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# Russian Reflexive Control

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## **Abstract**

Russia is increasingly applying methods of reflexive control (RC) to influence political decision-making through election manipulation as well as undermining the trust of citizens in political institutions and political systems of targeted countries. Russia is employing RC not only domestically and in neighboring countries such as Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland but also more and more in NATO countries such as the US, Germany, France, Great Britain, and Canada. For the CAF to be able to develop effective countermeasures, it is essential to achieve a deeper understanding of RC as it was used traditionally during the Cold War and particularly how it has been further developed to be used in current Russian operations. This report discusses the concept of Russian reflexive control, how it has evolved into its current iteration, the mechanics of how it works, and how to identify possible countermeasures to RC.

This RMCC research report addresses the following research questions:

1. What is Russian reflexive control?
2. In what instances has RC been successfully applied?
3. What were the underpinning mechanisms by which it worked?
4. What are possible countermeasures to RC?
5. What are possible applications of RC mechanisms by the CAF?

The paper concludes that reflexive control in its current form implies a compound program of targeted decision-making through multiple vectors, accounting for not only the adversary's logical processing of information, but also emotional, psychological and cultural frameworks within which decisions are made, over a long time-frame. The complexity of the concept offers avenues to counter reflexive control operations. It appears to be a fragile operation that is fairly easy to counter, once identified, if target audiences are made aware of the concept and how it works. In addition to moral and legal concerns, the high complexity and fragility of RC operations, along with fairly effective countermeasures to RC, suggest the CAF should not apply RC mechanisms in operations.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Definitions</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Context</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Operational Components</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Case Studies</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Georgia 2008 .....	13
Ukraine 2014-17 .....	18
Syria, the West and Turkey 2015-16 .....	20
<b>False Positives</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>Lessons from cases of RC</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>How Russia exploits social media for Reflexive Control</b> .....	<b>28</b>
Spreading Narratives .....	31
Smear campaigns/character assassination .....	31
Testing of narratives .....	32
Constructing credibility of influencers.....	32
Undermining credibility of adversaries.....	33
Information sabotage (counterfeit evidence).....	35
Policy Paralysis .....	36
Societal Norm Manipulation .....	37
Information pressure .....	37
Provoke hasty, unplanned or imprudent response.....	38
Creation of desired movements.....	38
Entice physical, offline dissent/demonstrations .....	39
Distraction .....	39
Propaganda .....	40
<b>Reflexive control countermeasures</b> .....	<b>43</b>
<b>Potential applications of RC mechanisms by the CAF</b> .....	<b>48</b>
The Strategic level.....	49
Effectiveness .....	51
Potential use forms of similar mechanisms for influence .....	51
Tactical level .....	52
Operational level .....	52
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>53</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>55</b>

## Introduction

Reflexive control (RC) 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. The term is primarily encountered in discussion of Russian techniques of information warfare.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the practice represents a key asymmetric enabler to gain critical advantages, neutralizing the adversary's strengths by causing him or her to choose courses of action that are damaging to the adversary and further Russian objectives.

The first section of this report (pp. 5-27) examines a number of case studies that may be considered the successful application of principles of reflexive control by Russia. In order to do so, it first introduces theories of reflexive control as described in Russian and other foreign sources. It then breaks down these theories into key operational components, each of which can be observed in the case studies of successful implementation. This section also notes a number of false positives in the form of Russian actions that have been described elsewhere as reflexive control but which should not be considered as such because they do not display its key criteria and characteristics.

Social media has vastly increased the ways RC can be applied, has reduced implementation costs, and offers better deniability of operations. The second section (pp. 28-42) discusses how social media is exploited for RC operations by Russia.

The third section (pp. 43-48) looks at possible countermeasures to RC operations and summarizes a number of key themes and principles to help targets defend against potential future RC attempts.

The report concludes with a section (pp. 48-52) on thoughts on the application of RC-like mechanisms by the CAF.

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<sup>1</sup> An accessible summary of the Russian-language literature on principles of reflexive control is available in Kasapoglu, Can (2015): Russia's Renewed Military Thinking: Non-Linear Warfare and Reflexive Control, NATO Defense College Research Paper 121; 25 November 2015. <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=877>.

## Definitions

Significantly, the phrase ‘reflexive control’ is today far more frequently encountered in Western writing about Russian information warfare principles than in Russian primary sources. In Russian public discussion, the term appears to have been superseded, and at least partially replaced, by ‘perception management’ with a meaning similar to the Western understanding of this approach. The Russian phrase ‘рефлексивное управление’ (additionally, ‘рефлексивный контроль’) now primarily refers to ‘reflexive practice’ in an educational or personnel management context.<sup>2</sup> As a result, it can be noted that few of the Russian-sourced definitions for reflexive control included below are more recent than the 1990s. Nevertheless, given its widespread application in Western analysis, and in the absence of a suitable replacement, ‘reflexive control’ continues to offer a suitable descriptor for the combination of information activity covered by the following definitions.

Two brief definitions from Russian military publications can be used to summarize the concept of reflexive control. According to the Navy Journal in 1999, reflexive control is “the process of intentionally conveying to an opposing side of a certain aggregate information (attributes) which will cause that side to make a decision appropriate to that information”<sup>3</sup>. As defined in the Army Journal four years earlier, “Reflexive control consists of transmitting motives and grounds from the controlling entity to the controlled system that stimulate the desired decision. The goal of RC is to prompt the enemy to make a decision unfavorable to him. Naturally, one must have an idea about how he thinks.”<sup>4</sup>

This second definition notes a key characteristic of reflexive control: the need to tailor false information to the specific target, and adapt it, reflecting the target's responses and reactions. This indicates that reflexive control entails a far broader and more complex approach than pure deception, or providing an adversary commander with false operational information on which to base his or her decision. Instead of consisting simply of disinformation, reflexive control implies a compound program of targeting decision-making through multiple vectors, taking into account not only the adversary's logical processing of information, but also the emotional, psychological, cultural and other frameworks within which decisions are made. The Russian General Staff Military Academy's glossary of information security terms defines ‘agitation’ (агитация) as “one of the forms of information-psychological influence on the emotional plane of the target or group of targets with the aim of achieving a specific psychological state which will lead to active and

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Korokh, AA (2009): *Refleksivnoe Upravlenie: Kontseptsii, Podkhodiy i Oblast' Priemeneniya* [Reflexive Control: Concepts, Approaches and Field of Application]. Novosibirsk State University of Economic Management, 2009. [https://nsuem.ru/science/publications/science\\_notes/issue.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=1021](https://nsuem.ru/science/publications/science_notes/issue.php?ELEMENT_ID=1021).

<sup>3</sup> Chausov, F. (1999): *Osnovy Refleksivnogo Upravleniya Protivnikom*, *Morskoi Sbornik*, No. 9, 1999, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Leonenko, S. (1995): *Refleksivnoye Upravlenie Protivnikom*, *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, No.8, 1995, pp. 27-32.

specific actions being taken”.<sup>5</sup> More general and less specific propaganda and counter-propaganda efforts also play a role in establishing the information background for decision-making.

Sergey Komov, a leading Russian thinker on information warfare, lists the variety of ways by which an adversary could be induced to make unfavorable decisions, as follows:

- “**Distraction**, by creating a real or imaginary threat to one of the enemy’s most vital locations (flanks, rear, etc.) during the preparatory stages of combat operations, thereby forcing him to reconsider the wisdom of his decisions to operate along this or that axis;
- **Overload**, by frequently sending the enemy a large amount of conflicting information;
- **Paralysis**, by creating the perception of a specific threat to a vital interest or weak spot;
- **Exhaustion**, by compelling the enemy to carry out useless operations, thereby entering combat with reduced resources;
- **Deception**, by forcing the enemy to reallocate forces to a threatened region during the preparatory stages of combat operations;
- **Division**, by convincing the enemy that he must operate in opposition to coalition interests;
- **Pacification**, by leading the enemy to believe that pre-planned operational training is occurring rather than offensive preparations, thus reducing his vigilance;
- **Deterrence**, by creating the perception of insurmountable superiority;
- **Provocation**, by forcing the commander to take action advantageous to your side;
- **Suggestion**, by offering information that affects the enemy legally, morally, ideologically, or in other areas;
- **Pressure**, by offering information that discredits the government in the eyes of its population.”<sup>6</sup>

These categories of influence are not mutually exclusive, and instead can be mutually supporting. In addition, an information campaign within any given category need not be limited to influencing a single decision. Similar to a skillful barrister cross-examining a witness, reflexive control can lead the adversary to make a series of decisions that successively discard options that would improve their position, until they are finally faced with a choice between bad and worse, either of which options would favor Russia. Consequently, application of reflexive control should be thought of as a persistent campaign waged along multiple cognitive axes.

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<sup>5</sup> Voyennaya Akademiya General’nogo Shtaba [Military Academy of General Shtaba] (2008): Словарь Терминов И Определений В Области Информационной Безопасности [Dictionary of Terms and Definitions in the Field of Information Security] 2nd Edition, Voyeninform, Moscow; 2008. p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Komov, Sergey A. (1997): About Methods and Forms of Conducting Information Warfare, *Military Thought* (English Edition), No. 4, July–August 1997. pp. 18–22.

The starting point for planning the campaign is the action or decision that Russia wishes the adversary to make. Scholar of Russian strategic thinking Dmitry Adamsky notes that reflexive control “forces the adversary to act according to a false picture of reality in a predictable way, favorable to the initiator of the informational strike, and seemingly independent and benign to the target. The end result is a desired strategic behavior.”<sup>7</sup> Timothy Thomas, a leading U.S. expert in the Russian approach to information warfare, also defines reflexive control as “a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.”<sup>8</sup>

Once this predetermined decision is defined, the sequence of steps to induce the adversary to arrive at it can be determined. Senior British analyst Charles Blandy has described the process as follows:

“Traditionally the Russian military mind, as embodied in the General Staff, looks further ahead than its Western counterpart, on the basis that ‘foresight implies control’. Having made the ‘decision’, the military mind works backwards from the selected objective to its present position. Subsidiary goals are identified for achieving the objective. The Soviet and Russian General Staffs over a long period of time have studied the application of reflexive control theory both for deception and disinformation purposes in order to influence and control an enemy’s decision-making processes.

Control of an opponent’s decision is achieved by means of providing him with the grounds by which he is able logically to derive his own decision, but one that is predetermined by the other side. This can be achieved:

- By applying pressure of force.
- By assisting the opponent’s formulation of an appreciation of the initial situation.
- By shaping the opponent’s objectives.
- By shaping the opponent’s decision-making algorithm.
- By the choice of the decision-making moment.”<sup>9</sup>

The target for reflexive control activity need not be limited to key decision-makers, but can include broader sections of the population as well, in order to deliver effects en masse as well as individual cognitive domains. The approach is different in each case; as described in 2014 in Russia's Bulletin of the Academy of Military Sciences:

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<sup>7</sup> Adamsky, Dmitry (2015): Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy, IFRI; November 2015. p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, Timothy (2004): Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military. *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Volume 17; 2004. p. 237.

<sup>9</sup> Blandy, Charles W. (2008): Provocation, Deception, Entrapment: The Russo-Georgian Five Day War, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom; March 2009. <http://conflictstudies.org.uk/files/04.pdf>. This case study argues that reflexive control was in play against Georgia in the lead-up to the armed conflict with Russia in August 2008.

“The targets for influence are both mass and individual consciousness. Those ‘honored’ with individual influence are those persons whose decisions determine issues of interest to the adversary party (i.e., the President, the Prime Minister, head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomatic representatives, commanders of military formations and so on). Information influence involves distorting facts, or envisages imposing on the target person emotional impressions which are favorable to the influencer.”<sup>10</sup>

Influence on mass consciousness can have two distinct aims. Russia seeks to influence foreign decision-making by supplying ‘polluted’ information to the public, exploiting the fact that Western elected representatives receive and are sensitive to the same information flows as their voters. When disinformation delivered in this manner is part of the framework for decisions, this constitutes success for Moscow, because a key element of reflexive control is in place. In addition, if information operations are being carried out as part of preparation for open conflict, reflexive control can have a key role in undermining popular will to resist. As put by Dmitry Adamsky, “Moral-psychological suppression and manipulation of social consciousness aims to make the population cease resisting (*otkaz ot soprotivleniia*), even supporting the attacker.”<sup>11</sup>

It follows that a key enabler of reflexive control is target audience analysis: to predict adversarial responses to specific tainted or false cognitive inputs. According to Sergey Komov, in order to achieve information superiority, it is essential to “permanently examine [the] enemy's response to informational and physical impacts and actively influence it.” And Komov adds that “information superiority” in turn is essential to implement reflexive control: “At the lowest level it can be a delay in decision-making by the enemy, which can be achieved by disorganizing the command and control system of its armies (forces). At the top-level it could involve the creation of favorable common operational environment with subsequent reflexive control of enemy's military command and control bodies, armies and troops.”<sup>12</sup>

## Context

Based on its Tsarist and Soviet inheritance, Russia today brings to the table a well internalized set of disciplines and instincts about the relationship between war, international politics and conflicts within states. In Russian/Soviet military science, war and peace are seen neither as absolutes nor as completely antithetical. Cooperation, partnership, even alliances unfold within a

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<sup>10</sup> Kuleshov, Yu. et al. (2014): Информационно-психологическое противоборство в современных условиях: теория и практика [Information-Psychological Warfare In Modern Conditions: Theory And Practice], Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk, Volume 46, No. 1; 2014. p. 105.

<sup>11</sup> Adamsky, Dmitry (2015): Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy, IFRI; November 2015. p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Komov, Col. Sergey A/ Korotkov, Maj-Gen S. V./ Dylevskiy, Col. I. N. (2008): About the Evolution of the Modern American ‘Information Operations’ Doctrine, *Military Thought [English Translation]*, Volume 3; 2008. pp. 14-23.

framework of ‘struggle’. By the same token, accommodation and ‘conditional alliances’ are considered possible even with resolute enemies (Nazi Germany, Daesh). These premises are staple to an operational military and state security culture that has been remarkably resistant to political and economic change. After years of incongruity and tension under Gorbachev and Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin has brought this military and special service perspective into close alignment with the political objectives of the state.<sup>13</sup>

Within this already fluid framework, the ambiguous and ‘non-linear’ character of what the West calls ‘hybrid war’ has eroded further distinctions that students of earlier conflicts often took for granted. The techniques of ‘military cunning’ are no longer confined to the battlefield. The same can be said of ‘information war’, which The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation defines as:

“...a conflict between two or more states in the information space with the aim of damaging the information system, processes and resources, critically important and other structures, undermining the political, economic and social system, mass psychological indoctrination of the population in order to destabilize society and the state, and also compel the state to take decisions in the interests of the opposing side.”<sup>14</sup>

If we substitute the word ‘induce’ for ‘compel’, the final point captures the essence of reflexive control. In application, this essence is invariably corrupted and confused by other techniques of manipulation operating in the same time and space. In the words of Russia’s leading military authority on ‘military cunning’, General VN Lobov, “all war is based on deception.”<sup>15</sup> Deception is achieved for a variety of purposes and by a variety of means, concurrently, of which reflexive control is only one.

