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Russia's information operations in the Eastern Ukraine conflict

Las operaciones de información rusas en el conflicto del este de Ucrania

ABSTRACT:

The fall of the USSR generated a progressive change in the relations between countries that were once part of the state apparatus of the Eurasian giant. The evolution of this process, within the framework of the post-Soviet space, has been significantly marked by the management of information in the scenarios resulting from the conflicts of interest arising from territorial disputes, which emerged in the new map of Eastern Europe.

The Ukrainian national problem has been one of the main chapters of the International pages in the global media. The events that took place around the war in Dombass continue to be, today, a recurring theme in the press. In this context, information operations have been a factor of special relevance when it comes to influence events, in order to favor a specific political agenda and generate a state of opinion that pushes the strategic movements of the actors involved.

The Russian Federation, as heir of the legacy left behind by the Soviet Union, has several interests in the Eastern region of Ukraine. On the other side, there is the policy deployed from Kiev in recent years, which is a gradual approach to the European Union and the West. This paper studies the Russian propaganda techniques applied to the Ukrainian conflict, the use of fake news as a weapon of hybrid warfare and its possible effectiveness, according to the current status of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Lugansk.

KEY WORDS:

Information operations; Propaganda; Russia; Ukraine; Hybrid warfare; Fake news.

RESUMEN:

La caída de la URSS precipitó un cambio progresivo en las relaciones entre los países que habían formado parte del aparato estatal del gigante euroasiático. La evolución de este proceso, en el marco del espacio post-soviético, se ha encontrado significativamente marcada por la gestión de la información en los escenarios resultantes de los conflictos de interés surgidos a raíz de las disputas territoriales, que emergieron en el nuevo mapa de Europa del Este.

La cuestión nacional ucraniana ha sido uno de los capítulos protagonistas de las páginas de Internacional en los medios de comunicación a nivel global. Los hechos que han acontecido en torno a la guerra del Dombás, continúan siendo, hoy en día, un tema recurrente en la prensa. En este contexto, las operaciones de información han resultado un factor de especial relevancia a la hora de influir en el desarrollo de los acontecimientos, para

favorecer una determinada agenda política y generar un estado de opinión que permita facilitar los movimientos estratégicos de los actores intervinientes.

La Federación de Rusia, como heredera del legado que dejó tras de sí la Unión Soviética, cuenta con numerosos intereses en la región oriental de Ucrania. Frente a su postura, se encuentra la política desplegada desde Kiev en los últimos años, que experimenta un paulatino acercamiento a la Unión Europea y al conjunto de Occidente. El presente trabajo estudia las técnicas de propaganda rusas aplicadas al conflicto ucraniano, el uso de la desinformación como táctica de guerra híbrida y su posible efectividad, de acuerdo con el estatus actual de las autoproclamadas repúblicas de Donetsk y Lugansk.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Operaciones de información; Propaganda; Rusia; Ucrania; Guerra híbrida; Desinformación.

1. Introduction

1.1. RUSSIA'S INTERESTS IN UKRAINE

The western powers develop their foreign policy and play their cards in the geopolitical arena looking sideways to the East, suspicious of the activity of the white giant that, from Moscow, seems to try to interfere in their affairs, with the intention of preserving at all costs their own strategic interests. In the last five years, the alleged meddling of the Kremlin in American political life has been a recurring theme of analysis in academic and journalistic circles. To this end, the Ukrainian geographic table has been marked as the core —around which the events that make up the relations between the two old blocks gravitate.

After the breakup of the USSR, Russia became the heir to the Soviet legacy and, as such, assumed its responsibility for maintaining a dominant status in the region, especially aimed to maintain a level of hegemonic influence over the former Soviet republics. Boris Yeltsin's leadership was perhaps more comfortable in this regard for the West, than has been the one exercised by Vladimir Putin since he came to power.

In this way, tying relations with Kiev is a priority for the Russian Federation, whose worldwide relevance flows from two complementary sources to its dominance of the post-Soviet space: permanent membership in the UN Security Council and maintenance of its nuclear capacity (Deyermond, 2014). Consequently, Moscow triangulates these three factors to support an international position that, if it depended on its economic competitiveness, would experience a very different situation.

