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De-hybridization and conflict narration

Ukraine's defence against Russian hybrid warfare

Niklas Nilsson

Introduction

Although Russia's actions in Ukraine have rightfully raised questions regarding the vulnerabilities to hybrid warfare in Western societies and their defensive capabilities, very little has been written on Ukraine's responses and the particular forms they have taken. Indeed, if Russia's aggression is the defining example of contemporary hybrid warfare, then Ukraine's response amounts to an inherently interesting case of hybrid warfare defence. This chapter focuses on two key components of Ukraine's defensive actions.

These include, first, Ukraine's military response to the war in Donbas. The fighting has gone through several phases, with escalating and increasingly overt Russian military involvement before stagnating into a positional war fought from trenches through artillery and snipers. The chapter argues that Ukraine's military response served to de-hybridize military violence in the conflict, by denying Russia the ability to conceal its aggression as a local insurgency and providing the fighting with features reminiscent of a classic interstate war for territory. This is the result of an extensive build-up of Ukraine's military based on the principle of mass. Ukraine's new army is clearly designed to fight over extended periods across vast ranges of territory, at high intensity against a peer adversary, and is deployed along the full stretch of the Donetsk and Luhansk frontlines. Second, Ukraine has made a comprehensive effort to take control of the conflict narrative, addressing the fundamental vulnerability implied in Russia's depiction of the conflict as a civil war, an internal Ukrainian affair. In this regard, Ukraine has exposed Russia's direct involvement in the fighting in Donbas. It has sought to boost confidence in its armed forces, both domestically and internationally, and it has embarked on a soft-power campaign to improve living standards locally in Ukraine-controlled territory adjacent to the frontlines.

Russia's operations in 2014 to sever Crimea and parts of Donbas from Ukraine indeed served as a wake-up call for Western policymakers, prompting rethinking of military doctrine to a renewed focus on territorial defence.[1] The Russian modus in Ukraine also increased awareness across Europe of the need for wider societal

preparedness to counter a wide range of non-kinetic threats. Indeed, aside from its overt conventional military involvement in Ukraine, Russia employed a range of covert and unconventional methods to prepare the ground for land grabs, assure deniability of its operations, delay the reaction of Ukrainian authorities and influence perceptions of the conflict, in Ukraine as well as internationally. Russia's strategy in Ukraine has thus comprised an integrated campaign, featuring a sophisticated combination of military and non-military tools, corresponding to the notion of hybrid warfare introduced in this volume.[2]

The various methods that Russia has employed against Ukraine have gained considerable political and scholarly attention across Western Europe and the United States, and hybrid warfare is only one among several concepts utilized to describe them. Indeed, the conflict in Ukraine has given rise to a new genre in the security literature, revisiting Soviet military studies and utilizing a range of different but overlapping concepts in attempts to describe Russia's 'new' way of war as, for example, non-linear warfare, full-spectrum conflict, hybrid warfare, new-generation warfare and political warfare.[3] The renewed security debate since 2014 reflects confusion regarding Russian intentions, strategy and tactics as well as proper descriptions of the complex current security environment. Arguably, it also constitutes a dazed reaction in the West to the end of a period of relative stability in relations with Russia, rather than any distinctive novelty in Russia's strategy for projecting power and influence abroad. Indeed, Russia's operations in Ukraine had antecedents in the 2008 war in Georgia, the 2007 cyber- and information operations in Estonia, the counterinsurgency wars in Chechnya, Russia's support for the separatist regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria, as well as in Soviet-era 'active measures'. Neither are the observed features of hybrid warfare, the strategic combination of a wide range of means, including, for example, military and economic power, subversion and information operations towards a unified purpose, a distinctively Russian invention – rather they are likely as old as human conflict.[4] Yet despite the vast amount of analysis on Russia's modus in Ukraine produced since 2014, and the growing body of work on vulnerabilities and ways to address these in Western societies, the responses crafted by Ukraine itself, despite being the country most immediately affected by Russian hybrid warfare, remains a neglected topic. The chapter seeks to address this omission.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of Russia's operations in Crimea and Donbas, exploiting Ukraine's serious vulnerabilities at the outset of the conflict through a series of tailor-made actions to prevent a comprehensive military response. It then proceeds to discuss Ukraine's responses including the country's conventional military build-up, its exposure of Russia's military involvement, and its creation of a strategic information campaign promoting Ukraine's own narrative of the conflict. The chapter concludes that the motives and modus of Russia's aggression has prompted Ukraine to devise a two-pronged response combining military and non-military tools, and therefore amounting to a strategy for hybrid warfare defence. The result is arguably more understandable and manageable for Ukraine's government and society, as well as the country's international partners than an obscure hybrid conflict: an interstate war where an external aggressor occupies Ukrainian territory and where Ukraine sees itself forced to respond in kind.