Since the end of the Second World War, if not before, strategic surprise and with it the ‘initial period of war’ have been major preoccupations for Russian military thought. Thus, it should not be surprising that whilst reflexive control is seen as a formal discipline in itself, the Russians have also devised other disciplines that are complementary. When assessing attempts at influence or preparation for conflict by Russia, it is not always easy to detach the reflexive element from

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<sup>13</sup> For a thorough introduction to the cultural and theoretical underpinnings of Russian reflexive control, see Diane Chotikul, Diane (1986): *The Soviet Theory of Reflexive Control in Historical and Psychocultural Perspective: A Preliminary Study*, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School; July 1986. <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a170613.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (2011): *Conceptual Views Regarding the Activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the Information Space [Kontseptual’nye vzglyady na deyatel’nost’ Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii v informatsionnom prostranstve]*, Russian Federation; 2011. p 5.

<sup>15</sup> Lobov, VN (1987): *Military Cunning: Foreword [Voennaya Khitrost’: Predislovie]*, Moscow; 1987. [http://www.biograph.ru/index.php?id=700:lobov-vn&Itemid=29&option=com\\_content&view=article](http://www.biograph.ru/index.php?id=700:lobov-vn&Itemid=29&option=com_content&view=article).

this mix.<sup>16</sup> Then again, it is not always helpful to do so if we want to arrive at a full understanding of what Russia is doing and why.

When considering the complementary and overlapping techniques that may be employed by Russia to achieve asymmetric military effect, the concepts of primary importance are:

- ‘Military cunning’ (*voyennaya khitrost*), which is ‘designed to throw the enemy into confusion regarding the condition, location and character of military activity’. An object of study in Russia since the time of Suvorov, it is reflexive in aspiration, but unlike reflexive control, it is not necessarily designed to induce the opponent to perform one action or another.<sup>17</sup> The same is true of the narrower and more familiar concept, *maskirovka* (an object of academic study since 1904): the complex of measures devised to confuse the enemy regarding the ‘presence and disposition of forces, their condition, readiness, actions and plans’. *Maskirovka* is explicitly designed to achieve surprise, which is not always a purpose of reflexive control.<sup>18</sup>
- Diversion (*diversiya*) serves a different, albeit complementary purpose: to ‘divert the attention of the enemy and divide his forces’. In the Soviet period, it referred primarily to actions carried out in the enemy rear, but now it can refer to any military activity ‘far from the theatre of war’ designed to distract the enemy from one’s own main effort.<sup>19</sup> The reflexive element in *diversiya* is strong. But it is designed to produce a general response whereas reflexive control, in its purest form, is designed to produce a specific one.
- Intelligence/reconnaissance by combat (*razvedka boyem*), the ‘acquisition of information about the enemy by offensive action’, sometimes has a reflexive component and sometimes none at all. When the action is designed to provoke a specific response revealing information of intelligence value, then reflexive control serves the purposes of *razvedka boyem*.

Despite the close relationship and affinity between reflexive control and military techniques of cognitive manipulation, reflexive control is not exclusively a military discipline. In the realm of cyber-attacks, electoral interference and ‘fake news’, reflexive control takes its place alongside other tools of ‘active measures’, such as disinformation (*dezinformatsiya*), penetration (*proniknoveniye*) and provocation (*provokatsiya*). The multiplicity of variables within complex undertakings, both civil and military, allows for a creative, dynamic and constantly evolving *kombinatsiya* of tools and aims.

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<sup>16</sup> Ионов, М. (1971): О способах воздействия на противника при принятии им решения (On Methods of Influencing an Opponent’s Decision), *Voyennaya Mysl*, Number 12d; 1971 p.24.

<sup>17</sup> Defined with near perfect consistency since the first published reference in the *Military Encyclopedia*, 1911-1915. <http://militera.lib.ru/enc/sytin/index.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Its core aims are to ‘achieve surprise, preserve combat readiness and the increase the sustainability of forces’. Ministry of Defence of the USSR (1983): *Military Encyclopaedic Dictionary [Voennyi Entsiklopedicheskiy Slovar]*, Moscow; 1983. p 430. (hereafter abbreviated VES).

<sup>19</sup> VES p. 233.

## Operational Components

In reflexive control, direction of the adversary's decision-making process must be undetected. This is achieved not only by driving in the required direction, but through continuous interaction and providing the adversary with all the evidence necessary to arrive at the required conclusion logically and apparently of the adversary's own volition.

In order to do this, Russia can draw on a well-established arsenal of information warfare tools, assets and techniques, some of which are recognizable from Soviet and Tsarist practice in past centuries, and others of which are entirely new and exploit the hyper-connectivity provided by the internet and social media. Dmitry Adamsky summarizes the nature of these tools as follows:

"Three main characteristics predominate. First, Russia's approach to informational struggle is *holistic (kompleksnyy podhod)*, that is, it merges digital-technological and cognitive-psychological attacks. While digital sabotage aims to disorganize, disrupt, and destroy a state's managerial capacity, psychological subversion aims to deceive the victim, discredit the leadership, and disorient and demoralize the population and the armed forces. Second, it is *unified (edinstvo usilii)*, in that it synchronizes informational struggle warfare with kinetic and non-kinetic military means and with effects from other sources of power; and it is *unified* in terms of co-opting and coordinating a spectrum of government and non-government actors – military, paramilitary, and non-military. Finally, the informational campaign is an *uninterrupted ('bezpriryvnost')* strategic effort. It is waged during 'peacetime' and wartime, simultaneously in domestic, the adversary's, and international media domains and in all spheres of new media."<sup>20</sup>

Each of these aspects requires use of a combination of effects, implemented by a variety of actors. Can Kasapoglu notes that "the conduct of 'reflexive control' incorporates an advanced toolkit that utilizes means of hard power, disinformation and manipulation, tools of influencing the adversary's decision-making algorithms, and altering the adversary's response time simultaneously".<sup>21</sup>

Direct and kinetic effects, and physical presence and movement, can be demonstrated by Russia's state or proxy forces, whether paramilitary, intelligence, or operating in cyberspace. Unconventional, information, psychological and cyber operations can be carried out with either plausible or implausible deniability – or merely suggested in order to sow doubt.

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<sup>20</sup> Adamsky, Dmitry (2015): Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy, IFRI, p. 27; November 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Kasapoglu, Can (2015): Russia's Renewed Military Thinking: Non-Linear Warfare and Reflexive Control, NATO Defense College Research Paper 121; 25 November 2015, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=877>.

Other human assets consist of a wide range of individuals operating on behalf of Russia in the target country – whether knowingly or unknowingly. These include marginalized members of political parties on the right and left, but also corrupt and compromised business and political elites, ‘useful idiots’, and nominally independent academic communities that provide advice to policymakers for dealing with Russia that in fact furthers Russian objectives. In each case, the use of human assets working within the adversary’s public opinion or decision-making ecosystem allows full exploitation of local influences and psychological frameworks that are based on history, preconceptions, national characteristics and even innate linguistic bias.<sup>22</sup> Crucially, it also facilitates what Can Kasapoglu describes as the "set of interrelated and specific procedures *which aim to imitate the adversary’s reasoning and possible behavior* [emphasis added] in order to drag him into an unfavorable decision for himself".<sup>23</sup>

One factor common to all of these is the ability to disseminate pervasive disinformation.<sup>24</sup> Russian disinformation efforts were relatively neglected in the post-Cold War period until becoming once more the subject of close study with the post-2014 rise of concern over social media effects and ‘fake news’. Yet their enduring power is sustained by the number of Soviet-era fabrications that are still widely believed today.<sup>25</sup> In addition to straightforward fiction, Russia continues to rely heavily on simulacra (representations of reality), analogies, and other forms of influence introduced into the reflexive process to control perceptions.<sup>26</sup> A prime example is the use of fascist and Nazi analogies by Russia when referring to Ukraine or the Baltic states. Not only does this galvanize opinion in Russia itself with explicit references to the Second World War, it also helps to erode international support for Russia's adversaries by casting doubt on their motivations and moral leanings. Furthermore, Russia seeks to influence the volume and timing of information flow, whether to leave the adversary confused at a dearth of hard evidence or, as noted by Sergey Komov above, entirely overwhelmed by a deluge of evidence that is possibly contradictory.

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<sup>22</sup> Shemayev, Volodymyr N. (2007): Cognitive Approach to Modeling Reflexive Control in Socio-economic Systems. *Information and Security*, Volume 22; 2007. p. 35, quoted in Selhorst, A.J.C. (2016): Russia’s Perception Warfare: The Development of Gerasimov’s Doctrine in Estonia and Georgia and its Application in Ukraine, *Militaire Spectator*, Volume 185, No. 4; 2016. pp. 151-2.

<sup>23</sup> Kasapoglu, Can (2015): Russia's Renewed Military Thinking: Non-Linear Warfare and Reflexive Control, NATO Defense College Research Paper 121; 25 November 2015, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=877>.

<sup>24</sup> Holland, Max (2006): The Propagation and Power of Communist Security Services *Dezinformatsiya* 2. *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Volume 19, Issue 1; 2006. p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Pomerantsev and Andrew Weiss cite the case of KGB disinformation on the murder of President John F. Kennedy becoming institutionalised in the United States, up to and including being incorporated without qualification in the Oliver Stone movie *JFK*. They note: "The lines of fact, fiction and *dezinformatsiya* have become utterly blurred, and few of the millions who have watched the movie are aware of the KGB’s influence on the plot."<sup>21</sup> See Pomerantsev, Peter/ Weiss, Andrew Weiss (2014): *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Money, and Culture*, Institute of Modern Russia; 2014. p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Makhnin, V.L. (2013): *Refleksivnye Protsessy V Voennom Iskusstve: Istoriko-Gnoseologicheskiy Aspekt* [Reflexive Processes in Military Art: The Historico-Gnoseological Aspect], *Voennaya mysl (Military Thought)*, Number 2, p. 40; 2013. p. 40.

Overall, some of the ‘categories of reflexive interactions’ defined during the 1980s to describe Soviet practice are entirely appropriate three decades later when applied to current Russian practice and ambition. These categories are expressed as ‘transferring an image’, that is, imposing on the adversary a false image of what is happening around him or her in order to guide his/her decision-making. They are as follows:

- "Transfer of an image of the situation: providing an opponent with an erroneous or incomplete image of the situation.
- Creation of a goal for the opponent: putting an opponent in a position in which he must select a goal in our favor (e.g., for provoking an enemy with a threat to which he must rationally respond).
- Form a goal by transferring an image of the situation: feigning weakness or creating a false picture.
- Transfer of an image of one’s own perception of the situation: providing an opponent with false information or portions of the truth based on one’s own perception of the situation.
- Transfer of an image of one’s own goal.
- Transfer of an image of one’s own doctrine: giving a false view of one’s procedures and algorithms for decision-making.
- Transfer of one’s own image of a situation to make the opponent deduce his own goal: presenting a false image of one’s own perception of the situation, with the accepted additional level of risk."<sup>27</sup>

## Case Studies

The following case studies examine in detail those instances of reflexive control directly linked to armed conflict between Russia and other states in the last decade: namely Russian actions in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria. It then goes on to introduce instances of reflexive control from previous decades that illustrate other characteristics or applications of the principle.

### Georgia 2008

The factors that led to the Five-Day War between Russia and Georgia in 2008, and where the blame lies for its occurrence, are both mixed and complex. By the summer of 2008, the Kremlin was increasingly ready to intervene forcibly to resolve tensions that it was actively exacerbating. For both political and military reasons, reflexive control was an important element in a policy faithful to Bismarck’s axiom: ‘if there is to be a war, we would rather make it than suffer it’. The

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<sup>27</sup> Reid, Clifford (1987): Reflexive Control in Soviet Military Planning. in Dailey, Brian/ Parker, Patrick (eds.), Soviet Strategic Deception. The Hoover Institution Press, Stanford CA; 1987. pp. 293–312.

calculations of Russia's political and military leadership stem from an outlook very different to that of their Western counterparts. Whereas the Western mind is trained to make distinctions and assess individual developments 'on their merits', the custodians of Russia's military and special services have been trained to make connections, to assess how developments in one region will affect the dynamics of another and, in turn, to ask what actions in distant parts might say about an adversary's intentions closer to the Russian homeland.

Almost ten years before these events, NATO's military intervention in Kosovo (which fatefully coincided with the first wave of NATO's eastern enlargement) had resolved a decade-long argument in Russia about whether NATO had changed or was changeable. Whatever can be said about NATO's bombing campaign, it was not the behavior of a 'strictly defensive' alliance. The Russian reaction, based on emotion more than on a serious appraisal of NATO's intentions ('today they are bombing Yugoslavia, but thinking of Russia') naturally raised concerns about how the techniques of NATO's intervention could be transposed to the Caucasus. These concerns were heightened by two developments that followed one another in swift succession in early 2008: Kosovo's declaration of independence on 17 February, followed by its recognition by the majority of EU member states, and on 3 April, the NATO Bucharest Summit Declaration, announcing that Ukraine and Georgia 'will become members of NATO'.

Regional developments added a further dimension of concern for a country that long had subscribed to the view that 'he who wishes to control the North Caucasus must also control the South': developing ties between Azerbaijan, the United States and Turkey, cooling of relations between Russia and Armenia, the spread of radical Islam following the second Chechen war, mounting threats to state authority in Dagestan and the horrific outrage in Beslan in 2004 (from which Putin concluded that 'we demonstrated weakness, and the weak are beaten' – and from which he went on to blame those who 'think that Russia, as one of the greatest nuclear powers of the world, is still a threat, and this threat has to be eliminated').<sup>28</sup> In itself, the 2003 Rose Revolution that brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power was widely believed to have been orchestrated by US intelligence services: a view even more tenaciously held about Ukraine's subsequent Orange Revolution.

Yet by 2008, Russia's mood was decidedly different from what it had been in 2004, let alone 1999. The state, the 'vertical of power', and collective self-respect had been restored on the basis of high energy prices driving year-on-year economic growth of 7 per cent. No less important was the perception that the United States, burdened by its War on Terror and its bungling of the war in Iraq, was rapidly losing its ability to influence the course of events in Russia's presumptive 'sphere of privileged interests'.

Thus, months before the August events, the Kremlin had reached the conclusion that conflict in the South Caucasus was not only becoming likely but necessary, and warnings to this effect were

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<sup>28</sup> Putin, Vladimir (2004): Televised Speech to the Russian People (translated as Putin Tells the Russians: 'We Shall Be Stronger'), *The New York Times*; 5 September 2004. As translated by *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/05/world/europe/putin-tells-the-russians-we-shall-be-stronger.html>.

given on more than one occasion by Presidents Putin and Medvedev, Foreign Minister Lavrov and CGS Baluyevskiy.<sup>29</sup> To accomplish its objectives, it was not enough for Russia to warn. It needed to establish culpability for the conflict. In military-operational terms, this, in Charles Blandy's words, meant exerting 'pressure on Georgian decision-making'.<sup>30</sup> The preparation of the physical and cognitive battlefields advanced along four vectors.

