

Political Communication, Political Discourse and Rhetoric

Rhetoric on Service of Russia's Information Warfare

Dmytro K. Poble

Odessa I. I. Mechnikov National University

E-mail: dmitrypoble@ukr.net

Abstract: The primary purpose of the article is to indicate the increasing role of “the war of ideas” in modern conflicts of a different kind. A brief historical overview has been given to draw a certain parallel between old Prussian-Danish and recent Ukrainian-Russian conflicts, as well as to indicate some rhetorical means used to “excuse” violence of territorial integrity, political independence, and inviolability of national borders. The global scope of Russian information warfare is shown based on the example of Germany and the USA. The article has the intent to explore the degree, to which Russian-speaking people have adopted pro-Russia propaganda themes in their Twitter language. The recent research is based on the analytic works by Dr. Susanne Spahn with an independent journalists group from Friedrich Naumann Fund: for Freedom in Germany, and Todd C. Helmus, Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, with a group of scientists from Rand Analytic Center in the USA, Maria Snegovaya from Institute for the Study of War in the USA, Keir Giles and James Sherr from Chatham House (the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Great Britain), Anthony Seaboyer from Royal Military College of Canada, Georgii Pocheptsov in Ukraine. Some examples are given based on US Senate intelligence investigations on Russia's proving interference in the 2016 presidential elections. The brief description of the analysis made by a US non-partisan center is considered and some recommendations are replicated.

Keywords: Rhetoric, hybrid war, media, news ticker, fake news, trolls and bots, cognitive attacks, reflexive control.

Introduction

History knows many examples of when politicians resort to rhetoric as the art of argumentation in their attempts to find an excuse for support of separatist movements and aggressive inspirations in neighboring countries. The first Schleswig-Holstein War between Denmark and Prussia broke out in 1848, a turbulent but momentous period in Europe. The residents of both Duchies, making up a third of the ethnic Germans in the Danish Kingdom, rebelled against the Danish rule. This uprising was supported by the military intervention of Prussia, whose army pushed Denmark's troops away from Schleswig and Holstein. The

war lasted three years until international pressure forced Prussians to withdraw their forces and accept the London Protocol of 1852.

The conflict makes a good “example of the role of nationalism in the transition period from monarchy to constitutional democracy in the Western part of Europe” [1]; it could even be considered as a crucial instrument in the construction of a national state. The three-year war was covered by both sides throughout their national rhetoric i.e. pictures and songs were targeting their recipients in the “right” way. Thus, the art of steering information has been well known since time immemorial. The national attitude predominated either in Germany or Denmark while describing the said events, *inter alia*, the Danes highlighted “the Ghost of 1848” in their history classes, as well as Germans raised “Schleswig-Holstein Uprising” from regional to national level.

Trying to develop an impartial coverage of the intricacies of history by both sides, Germany and Denmark started in 2005 the first VIMU, a joint virtual museum project, funded by the European Regional Development Fund within Interreg programs. It was the first history project on the internet presented in two languages where both sides found an actual narrative for this sensitive subject.

In contrast, the recent Ukrainian-Russian armed conflict in the Eastern part of Europe differs in its identification as a “proxy war”, or, mostly used by Ukrainian media, as a “hybrid war”, and Russian’s furthering its version as an “internal conflict” or even a “civil war”. Unlike the Prussian King Frederick William IV who “had withdrawn Prussian support of the rising in the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, aimed at overthrowing Danish rule and create a “Little Germany Federation” [2], Russia’s officials and thereby governmental media deny any involvement in the Donbas area warfare either by personnel or by military planning and supplies. They appeal with devious enthusiasm to the audience inside and outside Russia using the most sophisticated means of rhetoric to turn the true narrative on its head. Therefore, this article discusses the concept of Russia’s rhetoric in the information warfare and addresses some research questions, as follows: (1). What is the meaning of rhetoric and its application from Russia’s point of view? (2). What place does the war of ideas occupy in modern warfare? (3). What is the role of the media in different kinds of confrontation? (4). What are the most favorable media instruments used by the Kremlin authorities? (5). What is the target of Russian cognitive attacks and reflexive control?