Russia's operations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine

Russia's operation to annex Crimea was set in motion as Ukraine's Maidan Revolution, ongoing since fall 2013, resulted in clashes between demonstrators and authorities, forcing President Viktor Yanukovych to leave the country on 22 February 2014. The quick and effective operation to annex Crimea drew on the highly specific operational environment in the peninsula, where Russia enjoyed considerable advantages. These included the element of surprise, a strong pre-existing military and intelligence presence due to the basing of its Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, including a Naval Infantry brigade,[5] as well the large Russian-speaking and pro-Russian population of the peninsula. This latter fact stemmed both from the historical affiliation of Russian-speaking Crimeans with Russia, and from an ambitious information operation intended to project fears that Ukraine's new government was dominated by 'fascists', posing a threat to Russians and Russian speakers in the country.[6]

From 22 February, Russia transferred Spetznaz detachments and special forces operators to Crimea carrying no insignia, the infamous 'little green men' or 'polite people'. These forces moved quickly to take control of the Crimean Parliament and other local government buildings, as well as Simferopol airport and other key locations on the peninsula.[7] Simultaneously, marine infantry units moved to besiege Ukrainian military bases, preventing any effective response from locally based government troops and facilitating the subsequent build-up of conventional forces. In Kyiv, the obscurity of the scenario playing out on the ground stymied efficient decision-making and prevented timely actions to thwart the Russian takeover of Crimea.[8] Ukrainian decision makers were acutely aware of the 2008 scenario in Georgia as a caution that Russia could utilize any rash action to motivate a military intervention to 'protect' Russian speakers and Russian citizens.[9]

After Russian forces established control of Crimea, a new, pro-Russian government was installed, which declared secession from Ukraine on 16 March after orchestrating a referendum on Crimea's status. It then requested to become part of the Russian Federation. Russia complied on 18 March, marking the formal annexation of Crimea. Vladimir Putin acknowledged and took credit for the decision to launch the operation in March 2015.[10] The operation was effectively decided, executed and concluded before the new Ukrainian government or its partners in the West could acquire a picture of the situation on the ground, let alone mount anything in the way of a response. It thus achieved a clear outcome, as Russia views the annexation of the peninsula as an accomplished and non-negotiable fact.

The subsequent operation in eastern Ukraine was completely different, in terms of its execution and aims. Indeed, although it is difficult to assess with certainty Moscow's actual planning and motives, the available evidence suggests that Russia never aimed to annex Donetsk and Luhansk.[11] Instead, Russia's strategy regarding these territories has seemingly been to establish inherently unstable entities within Ukraine outside the control of the central government, intended as levers in interactions with Kyiv and as internal breaks on foreign policy decision-making contrary to Moscow's interests. It therefore remains essential, from Moscow's perspective, that contrary to Crimea, the future of Donbas and Luhansk remains open to negotiation – the two 'Republics'

are arguably more useful to Russia as future parts of Ukraine than as separate entities or as parts of the Russian Federation.[12] There are clear precedents for this strategy in Moldova's Transnistria, Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia before 2008 and Russia's approaches to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The drawn-out conflict in eastern Ukraine has gone through several phases. Initially, Russia sought to fuel a movement for the creation of 'Novorossiya', a construct engineered by Putin advisor Vladislav Surkov and intended to establish a confederation of 'people's republics', aside from Donetsk and Luhansk also encompassing large parts of southern and eastern Ukraine, including Kharkiv, Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, Odesa and Zaporizhia.[13] Aside from several Russian frontal figures of the Novorossiya movement, such as Denis Pushilin, Igor Girgin, aka Strelkov and Igor Bezler, the movement was in many cases locally led and organized by Ukrainians, including businessmen and activists, whose activities were nevertheless coordinated and funded from Russia. Surkov personally oversaw this project, as has been revealed by tranches of leaked emails that detail communications between him and agents responsible for activities in Ukraine, focusing on mobilizing political support in cities and regions that would prospectively be subverted within the project.[14]

Local campaigns for Novorossiya featured anti-government protesters paid to demonstrate, media outlets and journalists paid to provide news coverage, local commissions and conferences advocating constitutional reform and federalization, and social media campaigns (often featuring non-existing individuals), all to create the impression of a wide movement with broad popular support – and all at Russia's expense. The Novorossiya project also included planned provocations, violent actions and sabotage, particularly in Kharkiv and Odesa, in order to destabilize the targeted regions in question. Ukraine's Security Service SBU also averted an attempt to foment a separatist movement in Besarabia under the proclamation of a 'People's Council' that would advocate secession from Ukraine, while local activist groups would conduct sabotage against vital infrastructure, according to a plan drawn up by the Transnistrian KGB operative Dmitry Soin.[15] The project nevertheless failed to gain traction, as the movement did not gain a substantial following beyond the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) and was met by a successful mobilization of Ukrainians opposed to it. The leaders of DNR and LNR announced the abandonment of Novorossiya in May 2015.[16]