- *Discrediting President Saakashvili.* If war was to take place, it was essential that Mikheil Saakashvili's recklessness be the cause of it. Restoration of Georgia's constitutional authority in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, pledged at the start of his presidential term, might have rung alarm bells in several capitals, but it also provided an information opportunity for Moscow, as did the president's undeniable egotism and spasms of impulsiveness. In May 2006, *Mikhail Saakashvili: A Psychological Profile of the Character* was published by a collegium of leading Western institutes that did not exist.<sup>31</sup> Although the forgery was crude, the message was credible and, by 2008, well amplified.
- *Military Pressure.* Some three months before the start of exercise *Kavkaz-2008*, the Russian contingents of the Collective CIS Peacekeeping Forces in the North Caucasus [KSPM] were substantially augmented and became more active.<sup>32</sup> This intensification of activity, notably on the part of logistics and engineering personnel – and, more tellingly, a detachment of 400 railway troops deployed to Abkhazia in May – was more consistent with war preparation than posturing, and the point was not lost on Tbilisi.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Two themes were articulated: the self-proclaimed independence of Kosovo had created an 'extremely dangerous precedent', and Russia would take 'all possible measures' to prevent Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO. See for example Lavrov's interview to *Ekho Moskvii* on 8 April and Baluyevskiy's interview with *Vesti* on 11 April, warning that Russia would 'take measures with the aim of securing its interests in the close vicinity of its state borders'.

<sup>30</sup> Blandy, Charles W. (2009): *Provocation, Deception, Entrapment: The Russo-Georgian Five Day War*, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, March 2009. p.1. <http://conflictstudies.org.uk/files/04.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Available only in manuscript but widely circulated. For Edward Lucas's summary: <https://www.edwardlucas.com/2006/06/29/the-mysterious-assassination-of-mr-saakashvili/>. On 13 August 2008, a psychological profile in identical terms was published by *Krasnaya Zvezda*: [http://www.redstar.ru/2008/08/13\\_08/4\\_06.html](http://www.redstar.ru/2008/08/13_08/4_06.html).

<sup>32</sup> These forces officially formed part of the Collective Peacekeeping Forces of the CIS [KSPM SNG] established under the May 1994 Moscow Agreement, alongside UNOMIG, which had deployed 121 observers from 1994. Until April 2008, the deployed strength of KSPM fluctuated between 1,500 to 2,000, but between April and May swiftly rose to its maximum permissible level of 3,000.

<sup>33</sup> Not only Georgia, but the US administration, the NATO Secretary General and the EU Parliament stated that these steps were inconsistent with neutral peacekeeping. Note the observation of Charles Blandy: 'Before any movement of ground forces in [North Caucasus Military District] [...] a requirement would exist for route clearance involving sapper reconnaissance and regular culvert patrols [...]. Furthermore, roads are not up to Western European standards. Prior deployment of troops in encampments with detachments for collection and repair of vehicles... would certainly ease problems.' Blandy, *Op.Cit.*, p 4. steps and other incidents.

- *Masking and Baiting.* The Georgian state leadership, like many others, understood that military exercises have historically afforded Russia a means of camouflaging and preparing for military intervention. Commencing 15 July, *Kavkaz-2008* – officially 8,000 troops but possibly twice that many from different arms of service of the Ground Forces, naval, amphibious and airborne forces as well as Federal Border Service and MVD Internal Troops – took place across eleven areas of the Southern Federal District, the Black Sea littoral and almost all the mountain passes of the Great Caucasus Range. The exercise provided the backdrop for a deterioration of the general security situation on the South Ossetian-Georgian line of contact.<sup>34</sup> That this performance unsettled nerves in Tbilisi goes without saying.

On 4 August, the exercise officially ended. Nevertheless, exchanges of fire between South Ossetian militias and Georgian armed forces increased in intensity and scale, alarmingly so on 6 August. At least some of this appears to have taken the Georgians by surprise. The evacuation of South Ossetian civilians to the Russian Federation towards the conclusion of *Kavkaz-2008* suggests not only anticipation of a Georgian counterblow, but an element of premeditation in Tskhinvali and Moscow.<sup>35</sup> By 7 August, the fog of war had descended on Tbilisi. There was no clear picture of how many Russian units had returned to their permanent peacetime locations, how many were in transit and how many units that had departed were returning to the conflict zone. Among its many failings, the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia established after the conflict by the Council of the European Union (hereafter IIFFMCG) overlooked evidence that Russian soldiers had entered Georgian territory through the Roki tunnel already before the Georgian air and ground offensive started on 7 August 2008 at 11.35 p.m.<sup>36</sup> However, Georgia appears to have been fully aware that Russian troops unrelated to the peacekeeping units were crossing the border.

- *Lawfare.* The body of law pertaining to ‘self-defence’, ‘justified use of force’ and ‘proportionality’ sets a high bar in conditions where the techniques of employing unattributed force are well developed and the activity of militias and irregular forces defines the conflict environment. Real, as opposed to formal, lines of subordination and actual, rather than circumstantial, complicity of states in the actions of non-state entities operating under their protection is uncommonly difficult to prove according to legal

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<sup>34</sup> The intensity of fighting on 1-2 August between Georgian forces and South Ossetian militias, including exchanges of mortar fire, was assessed by the OSCE Mission in Georgia as the worst since 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Channel One Russia (2008): Transported Under Fire: Displaced from South Ossetia Arrive in Russia [*Viyvezli iz-pod ognya. V Rossiyu pribiyvayut bezhentsiy iz Yuzhnoy Osetii*], *Channel One*, 3 August 2008.

As Blandy notes, the South Ossetian leader, Eduard Kokoyty, left Tskhinvali on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> and established a military command headquarters in Dzhava. *Op Cit.*, p 7.

<sup>36</sup>Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (2009): Report, Volume 2; IIFFMCG/mpil.de; September 2009. p. 254. [www.mpil.de/files/pdf4/IIFFMCG\\_Volume\\_III.pdf](http://www.mpil.de/files/pdf4/IIFFMCG_Volume_III.pdf).

definitions.<sup>37</sup> These have not kept pace with changes in the modalities of warfare. With respect to Russian responsibility for South Ossetia's actions, the conclusion of the IIFFMCG should be noted:

"The *de facto* Ministries of Defence, Internal Affairs and Civil Defence and Emergency Situations [of South Ossetia], the State Security Committee, the State Border Protection Services and the Presidential Administration were largely staffed by Russian representatives or South Ossetians with Russian nationality who had previously worked in equivalent positions in Central Russia or in North Ossetia. *Nevertheless, all those security officials were formally subordinated to the de facto President of South Ossetia*" (author's emphasis).<sup>38</sup>

With respect to proportionality, South Ossetian militias were both resistant and indifferent to Georgia's responses between 1 and 7 August, which would have presented an impossible choice for any Georgian authority at the receiving end of unremitting and escalating provocations across its frontier. Georgia's foolhardy armed offensive in South Ossetia is not contested, though it is undeniable that it was both provoked and forewarned.

Russia has also used the war to prepare the peace. By rhetoric, as much as by bombardment and the movement of forces, Russia used every device to demonstrate that if Saakashvili did not go, he would be ousted. The military realities and atmospherics not only persuaded the Georgian government to evacuate the capital on 9 August, it persuaded the EU of the urgency of securing a peace accord. Yet in the absence of credible evidence that the storming of Tbilisi was ever seriously contemplated, one can conclude that Russia was driving its EU interlocutors to the negotiating table on its terms. The urgency with which French President Nicolas Sarkozy took over previously even-handed peace negotiations and drove through acceptance of a peace plan drafted in Moscow resulted from a false perception that Georgia could be lost altogether.

In the six-point ceasefire agreement of 12 August, Sarkozy forced a fateful concession on Tbilisi: that "awaiting an international mechanism, Russian peacekeepers shall implement additional security measures". In doing so, he gave Russia unintended licence not only to retain its troops in the disputed territories, but also to establish an 8-km 'security zone' beyond the administrative borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. A subsequent three-point agreement of 8 September mandated the 'complete withdrawal' of Russian 'peacekeeping forces' from the security zone by 10 October, as well as the deployment of 'at least 200' EU observers in 'the zones adjoining South Ossetia and Abkhazia'. But EU protests that Russia was violating the ceasefire agreement

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<sup>37</sup> According to the International Court of Justice (as summarized by the IIFFMCG), 'effective control [over the actions of irregulars and militias] *must be verified for each individual and each concrete action*' (author's emphasis). *IIFFMCG*, Vol 2, p 260.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p 261.

by occupying the two disputed regions were easily countered by reference to the explicit permission Russia had been given to do so in the ceasefire agreement.<sup>39</sup>

The Five-Day War provides two important examples of reflexive control: at the onset of the conflict and at its conclusion. It also shows how complex the undertaking can be even when the psychology of the opponent is well understood. It further demonstrates that the employment of reflexive control cannot be understood in isolation from the wider complex of measures designed to influence the perceptions and actions of an opponent.

If Russia sought to avoid all public blame for the beginning of the war, its efforts failed, and that judgment is manifestly underscored by the IIFMCG. In its second objective, the assigning of blame to Georgia, Russia manifestly succeeded. The realization of Georgian culpability at the onset of war distracted attention from Russia's breath-taking licence in its prosecution. The difficulty of 'naming an aggressor' and the resulting opportunity to apply moral equivalence eventually persuaded many NATO Allies (including the incoming Obama administration) that the war was an isolated local occurrence rather than the prelude to a more militarized and ambitious policy. These conclusions virtually ensured that the war's lessons would not be learned and that Russia's next and more ambitious exercise in 'hybrid warfare', like the war with Georgia itself, would come as a complete surprise.

#### *Ukraine 2014-17*

At the time of writing, Russia has entered a fifth year of conflict with Ukraine. The evolution of the conflict through repeated crises and nominal peace initiatives has provided Russia with a laboratory to evaluate different techniques of influence on Ukraine's friends and partners in the West.<sup>40</sup> The results have been impressive: they include not only persistent confusion and occasional panic as to Russian strategic intentions, but also – as in the case of Georgia above – the imposition of a ceasefire plan drafted in Moscow which constrains the victim, Ukraine, and allows the aggressor, Russia, continued freedom of action while in this case denying it is even a party to the conflict. This in turn leads to a perception that it is primarily Ukraine at fault for not implementing the (unfeasible) terms of the Minsk accords, which erodes international support for Russia's adversary still further.

#### *Crimea, February-March 2014*

The appearance of the so-called 'little green men' in Crimea a few days after Viktor Yanukovich was removed from office (22 February) is, with hindsight, widely taken to mark the start of Russia's covert operation to annex ('return') Crimea. In fact, Russia officially dates the start of the operation as 20 February, and intervention by Russia in non-military forms (e.g., preparatory

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<sup>39</sup> As predicted immediately after the signing of the ceasefire agreement in Advanced Research Group (2008): *The Nature of the Georgian Ceasefire*, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 13th August 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Snegovaya, M. (2015): *Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare*, Institute for the Study of War, *Russia Report I*; September 2015. p.9.

activities by the Night Wolves bikers) was discernible prior to the annexation. The aim of the covert and deniable preparations was twofold: to surprise and to prevent a coherent Ukrainian or Western response before ‘irreversible facts’ were created. These objectives had been facilitated by the progressive penetration of Ukrainian security structures and the dismantling of communications and agent networks well before these dates.

#### *Donbas, February-April 2014*

As with Crimea, the exercise of reflexive control also explains the ambiguous character and sequencing of the initial Russian interventions in Donetsk and Luhansk: First, by means of special service personnel disguised as ‘tourists’ and second, by means of larger detachments who formed and commanded local ‘militias’ (*opolchenie*). Although the first Russian-appointed ‘Defense Minister’ of the ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ stated that ‘everything would have collapsed’ without the arrival of these detachments – although only one of the initial ‘leaders’ of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics was a Ukrainian citizen – the pattern of intervention and Russian denials sustained, and still sustains, perceptions that the conflict is a civil war, rather than an irregular war financed and commanded from outside.<sup>41</sup>

Diversion also played a role. The deployment of Russian mobile battle groups on Ukraine’s borders served to focus Western minds on the hypothetical possibility of all-out invasion, and to divert attention from the real war taking place inside the country. At the operational level, the Russian military buildup along the border areas during and after the seizure of Crimea not only held Ukrainian military formations in place to counter them, but also kept the Kyiv leadership and the West in a state of confusion about the true scope and limits of Russian intentions in Ukraine. Subsequently, throughout most of 2014, the force deployed close to the Ukrainian border served as a distraction from the actual Russian operations within Ukraine. The Russian ground forces’ movements to and from the border kept Western governments and intelligence agencies in a perpetual state of speculation on the likelihood of a full-scale invasion, and served as a reliable implement to dial up or down the pressure on Western and Ukrainian decision-making by augmenting or depleting the forces in apparent readiness to invade. In this case, the actual capability of those troops was irrelevant.<sup>42</sup>

#### *Minsk I and II, September 2014 / February 2015*

Russia’s combined arms offensives of August 2014 and January 2015 introduced a dramatically new dynamic into the conflict. They represented escalations of information war as much as war-fighting. The January offensive formed the backdrop to threats delivered by Putin personally to German Chancellor Angela Merkel to escalate the conflict to unspecified levels if his demands were not met. Despite her singular resistance up to this point, a key part of Merkel’s cognitive

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<sup>41</sup> BBC Russian Service (2014): Strelkov Said that It Was He Who Began the War in Ukraine (Strelkov Soobshchil, Chto Eto On Nachal Voynu Na Ukraine), *BBC Russian Service*, 20 November 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Keir Giles, “Russia’s Toolkit”, in *The Russian Challenge*, London: Chatham House, 2015, p. 46.

‘filter’ was abhorrence of conventional war, let alone nuclear war in Europe, and Putin exploited this sensitivity to the full.<sup>43</sup> In other words, he used a combination of inputs and knowledge of the psychological trigger points of his adversary to exercise reflexive control over her actions (and those of French President François Hollande). The first consequence was the flawed and hastily arranged Package of Measures for Implementation of the Minsk Accords (Minsk II). The second was the decision to link sanctions, (hitherto tied to the return of Donbas to Ukraine), to the implementation of Minsk, which does not stipulate its return but only points to its ‘special status’ and hence meets Russian objectives entirely. The third was the ‘Normandy process’, which continues to this day despite Russia’s failure to honor any of the Minsk II provisions.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Maryinka, June 2015*

The fact that this brigade level offensive by Russian-commanded forces was repulsed was incidental to its purpose. The more straightforward purpose was reflexive control: provoking Ukraine into redeploying heavy weaponry from the demarcation line set by the Minsk accord to the combat zone. The more significant but less straightforward aspect, as Ukraine’s military commanders understood, was *razvedka boem*: establishing the speed with which this deployment could be affected. Maryinka constitutes a model (but not singular) example of the synergy between reflexive control and *razvedka boem* at the higher tactical level.

#### *Crimea war scare, August 2016*

A sharp engagement between a Ukrainian border contingent and armed smugglers from Crimea triggered a mobilization of Russian forces and a two-week war scare. This incident could have developed the exercise of reflexive control against two very different audiences: First, Ukraine’s armed forces, who instead chose wisely not to respond with reciprocal measures and therefore avoided escalation of the conflict; and second, Western leaders on the eve of the G20 summit in Hangzhou, who might have been intimidated into further concessions to Russia had the escalation taken place.

#### *Syria, the West and Turkey 2015-16*

Russia’s intervention in Syria in September 2015 was as much the product of urgency (the potential fall of Assad) as opportunity. It was an ambitious step, that relied on a fortuitous combination of timing and circumstance. Had Crimea still been under Ukrainian jurisdiction, Russia might not have had the confidence to undertake the operation at all.

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<sup>43</sup> Already, Putin had issued similar threats to EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso. The Kremlin’s furious reaction when he publicized the comments suggests that their purpose was intimidation rather than propaganda. See: CBS News (2014): Leaked Putin Comment on Ukraine Spurs Diplomatic Showdown, *CBS News*, 2 September 2014. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/leaked-putin-remarks-on-ukraine-enrage-russia>.