The answers to these questions certainly do not imply proven techniques and recommendations to counter the disinformation instruments and methods due to their high complicity and even fragility. The moral and legal concerns of the advisory’s processing of information as well as the emotional and psychological

frameworks of the recipients in the targeting country should be considered. Anyway, disinformation, if identified, makes the audience aware of the concept and how it works.

1. Rhetoric and the war of ideas

Rhetoric, following the Oxford dictionary content, is defined as a “political speech or writing that is intended to influence people, but that is not completely honest or sincere”. [3] The most important inherent component of this definition is that “not completely honest or sincere”, which implies certain manipulation of human minds. In the meantime, Encyclopedia Britannica refers to another background of the related definition as “Rhetoric, the principles of training communicators – those seeking to persuade or inform. In the 20th century, it underwent a shift of emphasis from the speaker or writer to the auditor or reader.” [4] Thus the consideration of rhetoric is given in both traditional and modern forms. As far as its application, so is closely related to broadcasting, communication, and propaganda...

Nowadays conventional warfare is transforming into a proxy war, hybrid war, accidental war, etc. and simultaneously “is being replaced by a war of ideas” [5], that sometimes precedes the direct armed clashes. Antulio J. Echevarria II in his monograph defined a war of ideas as “...a clash of visions, concepts, and images, and – especially – the interpretation of them; for the images themselves matter much less than the way they are perceived”. [6] At the same time the physical events make somehow a strong argument to affect the course and the outcome of a war of ideas. Propaganda and patriotic rhetoric, conducted by opposing parties, may frequently escalate into a war of words and a battle for ideas of some kind. Thus, such battles may support physical fighting and sometimes constitute a pretext of war.

Media as the fourth estate are considered to be an integral democratic institution to ensure unbiased information on the political, economic and social situation and even confusing the politics by directing uncomfortable questions and criticism to them. Regrettably, however, the powers-that-be resort to the media to consolidate its authority. Russian President Putin with his pro-governmental parliament follows a well-established pattern of seizing on news events in the “proper context” at his discretion. Meanwhile, the main Federal TV channels play the predominant role. The broadcasting, aimed at civic conscience and patriotic devotion, especially after Crimea annexation, raised Putin’s rating to 80-90%.

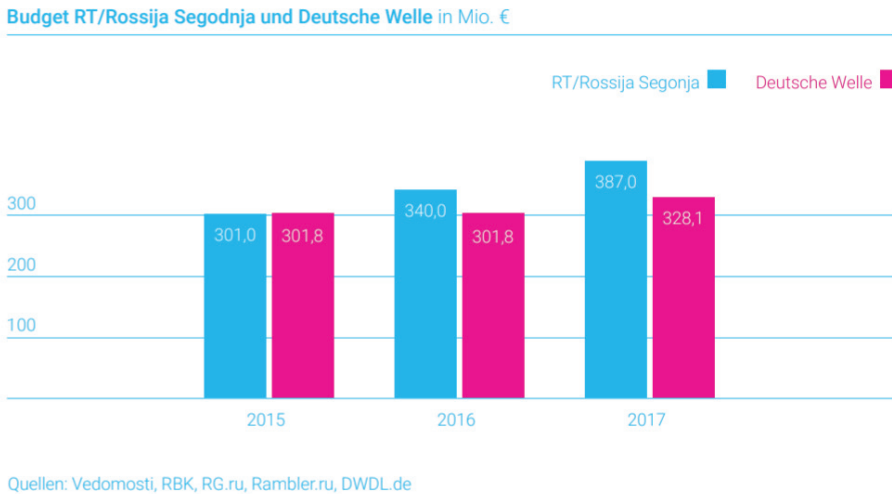
Kremlin is reviving old Soviet propaganda on a new base, using new instruments and ideas. The Russian military doctrine which became public