In the course of spring 2014, political activity and occasional clashes between activists took place in several locations across southern and eastern Ukraine, the events in Odessa in May being the most tragic as forty-two pro-Russian activists were killed in a fire.[17] Nevertheless, it was becoming clear that the effort to foment support for a larger secessionist movement was failing, and met increasing resistance from Ukrainian authorities and citizens. However, separatist groupings and pro-Russian activists, spearheaded by Russian special forces,[18] succeeded in capturing local administration buildings and establishing control over the cities of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kramatorsk, Slovyansk and Krasny Liman, proclaiming the DNR and LNR.[19] Ukraine launched what was designated an Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) to defeat separatist militias, aided by several volunteer units.[20] From the outset, Russia sought to achieve its objectives in eastern Ukraine without having to intervene overtly in the conflict, limiting its involvement to detachments of special forces and security contractors

operating under fake identities[21] while backing the separatist forces politically and economically, along with instructors and equipment.[22]

In April and May 2014, Ukrainian forces managed to mount sufficient pressure on the separatist militias in cities under their control to force a more substantial Russian intervention. The first battle of Donetsk airport, which featured volunteers from Russia along with separatist fighters, marked the beginning of steady reinforcements and a shift towards more conventional tactics. From June, Russia steadily resupplied the separatist side with manpower and heavy equipment, including armour and air defence systems. However, the Ukrainian side continued to gain ground over the summer and in August threatened to drive a wedge between the two separatist territories. As the separatist side faced the threat of defeat, Russia sent in an estimated 3,500–6,000 mechanized troops organized in battalion tactical groups,[23] with heavy artillery support from across the border,[24] rolling back the Ukrainian advances and inflicting several crushing defeats on Ukrainian forces, most prominently at Ilovaisk. After the signing of the Minsk Protocol in September 2014, Russia undertook a more concerted effort to train and equip the separatists, mounting a new offensive in January 2015. Ukraine signed the Minsk II agreement after the defeat of Ukrainian forces at Debaltseve.[25] Russia's involvement in the fighting peaked at 10,000 troops by the end of 2014, after which a similar number of Russian troops remained in rotation in the two territories.[26]

Thus, by early 2015, Ukraine's mobilization and Russia's heavy reinforcement of the separatist side had effectively transformed the initial fighting between separatist proxy forces and weak, underequipped Ukrainian forces into a standoff between two much more formidable forces. Although fighting has continued after the signing of Minsk II, this has primarily featured static trench warfare along the by now heavily fortified Donetsk and Luhansk frontlines, with few territorial gains on either side. In a very different type of operation comparing to Crimea, Russia was required to improvise and gradually commit increasing numbers of conventional units and combined arms to attain its objectives. In the course of 2014 and 2015, the conflict thus transitioned from an insurgency fought by local Russian proxies, via mechanized manoeuvre warfare, which aside from Russia's continued denial of its involvement attained highly conventional features, into positional, low-intensity fighting.

Ukraine's responses

De-hybridizing military violence

During Russia's annexation of Crimea and at the outset of the war in the East, Ukraine was extremely ill prepared for fighting a war, in terms of both the unconventional and conventional means that Russia deployed in the conflict. Ukraine had inherited a Soviet-style army that, while sizeable on paper, was overall severely underfunded, underequipped and undertrained. Ukraine took some steps towards reforming and modernizing its armed forces in the aftermath of the 2004 Orange revolution, with the aim of transforming them into a smaller, professionalized and well-equipped force spearheaded by Joint Rapid Reaction forces deployable to international peacekeeping

missions. These reforms were nevertheless stymied by a lack of funding along with the bitter political infighting of the post-revolutionary period.[27]

Since the breakdown of the USSR in 1991, Ukraine and Russia have on occasion clashed over the ownership and use of territory; the most prominent dispute emerged over Tuzla Island in the Kerch strait in 2003.[28] Crimea, and particularly Sevastopol, was considered a potential flashpoint long before 2014.[29] Following the 2004 Orange revolution, the Ukrainian and Russian sides disputed the pricing and transit of natural gas – with broad international implications since Ukraine is a key transit country for Russia's westward gas exports.[30] However, despite these latent tensions, and especially under Yanukovych, it appears that the prospect of a future territorial war with Russia was an impermissible idea in strategic and doctrinal thinking in Ukraine, implying that no force deployment or exercises were conducted in accordance with such a scenario.[31] Indeed, Ukraine's most important military commands and units remained based in the Western part of the country, a largely untouched remnant of the Soviet military districts; prior to 2013, no command had de facto operational responsibility for defending the East.[32] Moreover, the penetration of Russian intelligence services into Ukraine's armed forces, intelligence agencies and political institutions became particularly intense during this period, as an effect of the client-patron relationship between the Yanukovych government and Moscow and the deeply entrenched corruption in Ukraine's politics and state bodies.[33] Thus, as Russia set its operations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine into motion in 2014, it was able to outmanoeuvre decision makers in Kyiv as well as Ukraine's armed forces. Russia also sought to exploit linguistic divisions in Ukrainian society, particularly through identity-focused information operations painting the picture of a right-wing onslaught of nationalistic Ukrainian speakers against Russian speakers and ethnic Russians.[34]