<sup>44</sup> Sherr, James (2017): Geopolitics and Security. In Lough, John et al., *The Struggle for Ukraine*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House; 18 October 2017. pp. 11-13. <https://reader.chathamhouse.org/struggle-for-ukraine#>.

Despite the multiplicity and tenacity of Assad's internal opponents, the most problematic factor for Russia has been the external players: The West (loosely speaking) and Turkey, which by any standards is a determinant regional actor with high stakes in the conflict's course and outcome. For Russia, the parrying of these challenges and management of others (notably the war in Ukraine) have made inescapable various forms of *kombinatsiya*, in which diversion, reflexive control and *razvedka boem* play a necessary part.

More than once in this conflict, the aim of diversion, 'to divert the attention of the enemy and divide his forces' has been met by third parties – not necessarily acting in connivance with Russia. The November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris presented just such an opportunity with respect to François Hollande, just as fourteen years earlier Putin had used the attack on the Twin Towers to make common cause with George Bush and reduce the significance of Chechnya and the Caucasus in US thinking. Hollande's calls for the revival of a 'grand coalition' with Russia not only diverted his attention from Syria, but from the war in Donbas less than a month after he and Merkel had toughened the West's stance. Within days of Hollande's speech, fighting in Donbas sharply escalated – there was no French response.

At the time Russia's expeditionary deployment got under way in Syria, Erdogan's Turkey was resolved to aid the portion of Assad's opponents it could influence. This automatically placed it in an adversarial relationship with Russia. Repeated overflights of Turkish territory in defiance of multiple warnings led on 24 November to the downing of a Russian Su-24M by a Turkish fighter jet. In view of the persistence of these overflights and the fact that Russia had been targeting the very Turkmen tribes that Turkey had been supporting, it is difficult to imagine that Russia was not testing reactions (*razvedka boem*), and provoking a response (reflexive control) in addition to pursuing immediate operational objectives.

It is equally difficult to imagine that Russia did not draw conclusions from NATO's conspicuously *pro forma* declaration of support for Turkey, the elaborately even-handed responses of Obama and Hollande, and especially from Washington's failure to postpone the scheduled withdrawal of a US air defense component from Turkey in the wake of the incident.<sup>45</sup> After much noisy talk of war with Turkey, two major terrorist attacks in Istanbul changed the conversation. In June 2016, Erdogan formally apologized to Putin, and relations embarked upon a different trajectory, one which was greatly more favorable to Russia.

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<sup>45</sup> Stoltenberg, Jens (2015): Statement by the NATO Secretary General After the Extraordinary NAC Meeting, NATO.int; 24 November 2015. [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_125052.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_125052.htm). And see: CNN (2015): Obama: 'Turkey Has the Right to Defend Itself and its Airspace', *CNN.com*; 24 November 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/24/politics/obama-francois-hollande-white-house-meeting/>; and also: BBC (2015): US Urges Turkey and Russia to End Row Over Downed Plane, *BBC.com*, 1 December 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34974409>; and also: RT (2015): Obama, Hollande Call on Turkey and Russia to Prevent Escalation After Jet Downing; *RT.com*; 24 November 2015. <https://www.rt.com/usa/323324-hollande-obama-isis-terrorism/>.

The factors that led President Erdogan to change course regarding Russia are diverse and cannot be attributed to Russian policy alone, though they provide further illustration of Russia's means of acting upon events. They also illustrate its long-standing determination to make use of unexpected opportunity as well as the vulnerabilities of its opponents.

## **Further Examples**

### *Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons*

Russia has repeatedly implied that tactical nuclear weapons might be used against NATO states in the event of conflict. Moscow capitalizes on the prospect that this is highly alarming for Western leaders. Within this overall atmosphere of apprehension, Russia cultivates its image as an irresponsible actor in order to increase the credibility of the nuclear threat. It also actively disseminates the highly dangerous argument that the best way to respond to Russian nuclear posturing is to withdraw the last remaining non-strategic nuclear weapons from Western Europe.<sup>46</sup> In this way, counter-intuitively, Russia creates a mindset where abolishing a significant deterrent at the West's disposal is presented as a rational response to Russian behavior.

### *Air and Sea Incidents*

Russia consistently contrives situations where it can present itself as a solution to a problem rather than the cause of it. One such is the pattern of unsafe behavior by Russian aircraft interacting with the air and maritime assets of NATO and other nations. Russia offers as the solution consultations and negotiations on new binding agreements on air and sea encounters. This finds a receptive audience among politicians alarmed at the potential for conflict, who overlook the fact that agreements and international regulations have been in place for decades and that Russia is non-compliant. This campaign leads to a range of outcomes beneficial to Russia. The perception is created that normal air and sea operations by NATO nations in the vicinity of Russia are dangerous and provocative and could lead to a serious incident, which will generate pressure by uninformed or Russia-friendly politicians and decision-makers to halt these operations, thereby compromising friendly training and intelligence gathering. In addition, NATO nations are faced with no good choices when responding to Russian calls for talks on reducing the number of incidents. If they agree, they legitimize Russian behavior, at best are entangled in unproductive negotiations with Russia, and at worst arrive at a new bilateral or international agreement shifting the regulatory framework in Russia's favor. If they refuse, this contributes to the broader Russian campaign to present Western countries as uncooperative and obstructive, for failing to entertain Russian offers of friendship and constructive cooperation.

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<sup>46</sup> As repeated in Wilton Park (2015): Rethinking Deterrence and Assurance, Wilton Park Conference Report, Wilton Park.org; 10–13 June 2015. <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/event/wp1401/>. See also continued debate on the renewal of nuclear sharing in NATO and dual-capable aircraft in Europe, especially Germany.

### *Moscow 1993*

According to Timothy Thomas, during the temporary occupation of the Russian White House by members of Parliament in October 1993 the Russian military employed reflexive control to remove the parliamentarians and their supporters from the building. Key figures within the White House had refused to leave the building, even to address their supporters who had surrounded it, probably because the Russian security police (MVD) or regular police were also in the crowd and might try to overpower them. Therefore, the security services developed a reflexive control plan. On the day of an immense demonstration in support of the White House's occupiers, the police permitted one of their communication posts to be overrun by the protestors. At the same time, the military authorities broadcast messages that would be intercepted in this communications post, simulating a conversation between two high ranking Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) officers discussing the imminent storming of the White House. The two officers discussed details of the 'operation', which they implied was an attack designed to clear the occupants out of the building. One of the officers said repeatedly, "No matter what, get the Chechen. Kill him if you have to." 'The Chechen' was a clear reference was to Ruslan Khasbulatov, the speaker of the Parliament and one of two key figures in the occupation (the other being former Vice President Alexander Rutskoi). Within a few minutes of receiving this information, both Khasbulatov and Rutskoi emerged on the White House's balcony and asked the crowd to go instead to the Ostankino TV station and capture it. President Boris Yeltsin now had a *raison d'être* to act against both Khasbulatov and Rutskoi based on the latter's incitement of mass disorder.<sup>47</sup>

### *Chechnya 1999*

Charles Blandy describes preparations for Russian military intervention in Chechnya as an instance of reflexive control. It should be noted that the entire pretext for the intervention – an attack on neighboring Dagestan by Chechen jihadist groups – has been alleged to have been staged by the authorities in Moscow. The lead-up to the move into Chechnya by the Russian Combined Group of Federal Forces (OGV) was accompanied by intense speculation in Chechnya and throughout Russia as to the federal authorities' intentions. This resulted from use of reflexive control to create false perceptions, misconceptions and doubts about the location, direction and aims of federal forces throughout the period of the military build-up. The outcome was to complicate Chechen preparations for resistance, to pre-empt domestic protest (the bruising first Chechen war five years before was still fresh in Russian minds), and to divert and confuse overseas objections to the impending invasion.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas, Timothy L. (2004): Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Volume 17; 2004. pp. 252-3.

<sup>48</sup> Blandy, Charles W. (2001): *Chechnya: Federal Retribution. Encirclement, Forceful Intervention and Isolation*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, March 2001.

### *Netherlands 2016*

The Dutch referendum held on the Ukrainian EU Association Agreement in April 2016 was marked by public confusion and dismay over relations with eastern Europe and Russia in the aftermath of the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 which killed 193 Dutch nationals. Voters were skillfully orchestrated from the Kremlin to deceptively link a range of unrelated issues to the vote. The outcome was to guide Dutch voters to incorrectly connect rising security threats, immigration, and unemployment in the European Union with the prospect of a commercial treaty with Ukraine.

## **False Positives**

Exercise of reflexive control involves a combination or sequence of different influences, actions and dynamics. As such, any one of these elements in isolation cannot properly be labelled as reflexive control. Use of disinformation or straightforward deception by Russia is a case in point. The following cases have been repeatedly cited to the authors in academic discussions, at conferences, in research group meetings as well as in private correspondence as instances of reflexive control. In each case, they are single actions and do not satisfy the key criterion of involving a complex *kombinatsiya* of inputs to induce the adversary to adopt a specific course of action.

### *Russian information operations directed at public opinion during the armed conflict with Georgia in 2008*

According to Timothy Thomas,

"The Russian information warfare campaign was a clear example of reflexive control to shape perceptions of public opinion prior to their military operations in South Ossetia and Russia used proven media techniques: (1) one-sidedness of information; (2) information blockade; (3) disinformation; (4) silence over events inconvenient for Russia; (5) 'cherry picking' of eyewitnesses and Georgians that criticized their government; (6) denial of collateral damage and (7) Russian versions of town names in the regions to suggest the motherland relation."<sup>49</sup>

All this is true, and all of this serves as a precursor for similar operations six years later around the conflict with Ukraine. And yet, unlike the specific strategic and military measures against Georgia described above, they represent simple principles of 'winning the information war' in

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas, Timothy L. (2011): *Recasting the Red Star: Russia Forges Tradition and Technology Through Toughness*, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, 2011. p. 157.

Georgia and the rest of the world, rather than elements in a complex campaign intended to cause the Georgian leadership to act in a specific way.

### *The “Lisa Case” in Germany in 2016*

On January 16, 2016, Russian media and officials created public hysteria and a diplomatic fracas in Germany over the alleged rape of a 13-year-old Russian immigrant ‘Lisa’ by a Middle Eastern migrant. The 13-year-old was real, but the incident was fictitious. The public outcry generated by the Russian intervention inflamed German opinion, already deeply ambivalent over the mass arrival of migrants into the country. As a result, Chancellor Angela Merkel’s waning public support plunged further. Despite the fact that the Russian information campaign took the form of varying inputs from news reporting to hostile comment by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, this was a case of Russia furthering its objective of dividing European societies rather than to bring about a specific German government decision.<sup>50</sup>

### *Straw men*

In other incidents, Russia successfully (even if only temporarily) avoids repercussions for hostile actions by employing deception to shift the blame elsewhere. Instances of this technique include the cyber-attack on French TV network TV5 Monde (blamed on jihadists), the release of e-mails from the Democratic National Congress during the 2016 US election (blamed on a Romanian hacker), and the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 (blamed on more or less anybody, but primarily Ukrainians). In each case, Russia does succeed in influencing responses by other actors, and as such, the campaigns resemble reflexive control. However, these do not count as targeted campaigns aimed at specific decision makers with a distinct outcome in mind other than creating confusion in order to escape accusation and countermeasures.<sup>51</sup>

### *Distraction tactics*

On August 5, 2014, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that Russia was going to organize “an international humanitarian mission for the southeast of Ukraine.” Almost the entire Russia-watching foreign media, and a substantial proportion of the Western diplomatic corps in Moscow, watched the progress of the resulting convoy toward Ukraine and focused on the potential for conflict once it reached the border. This allowed Russia to prepare and launch its mid-August cross-border offensive into Ukraine practically unnoticed. This was a highly

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<sup>50</sup> We point out though that some researchers do see the Lisa case as part of a larger Russian effort to get rid of EU sanctions against Russia by targeting their strongest proponent, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and building political pressure up against the Chancellor. In this case, Russian representatives – including the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov – claimed a cover-up by the German government and law enforcement agencies of the incident and of the actual number of refugees in the country. The Lisa case can therefore also be seen as contributing to the larger Russian effort to delegitimize the current German government to achieve sanctions relief.

<sup>51</sup> For a detailed discussion of these and other campaigns, see Eronen, Pasi (2016): *Russian Hybrid Warfare: How to Confront a New Challenge to the West*, Centre on Sanctions and Illicit Finance; June 2016. p. 13.

successful disinformation operation with no positive decisions induced in the Ukrainian side, and constituted sleight of hand rather than reflexive control.<sup>52</sup>

### **Lessons from cases of RC**

In Georgia in 2008, and in Ukraine in 2014, Russia succeeded briefly in preventing Western powers from assessing correctly what was happening and for a much longer period succeeded in preventing a unified, coherent and effective response to the crises. Another principle that is common to both these conflicts, and to Russia's intervention in Syria, is the critical importance for Russia of swift and effective movement to create physical presence and leave the rest of the world dealing with a *fait accompli*. In this context, another essential element in Russia's success is distorting the perception by other powers both of the sequence of events and of the time available for preparing and implementing an effective response.

Reflexive control can play a key role in ensuring the success of future Russian hostile action, whether in the military domain or by some other means of achieving Russian strategic or geopolitical aims. In some cases, it may be sufficient not to lead the adversary to a specific decision favorable to Russia, but simply to induce paralysis. Mixed messages, widespread disinformation and perception management can persuade adversary governments that the best course of action is to do nothing, as there is no basis for certainty that any given course of action could be the right one. In the circumstances of the armed conflicts listed above, this hands Russia victory.

As noted above, disinformation in itself does not constitute reflexive control, but it is a common element to it. Nations seeking to resist pernicious Russian influence face the challenge of pervasive and highly effective disinformation campaigns, facilitated by a conducive media and social media ecosystem and (often) liberal democracies that wish to preserve core values such as freedom of expression. They are also constrained by an international political and legal construct that has failed to keep pace with developments in the nature of warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both proxies (non-state and quasi-state entities for grey zone operations) and actions in the cognitive domain (which are undeniably hostile but not technically illegal) demonstrate the difficulty of countering Russian campaigns designed to exploit the gaps between Western concepts of operations and siloed areas of activity. While the United States has identified a substantial Russian offensive against the 2016 presidential election using social media, the investigation has, as of the date of this publication, not reached its conclusion. Though indictments against Russian

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<sup>52</sup> Pynnöniemi, Katri (2016): Metanarratives of Russian Strategic Deception, in Pynnöniemi, Katri/ Rácz, András (eds.) Fog of Falsehood: Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine, Finnish Institute of Foreign Affairs, Issue 45; May 2016. p. 79. <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/3b39efa7-cafe-4794-8d62-0279242c421e>. On this and other Russian disinformation efforts in Ukraine, see Lucas, Edward/ Pomerantsev, Peter (2016): Winning the Information War, CEPA Information Warfare Initiative; August 2016. p. 16. <http://infowar.cepa.org/Winning-the-Information-War>.

nationals were issued in 2018, the alleged perpetrators may never be arrested as there is no means to extradite them. The campaign of subversion waged through Facebook was not only entirely legal, but did not even contravene Facebook's own acceptable use policies at the time.