in February 2010 highlighted the intensification of the role of information warfare due “to achieve political objectives without the utilization of military force.” Therefore information warfare may be defined as a “holistic concept that includes computer network operations, electronic warfare, psychological operations, and information operations.” Unlike the Soviet propaganda, the recent Russian information warfare doesn’t concentrate on going to great length while proclaiming its own interpretation as the absolute truth, but it tries “to plant seeds of doubt and distrust; to confuse, distract, polarize and demoralize”. [7] Since the annexation of the Crimea peninsula and triggering the armed conflict in the Donbas area Russia seems to use the covered cyber activities against Ukrainian installations coordinated with information, or rather disinformation instruments and military operations. “Through this cyber campaign, Russia has been able to quietly and persistently compromise the Ukrainian government and military’s ability to communicate and operate, thereby undermining the legitimacy and authority of Ukrainian political and military institutions”. [8]

2. The Kremlin’s information operations abroad

Therefore, the Kremlin leadership pays particular attention to purposeful broadcasting abroad. In his decree, dated the 9th of December 2013, President Vladimir Putin called for the necessity to enhance the effectiveness of state mass media. The news agency RIA “Novosti” was liquidated and after merging with international radio broadcasting service “Golos Rossii” (Voice of Russia) a new international news agency “Rossia Segodnya” (Russia Today or RT) was established. The new media group was immediately given a high priority status as “Russia’s strategic enterprise”. Next year, RT news agency launched a new multimedia platform, Sputnik, with its audio component, replacing accordingly the Voice of Russia. RT international TV network, funded by the Russian Government, plays an important role outside Russia providing television channels and internet content in English, Spanish, French, German, Arabic, and Russian. The diagram below shows the three-year dynamics of RT’s funding for broadcasting in Germany as compared with Deutsche Welle, German state-owned international public broadcaster. (Refer Fig.1). [9]

Fig. 1. Budget RT/Russia Today and Deutsche Welle in millions of €



Source: Spahn, S. (March 2018). “Russische Medien in Deutschland: Unabhängiger Journalismus oder politisches Instrument?” In Friedrich Naumann Stiftung: Für die Freiheit, p.7. https://shop.freiheit.org/download/P2@754/145670/A4_RussischeMedien_D_Endfassung.pdf

At the end of 2014, the RT TV broadcaster had an advanced network including 22 bureaus in 19 countries under its control. According to the Ipsos Global Market Research Group, 70 million viewers all over the world watched RT programs in 2016 once a week; 36 million of them were in Europe. Such audience penetration may be compared with the BBC World service having 76 million viewers per week worldwide in the same period.

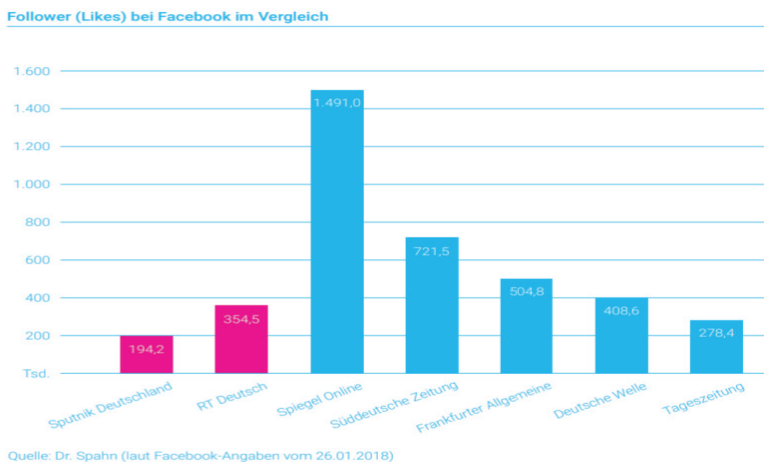
RT Deutsch and Sputnik News are extremely active nowadays as it has never been before. SNA-Radio (Sputnik-News-Agency) carries out its broadcastings using a certain logo, as well as RT (Russia Today). The key problem is that German listeners and viewers don't realize their direct access to the Russian state media information, using abbreviations, and accept them as local or international news... e.g. SNA-Radio is known among the Federal States as Mega-Radio, etc.