At the time of the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine was capable of fielding a modest 6,000 soldiers from an army that, on paper, comprised 130,000 servicemen to carry out the ATO against separatist forces.[35] Instead, Ukraine had to rely on over fifty volunteer units to carry out much of the fighting, particularly in the summer of 2014. These militias were highly heterogeneous in their political and ideological motivations as well as in terms of their sources of funding, spawned from political groups as well as local civic initiatives and foreign fighters, including Chechens and Georgians, joining the Ukrainian side. Several of these battalions, such as Azov, Ukrainian Volunteer Corps (DUK)[36] and Aidar, included sizeable elements of nationalistic right-wing activists among their members. Yet others, such as Donbas and Dnipro-2, stemmed from local volunteer initiatives.[37] Many of these volunteer forces acquired funding from private individuals (most prominently Ukrainian oligarchs such as Ihor Kolomoisky). Yet others afforded their activities and equipment through crowdfunding (one example of the significant role of Ukrainian civil society in responding to Russia's aggression against the country) or from Ukrainians and other sympathizers abroad.[38]

In the summer of 2014, these forces were only weakly coordinated with Ukraine's military command and displayed great heterogeneity in professionalism, discipline and fighting skill. Nevertheless, several of these volunteer groups made substantial and sometimes decisive contributions to the fighting – for example, members of DUK were among the famous 'cyborgs' defending Donetsk airport.[39] Azov has become regarded

as the most effective among the volunteer battalions, playing a crucial role in the June 2014 counteroffensive to recapture Mariupol and the June 2015 battle of Marinka, among others.[40] The raising and funding of the volunteer battalions can be considered a response in kind to the undeclared proxy warfare that Russia deployed in eastern Ukraine – a response that proved necessary in light of the vastly degraded capacity of the country's regular forces.

Indeed, Ukraine's experiences from the war in Donbas suggest that attempts to emulate the US military, in terms of building smaller but more capable forces supported by the latest military technology may not be a sustainable path forward for smaller forces with scarce resources such as those of Ukraine. A key problem during the 2014 fighting was the army's lack of manpower, reserves and equipment stockpile – translating into a very low tolerance for attrition. From 2014 onwards, Ukraine has sought to address the problem of military weakness by, as Sanders puts it, 'embracing a return to mass and positional warfare'.[41] In response, and by using Russia's aggression against the country as a rallying point, the Ukrainian government has undertaken, at least on paper, a highly ambitious reform programme of its armed forces. Defence funding was increased to 3 per cent of GDP. By reintroducing conscription, the manpower of the armed forces grew to 250,000, with an additional operational reserve of 130,000.[42] To this can be added forces in the National Guard, created out of the reformed interior troops, and the Territorial Defence Forces. Moreover, in order to exert control of armed formations under its command, most of the volunteer battalions were subordinated to the National Guard or other parts of the Interior Ministry. They thereby acquired a formal role in Ukraine's force structure (although some of these groups nevertheless retain a high degree of de facto autonomy from the state through their political and business connections, funding streams and public relations operations).[43]

Although Ukraine's military reform has been fraught with setbacks, including in terms of funding, resistance to change in parts of the military organization, corruption and institutional infighting,[44] Ukraine can display a military in 2020 is radically different from 2014, in terms of manpower, command, training and equipment. These changes are also reflected in the comparatively static nature that the fighting in Donbas has displayed since 2015 and the signing of Minsk II. Ukraine's military build-up and deployments to the frontline implies that any offensive from the separatist or Russian side would be very costly. In the assessment of Ukraine's Military Intelligence Service (HUR), Russia is 'comfortable' with the current situation and will aim to retain the status quo in the occupied territories for an indefinite time, while using other, non-kinetic means, to influence Ukraine.[45] Likewise, although a Ukrainian offensive to retake the DNR and LNR territories could be feasible given the separatist and regular Russian forces currently deployed to the regions, Russia's ability to mount a heavy counteroffensive from Russian territory poses a significant deterrent against any such initiative. As put by Ukraine's Joint Forces Commander, 'there is no military solution to this conflict'.[46] Instead, the frontline around DNR and LNR has stagnated into a largely positional war, where units are deployed head-to-head, brigade for brigade in a vast system of trenches, often separated by only a few hundred metres of no man's land.