While policy, regulation, countermeasures and doctrine evolve to meet the new challenges emerging from Russia, the most important tools available to Western democracies to counter them are threat perception and situational awareness. Reflexive control, like other Russian activities intended to subvert and weaken adversaries, relies on a lack of awareness. It has been repeatedly noted that the substantial progress made by frontline states Finland, Sweden and Estonia in containing Russian influence was facilitated by early public recognition of the problem by senior leaders and empowering government, society and media to take countermeasures. The same recognition and public acknowledgement of the threat should be the first step for any other nation or community under cognitive threat from Russia.

## How Russia exploits social media for Reflexive Control

The history of the concept of reflexive control – as it is referred to in this chapter on Russian social media exploitation for RC – stems from work performed by Vladimir Lefebvre from 1963 to 1967 in the Soviet Union. Following the publication of two seminal works *Conflicting Structures*<sup>53</sup> and *The Algebra of Conflict*,<sup>54</sup> Lefebvre's work became the object of a classified report by the KGB in 1968, alleges Diane Chotikul from<sup>55</sup> Lefebvre's (1984) own work entitled *Reflexive Control: The Soviet Concept of Influencing an Adversary's Decision-Making Process*.<sup>56</sup> Lefebvre 'arrived' in the United States in 1974.<sup>57</sup> This information seems important in light of Chotikul's assertions<sup>58</sup> that successful reflexive control processes are based on Soviet (and now Russian) ethical legacies which are vastly different from that of the 'Christian' West, and that Russians have a particular understanding of what constitutes 'truth'. According to Chotikul, the concept of *vranyo* (вранью) concerns the "dissemination of untruths which have some grounding in reality."<sup>59</sup>

### What is Social Media?

Despite social media use being omnipresent today, there is no agreed upon definition of what it actually is and what online services belong to it. Traditionally, social networking services like Facebook, Myspace and LinkedIn were primarily seen as social media services. When discussing social media exploitation for RC, it is essential to agree on what social media actually is and which social media services and providers are potentially exploited for RC campaigns. The current Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) psychological operations (PSYOPS) doctrine does not define social media, nor does it even mention social media.<sup>60</sup> Published in 2004, the only mention of 'internet' is as a 'reach back capability'. The Department of National Defence (DND)

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<sup>53</sup> Lefebvre, Vladimir A./ trans. Lebevre, Victorina D. (2015): *Conflicting Structures*, English Edition from Original Russian 1<sup>st</sup> Edition of 1967 and 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of 1973, Leaf & Oaks, Los Angeles.

<sup>54</sup> Lefebvre, Vladimir A. (1968): *Algebra Konfliktka* [The Algebra of Conflict], Amazon.com.

<sup>55</sup> Chotikul, Diane (1986): *The Soviet Theory of Reflexive Control in Historical and Psychocultural Perspective: A Preliminary Study*, C3CM Joint Test Force, pp. 89-91; July 1986. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3901091-Diane-Chotikul-The-Soviet-Theory-of-Reflexive.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Lefebvre, Vladimir A./ trans. Lefebvre, Victorina D. (1984): *Reflexive Control: The Soviet Concept of Influencing an Adversary's Decision Making Process*, Science Applications, 1984.

<sup>57</sup> Library of Educational and Science Literature (undated): *Biography of Vladimir Alexandrovich Lefebvre*, sbiblio.com; undated. <http://sbiblio.com/biblio/persons.aspx?id=987>.

<sup>58</sup> Chotikul, Diane (1986): *The Soviet Theory of Reflexive Control in Historical and Psychocultural Perspective: A Preliminary Study*, C3CM Joint Test Force, pp. 23-25; July 1986. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3901091-Diane-Chotikul-The-Soviet-Theory-of-Reflexive.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Chotikul, Diane (1986): *The Soviet Theory of Reflexive Control in Historical and Psychocultural Perspective: A Preliminary Study*, C3CM Joint Test Force, pp. 66-67; July 1986. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3901091-Diane-Chotikul-The-Soviet-Theory-of-Reflexive.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Department of National Defence (2014): B-GJ-005-313/FP-001 Canadian Forces Joint Psychological Operations. Joint Doctrine Manual. 15 January 2004. [https://www.psywar.org/psywar/reproductions/CF\\_Psychological\\_Operations\\_Joint\\_Doctrine.pdf](https://www.psywar.org/psywar/reproductions/CF_Psychological_Operations_Joint_Doctrine.pdf)

and CAF Policy on Joint Information Operations – from April 2018 – does refer to social media as indicated below:

“ [...] capabilities and activities can be offensive or defensive in nature and the extent of use is only limited by imagination and availability within policy and legal guidelines...this includes activities on social media and SMS platforms. Particular attention is to be paid to these types of emerging electronic platforms which can be used in the conduct of Info Ops of differing purposes. For example, social media may be used concurrently by Cyber Operations for technical exploitation, PSYOPS for influencing and PA for informing, all of which need coordination.”<sup>61</sup>

NATO, in its guidelines on social media use within Allied Command Operation’s (ACO) organization, describes social media as “designed for dissemination through social interaction using internet- and web-based technologies to transform broadcast media monologues (one-to-many) into social media dialogues (many-to-many).”<sup>62</sup>

The European Union (EU) – the target of constant Russian RC campaigns – provides further detail when defining social media as “online technologies and practices to share content, opinions and information prompting discussion and building relationships. Social media services and tools involve a combination of technology, telecommunications and social interaction. They can use a variety of formats, including text, pictures, audio and video.”<sup>63</sup>

The definition Christian Bell developed specifically with a focus on social media from an influence capability perspective appears most helpful: “Social media refers to internet-based platforms and software used to collect, store, aggregate, share, process, discuss, or deliver user-generated and general media content, that can influence awareness, perception, acceptance, and can promote behavior indirectly as a means of interaction”.<sup>64</sup> This chapter modifies Christian Bell’s definition of social media to include the marketing aspect of social media (for which platforms like Facebook were primarily created) to the following working definition of social media:

Social media are internet-based platforms created for influencing, marketing, collecting, storing, aggregating, sharing, processing, discussing and delivering user-generated content, which can influence awareness, perception, acceptance and actions, and promote behavior.

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<sup>61</sup> Department of National Defence (2018): Policy on Joint Information Operations (INFO OPS), 3 April 2018.

<sup>62</sup> NATO (2009): ACO Directive 95-3: Social Media. December 2009. <http://www.aco.nato.int/page300303028.aspx>.

<sup>63</sup> European Commission (2013): Communicating with the Outside World – Guidelines for All Staff on the Use of Social Media. [http://ec.europa.eu/ipp/docs/guidelines\\_social\\_media\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/ipp/docs/guidelines_social_media_en.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> Bell, Christian (2016): Use of Social Media as an Effector, Multinational Capability Development Campaign, Zentrum für Operative Kommunikation der Bundeswehr, Mayen.

There are at least 200 different social media platforms that vary based on what services they offer. Examples for platform types and providers are:<sup>65</sup>

Platform type	Providers
Social networks	Facebook, VKontakte, WeChat, LinkedIn, Xing, QQ, Google+ myspace
Video content	YouTube, Vimeo, Youku, Periscope, Facebook Live
Picture content	Instagram, Tumblr, Flickr, Snapfish, Snapchat, Pinterest
Book content	Goodreads, WeRead, Audible
Training content	Strava, Polar Flow, Garmin Connect, <sup>66</sup> KeepFitness
Instant messaging	Facebook messenger, WhatsApp, Telegram, Skype, Signal, Viber
Blogs	WordPress, Blogspot, SquareSpace, LiveJournal
Micro-blogging	Twitter, Friendfeed, Twitpic, Weibo, Qzone
Analytics tools	Klout, Socialmention, Geofeedia, Audiense, TweetReach
Crowd-sourcing	InnoCentive, iStockPhoto, GoFundMe, Kickstarter, IndieGo, Patreon
Location services	Foursquare, TripAdvisor, Yelp, Tinder, Grindr

The above table only contains a fraction of the existing sites. Social media sites generally have short life cycles. The exception is Facebook that has existed – although in a vastly altered form – since 2004. New forms emerge frequently making it difficult to identify all possible social media sites that could be relevant for identifying adversary RC campaigns particularly as some sites are only used in very limited regions. Generally, it has to be assumed that adversaries such as Russia, China, Iran and North Korea are exploiting all social media platforms that are of relevance to their target audience. The concept of social media in this chapter specifically refers to internet platforms most used by Russia for RC campaigns such as LiveJournal, Facebook, VKontakte, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, as well as blogs where interaction among content publishers and audiences happen online.<sup>67</sup> As part of larger social media campaigns, the use of e-mail and other online content are drivers of what Miah Hammond-Errey calls “amplification and automation”.<sup>68</sup> In a wider sense, they must also be factored in as they are often used to complement Russian social media campaigns. The vast majority of influence operations, however, is directed through social media. While Russian RC campaigns never contain only social media operations, it appears as if social media is lately the main channel through which RC campaigns are implemented. However, further online activities like hacking of websites also

<sup>65</sup> This table is inspired by (but adds additional platform types and providers): Bell, Christian (2016): Use of Social Media as an Effector, Multinational Capability Development Campaign, Zentrum fur Operative Kommunikation der Bundeswehr, Mayen.

<sup>66</sup> Both Polar Flow and Garmin Connect have different primary functions (analysis of training data) but offer social media services to connect with other athletes, share pictures and competition or training results or simply to communicate with others through the platform.

<sup>67</sup> Darczewska, Jolanta (2014): The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, a Case Study. Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW): Point of View #42, Warsaw, p. 26; May 2014.

<sup>68</sup> Hammond-Errey, Miah (2017): A Perpetual Conflict of Ideas, *The Strategy Bridge*; 28 September 2017. [https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2017/9/28/a-perpetual-conflict-of-ideas#\\_ftn2](https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2017/9/28/a-perpetual-conflict-of-ideas#_ftn2).

play crucial roles. Due to the role of social media as the recently most relevant channel for Russian RC operations to influence the perceptions of entire populations of countries, this chapter focuses on examples of social media exploitation for RC campaigns.

While the concept of RC has existed at least since the 1960s, social media has made RC operations much more effective, cheaper and feasible while enabling full deniability. There can be no doubt that social media is the technology that has revolutionized the Russian implementation of RC operations most in the past decade. Finally, while social media significantly eases the implementation of RC operations, it also makes RC operations more vulnerable. Each of the examples of social media exploitation for RC discussed below is also a potential avenue to identify RC campaigns and introduce effective and simple countermeasures.

### Spreading Narratives

Darczewska alleges that Kremlin ideologue Aleksandr Dugin used the netwar portal *rossia3.ru* to instruct readers and sympathizers in how to behave with ‘internal enemies’ (pro-West, anti-Putin activists) on 10 March 2014, coinciding with the annexation of Crimea.<sup>69</sup> In his post, he argues that there are two camps within Russian society: the patriotic camp (Putin, the people and himself), and the liberal-Western camp. He forcefully suggests a counter-narrative for Russians to develop resilience to Western ideas that Russian actions in Crimea are illegal. Thus, he instructs calls for Russians to being “nationalists, communists or Soviet” to be answered by “US agents of influence, and the fifth column.”<sup>70</sup> This is one of many cases where social media is used as a cheap, fast and simple method to reach and influence target audiences by spreading narratives where they already regularly and voluntarily spend time, to obtain information, meet with friends and find entertainment. Social media is a natural environment that target audiences configure themselves, to their own preferences, thereby communicating directly – unintentionally – how they most like to be influenced and with which content, through their own shares, likes or retweets.<sup>71</sup>

### Smear campaigns/character assassination

An example of character assassination is the infamous case of actor Morgan Freeman, who publicly called for an investigation into allegations of Russian meddling in US elections, and

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<sup>69</sup> Darczewska, Jolanta (2014): *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, a Case Study*. Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW): Point of View #42, Warsaw, p. 26; May 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Darczewska, Jolanta (2014): *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, a Case Study*. Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW): Point of View #42, Warsaw, p. 27; May 2014.

<sup>71</sup> Vaidhyanathan, Siva (2018): *Antisocial Media*. Oxford University Press, New York.

collusion with Donald Trump.<sup>72</sup> Within a day of the Kremlin spokesman's retaliatory tirade against the actor's 19 September video going live, an army of troll agents began producing anti-Freeman tweets and social media material. Synovitz suggests this is designed to create not only an unpleasant atmosphere for the target, but also to raise doubt within the target audience about the trustworthiness of the target and his statements. The US Committee to Investigate Russia<sup>73</sup> became the target of pro-Kremlin and pro-Russia social media messaging immediately after the Freeman video went public, with memes on YouTube and Facebook that attacked the credibility of the actor following closely behind. Social media here again offers not only an effective, fast and cheap influence capability, it also enables complete deniability for the Kremlin.

### Testing of narratives

Social media is also a testing chamber for the Kremlin to vet how potential narratives, that could be used for RC campaigns, resonate with target audiences. For this testing, the Kremlin sets up groups containing members of different target audiences with specific political leanings that it can then use to test how well narratives are received and if they resonate sufficiently to have an effect. Once a narrative is introduced to social media, it is easy to identify how often a narrative was shared, and how many people commented on it or otherwise engaged in the content. For example, the simplest way of comparing how well narratives resonate is to use 'likes' as a form of 'upvotes' or an approximate measure for narrative resonance.<sup>74</sup> Due to the easy manipulation of feedback on social media, there are limits to the reliability of any testing of narratives.

### Constructing credibility of influencers

Credibility and, therefore, the legitimacy of commentators supporting the Kremlin agenda – such as Alexander Dugin – is often partially fabricated by claiming false academic credentials of individuals on networks of websites. These posts are then used to cross-reference each other to create the impression of a credible source due to the various other references to the author that have been set up online for this purpose. Social media is thereby used to design echo chambers<sup>75</sup> to enhance the credibility of actors with target audiences that are targeted in RC campaigns. The more credible actors appear to a target audience, the more influence they will be able to assert on

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<sup>72</sup> Synovitz, Ron (2017): NATO Adviser Says Morgan Freeman May Be Russian Troll Target After Calling Out Putin, *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*; 21 September 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-morgan-freeman-troll-target-putin/28749400.html>

<sup>73</sup> Not to be confused with the Special Counsel Investigation aka the Mueller Investigation. It is a group of private citizens, journalists and former government officials. See: Johnson, Ted (2017): Rob Reiner Helps Launch Committee to Investigate Russia, *Variety*, 19 September 2017. <https://variety.com/2017/politics/news/rob-reiner-david-frum-committee-to-investigate-russia-1202563293/>.