According to Professor Ruth Deyermond, all three elements of supremacy have come under pressure from the West in the past decade. Initiatives like NATO's missile shields in Central Europe and Washington's push in the direction of Georgia and Ukraine's accession to NATO have kept the rope taut, especially since Kiev's approach to the European Union in 2014, with the signature of the Association Treaty between both actors. The sum of the elements mentioned supposes, from the prism of the Moscow government, a threat to the security of the State (Deyermond, 2014).

In line with the previous point, in February 2019, former President Poroshenko signed a constitutional amendment to facilitate the incorporation of Ukraine into NATO and the European Union before 2023 (RFE/RL, February 19, 2019). Faced with the predictable scenario, Russia began to move years ago with the annexation of Crimea and the



destabilization of the eastern Ukrainian territory, assisting in various matters the pro-Russian rebel movements that, in the framework of the civil war still to be resolved, the republics proclaimed from Donetsk and Lugansk. The next step came after Volodymyr Zelensky's was sworn in as the Ukrainian presidency, at which point Moscow decided to grant the Russian passport to the inhabitants of Dombás, which set off alarms in Kiev in fear of «[...] that the issue of Russian passports can give rise to the future deployment of Russian troops in the rebellious territory, with the Russian excuse to protect its people,» as it happened in the Crimea (Colás, April 24, 2019).

Precisely the use of this argumentative resource —a kind of diaspora of the Russian people in which were territories of their former empire— is one of the main mechanisms of the propaganda war in which the Kremlin is developing. However, information operations seek to attract, not only in the post-Soviet space, but where there is a possibility, a network of supporters of the Russian worldview, as a base of support for the policies of the United States, the European Union and its allies, who confront their interests (Darczewska, 2014, p. 14).

1.2. METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework used for this investigation is the result of a hemerographic examination of the relevant journalistic material as a result of the events that make up the subject matter of the study object. The production of information derived from the matter in question—and the facts that comprise it— constitutes a compendium of documentary resources necessary to understand the historical, political, and geographical dimension of the question at hand, these aspects being endowed with scientific content.

This comparative analysis has included and taken into account disparate and antagonistic media from the narrative and editorial point of view, in order to have a sufficiently broad perspective to review and contrast the information through which the consequent conclusions have been drawn.

The configuration of this method turns to a hypothetical-deductive approach based on the observation of the phenomenon through the testimony of the informative actors involved. The latter use a certain discourse conditioned by a certain geopolitical context and deontological principles subordinated to the bias of their interests as part of the aforementioned scenario. Once the complete story is examined from its opposite perspectives, it is possible to deduce the consequences and implications in the material scope of the question, confronting these discourses with the reality of the events that have occurred and their repercussion on the current international scene.

This methodology, in turn, has a semiotic approach, from which it is intended to carry out a formal analysis of the discourse, interpreted and contextualized in the framework of international relations marked by the geostrategic agendas of the old blocks of the East and West, reedited and directed by the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, the United States, the European Union, Ukraine and the countries near the Russian western border.

From these study mechanisms, the aim is to conclude the importance of the propaganda message in this context, its different uses, its projection and instrumentalization as a weapon in one of the most notable international conflicts of interest of our time.



2. Reflective control: propaganda and hybrid war

According to Dr. Snegovaya,

Russia has been using an advanced form of hybrid warfare that relies heavily on an element of informational warfare that the Russians refer to as «reflective control». Reflective control pushes a stronger adversary to choose the actions that are most beneficial to Russian objectives, by decisively modulating the adversary's perception of the situation (Snegovaya, 2015, p. 7).

Authors such as Javier Miguel-Gil, referring to this particular way of confronting the adversary, point to a strategic framework called the «Gerasimov doctrine» (Miguel-Gil, 2019, p. 112), alluding to the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

Following this *modus operandi*, Moscow has tried to anticipate the rival's movements, presumably based on information considered true, to imitate and reflect them through an intensive propaganda campaign, which seeks to influence the opponent's determinations (Reid, 1987, p. 294). This mirror technique is accompanied by a methodology of repetition and response to events that, according to Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, focuses on the dissemination of content based on the «interpretation of emerging events that seem to favor their themes and objectives» (Paul and Matthews, 2016, p. 4).