The Russian media in Germany, regarding organization and content, are integrated into media machinery, which is considered a “weapon” according to Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the RT TV network and the “Rossiya Segodnya” international news agency. RT Deutsch and Sputnik News divide the

whole world into “friend-or-foe”, manage the facts selectively, and do not hesitate to deal with falsification and fake news. They usually include well-balanced news content, which at first glance could be easily found, news ticker and daily highlights in any popular news report. But “a conspicuous selection or omission of the facts that don’t respond to Kremlin’s official position, seems to be implemented on a regular basis”. [10] The tendency became obvious after the annexation of Ukrainian Crimea and the military interference into the eastern part of Ukraine.

The increasing impact of Russian broadcasting on German viewers and listeners among other media available is evident. At the turn of 2017 and 2018, the analytic team of Friedrich Neumann Fund: for Freedom and Dr. Susanne Spahn from Zentrum Liberale Moderne published a chart diagram showing a cross-section of Facebook followers and their attitude towards Russian and German news media in Germany. Sputnik News had 193,599 followers (likes) on December 13, 2017, and 3,196 viewers on YouTube. RT Deutsch share was more significant due to its representation on the Internet. The agency had 354,463 followers (likes) on their Facebook pages, i.e. six times more as it did at the end of 2014 when it started.

Fig. 2. Cross-section of the Facebook followers’ attitude towards Russian and German news media in Germany (thousand recipients)



Source: Spahn, S. (March 2018). “Russische Medien in Deutschland: Unabhängiger Journalismus oder politisches Instrument?” In Friedrich Naumann Stiftung: Für die Freiheit, p.9. https://shop.freiheit.org/download/P2@754/145670/A4_RussischeMedien_D_Endfassung.pdf

The consequences following the Ukrainian events attract public attention and concerns to Russia's violation of international law and its increasing propagandistic campaign not only on the regional level i.e. close to the conflict area but worldwide. The appearance of the Pro-Ukrainian attitude in US and UK media as well as Poland, Canada, and Slovakia indicates a rising interest in the Ukrainian subject and counteracts the negative influence of Russian rhetoric, which is aimed to "justify" the military pressure on its neighbor countries and aggressive policy in the Middle East.

3. Russia's interference in US elections

Established in 1948 RAND, American nonprofit analytical tank-think (center), published in 2018 an outstanding research work on Russian global propaganda campaigns based on detailed analytic and statistic data. The stated objective of the study was "to examine Russian-language content on social media and the broader propaganda threat posed to the region of former Soviet states that include Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and, to a lesser extent, Moldova and Belarus". [12] Russia favors the regional "compatriots" who speak Russian, hail ancestry from Russia, and, sometimes, haven't been eagerly adopted by the resident countries. "Russian government broadcasts in the region serve as a potent propaganda weapon for Russia, and it is one with often relatively few regional competitors". [13]

The RAND researches performed a detailed analysis of social media data to estimate the scope of social media campaigns in Russia's favor and interviewed experts at the regional and national levels, as well as NATO specialists. According to the experts' opinion, Russia uses synchronically a mixture of varied media, including governmental-controlled radio and TV, news websites, as well as unknown social media accounts in the form of bots and trolls.