In 2018, Ukraine introduced a law transforming the ATO into a Joint Forces Operation (JFO), recognizing Russia's 'armed aggression' against Ukraine, designating

Donetsk and Luhansk as 'temporarily occupied territories' and transferring command from the non-military Security Service SBU (previously commanding the ATO) to Ukraine's general staff. Aside from placing the operation unequivocally under military command and thus signalling a coherent military approach to stabilizing and eventually liberating the occupied territories, the introduction of the JFO recognized that Ukraine is primarily fighting Russian and Russian-supported forces in the East, rather than local separatists.[47] Ukrainian forces regularly make small advances in order to recapture territory allotted to them by the Minsk II agreement, and artillery and sniper fire occur regularly along the confrontation line, inflicting a steady stream of casualties on both sides. However, high-intensity fighting has been largely absent since 2015 (the most prominent exception being the 2017 battle for Avdiivka) mirroring the limited willingness or capacity on either side to fundamentally alter realities on the ground.

Thus, Ukraine's ability to draw on the experience of the invasion of Crimea by responding with conventional military force to Russia's attempt at covertly infiltrating Donbas was instrumental in transforming and clarifying perceptions of the conflict, domestically and internationally. Ukraine's response served to de-hybridize military violence in Donbas, by exposing and engaging an initially ambiguous opponent covering behind ostensibly domestic insurgents. This transformation has served to call out Russia's agency, making it clear that Ukraine is responding to external aggression, not fighting a local insurgency as Moscow claims. The approach has had the added benefit, from Ukraine's perspective, of largely containing military violence in Donbas to the physical frontlines along the DNR and LNR. These clarified features of the fighting have been important in the Ukrainian government's effort to uphold and unify domestic backing for the war effort, and in mobilizing international support for the country.

Exposing Russian involvement

A key objective of Ukraine's defensive posture in the East has been to expose Russian involvement in the conflict. From the outset, Moscow denied any involvement of the Russian military in eastern Ukraine. In 2015, President Putin admitted that Russian military intelligence operatives were indeed present in Ukraine, but no regular troops.[48] Instead, Moscow has claimed, first, that the forces fighting on behalf of the separatist side in DNR and LNR consist exclusively of local militias. When confronted with incontrovertible evidence that Russian servicemen had indeed been killed or taken prisoner during the fighting, Moscow conceded that they had 'volunteered' in the conflict, taking a leave of absence from their postings in the Russian armed forces. Moreover, Russia has denied supplying the separatist forces with equipment, fuel and funding, arguing that all lethal material observed in use by the separatists has been captured from the Ukrainian army, recovered from old weapons caches or supplied by foreign sympathizers other than Russia.[49]

In reality, the troops fighting on behalf of the DNR and LNR are a complex mix of local separatist militias, along with regular Russian forces and international volunteers and mercenaries. These forces are since 2016, respectively, formed into the DNR 1 and

LNR 2 Army Corps in the two 'republics'. The formation of this heterogeneous group of fighters into Army Corps, along with the assassinations of several overly independent-minded and power seeking militia commanders, reflects the subordination of these forces to the operational command of the Eighth Army headquartered in Novocherkassk. Although it may be difficult to exercise absolute control over these forces due to discipline problems, all higher command positions are today manned by Russian officers and the two Army Corps are fully dependent on air defences, communications, logistics, supplies and training controlled by the Eighth Army and supplied to DNR and LNR via Rostov-na-Donu.[50] Ukraine's HUR describes the setup as an intricate system of cover legends and covert logistical support for regular servicemen in Ukraine, supported by a sizeable deterrent force along the border while local separatists and mercenaries function as 'cannon fodder' at the front.[51]

In 2019, Ukraine's armed forces estimated the total number of separatist and Russian regular forces in the DNR and LNR to 37,000.[52] In addition, Russia deploys large forces in close proximity of Ukraine's border, which have during exercises comprised up to 75,000 servicemen and could quickly enter the fighting in eastern Ukraine, for example, in case of a Ukrainian offensive to retake the two regions.[53] Other forces fighting on behalf of DNR and LNR include various militias from the Russian Federation, including the (initially) largely Chechen manned Vostok battalion, foreign mercenaries, as well as the Wagner group, the Russian private security contractor firm that has made headlines for its activities in Syria.[54]

Russia's insistence on denying its direct military involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, served to obfuscate realities on the ground at the outset of the conflict, delaying reactions from Kyiv as well as its Western partners in response to the unfolding war. Today, the reality of a strong Russian military presence on the ground in these territories is widely understood in Europe and the US, however, the denial of direct involvement still serves a dual purpose from Russia's perspective. First, it relieves Moscow of accepting partisanship in the conflict and any stated responsibility for a long-term military and economic commitment to the separatist projects in eastern Ukraine. Second, and most important, it allows Moscow to depict the conflict in eastern Ukraine as a civil war between the central government and the Russian-speaking population of the East.

