оштећује противничку страну. Тако настаје нови облик асиметричног сукобљавања који актерима омогућава да наносе значајну штету политичким противницима или технолошки и војно супериорним непријатељима, при чему последицама може бити изложен велики број припадника цивилног друштва.

Пропагандни рат Украјине и Русије карактеристичан је по мноштву лажних вести, дезинформација, гласина, спинова и бројних облика непроверених садржаја. Рад указује како нас дигитална револуција софистицираном техникама завођења води још дубље у свет алгоритама, шифрованих порука и друштвених мрежа са персонализованим приступима, при чему трендови указују на растућу моћ паметних филтера којима управља вештачка интелигенција и који одлучују о легитимности информација и пре него што се појаве.

Кључне речи: национални суверенитет, политичка пропаганда, руско-украјински рат, алгоритми, вештачка интелигенција, нова реалност.