Russian attempts to influence the Americans through social media became public in the fall of 2017. The reports released by Senate intelligence committee one year later said that "Russia's sweeping political disinformation campaign on U.S. social media was more far-reaching than originally thought, with troll farms working to discourage black voters and "blur the lines between reality and fiction" to help elect Donald Trump in 2016". [14] Kremlin's success in its use of fake social media accounts in an automated mode, as well as those operated by humans, deserves closer examination. Russia operated trolls and bots in order to multiply Russian disinformation operations. "For instance, during a period in the summer of 2014, the Kremlin troll army reportedly flooded The Guardian's website with 40,000 comments a day". [15]

Public opinion surveys in the USA show deep concern about Russia's attempts to influence the 2016 presidential election. Upon the election, the Obama administration initiated certain sanctions on Russia that required the expulsion of Russia's intelligence agents. And after that James B. Comey, FBI Director, confirmed an open investigation about Russia's interference in the 2016 election. Russian agents were indicted in 2018. Then in 2019, the report prepared by special counsel Robert S. Mueller III said: "Russia used email leaks, propaganda and social media to stoke societal divisions and undermine the integrity of the election process in the United States". [16] The report released by Senate Intelligence Committee on July 25, 2019, offered new details about the intensity of "unprecedented" Russian cyber activity aimed at election infrastructure in the USA ahead of the presidential elections 2016. The 67-page report also left "unresolved the mystery of Moscow's intentions as, officials eventually found, it targeted election systems in all 50 states". [17]

The cyber scandal with Russia's interfering in 2016 elections hasn't found its solution yet and nevertheless the threat of a new cyber attack in the next US presidential elections remains. The RAND researches backed their analytical report with several recommendations to withstand any attempts outside the USA to affect the presidential polls of 2020. Summarizing the completed research work, they concluded the recommendations as follows: "(1). Highlight and "block" Russian propaganda. (2) Build the resilience of at-risk populations. (3). Provide an alternative to Russian information by expanding and improving local content. (4). Better tell the U.S., NATO, and EU stories. (5). Track Russian media and develop analytic methods". [18]

One of the most effective countermeasures to withstand Russian information is providing "an alternative to Russian information by expanding and improving local content." The Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic countries and Ukraine where approximately half of the population uses the Russian language in their daily life are in desperate need of impartial, high-quality sources of information on Russian-language platforms. This could be an effective way to ward them off the Kremlin's narrative. Ukraine made a successful step towards creating an "information army", an online platform uniting more than 40,000 volunteers who wish to confront Russian propaganda.

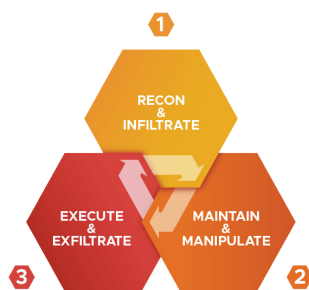
4. Cognitive attacks and reflexive control

Ukrainian expert in communication studies Georgii Pocheptsov described a cognitive attack associated with a panic attack in a certain way as that is "aimed at the transformation of understanding and interpretation of the situation by an individual

and in mass consciousness”. [19] The course of the Russian hybrid warfare in the Donbas area has been covered by the Ukrainian, Russian and international news agencies but the audience in each case has been receiving different interpretation of the same facts resulting in inevitably different comprehension and conclusions. There is a Dunning-Kruger effect in psychology which means “a cognitive bias whereby people with limited knowledge or competence in a given intellectual social domain greatly overestimate their own knowledge or competence in that domain relative to objective criteria or to the performance of their peers or of people in general.” [20] The idea is that a deficit of knowledge may probably mislead people into thinking that they are more expert than they are in fact, which may lead to misperception, as well as to mistakes being made. Misperception is one of the features related to the cognitive attack but the capability to predict the opponent’s reaction to your activities and furthermore to activate his response into the desired direction is more important.