Aside from the domestic political benefits of this narrative in Russia, Moscow's insistence on the war being an internal Ukrainian affair allows it to pose as a potential mediator in its pursuit of a solution to the conflict that involves constitutional reform and federalization – as stipulated in the Minsk II agreement. This would imply a 'special status' for the two regions, implying a high degree of autonomy along with influence and veto powers over the central government.[55] By extension, this would provide Russia with a permanent tool for exercising influence over the Ukrainian government, including the country's foreign policy decision-making and relations with NATO and the EU.[56] Indeed, as the leaked email correspondence of Putin advisor Surkov reveals, a federalization of Ukraine has constituted one of Russia's main objectives ever since the launch of the Novorossiya project.[57]

For the same reasons, the Ukrainian side perceives it as crucial to expose direct Russian involvement.[58] Evidence to support this claim is plentiful.[59] Aside from

Russian servicemen and intelligence operatives captured in Ukraine, evidence includes a plethora of Russian military equipment from recovered rations and personal documents, latest-issue uniforms and firearms, to footage and sightings of state-of-the-art armour, anti-air and artillery systems. One central feature of this information warfare has been the practice of Ukraine's intelligence agencies, most prominently the Security Service (SBU), to rapidly disseminate incriminating evidence through their own webpages and in social media. The perhaps most important example included intercepts of telephone conversations between separatist commanders in immediate connection with the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on 17 July 2014; in itself pivotal in drawing Western attention to the war.[60] Moreover, NGOs such as Bellingcat, InformNapalm and Forensic Architecture have played an important role in these revelations, including Russia's transfer into Ukraine of the Buk-1 air defence system responsible for downing flight MH17, as well as the considerable involvement of T72B3 tanks in the battle of Ilovaisk. T72B3 is a new iteration of the T72 that had not begun export at the time and was in use only by Russia's armed forces.[61]

Evidence of Russian involvement is a standard talking point in briefings provided by the Ukrainian military to foreign visitors, detailing observations and footage of Russian military equipment deployed in DNR and LNR, controverting Russian denials of any such transfers of equipment. These include the Orlan-10 UAV, Torn-MDM signal intelligence stations, Repelent-1 anti-drone complexes, Kasta-2E2 radars, Krasnopol laser-guided grenades, and Kornet antitank missiles, all representing modern Russian equipment that can hardly have been captured from Ukrainian forces.[62] Another notable new weapons system spotted in Donbas is the Tornado-S (9A52-4) MLRS, which was specifically and probably accidentally mentioned in the Minsk II agreement – it was at the time in use only by the Russian armed forces and the mention thus constituted an indirect confirmation of Russia's direct military involvement.[63]

Moreover, several pieces of advanced Russian electronic warfare equipment have been observed in the DNR and LNR, including IL269 Krashukha-2, R-934BM, R-378BM and R-330ZH, RB-341V 'Leer-3', and RB-636 'Svet-KU'.[64] Aside from providing evidence of Russian deployment and/or transfers of advanced equipment to the separatist side, and of trained personnel to operate it, this also indicates that that Russia's arms industry is utilizing Donbas as a testing ground.

It may seem odd that representatives of Ukraine's armed forces go to such lengths to detail evidence of the Russian military presence in DNR and LNR. After all, the fact of Russia's involvement has been recognized by Ukraine's international partners at least since the summer of 2014 and is since the same year monitored by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM).[65] However, Ukraine's effort in this regard signifies uncertainty as to whether this point has really landed internationally. Since international organizations such as the UN and OSCE through their composition will take positions that reflect compromise between the involved actors, and since the diplomatic missions of several countries operate on a similar basis, Ukrainian authorities perceive it as necessary to constantly repeat and reinforce Ukraine's own conflict narrative, in competition with that presented by Russia. Moreover, since the Minsk agreements stipulate the withdrawal of military equipment to a set distance

from the frontline, it becomes particularly important for Ukrainian authorities to highlight that violations in this regard are committed by Russia, not the separatists.[66]

From Ukraine's perspective, exposing Russian involvement is a key part of presenting the conflict as an interstate war, triggered by Russia's subversion of Ukrainians and subsequent invasion of Ukraine. Domestically, an understanding of the conflict as a civil war waged by Kyiv against its citizens would have had detrimental consequences and could potentially have pitted Ukrainian citizens against each other far beyond Donetsk and Luhansk – which was indeed what Russia sought to achieve in the spring of 2014. Yet first Ukraine's civil society and then national authorities proved capable of mobilizing and rallying the population at large in the face of an external threat – seemingly to a far greater extent than Russian intelligence services had estimated at the outset of the conflict.[67]

Moreover, the international support for Ukraine's territorial integrity hinges on its victimhood to Russian aggression, which also puts the conflict in a very different international-legal perspective. This has not only raised sympathies for Ukraine, but also obliged the international community to devise a response, through the sanctions regime against Russia. Ukraine's efforts to highlight Russia's military presence in the country thus serve to keep the issue on the international political agenda and to motivate continuity in the sanctions regime.

Informational defences and the military's image

Although the actual fighting in and around the DNR and LNR has over time consolidated into positional land warfare, the war has also demanded a considerable informational effort on the part of Ukraine's armed forces. Indeed, whereas military activity on both sides has gradually stagnated along a relatively stable frontline, the competing strategic narratives remain crucial to perceptions of the war, as well as potential paths forward in negotiations. For both Russia and Ukraine, this informational aspect of the war effort has domestic as well as international dimensions.