To achieve a desired level of effectiveness in its information operations, the Russian government deploys a multi-channel media strategy that not only encompasses its own media —funded in whole or in part by the state— but makes extensive use of social media and even infiltrates a beforehand non-related social media, which takes the bait of their orchestrated disinformation. Probably, its flagship in terms of information dissemination is the Russia Today channel, an audiovisual platform that began its journey in 2005 with a budget injection of \$ 30 million that, six years later, would experience an increase of 91.43% to reach 350 million in 2011 (Klimentov, 2013). By 2014, the emergence of Sputnik would catapult the Russian information campaign with a plan for the dissemination of content in 30 languages (Darczewska, 2004, pp. 11-12).

Therefore, there is an extensive display of media that already suggests in itself the importance that Moscow attaches to information operations, when it comes to generating confusion and raising a discourse that keeps public opinion connected to a hypothetical alternative point of view of the facts, decontaminated —following the argument put forth in these media— from the unipolar perspective that, according to its criteria, the West intends to implant in the media (Darczewska, 2004, pp. 11-12).

In essence, the dissemination of informative material —regardless of its rigor— seeks to extend conflicts to buy time and gradually obtain a position of advantage that can be used in other geopolitical settings. The media financed by the Russian state and with a presence in the West, support this objective, which aims to facilitate an old tactic: «divide and conquer». For Russia, favoring the territorial fragmentation of a satellite state or former Soviet republic is not something new either. An illustrative example is its policy on the entrenched problem of Transnistria, the *de facto* independent state outside the control of the Moldovan government.

The Kremlin not only assists the rebel region in military matters, it provides up to 80% of its budget and acts as its unofficial international representative. «Russia has also issued around



150,000 passports to residents of the region, which provides an additional justification for Moscow to interfere in Transnistrian affairs» (Popescu and Litra, 2012, p. 4).

3. Plot resources (or Storyline)

The support or creation of a population group affine to the agenda of interests of the Russian Government is a recurring figure. At the plot level, the propaganda catapults under the Moscow umbrella seek to give visibility to the aforementioned diaspora, placing the emphasis on the existence of Russian minorities with an important social and cultural weight in the reality of the country in question. To this end, they may use this narrative resource to justify the actions and movements of the Kremlin with respect to States in its orbit. Maintaining primacy in relations with them is a matter to which Russian foreign action is unwilling to give ground.

In maintaining a dominant position with respect to its geographical area of influence, extending an incisive language policy has proven remarkably effective. It is well known that language is a typical weapon of nationalisms, although, despite everything, it continues to be a surprisingly useful resource. In its hybrid war strategy, Russia has used language defense to the hilt, to guarantee its influence in Ukraine. This fact has been the subject of heated debates in the Kiev Rada, from where positions have been taken to close ranks towards the Ukrainian language, favoring a migration for the Russian-speaking citizens to the media protected by the Kremlin, where they find refuge at the same time they receive the desired message from Moscow.

This tactic, like those previously mentioned, is not new, although it has been adapted to current times. Russian communication platforms and their ramifications in the Internet universe, are capable of arguing a linguistic discourse as part of the protection of a national identity, today far from the ideological postulates of the Soviet Union (Chivvis, 2017, p. 8). In this way, a certainly more attractive message is articulated, which allows to attract a greater number of followers not only in Ukraine, but in other areas such as the Baltic republics, where linguistic subterfuge has also been seen. For its part, the legislative drift in a restrictive tone of countries such as Estonia and Latvia regarding the linguistic diversity of their countries, only increases the ethnic division. Professor Hogan-Brun's research on the subject has pointed out an important dividing factor, relating the need for mastery of the Baltic vernacular languages to enter the labor market, especially in the public sector (Hogan-Brun, 2007, p. 577, cit. Best, 2013, p. 36).