<sup>74</sup> Wang, Tony/Chen, Ping/Li Boyang (2017): Predicting the Quality of Short Narratives from Social Media, Proceedings of the Twent-Sixth International Joint Conference on Artificial Intelligence. <https://www.ijcai.org/proceedings/2017/0539.pdf>

<sup>75</sup> Echo chambers here means a system of websites or social media posts that reference each other creating the impression of legitimate popularity of content or content distributors.

their world view. These previously created references are then cross-referenced through tweets and reposting on all social media sites that are of relevance to the target audience and then complemented with references in traditional media. Dugin creates discussion groups specifically for this purpose. The networks are used to provide dedicated actors with ‘street credibility’ in the form of trust in target audiences which enables them to become key actors in the spreading of narratives for propaganda.<sup>76</sup>

### Undermining credibility of adversaries

Just as social media is exploited by Russia to build the credibility of selected actors, it can be used to undermine the authenticity of voices that are unfavorable to an RC campaign or even directly diminish the credibility of an opponent. Well before the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, Russian online media claimed that not only Georgia’s leadership, but also that of the other South Caucasus countries, were preparing an ‘Orange Revolution’ by seeking to retake disputed territories in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria. In 2005, Mikheil Saakashvili, the newly-installed leader of Georgia, was the target of an article in *Voenna Promishlennyyi Kurier* (VPK) where his operational and strategic intentions were clearly outlined, and strongly resembled how the Russia-Georgia war started three years later.<sup>77</sup> This was part of a larger influence campaign that helped prepare the target audience for eventual follow-on narratives.<sup>78</sup> It was also part of a larger provocation operation initiated by Russia. Interestingly, all countries of the GUAM (Georgia-Ukraine-Armenia-Moldova) association were targeted by the article, and Russia has been able to justify, one way or another, intervention in each of them within ten years of the Matveev article.

Another example of social media exploitation for undermining the credibility of adversaries is the *Argumenti I Fakty* (AIF) production of an online post instructing readers to make fun of Saakashvili eating his tie.<sup>79</sup> This episode became a ten-year running joke for *Russia Today* (now *RT*), which posted on its YouTube channel the adventures of the beleaguered ex-president up to his rooftop chase in Kyiv in 2017.<sup>80</sup> As a result of such coverage, Saakashvili’s hopes to one day become President of Ukraine are systematically undermined.

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<sup>76</sup> Darczewska, Jolanta (2014): *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, a Case Study*. Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW): Point of View #42, Warsaw, pp. 28-29; May 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Matveev, Aleksei (2005): ‘Orangeviy Revansh’ Dlya Nepokornikh Avtonomii, *Voenna Promishlennyyi Kurier* Volume 26, No. 93, 20-26 July 2005. pp. 1,3. [www.vpk-news.ru](http://www.vpk-news.ru).

<sup>78</sup> Amashukeli, Tamar (2011): *The Russian Media and Russia’s Military Intervention in Georgia in 2008*. Master’s Thesis, Manuela Nilsson, Phd, Sup. Växjö, Sweden: Linnaeus University, 2011.

<sup>79</sup> AIF (2008): Laugh at Saakashvili! Laughter Destroys Dictators!; *AIF.ru*; 8 August 2008. <http://www.aif.ru/society/5373>.

<sup>80</sup> RT (2017): Saakashvili's Ups & Downs: From Eating Tie to Kiev Rooftop, *RT YouTube Channel*; 5 December 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQhXE9hrwuc>.

There can be no doubt that social media is uniquely capable to facilitate in a key component of Russian RC, the targeting of entire populations, as it reaches targets in their natural environment. Social media can directly introduce very large numbers of people – even entire populations – to narratives that might lead to the reconsideration of their support for their government. The US successfully weakened support for ISIS by spreading images of ISIS atrocities on social media.<sup>81</sup> The effect of social media for influencing public support of the adversary is twofold. First, the target audience becomes aware of adversary activities from an angle it may not otherwise be subject to, which can lead to doubts about the legitimacy of an actor or government,<sup>82</sup> potentially weakening public support for the opponent.<sup>83</sup> Secondly, social media campaigns signal to target audiences that the information space is not owned by the adversary alone. A social media campaign can give dissenting voices encouragement for their own activities against the adversary government, thereby strengthening RC campaigns.

Another example of the use of social media to undermine adversary credibility – likely in the form of RC campaigns – is Russia’s worldwide campaign to undermine support of governments the Kremlin would like to see replaced.<sup>84</sup> As part of this campaign, Russia disseminates propaganda to Russian speakers – among many other countries - in the Baltics, Ukraine, and other nearby states through a variety of means, including social media. It uses this messaging to sow dissent against host and neighboring governments, as well as against NATO and the EU.<sup>85</sup> Russia has also used social media to promote a narrative throughout the global Russian diaspora indicating that the insurgency it supports in Eastern Ukraine is a response to an all-out war against the Russian population of Eastern Ukraine.<sup>86</sup> Russian bot networks have also used social media to undermine public support in the West for interventions against the Assad government in

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<sup>81</sup> Helmus, Todd C./ Bodine-Baron, Elizabeth/ Magnuson, Madeline/ Mendelsohn, Joshua/ Marcellino, William/ Bega, Andriy/ Winkelman, Zev (2016): Examining ISIS Support and Opposition Networks on Twitter, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica; 2018. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2200/RR2237/RAND\\_RR2237.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2200/RR2237/RAND_RR2237.pdf).

<sup>82</sup> Zeitzoff, Thomas (2018): Does Social Media Influence Conflict? Evidence from the 2012 Gaza Conflict, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Volume 62, Issue 1. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022002716650925>.

<sup>83</sup> Bodine-Baron, Elizabeth (2016): U.S. Social Media Strategy Can Weaken ISIS Influence on Twitter, RAND Corporation, 16 August 2016. <https://www.rand.org/news/press/2016/08/16.html>.

<sup>84</sup> The Economist (2018): Russian disinformation distorts American and European democracy, *The Economist*, 22 February 2018. <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2018/02/22/russian-disinformation-distorts-american-and-european-democracy>.

<sup>85</sup> Helmus, Todd C./ Bodine-Baron, Elizabeth/ Magnuson, Madeline/ Mendelsohn, Joshua/ Marcellino, William/ Bega, Andriy/ Winkelman, Zev (2016): Examining ISIS Support and Opposition Networks on Twitter, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica; 2018. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2200/RR2237/RAND\\_RR2237.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2200/RR2237/RAND_RR2237.pdf).

<sup>86</sup> Makhortykh, Mykola/ Sydorova, Maryna (2017): Social media and Visual Framing of the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine, *Media, War & Conflict*, Volume 10, Issue 3; 9 April 2017. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1750635217702539>.

Syria.<sup>87</sup> While it is not proven that these Russian efforts were part of an RC campaign, they certainly fulfill all requirements to appear so.

#### Information sabotage (counterfeit evidence)

Anatoly Tsyganok produced 'evidence' from a website indicating that the Georgian Armed Forces had pre-planned the attack on South Ossetia.<sup>88</sup> This website is listed in his 2011 book *The 8.8.8 War: Georgia's Attack on Peace* (in Russian). The evidence in question consisted of three documents, accessible from the website. Each document seemed to be the exact Georgian orders for battle for each infantry and tank unit, engaged in hostilities. The documents gave the impression to be signed by Georgian commanding officers but were actually fabricated. The aim of this effort was to exonerate Russia *post facto*, and to make these documents known and available for use in future social media campaigns.

Another example of information sabotage is the damage-control exercise, in form of the online activity following the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH-17 over Ukraine in July 2014. It can be seen as a textbook case of information sabotage seeking to deflect blame and confuse the target audience. It also fits into the larger RC campaign that attempts to influence the perception of domestic and international audiences of Western intentions. On 17 July 2014, flight MH-17 was shot down over Lugansk suburbs and the incident was immediately posted on YouTube, as well as on VKontakte by separatist militiaman Igor Strelkov.<sup>89</sup> It was initially believed by the separatists that they had succeeded in shooting down a Ukrainian An-26. As news that the aircraft was a commercial jet surfaced, some VKontakte and Facebook posts were immediately taken down and replaced by a tweet emanating from official Russian sources, stating that two Ukrainian jet fighters were in the vicinity of the Boeing 777.<sup>90</sup>

The to-and-fro on social media between the Russian, Ukrainian and Western governments is instructive as, slowly but surely, Russia was faced with demands to allow an impartial investigation which indirectly puts the blame on the Kremlin for having supplied the material that brought down MH17, short of Russian officialdom accepting responsibility for the incident.<sup>91</sup> Information sabotage in this case served to deflect blame, confuse public opinion

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<sup>87</sup> Middle East Eye Staff Report (2018): Russia Driving Huge Online 'Disinformation' Campaign on Syria Gas Attack, Says UK PM Theresa May, *Middle East Eye*; 20 April 2018. <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/salisbury-syria-russia-social-media-theresa-may-528921594>.

<sup>88</sup> Tsyganok, Anatoly D. (2011): *Voina 08.08.08: Prinuzhdenie Gruzii k Miru*, Moscow: Vetche, 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Fisher, Max (2014): Did Ukrainian Rebels Really Take Credit for Downing MH17?, *Vox*; 17 July 2014. <https://www.vox.com/2014/7/17/5913089/did-this-ukrainian-rebel-commander-take-credit-for-shooting-down-the>.

<sup>90</sup> 3MV (2014): RF Defense Ministry is Waiting for Kiev's Response About the Aircraft Allegedly Accompanying MH17, *3mv.ru*; 19 July 2014. [https://3mv.ru/publ/minoborony\\_rf\\_zhdet\\_otvet\\_kieva\\_o\\_samoletakh\\_jakoby\\_soprovozhdavshikh\\_mh17/1-1-0-28915](https://3mv.ru/publ/minoborony_rf_zhdet_otvet_kieva_o_samoletakh_jakoby_soprovozhdavshikh_mh17/1-1-0-28915).

<sup>91</sup> Toler, Aric (2018): The Kremlin's Shifting, Self-Contradicting Narrative on MH17, *Bellingcat*; 5 January 2018. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/01/05/kremlins-shifting-self-contradicting-narratives-mh17>.

about responsibility, and cast doubt on official Western statements. While these activities were a short-term response to the incident, they do feed into that larger Russian effort to discredit Western governments and create the impression of the West acting aggressively.

## Policy Paralysis

The Kremlin uses social media to achieve policy paralysis by creating chaos in the information space. To achieve this effect, it introduces vast amounts of information specifically designed to occupy both a population and its leadership with trying to process conflicting information. This happens by eroding trust in governments and its institutions through spreading false narratives that implicate the government of a target audience in wrongdoing.<sup>92</sup> Russia employs a synchronized mix of media that varies from attributed television and news website content to far-right blogs with unclear attribution, to bots and trolls, that in combination with its social media campaigns spread coordinated – but in for this purpose – conflicting, inconsistent and often disputed information. A goal is to create the impression that one cannot really find out what actually happened and what the situation is, as the available information is conflicting and ‘both sides’ could be right. Due to the seemingly large amount of time necessary to identify truth from falsehoods, many members of the target audience will turn away from the issue. Recent reports show that since 2014, Facebook has been the platform of choice to capitalize on discord within the US, not only over foreign policy, but to exploit internal divisions on issues such as religion, race and immigration by spreading often various conflicting narratives.<sup>93</sup> As a response to the uncovering of these activities, Facebook has recently deleted mass numbers of ‘fake’ accounts created by Russian troll farms<sup>94</sup> as well as the content they uploaded.<sup>95</sup> This has drastically reduced Russian influence through these channels – at least for the time being. Other social media services like Tumblr have taken similar measures, further reducing Russia’s impact on public support through social media in Western countries.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Helmus, Todd C./Bodine-Baron, Elizabeth/Radin, Andrew/Magnuson, Madeline/Mendelsohn, Joshua/Marcellino, William/Bega, Andriy/Winkelman, Zev (2018): Russian Social Media Influence, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2237.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2237.html).

<sup>93</sup> Frenkel, Sheera/ Benner, Katie (2018): To Stir Discord in 2016, Russians Turned Most Often to Facebook, *The New York Times*; 17 February 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/17/technology/indictment-russian-tech-facebook.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Meixler, Eli (2018): Facebook Has Removed Hundreds of Accounts Linked to a Russian Troll Farm, *Time*, 4 April 2018. <http://time.com/5227225/facebook-russia-troll-accounts/>.

<sup>95</sup> Menn, Joseph, Ingram, David (2018): Facebook Deletes Posts Linked to Russian ‘Troll Factory’: CEO Zuckerberg, *Reuters*, 3 April 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-ceo-fakenews/facebook-deletes-posts-linked-to-russian-troll-factory-ceo-zuckerberg-idUSKCN1HA2LV>.

<sup>96</sup> BBC (2018): Tumblr Deletes ‘Russian Troll’ Accounts, *BBC News*, 26 March 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-43539886>.

## Societal Norm Manipulation

A February 2018 Russian election advertising campaign designed to be humorous conflates refusing to vote with homosexuality.<sup>97</sup> This is a clear example of an attempt to create societal norms: namely institutionalizing homophobia (and racism) for political gain. The video that was spread on social media attempted to create the impression that those that do not vote are not the norm in the society. Instead if you do not vote you will be an outsider in society. The video both engaged in ‘othering’ by singling out a minority group (homosexuals) and labeling them with an undesired activity. An existing norm – homosexuality, which is not well respected among conservative voters in Russia – is supported and extended, while a message is tagged on to stigmatize an undesired activity (not voting). The ad was initially released in the Togliatti region and viewed 11,500 times in VKontakte discussion groups, and a further 1500 times a week on Facebook.<sup>98</sup> The video was posted by multiple third parties on YouTube, some gaining only a few thousand views, while others had hundreds of thousands of views. Online news media *Metro* claims that the video has been viewed 3 million times.<sup>99</sup> Attribution and origin of the video cannot be conclusively ascertained; thus, its true audience reach cannot be verified.<sup>100</sup>

## Information pressure

The GMF’s Alliance for Securing Democracy/Hamilton 68 dashboard describes the recent near 7000% increase in the Christopher Steele hashtag on Twitter. This can be understood as an attempt at information pressure (and distraction/diversion) by Russia, since the Steele dossier involves claims and counter-claims made by senior political officials in the UK and the United States. The 35-page dossier alleging collusion between Russian authorities and then-presidential candidate Donald Trump was published on BuzzFeed, a digital media service designed to create

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<sup>97</sup> The Moscow Times Staff Report (2018): Russians Threatened with Conscriptioin and Gay Homestays in Presidential Campaign Ad, *The Moscow Times*; 19 February 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russians-threatened-with-conscription-gay-homestays-presidential-campaign-ad-60555>.

<sup>98</sup> The Moscow Times Staff Report (2018): Russian Election Ad Maligns Gay People to Get Out the Vote, *The Moscow Times*; 8 August 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-election-ad-conflates-not-voting-with-being-gay-62468>. The video, which only has a few thousand views, can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sc68S3W8IPM&t=5s>.

<sup>99</sup> Neshevets, Mikhail (2018): More than 3 Million Views for Viral Video Calling on Russians to Come to the Polls; *Metronews.ru*; 18 February 2018. <https://www.metronews.ru/novosti/russia/reviews/bolee-3-mln-prosmotrov-sobral-virusnyy-rolik-prizyvayuschiy-rossiyan-priyti-na-vybory-1373841/>.

<sup>100</sup> Meduza Project (2018): Viral Videos Promoting the Presidential Election Are Popping Up Online in Russia and Nobody is Sure Who's Making Them. The Breadcrumbs Lead Back to the Kremlin, *Meduza.io*; 23 February 2018. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2018/02/23/viral-videos-promoting-the-presidential-election-are-popping-up-online-in-russia-and-nobody-is-sure-who-s-making-them-the-breadcrumbs-lead-back-to-the-kremlin>.

and promote viral content. The massive increase of content related to the dossier, and about the dossier's financing connection to Fusion GPS and the Clinton campaign, are narratives that have been seized upon by *RT* and others – on social media and beyond – to instill confusion and doubts about the credibility of the dossier. Part of the attempt is to spread so much (seemingly) related information that it appears impossible for target audiences to determine the veracity and authenticity of the report.