From the very beginning of Russia's operations in Crimea and Donbas, information operations functioned as an important enabler of these operations. From the deployment of 'little green men' in Crimea to the mobilization of ostensibly domestic separatist fighters in Donbas, Russia promoted the narrative of an imminent threat to Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine, posed by the ascent of a 'fascist junta' in Kyiv, through Russian state media, social media and agents of influence.[68] In order to sustain these claims, several examples have emerged of fabricated war crimes allegedly committed by Ukrainian forces.[69] Although this should not obscure the existence of evidence that both sides in this conflict have indeed committed real war crimes,[70] Russia engaged in a strategy of scaremongering in order to fuel polarization in Ukrainian society, locally in Crimea and Donbas, as well as in Ukraine at large. Regarding Ukraine's military and war effort, Russian information campaigns have made a point of underscoring the weakness and incompetence of Ukraine's armed forces, seeking to demoralize troops as well as Ukrainian society by reinforcing the sense that resistance is ultimately futile and that the country is defenceless. Russia has also sought to depict Ukraine as strategically isolated – portraying NATO and the EU

as responsible for the conflict by interfering in Ukraine and actively provoking Russia, but simultaneously as disinterested in Ukraine per se.[71]

In its response to Russia's comprehensive information operations, Ukraine has attempted, in large part successfully, to delimit Russia's information channels in the country. The effort has included banning the popular Russian social networks VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, the Yandex search engine and the Mail.ru email service.[72] Ukrainian cable providers were also ordered to stop the broadcasting of major Russian state-controlled TV channels, including Rossiya 1, Channel One, NTV and Rossiya 24, which have functioned as megaphones of Russian state propaganda.[73]

Ukraine and its reforming military has also made a considerable effort to promote its own, competing narrative, ranging from the highly localized setting of the conflict zones around DNR and LNR, via national political mobilization in Ukraine, to the international political arena. In Donbas, local administrations are implementing what they describe as a soft-power campaign, assisted by the central government. Indirectly, this campaign also benefits from humanitarian and post-conflict reconstruction projects supported by foreign donors such as UNDP, EIB and USAID, which are allowed to operate only on Ukrainian-controlled territory. Various projects focus on reconstructing infrastructure schools, houses, water and gas supply in order to demonstrate to inhabitants of DNR and LNR that life is essentially better on the Ukrainian-controlled side of the frontline.[74] Although Ukraine imposed an economic blockade on DNR and LNR in 2017, residents of these regions can still cross the demarcation line, which large numbers of people do in order to collect pensions, acquire documents such as passports, work, trade or visit relatives.[75]

Ukraine's military has innovatively deployed Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) – a concept otherwise developed for expeditionary missions and international peacekeeping missions – to its own domestic context, a unique experience in the effort of winning the 'hearts and minds' of Ukraine's own population in Donbas. In Ukraine's domestic context, CIMIC has included reconstruction of infrastructure for civilian use as well as the provision of information on the activities of Ukraine's military and domestic and foreign policy, including the activities of NATO and the EU in Ukraine. In a region whose population has traditionally been Russia-oriented and suffered from isolation and neglect from the central authorities in Kyiv, this effort is, according to representatives of the Ukrainian military, making a substantial difference in influencing local opinion about the conflict.[76] The effort also includes Ukrainian radio broadcasting aimed at the occupied territories, seeking to provide at least some informational counterweight to the overwhelming Russian media supremacy in these regions.[77]

Aside from its vastly improved fighting capability, Ukraine's reformed military has also acquired an important symbolic role in contravening the Russian narrative described earlier. Indeed, Ukraine's Ministry of Defence has invested in demonstrating competence and heroism in the face of Russian claims to the contrary. One example is the campaign 'Army Rebirth' in cooperation with Stratcom Ukraine, highlighting the positive achievements of Ukraine's armed forces.[78] Another is the elevation of the 'cyborgs' defending Donetsk airport, not least through providing government funding for the locally produced film 'Cyborgs: Heroes never Die'.[79] The Ukrainian military's

strategic communication also involves publicizing its participation in international exercises, particularly with NATO, which serve the triple purpose of learning and developing as a force, showing an interoperable commitment to NATO, and demonstrating to the Ukrainian public that the country is not internationally isolated but enjoys support from important partners in the West. The presence of international trainers from NATO and EU countries in Ukraine similarly provides both a transfer of knowledge and a symbol of support.[80] Moreover, the US decision in 2018, after a long delay, to sell Ukraine Javelin antitank missiles improved the defensive capabilities of the Ukrainian army but even more importantly constituted a symbolic gesture of support beyond words, sanctions against Russia and provisions of non-lethal equipment. The purchase of a second batch of Javelins was agreed in 2019.[81]

The general message of Ukraine's information campaign is addressed to both the Ukrainian public and international partners. Domestically, it signals that the country is neither defenceless nor abandoned and that it is indeed possible to resist and repel Russian aggression. To partners in the West, that the country is capable of safeguarding its territorial integrity and that efforts to support it are not wasted.