The pendulum effect generated by the rejection of the Russian language in Ukraine has provided an opportunity for the Putin Administration to intervene visibly in the Dombás situation. The reflexive control tactic has provided an excuse for Moscow to position itself firmly in the area, putting ahead a rhetoric of defense of human rights, publicized in its media. To this end, Russia Today recently noted that

with bubbling anti-Russian sentiment in Kiev, President Vladimir Putin has thrown a lifeline for Russian speaking residents of eastern Ukraine, passing a decree to simplify the process of obtaining a Russian passport. The separatist republics of Lugansk and Donetks are home to 3.7 million inhabitants, predominantly Russian speakers' (RT, April 25, 2019).



As a summary, the communication strategy in the framework of the information operations of Russia —with special incidence in Ukraine— bases its discourse on the protection of the Russian ethnic minority. To do this, it amplifies the media coverage around the protection of an isolated language, from whose unfavorable situation it is possible to obtain strategic benefit; as well as an auto attributed custody of the rights of the given population.

4. Disinformation in the Dombás war: Flight «MH17»

The disinformation and fake news game have been - both in the media and on social networks —main characters of the events that have surrounded the Ukrainian territorial conflict. One of the most significant and tragical cases was the shooting down of commercial flight «MH17». This episode, occurred in 2014 and whose inquiries have recently brought to light the first alleged perpetrators, added a significant level of international pressure on Russia, casting doubt on its external image and, of course, increasing mistrust between Brussels and Moscow, due to the more than suspicious participation of Russian elements in the framework of the attack (Hartman, Golovchenko and Angenstein, 2019).

Days after the incident, the head of the General Directorate of Political-Military Affairs of the Russian Armed Forces, Lieutenant General Andrei Kartapolov, appeared before the media to expose the official version of the Russian Federation to accusations from the international community. In his address, the military high commander projected what Toal and O'Loughlin have called «circumstantial evidence», aimed at raising the shadow of the doubt in public opinion, indirectly blaming the Ukrainian army for the incident. Without explicitly mentioning Kiev's responsibility, Lieutenant General Kartapolov showed satellite images of *Buk* anti-aircraft missile systems belonging to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, within range of the Malaysia Airlines flight, casting the question: «What was the purpose to deploy such a large number of air defense systems near Donetsk?» (Toal and O'Loughlin, 2017, p. 17).

Kartapolov's allegations were replicated by Russia Today in its English and Spanish editions simultaneously on the same day as the press conference. Both reports, available in their websites, headlined the news claiming the alleged proximity of a Ukrainian Su-25 fighter with respect to the Malaysian Boeing 777 (RT, July 21, 2014). This data would serve as a complement to add another unknown factor in the search for relief from Russian responsibility, generating confusion and returning the ball to the authorities in Kiev.

In this sense, blurring the Kremlin's military patronage over the rebel militias was a priority of the coordinated strategy of its own resources with scope in the West. On July 22, 2014, the Spanish edition of Russia Today continued with the storyline of Lieutenant General Kartapolov, this time releasing a compilation of ten rhetorical questions that questioned the accusations of the United States and hinted towards the action of Ukrainian forces in the development of events. To do this, the RT editorial line placed the spotlight on the four main issues on which Moscow supported its speech (RT, July 22, 2014):

- The deviation of flight 'MH17' from its original route.
- The activity of the Ukrainian military radars.
- The deployment of Ukrainian anti-aircraft defenses.
- The presence of the Ukrainian Su-25



In turn, the four blocks opened two limited narrative lines. Points one and two veiled the involvement of the State of Ukraine in maliciously manipulating the flight path, within the range of a surface-to-air missile of its belonging, which would explain —following this logic— the increase in the activity of certain Ukrainian military radars —Kupol-M1 9S18— (RT, 22 de julio de 2014). In parallel, points three and four were intended to target hostile will and activity, orchestrated from Kiev, towards the Donetsk area. Ultimately, this attitude of Ukraine would have led to the demolition of the apparatus, for reasons only attributable to the movements of the Ukrainian forces, according to the justification defended by Russia.