As far as the sphere of commercial communication is concerned, cyber security companies like US Carbon Black, develop and advertise their products e.g. cloud-native endpoint security software to find malicious activities and to withstand any attacking a company. Refer to Carbon Black Loop presented by the mentioned company.” [21]

Fig. 3. The Cognitive Attack Loop and its 3 phases



Source: Viscouso, M. (09.09.2019). “Introducing the cognitive attack loop and its 3 phases”. In *VMware Carbon Black*. <https://www.carbonblack.com/2019/09/09/introducing-the-cognitive-attack-loop-and-its-3-phases>

The Russian Federation has resorted to an advanced form of hybrid war in Ukraine, using an element of information warfare, which is referred to as “reflexive control”. “Reflexive control is the term used to describe the practice of predetermining an adversary’s decision in your favor, by altering key factors in

the adversary's perception of the world". [22] This term is notably used in the discussion of Russian techniques and instruments related to information warfare. The Kremlin has used reflexive control to keep the USA and the European allies in passive mode while facing Russia's efforts to intrude on Ukraine applying to military and non-military instruments. Maria Snegovaya from the Center for European Policy Analysis highlighted five key elements of Russia's reflexive control techniques in Ukraine in 2015, as follows: (1). Deception operations to conceal the presence of Russian regular forces in Ukraine. (2). Concealing Moscow's goals in the conflict. (3). Imposing the idea of plausible legality for Russia's actions comparing with supposedly equivalent Western actions in Kosovo during the 1990s and the Iraqi invasion in 2003. (4). Threatening and provoking the West by demonstrating Russia's military power, including conventional and nuclear weapons. (5). Imposing Russia's own narrative about the Ukrainian conflict through formal and social media. [23]

The Russian ministry of finance has proposed "to increase state budgeting of mass media outlets in 2020 by a third as compared with the current budget and to constitute 91.9 billion rubles". [24] Seventy-six billion rubles of this sum should be allocated for Radio and TV in 2020 according to the ministry's proposal. Twenty-three billion rubles are foreseen for the Autonomous non-profit organization TV-Novosti as the owner of Russia Today (RT). This state funding is officially declared in the Russian Federation to create mass media outlets and disseminate news and information on the domestic and international markets.

Conclusion

The increasing role of the war of ideas has changed the traditional features of armed conflicts worldwide. Combat operations previously have been accompanied or followed by premeditated information warfare while creating a "gentle image" of an intruder or an initiator of armed conflict. The current experience indicates that sometimes a deliberate misinformation campaign precedes the direct armed clashes or covered military operations like "little green men" in the case of the Crimea annexation. The rhetoric widely used by Russia's officials and thereby pro-governmental media outlets does imply the influence on the population both inside and outside Russia, especially affecting the people who live in the neighboring countries. The Russian Federation inherited the capability to turn the true narrative on its head from its skilled predecessor, i.e. the Soviet Union. Compared with former Soviet propaganda, the recent Russian "media army" goes to great lengths to confuse, distract, polarize and demoralize the population including the officials and military personnel of the targeted countries, which have no

intent to follow strictly the course of the Russian Federation. The implementation of different kinds of rhetorical means doesn't comprise the physical and informational domains only where the facts and the reality have their dominating role. The Kremlin authorities are mastering the use of their propaganda techniques in the virtual domain touching such sensitive aspects as religion, culture, literature, and arts. The techniques and instruments they use have brought them certain dividends in the political as well as military spheres. The numerous examples are evident, e.g. the most-talked-about Russia's interference into the course of elections in several countries (the USA and some Balkan states) may be referred to as the first proof, and the expansion of territory at the expense of other countries or the creation of destabilized buffer zones with totally loyal regimes to Moscow (Crimea, the eastern part of Ukraine, Transnistria, Abkhazia) as the second. In the case of Ukraine, Russia has faced a powerful resistance in the Donbas area and international non-acceptance of the Crimea annexation. Thus, the Russian Federation was modeling the perception of the voluntary reunion of Crimea with Russia and the exclusion of its aggression. As far as the Donbas area is concerned Russia was creating another image, i.e. the image of civil war among Ukrainians themselves. The created perceptions implied different kinds of audiences, namely the Russians, the Ukrainians with the neighboring countries and the international audience. The best way to withstand the Kremlin's war of ideas is to raise standards of living in the targeting countries and to expose misinformation campaigns by impartial, high-quality information added to the effective resistance and the determination to protect the integrity of own homeland.

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