Finally, Ukraine's narrative concerning the conflict is fundamentally underpinned by the notion that the country constitutes the frontline in an all-encompassing Russian aggression against the West – a civilizational conflict that threatens the values of the Western security community as much as the Ukrainian state. Therefore, according to this narrative, the stakes in the conflict and its outcomes for NATO and the EU are considerable and should motivate sustained attention and significant efforts to support Ukraine's territorial integrity. Giving up Ukraine would encourage further Russian aggression and the next victim may well be a member state in these organizations.[82]

Conclusion

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is far from settled, yet the military dimension of the war in Donbas has settled into a mostly static frontline. Neither side will likely continue to pursue a military solution at this stage or to seek any significant alteration of realities on the ground. The conflict's future, as well as that of Ukraine, will be decided through diplomatic wrestling between Ukraine, Russia and the West over the implementation of the Minsk agreement. At the time of this writing, the most recent summit within the Normandy format in December 2019 saw some progress towards a cease-fire agreement and exchanges of prisoners, although positions remain locked regarding the fateful question of the future status of the separatist territories within Ukraine.[83]

However, the military standoff in itself says something important about defending against the type of hybrid warfare that Russia has deployed in Ukraine. Judging from the sequence of events, Russia did not initially intend to fight the war through a display of conventional military force. It was gradually compelled to do so by Ukraine's military response. Moreover, Russia's ambition at the outset of the operation, as suggested by the far-reaching aims of the Novorossiya project, indicates that Ukraine averted the

loss of control over far larger areas than those currently constituting the DNR and LNR. Although Russia has reason to be content with the outcome achieved – the two separatist regions arguably constitute considerable and sufficient leverage on Kyiv – the situation could have been much worse in Ukraine's perspective.

It is not possible to ascertain Ukraine's intentionality regarding this effect – indeed, Ukrainian authorities likely took decisions on the response in light of the immediate conflict dynamics and the resources available, with unforeseeable long-term consequences. Nevertheless, in the course of the fighting in Donbas, Ukraine's conventional response did deny Russia the option of masking its aggression as a local insurgency, thus serving to de-hybridize the military violence. Ukraine forced Russia's hand in having to escalate its deployment of regular forces to the war, making all attempts at denying its involvement utterly unconvincing. This was combined with an effort to take control of the conflict narrative, by publicizing evidence of Russia's involvement, restricting Russia's information channels and systematically communicating Ukraine's own perspective of the unfolding events. Combined, these responses amount to a strategy for hybrid warfare defence that enabled Ukraine to deflect the imagery of a civil conflict, instead demonstrating that this is fundamentally a defensive war against an external aggressor. Despite the destruction and tragedy brought about by the fighting, this has made a substantial difference for Ukraine's internal cohesion as well as for the sustained support offered to the country from the West. The ensuing character of the fighting has arguably been more understandable and perhaps manageable to both Ukraine and the West. Trenches, tanks, standard-issue uniforms and drones are simply more graspable images of war than little green men, obscure separatist movements and information operations.

Indeed, the exposure of Russia's hybrid strategy and subversive tactics in the initiation of the war has resonated heavily in the West, effectively ending the strategic pause in much of Western Europe during the period of détente following the end of the Cold War, with implications for security strategies, doctrines and national defence budgets. While Russia's modus in Ukraine in 2014 had clear similarities with its preparations for war with Georgia in 2008, the war in Ukraine reverberated much more strongly with Western governments due to the country's size, geographical location, and presence on the mental maps of Western decision makers.[84] Of course, another factor is the considerably improved efficiency demonstrated by Russia's armed forces, compared to 2008. Moreover, and in direct relation to Ukraine's ability to devise a response, the war in Donbas has extended over a long period of several years. In sharp contrast to the scenarios in Georgia and Crimea, this has provided ample time for Ukraine's international partners to fathom developments and react to them.

Whereas the war in Ukraine has been a catalyst for the security debate in NATO and the EU, this debate has to a large extent focused on the subversive and non-kinetic components of what is essentially a strategy aiming to amplify the application of traditional material means of statecraft, primarily military and economic power. An essential component of this strategy is the use of conventional military force, or the threat thereof. Indeed, the evolution of Russia's operation in eastern Ukraine demonstrates that while relying on proxy forces and political subversion can go a long way towards destabilizing an adversary, these approaches alone have clear limits in

the pursuit of strategic objectives. In this light, the case of Ukraine demonstrates the potential of asymmetry – otherwise usually denoting the means by which a weaker party can defeat a stronger adversary by deploying unconventional means aimed at particular weaknesses. Yet in Ukraine, the reverse is true: Ukraine, as a weaker party, responded conventionally to a much stronger opponent deploying unconventional means for the sake of obscuring its actions and intentions.

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