#### Provoke hasty, unplanned or imprudent response

On 2 July 2008, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reproduced online a portion of an interview given by then member of the State Duma committee for defense Zavarzin to well-known propaganda digital media IA Regnum to the effect that the Georgian government was behind a car-bomb explosion that took place in Abkhazia between two checkpoints. In hindsight, this piece of information would be seen as a provocation aimed at Mikheil Saakashvili to initiate hostilities over separatist regions (which ended up succeeding less than a week later in South Ossetia). Provocations of the sort led Georgia to indeed initiate hostilities ten years ago, leading to Saakashvili's near-complete discredit, and practically nullifying Georgia's NATO hopes.<sup>101</sup>

#### Creation of desired movements

The online presence of militia and political support movements is very evident in the case of the Ukraine civil war. Social media is being used to lure fighters to the separatists' side to enable Russia to benefit from plausible deniability.<sup>102</sup> In this sense, the use of social media works hand-in-glove with kinetic methods, as social media is used as a recruitment tool, spawning other websites like *dobrovolec.org* to entice volunteers to join separatist forces. More importantly under this rubric, an aura of legitimacy is being produced by the appearance on social media of pages or discussion groups dedicated to 'Novorossiya' such as the Eurasia Youth Union, and the National Liberation Anti-Maidan.

As evidence that such social media activity can have a life of its own and spin out of the control of agents, Daria Litvinova wrote a piece for *The Telegraph* on the unilateral declaration of independence of "Malorossiya" (Little Russia).<sup>103</sup> Judging by her article, the intent could be to lead Kyiv to institute the federalization of Ukraine, but the cessation of the Novorossiya project around 2016 suggests that Moscow or the separatists themselves may have begun to fear the

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<sup>101</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (2008): Zavarzin believes that behind the explosions in Abkhazia is Georgia, *Kp.ru*; 2 July 2008. <https://www.kp.ru/online/news/108550/?geo=14>.

<sup>102</sup> Snowiss, M / Galperovich, (2014): Russian Social Media Fortify Rebellion in Eastern Ukraine, *Voice of America*; 30 June 2014. <https://www.voanews.com/a/russian-social-media-fortify-rebellion-in-eastern-ukraine/1947973.html>

<sup>103</sup> Litvinova, Daria (2017): Separatists in Ukraine Declare the Creation of New State "Malorossiya", *The Telegraph (UK)*; 18 July 2018. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/07/18/separatists-ukraine-declare-creation-new-state-malorossiya/>.

specter of further uncontrolled fragmentation. This would affect the prospects of the Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics respectively, but it would also send alarm bells ringing in Moscow.

#### Entice physical, offline dissent/demonstrations

Romm and Wagner describe Facebook's investigations into the purchasing of advertising space by Kremlin-backed profiles prior to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.<sup>104</sup> The ads aimed to foster discord within the US electorate, particularly in swing states. Interestingly, both the GOP and the Democratic Party supporters were targeted. Ad content pertained to polarizing social issues in the United States, such as race relations or gun control. When ads were pulled by the social media companies, Kremlin trolls directly pushed the ads through Instagram or Facebook's Messenger application.

It can be argued that some violence that occurred during demonstrations in the United States, such as the Charlottesville White Nationalist demonstration and the Black Lives Matter counter-protesters incident<sup>105</sup>, and similar incidents during Black Lives Matter demonstrations<sup>106</sup>, correlate with Russian social media subversion operations. Causation, however, is very difficult to establish. Nonetheless, geotargeting of residents of Ferguson and Baltimore suggests a direct attempt by Russian influence campaigns to capitalize on racial tensions and past violence.

#### Distraction

The Skripal poisoning case provides an excellent example of Russian social media exploitation for distraction and diversion. This technique requires anchoring on the news item to begin the operation. Alex Christoforou uses *The Duran*, a pro-Russia website he's founded with political commentator for *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*), Peter Lavelle, to develop news items which are then propagated through his personal Facebook and Twitter accounts. In addition, his personal and professional legitimacy are increased by frequent interviews on *RT*— which he and *RT* spread further through social media. *The Duran* has 25,000 subscribers on YouTube, and although most of its some 230 videos only gather a few hundred views, some manage to reach 54,000 viewers (e.g., a negative video on President Obama). His video that has garnered the most (536,000

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<sup>104</sup>Romm, Tony/ Wagner, Kurt (2017): Silicon Valley's Russian Ads Problems, Explained, *Recode*; 23 Oct. 2017. <https://www.recode.net/platform/amp/2017/10/6/16419388/facebook-google-twitter-russia-ads-2016-election-president-donald-trump>.

<sup>105</sup>CNN / User Generated Content (2017): Protester's Video of the Charlottesville Crash, *CNN.com*; 12 August 2017. <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/us/2017/08/12/charlottesville-crash-protesters-video-orig-vstop-dlewis.cnn>. See also: Heim, Joe (2017): Recounting a Day of Rage, Hate, Violence and Death, *The Washington Post*, 14 August 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/?utm\\_term=.fd77f083e591](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/?utm_term=.fd77f083e591).

<sup>106</sup> Walsh, Paul (2015): Car plows through Protesters during Ferguson rally in South Minneapolis, *Star Tribune*; 6 January 2015. <http://www.startribune.com/nov-25-car-plows-through-protesters-during-ferguson-rally/283891941/>.

views on the Duran YouTube channel) features his commentary on and clips from an *RT* interview with Vladimir Putin who discredits philanthropist George Soros.<sup>107</sup>

The quality and integrity of the news items displayed on *The Duran* is at the very least dubious, and stories integrate disparate content into a single narrative, while each item is then hyperlinked and spread individually in later tweets and other social media posts. An example of this mixing of multiple stories to one narrative is this headline, which appeared 10 March 2018: “The Poisoning of Skripal leads right to Hillary Clinton and the DNC. What did Skripal know about the Steele Dossier?”<sup>108</sup> The article hyperlinks to every argument leading the reader away from the original story (the questions of former FSB agent Sergei Skripal’s poisoning) towards other contentious and controversial topics: Hillary Clinton’s hacked e-mails, the DNC sponsoring an anti-Trump smear campaign, Christopher Steele, all the way to the FISA investigation. This news story garnered some 29,000 views. Meanwhile it was rebroadcasted on Christoforou’s personal Facebook account, where he has over 4,000 followers and 3,500 friends, his Twitter account, and *The Duran*’s Facebook account, which has 59,000 followers.<sup>109</sup> In support of a wider RC campaign, actors attempt to legitimize further various narratives by creating connections among stories that compound into a bigger picture, thus adding legitimacy to each narrative.

Another recent example is Russian distraction operations in the case of the recently uncovered Russian agent Maria Butina who operated in the US. *The Duran* re-published an *RT* analysis which focused on alleged procedural errors in the arrest and indictment. While Butina is accused of not registering as a foreign agent and infiltrating the National Rifle Association (NRA), *The Duran* and *RT* aim at distracting attention from her activities by fabricating news content around the actual story, thereby focusing the target audience’s attention to other issues.

The information thereby leads the target audience from one undesired position that doesn’t fit into the larger RC campaign narrative to a new destination far removed from that original story.

## Propaganda

The cross-referencing enabled by digital news sites and social media works to legitimize a message using *vranyo* methods.<sup>110</sup> An example for this is the cross-pollination of a message spun

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<sup>107</sup> Christoforou, Alex/*The Duran* (2018): Vladimir Putin CRUSHES George Soros for All Western "Leaders" to See, *The Duran YouTube Channel*; 6 June 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjf6hJYO6io>.

<sup>108</sup> Christoforou, Alex (2018): The Poisoning of Sergei Skripal Reads Right to Hillary Clinton and the DNC, *The Duran*; 10 March 2018. <http://theduran.com/the-poisoning-of-sergei-skripal-reads-right-to-hillary-clinton-and-the-dnc/>.

<sup>109</sup> Links to Alex Christoforou’s social media accounts: <https://www.facebook.com/alex.christoforou>, <https://twitter.com/alextheduran>) and *The Duran* Facebook page: [https://www.facebook.com/thedurancom/?hc\\_ref=ARR4p0hqrVennNbiqRIBZANRRJ3k5V9NKIB5ghmsb9zsIc1rigp5Lhw6aKtKFDHeqzs&fref=nf](https://www.facebook.com/thedurancom/?hc_ref=ARR4p0hqrVennNbiqRIBZANRRJ3k5V9NKIB5ghmsb9zsIc1rigp5Lhw6aKtKFDHeqzs&fref=nf).

<sup>110</sup> Chotikul, Diane (1986): The Soviet Theory of Reflexive Control in Historical and Psychocultural Perspective: A Preliminary Study, C3CM Joint Test Force, p. 96; July 1986. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3901091->

by *RT* to other news sources through social media. Here, the effect of the propaganda is amplified by bots or trolls in addition to regular users. For example, another *The Duran* video argues that the NATO declaration following the 2018 Brussels Summit moves Alliance troops into “direct confrontation with Russia” by moving troops closer to the Russian border.<sup>111</sup> Of course the troops posted are far from in any direct confrontation with Russia and are not posted at the border. But the Russia effort was to try to contribute to the overall impression of NATO aggressiveness towards Russia which contributes to the larger RC campaign trying to undermine NATO support in Western countries.

The examples discussed above show that Russian social media exploitation is a key component in implementing or at least complementing RC campaigns on many levels. Not only is social media exploitation integral to the Russian state’s influence arsenal (and the whole gamut of its coercive power), but social media platforms are used to reinforce each other to magnify, amplify, diversify, and legitimize a message in the mind of the audience.

From the above-mentioned examples of Russian social media exploitation for RC campaigns, the following trends can be discerned: While there is a difference to military *maskirovka*, civilian RC operations sometimes act in preparation and support of military operations and vice versa. For instance, RC campaign components aiming at provocation largely succeeded in the Russia-Georgia war, and information that surfaced in the wake of the conflict appears to have been tampered with or fabricated to sustain the idea that Georgia was the initiator of hostilities – a fact that was later established by European officials. This is a clear case of ‘operational’ RC in support of kinetic activities.

One of the most frequent social media uses is for discrediting and smearing in support of larger RC efforts. The examples of character assassinations are too numerous to count, but the Freeman and Chrystia Freeland cases stand as prime examples. Inversely, ‘useful idiots’ (like actor Steven Seagal) or the US politician Ron Paul are actively leveraged and defended by Russian social media without regard to them being discredited at home. Since opinion about Russia is polarized in the West, the association of a celebrity’s opinion about an issue can lead to a complete discredit if they are tainted by apparent complicity with active targeting by Russia.

In terms of opinion shaping, coordinated campaigns through all relevant media sources – television, online media, social media in the form of Twitter, Facebook, VKontakte and YouTube – achieve the largest reach. It is likely that social media will continue to play a central

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[Diane-Chotikul-The-Soviet-Theory-of-Reflexive.html](#). See also: Lefebvre, Vladimir A./ trans. Lefebvre, Victorina D. (1984): *Reflexive Control: The Soviet Concept of Influencing an Adversary’s Decision Making Process*, Science Applications, 1984.

<sup>111</sup> Christoforou, Alex/ *The Duran* (2018): NATO's "Summit Declaration" Moves Troops into Direct Confrontation With Russia, *The Duran* YouTube Channel; 3 August 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISXPO8pH-2M>.

role in supporting Russian RC campaigns, particularly because the fabrication of authority and followership is so easy to construct; on social media, an alternate reality can be automated by bots and trolls, for example, posting in comment sections. This alternate reality helps shape attitudes, create sentiments, and propel users into a parallel universe which can be created to the exact liking of the Kremlin – a form of influencing that cannot be created to the same extent in the offline world. These shaped attitudes can then be further influenced through campaigns affecting existing groups or leading to the formation of new groups that push narratives in support of the alternate reality. These groups – and they can be online communities – can then propel emotions of its members to extreme levels, mobilizing targets to commit violence. An example for this is the violence seen in Charlottesville in 2017. In this case, RC methods were used to discredit Western actors in the eyes of the target audience by exploiting societal fault lines and supporting political extremes.

Another trend is the use of RC methods through social media for damage control, as apparent in the Maria Butina, Skripal and MH-17 cases. The confusion created by the conflicting accounts is aimed at deflecting blame and re-orienting attention while the media storm passes. These instances, however, can also be seen as purely reactive, and may not all actually be part of an overall RC campaign (but they do feed well into existing RC campaigns). As mentioned above, it is not always easy or even possible to detect if an individual Russian operation is part of a long-term RC campaign or not.

Finally, an important trend that merits attention is the power of social media-propelled RC to create movements and groups, such as the separatist groups present online to support an independent Donbass, or the Free Maria Butina hashtag, more recently. This process is especially relevant as it attracts target audience members from various sides of an argument, while also developing a life of its own – a development that is always possible with RC campaigns as the campaigns can backfire if detected in time and made public by the adversary. Also, actual innocent while unknowing members of such groups set up or created by Russia can start acting on their own initiative, which may not be in the interest of the Kremlin, thereby negatively affecting the overall campaign.

## Reflexive control countermeasures

It can be seen from the above that reflexive control is a complex, dynamic and constantly evolving discipline, with inputs and effects that are highly specific to each individual circumstance and target. As a result, it is difficult if not impossible to prescribe countermeasures for attacks, as the appropriate response will vary as widely as the attack itself. There are a number of principles that, while relevant to conflict in general, are especially important for defence against reflexive control. This chapter first introduces these concepts and then discusses examples of countermeasures that can be introduced to mitigate the impact of RC campaigns.

- 1. Knowledge of the adversary is as important as self-knowledge.** It is not enough to understand our own objectives and our intended means of achieving them. Equal attention must be given to the enemy's understanding of the conflict, along with his or her culture of planning and warfighting, information warfare principles, assets, targets and objectives. Reflexive control cannot be addressed in isolation from other means the adversary will utilize to achieve mastery before or during the initial period of war – including the period before it is obvious to the victim that war has begun – nor can it be addressed in isolation from the wider suite of techniques he or she will employ to get inside the friendly decision-making cycle.
- 2. Deterring and defeating 'hybrid war' demands local knowledge.** Templated, generalized responses will not be adequate against an opponent trained for 'non-standardized' operations. When that opponent is determined to extract military advantage from the distinctive military-political and socio-political features (and vulnerabilities) of the specific theatre of operations and those operating in it, tailored approaches based on local knowledge are necessary. An understanding of the socio-political environment, sensitivities and fault lines is not just the job of the politicians or cultural advisers. It is also the job of the military commander. Nothing will be accomplished if knowledge is confined to academic circles. Knowledge must be acquired and disseminated within the zone of operations, transmitted to higher command echelons and, just as importantly, handed on to incoming commanders and their subordinates. Institutional memory (that outlasts tours of duty and the rotation of national contingents) needs to be developed at theatre and, as far as possible, unit level. In this area, as in every other, assessments and responses must be three-dimensional and joint (i.e., expanded to all branches of the armed services, and even beyond the military realm).
- 3. The relationship between the military commander and political decision-maker is of the utmost importance.** Sustained and systematic effort must be expended to disseminate knowledge, establish trust and find a common language among all authorities that have

influence on the security situation – not just in national capitals but in those localities where ‘indirect aggression’ is more likely.