On the other hand, after five years of investigation, the Joint International Team (JIT) in charge of the case, concluded in 2018 «that a 9M38 series *Buk* missile, carried from the base of the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Brigade of the Russian Federation Army in Kursk to the Ukrainian town of Donetsk, shot the plane down» (Ferrer, June 19, 2019). Despite challenges from the pro-Russian militias, backed by the Kremlin, the Donetsk paramilitaries had confirmed the possession of the same missile system to the Russian media in the summer of 2014, and even published it on the social network VK, a statement informing on the shooting down of what they considered an *An-26* military aircraft. Given the evidence of the attack on a passenger flight, the Russian information apparatus produced a message blaming the Ukrainian Air Force (Colás, 2019).

As reported by the correspondent of the newspaper *El Mundo* in Eastern Europe, Xavier Colás,

at 23.04, RT channel issued a message on behalf of a supposed Spanish air traffic controller with the Twitter user name «Spainbuca», allegedly an employee of the airport of Kiev Boryspil: «The *Boeing* was followed by two Ukrainian attack planes, and they destroyed it.» Shortly after this version is picked up by *Russia-24*, by *RIA Novosti*, then by *ITAR-TASS* and *Channel One*. But the person behind the @spainbuca account was José Carlos Barrios Sánchez, a professional scammer residing in Romania with a criminal record. This was demonstrated by a joint investigation by the *RISE* research portal and the *RFE / RL* information portal. Precisely these days «*El Confidencial*» has released the content of a call in which this trickster admits to having received payments from the *RT* team in exchange for telling what they asked him to say (Colás, 2019).

To appease the confusion generated by the Russian propaganda campaign, the Government of the Netherlands created a transparency portal regarding the work of the JIT. The online platform includes the explanation of forensic, police and military investigations, with a view to clarifying the tragedy and clarifying responsibilities.

At the same time, the communication portal of the Dutch Prosecutor's Office announced the issuance of international arrest warrants against the three Russian citizens and the Ukrainian citizen identified as allegedly involved in the event. In return, Vladimir Putin appeared before the media and, again, the Sputnik agency released his statements questioning the evidence collected by the task force made up of experts from Australia, Belgium, Malaysia and Ukraine (Sputnik, July 20, 2019).



5. Twitter and the international status of Crimea

The use of the social network *Twitter* as the dominant political communication platform is, today, an accomplished reality. In recent years, this virtual service has acquired the status of official publication in real time, with the global existence of verified profiles belonging to organizations and institutions in dozens of countries. The powers of the State have updated and adapted their public communication activities to the tools that impose trend, taking advantage of the global scenario of «hyperconnectivity» to have a greater reach in the dissemination of the message to public opinion.

Not only political figures use *Twitter* as an ideological speaker, or governments as a bulletin board; even religious authorities have adjusted some of their procedures to online dissemination through this instrument (Kington, 2013). However, in the case at hand, the characteristics of *Twitter* allow us to further expand, if possible, the level of interference of social networks in the evolution of current social reality.

In 2018, Twitter verified the account on its social network of the Office of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Simferopol, meddling —even without intention— in the international debate on the legitimacy of the Russian occupation of Crimea. The Ukrainian diplomatic mission in the United Kingdom announced the presentation of a formal complaint to the American company about this position, which, one way or another, validates before public opinion the existence of a Russian delegation not recognized by Kiev (Brown, 2019). The Ukrainian government's position on Crimea is, in turn, supported by the international community. In March 2014, the United Nations General Assembly urged the preservation of the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of Ukraine, adopting a resolution with the purpose of requesting member countries not to recognize any change in the political and legal status of Crimea (UN, 2014).

On the other hand, Russian diplomacy has taken advantage of the situation to send messages from a scenario endowed with greater significance. Following the verification of his profile, *@PMSimferopol* has been in charge of collecting examples of recognition of Crimea as part of Russia in other informative orders. In this way, they tried to *viralize* the BBC typo pointing out the Crimean capital as Russian, exploiting its new attribute as «a reliable source of official information regarding Crimea», in the words of the Russian Foreign Ministry (Brown, 2019).

The popularity of the profile maintains an upward trend that, with an average of four to five posts per day, has experienced an increase of 24.4% in the last eight months. Considering this progression, Sergei Lavrov's department has proclaimed the popularity of the account among Twitter users (Brown, 2019). Likewise, *@PMSimferopol* has focused much of its activity on combating the Kiev story, with tweets calling into question the willingness to resolve the conflict on the Ukrainian side.

#Ukraine has not fulfilled its obligation to withdraw troops in Dombás, Donetsk and Lugansk. Representatives of the #OSCE stressed that Kiev has not sent any sign of readiness to begin the withdrawal of troops. Who really needs peace in the region? (Russia's MFA in Crimea, October 14, 2019).

Subsequently, the same day, the self-proclaimed diplomatic mission released images of a demonstration in Kiev led by radical far-right groups, commemorating the anniversary of the creation of the Ukrainian Insurgency Army, a collaborative militia with Nazi Germany. In



the same tweet, it annexed a condemnatory statement of these movements by members of the United States Congress, in the face of the alarm of growing anti-Semitism in Poland and Ukraine (Russia's MFA in Crimea, October 14, 2019). The two messages broadcasted practically in unison, with strong visual support, gave Russia the opportunity to place in the same context an alleged belligerence attitude on the part of the Kiev Government, coupled with a totalitarian and anti-Semitic ideology with which to associate the enemy towards Western public opinion, given that the message was published in English.

6. Conclusions/Discussion

The communication policy of the Russian Federation regarding Ukraine and, in general, geopolitical conflicts involving the West in some sphere of action, is based on a strategy of media and omnipresence in social networks aimed at the loyalty of a predisposed group to follow the version of reality promoted from Moscow. During the Cold War, the «battle for hearts and minds» focused mainly on attracting adherents to the ideological package of one block or another. In this struggle, Soviet propaganda played a decisive role in trying to create a fifth column that could destabilize the movements of the allies on the West side of the Iron Curtain.

Since the dissolution of the USSR, a progressive plot turn has been observed, especially notable after Putin's arrival in the Kremlin. Practically since his accession to the Presidency, the Russian president has embarked on a dialectical struggle based on the resurgence of Soviet international power and, eventually, the attempt to regain ground, this time leaving aside communist iconography, to make way for an updated version. of the Russian Empire.

However, in this episode of Russia's history and international relations, the praxis-based strategy of updated hybrid warfare has been imposed on the contemporary informational and technological landscape. To enhance the achievement of its objectives, Moscow complements its diplomatic and military action with multichannel and multilingual information campaigns aimed, in large part, at exercising that reflective control conceived by the architects of Soviet propaganda. In this way, by simultaneously attacking all the branches of the same front, a population niche favorable to their interests is promoted, taking advantage of political divergences and diversity of opinions to cultivate a story with penetration in public opinion, which conditions the decisions of opposing actors to favor them in given scenarios.

In putting this deterrence policy into practice, Russia favors its vision of itself as an alternative to the hegemony of the United States and the European Union, trying to point out the weaknesses and contradictions of Western democracies, while exhibiting a political boast in its media, known for a significant lack of self-criticism towards the Kremlin. So, trying to sow a narrative seed that germinates at the right time, Moscow and its media apparatus resort to old propaganda principles such as persuasion through disappointment, blurring realities through misinformation or combining a number of information —true or not—, to place the narrative line in the desired context.

In the Ukrainian issue, Russia's interest lies in keeping part of the territory of Ukraine under its area of influence. In this way, the country's progress is divided on its way to European integration and a territorial sector is sustained that continues to act as a buffer against the already lost Central European republics, formerly satellite countries of the Soviet Union. To



do this, making use of its extensive media network and social media activity, it confronts the story of Kiev, presenting the adversary as a perfidious State that evades its responsibilities regarding the maintenance of peace and the preservation of Russian culture in the Eastern part of the country. In addition, using its policy of *fait accompli* after the annexation of Crimea and the interference in Dombás, Russia projects a story aimed at legitimizing its posture and position regarding the course of events and the resolution of the Ukrainian question, resulting in a favorable result to its agenda.

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