4. **There are no ‘rear areas’.** Defence against reflexive control must be as responsive to ‘deep operations’ and ‘diversion’ in the operational rear as to ambiguous threats in regions contiguous to the enemy’s peacetime deployment. These threats may emerge in an unfamiliar sequence or simultaneously, and potentially in areas that are entirely unrelated to the notional target. Thus, for example, defence of Latvia must focus not only on the potential for subversive operations in Latgale, but also consider the vulnerabilities of Latvian representations to the EU and NATO in Brussels. By extension, the Canadian contingent in Latvia can be exposed to cognitive attacks not just locally, but through friends, families, communities and political figures in Canada itself. The same principles apply to all nations that Russia considers to be adversaries, whether those countries reciprocate the sentiment or not.

Keeping these principles in mind, we can identify the following concrete countermeasures that affect individual operations that are part of larger RC campaigns. While Russian reflexive control operations are difficult to detect, they contain many different elements that all need to work together to achieve the overall desired effect on a target audience. These many elements – like individual links of a chain – are all possible entry points to engage the reflexive control operation and employ countermeasures to mitigate its effect.

#### Overview of countermeasures

- Understand the Adversary
- Analyze Previous Operations
- Analyze Previous Responses
- Understand the Adversary
- Identify Adversary’s Goals
- Plan for Adversarial Influence Operations
- Be Pro-Active
- Be Creative
- Invest in Training
- Invest in Legal Expertise
- Consult Allies
- Create Relationships and Build Alliances
- Consolidate Communications
- Unify Responses
- Fight Fire with Fire
- Apply Tactical Responses

- Apply Operational Responses
- Escalate Economic Responses
- Play the Long Game

### Understanding the Adversary

It appears as if Canada (particularly the CAF) and most NATO militaries and governments lack sufficient understanding of how adversaries, Russia in particular, have changed the way they engage in warfare. It is essential to understand that traditional, conventional force on force warfare is more and more only a last resort effort. Modern warfare consists primarily of Info Ops, Cyber, and SOF instead of conventional operations.<sup>112</sup> This lack of focus on the exploitation of the information space for RC campaigns and similar operations has enabled Russia to significantly affect NATO, the EU, the TPP, NAFTA, and US/Canada relations, among other Russian targets. Furthermore, Russia succeeds in claiming a lack of necessity for serious development and engagement in Information Operations because there is no declaration of war and deniability exists to a large extent. It appears more and more as if Russia and other adversaries use kinetic operations to support information operations, while the West focuses on information being used to support kinetic operations. This created the false impression that, as long as there is no kinetic activity, operations in the information space are not such a serious threat. This particularly leads to a lack of focus on pre-emptive measures such as a serious focus on investing in defending against attacks in the information space.<sup>113</sup> Slowly, however, a deeper understanding of Russian intent behind its information operations is emerging.<sup>114</sup> A deeper understanding of Russian activities in the information space and how they operate can enable better detection operations and limit their effects.<sup>115</sup> It is particularly essential to understand Russian intent and operations in regions it declares as the Russian ‘sphere of influence’ in the former Soviet Republics as well as where Russia is highly active in Central Asia<sup>116</sup> and the Middle East.<sup>117</sup> Most recently, for example, Russia is fueling animosity among Bosnian Serb nationalists in advance of Bosnian elections. Demonstrators carrying photos of Vladimir Putin

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<sup>112</sup> Seely, Robert (2017): Defining Contemporary Russian Warfare: Beyond the Hybrid Headline, *The RUSI Journal*, Volume 162, Issue 1, pp. 50-59; 2017. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2017.1301634?src=recsys&journalCode=rusi20>.

<sup>113</sup> Glasser, Susan B. (2018): The War America Isn't Fighting: Interview with Former US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter on Russia Plan, *The Global Politico Blog / Podcast*, 19 February 2018. <https://www.politico.eu/article/war-america-isnt-fighting-ash-carter-russia-plan/>.

<sup>114</sup> Stupples, David (2015): The Next War Will Be an Information War and We're Not Ready for it, *The Conversation*; 26 November 2015. <http://theconversation.com/the-next-war-will-be-an-information-war-and-were-not-ready-for-it-51218>.

<sup>115</sup> Schoen, Douglas E./ Roth Smith, Evan (2016): Putin's Master Plan: To Destroy Europe, Divide NATO and Restore Russian Power and Global Influence, Encounter Books, New York.

<sup>116</sup> Cooley, Alexander/ Heathershaw, John (2016): Dictators Without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia, Yale University Press, New Haven. <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300208443dictators-without-borders>.

<sup>117</sup> Cook, Steven A. (2018): Russia is in the Middle East to Stay, *Foreign Policy*; 18 March 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/16/the-middle-east-needs-a-steady-boyfriend/>.

were photographed in Banja Luka in May 2018.<sup>118</sup> At the same time, Serbia's President has accepted Putin's aid with respect to Kosovo.<sup>119</sup> Above all, the Russian government has been encouraging Kosovo's ethnic Serbs in their efforts to undermine the Kosovar government.<sup>120</sup> Russia's ambassador to Belgrade made that clear in June 2018 when he made the comparison, "Crimea is Russia, Kosovo is Serbia".<sup>121</sup> Paying sufficient attention to similar regional developments can help identify influence campaigns in their infancy before they gain significant traction and achieve larger effects.<sup>122</sup> Having a good understanding of the information space, the players and their intentions is essential for any applications of countermeasures.

### **Analyzing Previous RC Operations**

Analyzing previous Russian operations of reflexive control – and paying particular attention to the study of accompanying decision-making – can help evaluate the strengths and shortcomings of previous operations and how lessons learned can be implemented.<sup>123</sup> We have mentioned several cases above that can be well used to study the past application of RC earlier identify and counter future RC operations.

### **Analyzing Previous Responses**

Adopting critical thinking and red-teaming; focusing on identifying corroborating information from reliable, trusted sources; and seeking confirmation from Allies and trusted partners to substantiate or refute claims by the adversary can make RC campaign components less effective.<sup>124</sup> A strong focus on, and sufficient staffing for, a deeper analysis of long-term adversarial intentions is essential for supporting decision-making for countermeasures.<sup>125</sup> Weighing the effectiveness of prior responses to evaluate their impact (e.g., whether they were delivered in a timely manner) can make countermeasures more effective. For example, the actual

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<sup>118</sup> Miranova, Vera/ Zawadewicz, Bogdan (2018): Putin is Building a Bosnian Paramilitary Force, *Foreign Policy*; 8 August 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/08/putin-is-building-a-bosnian-paramilitary-force/>.

<sup>119</sup> McLaughlin, Daniel (2018): Serbia's President Hails Russian Support and Seeks Help on Kosovo, *The Irish Times*; 9 May 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/08/putin-is-building-a-bosnian-paramilitary-force/>.

<sup>120</sup> European Western Balkans Contributor (2017): Russian Interference in Kosovo: Kosovo Serbs Primary Tool of Influence, *EWB*; 14 November 2017. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/11/14/russian-interference-kosovo-kosovo-serbs-primary-tool-influence/>.

<sup>121</sup> B92 News Agency Report (2018): "Crimea is Russia, Kosovo is Serbia": Russian Ambassador, *B92.net*; 12 June 2018. [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2018&mm=06&dd=12&nav\\_id=104376](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2018&mm=06&dd=12&nav_id=104376).

<sup>122</sup> Clark, Wesley K. (2018): Don't Wait for the Western Balkans to Blow Up Again: The US and the EU Must Act, *The Washington Post*; 11 April 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/04/11/dont-wait-for-the-western-balkans-to-blow-up-again-the-u-s-and-the-e-u-must-act/?utm\\_term=.fb0e35895608](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/04/11/dont-wait-for-the-western-balkans-to-blow-up-again-the-u-s-and-the-e-u-must-act/?utm_term=.fb0e35895608).

<sup>123</sup> Musco, Stefano (2017): The Art of Meddling: A Theoretical, Strategic and Historical Analysis of Non-Official Covers for Clandestine Humint, *Defense & Security Analysis*, Volume 33, issue 4, pp. 380-394. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14751798.2017.1377367>.

<sup>124</sup> Kilovaty, Ido (2018): Doxfare: Politically Motivated Leaks and the Future of the Norm on Non-Intervention in the Era of Weaponized Information, *Harvard National Security Journal*, Volume 9, Issue 1; 2018. p. 16. <http://harvardnsj.org/volume-9/>.

<sup>125</sup> Kasprzyk, Rafal (2018): The Essence of Reflexive Control and Diffusion of Information in the Context of Information Environment Security in Burduk A./ Chlebus E./ Nowakowski T./ Tubis A. (eds) *Intelligent Systems in Production Engineering and Maintenance*. ISPEM 2018. Advances in Intelligent Systems and Computing, Volume 835. Springer, Champlain NY.

effect of economic sanctions may require a longer observation period to play out.<sup>126</sup> However, as the cumulative effect of those measures takes hold or when new measures are applied, there may be a significant shift in the adversary's ability to launch new campaigns, or they may be more isolated<sup>127</sup> than previously known, as traditional Allies retreat for fear of being sanctioned themselves.<sup>128</sup> In countering long-term RC campaigns, a wide net must be cast that keeps a bigger picture in mind when evaluating individual Russian operations and their connections. Other factors, such as Vladimir Putin's consolidation of power following the 2018 Presidential election, could also leave little incentive for a shift in policy by the regime. Sanctions may still have had a detrimental effect, but that effect may just have been balanced out by the stabilizing outcome of the election.<sup>129</sup>

### **Playing the long game**

Russia created decoy campaigns to mask the real activities during the annexation of Crimea. As it took advantage of the disarray within the Ukrainian AF chain of command, it arranged for sympathetic stakeholders including Cossacks, Russian nationalists and Soviet era war veterans to create a distraction into which the Russian military could seamlessly blend.<sup>130</sup> The groundwork was laid out in advance, as Crimea's Cossacks were already radicalized years before and could be counted on to be loyal to Russian intervention. They were also highly committed to engaging local youth in the movement through a network of military-style boot camps which served as initiation into the Cossack pro-Russian legacy. They also engaged youth in combat.<sup>131</sup> Perpetual long-term observation of an adversary's activities, particularly in the cyber domain, is key to identifying and launching pre-emptive moves to prevent damaging campaigns from unfolding.

### **Foresight**

The use of foresight is also key to anticipating and responding in a timely way to influence campaigns. Due to the lack of understanding that *information leads*,<sup>132</sup> and that Russia is actively

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<sup>126</sup> Hunter Christie, Edward (2015): Sanctions After Crimea: Have They Worked?, *NATO Review*; 2015. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2015/russia/sanctions-after-crimea-have-they-worked/EN/index.htm>.

<sup>127</sup> Hille, Kathrin (2015): Russia: Danger of Isolation, *Financial Times*; 8 January 2015. <https://www.ft.com/content/657967da-9725-11e4-845a-00144feabdc0>.

<sup>128</sup> Keatinge, Tom (2018): This Time, Sanctions on Russia are Having Desired Effect: The Country's Integration in Global Finance Has Made it Vulnerable, *Financial Times*; 13 April 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/cad69cf4-3e40-11e8-bcc8-cebcb81f1f90>.

<sup>129</sup> Janjevic, Darko (2018): Western Sanctions on Russia: Lots of Noise and Little Impact, *Deutsche Welle*; 05 April 2018. <https://www.dw.com/en/western-sanctions-on-russia-lots-of-noise-and-little-impact/a-43271200>. See also: MacFarquhar, Neil (2018): The Fight with the West is Isolating Russia, But That's Not Stopping Putin, *The New York Times*; 17 April 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/17/world/europe/russia-putin-sanctions-economy.html>.

<sup>130</sup> Shuster, Simon (2014): Armed Cossacks Flock to Crimea to Help Russian Annexation Bid, *Time*; 12 March 2014. <http://time.com/22125/ukraine-crimea-cossacks-russia/>.

<sup>131</sup> Shuster, Simon (2011): The Return of the Cossacks: Russia's Warrior Clan Wants its Old Country Back, *Time*; 17 August 2011. <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2088949,00.html>.

<sup>132</sup> Information 'leads' in the sense that any action taken is based on information that has triggered it. If an actor can sufficiently manipulate the information an adversary consumes, it can 'lead' the actions of the adversary. The more the actor control the information, the more it can determine actions.

controlling ‘the chess board’ (*so to speak*), there is no ability to utilize foresight to anticipate or even pre-empt activities that Russia props up and reinforces constantly. Unfortunately, these activities are not seen as having a ‘leading’ effect on crucial actions. Identifying ‘long game’ end states, is often met with dismissal as being conspiracy theories due to so many different factors having to be included that the complexity soon reaches a point where many become unconvinced. There almost seems to be a defensive arrogance (to protect egos) when it comes to such a topic, as leaders don’t want to admit weakness or lack of knowledge/understanding. In my opinion, Russia also knows of this weakness in NATO leadership, which gives them even more ability to ‘control the chess board.’

### **Potential applications of RC mechanisms by the CAF**

Western countries that might seek to adopt Russia’s techniques of reflexive control and turn them against Moscow in response would face a number of severe ethical and practical challenges.

1. **Loss of the moral high ground.** The legal, political and cultural constraints under which Western militaries and governments operate rule out many of the key components of reflexive control. In particular, the element of pervasive disinformation – far above and beyond simple military deception – runs counter to basic principles to which Western information operations subscribe, and the values framework within which they operate.

In February 2018, an unknown but significant number of employees of a Russian private military company (PMC) were killed by Russian airstrikes near Deir ez-Zor in Syria. The incident may have resulted from probing by Russia to determine the limits of behavior that that United States would accept. In any case, it is likely to have been highly educational for Moscow. It would have been possible for the United States to have employed principles of reflexive control in order to cause the incident in a form of entrapment to demonstrate boundaries to Russia and limit Russian provocative behavior in Syria. It would have been impossible to do this without publicity, harsh public criticism from legal opinion and the media, and consequent questioning of the legitimacy of the US mission in Syria. In short, Western actions are constrained by values, ethics, the rule of law and oversight while Russia is not bound by such constraints.

2. **Difficulty of pre-emption.** A similar range of constraints affects any ambition by Western nations to take pre-emptive actions to mitigate threats. The principles under which pre-emptive action are considered legitimate are well known and generally accepted in the West. It can be assumed, therefore, that Russian actions are calibrated to avoid situations where Western legal opinion would endorse pre-emptive action.

The key to understanding and mitigating this problem is a full grasp among military and civilian decision-makers of the ‘initial period of war’ as it is seen from Russia, and in particular the distinctive understanding of the transition from peace to war that pertains to Russian thinking and planning.

A further enhancement to Western freedom of action could come in the form of a shift in emphasis in lawfare from the defensive to the offensive. DoD, MOD, DND and others need legal teams who, rather than simply setting parameters, have the expertise to advise how to make a necessary military or political objective legally possible. In particular there should be a synergy, not a divide, between the military-technical and military-legal establishments.

3. **Inability to deploy coordinated information effects.** The fact that Western nations are by default liberal democracies and open societies with free media and independent legislatures makes them fundamentally unsuited to a key element of reflexive control: namely coordinating and controlling the information, influence and inputs that are being directed to the adversary.

Russia benefits from unity of information space, and can harness the official and notionally unofficial information media of an entire country to project a unified cognitive assault – even before consideration of infiltration directly into the adversary’s information space through social media, ‘useful idiots’, and disinformation repeated by home nation media. Western nations, by contrast, are highly limited in the tools of influence at their disposal. Planting or projecting information in advance from sources other than the government or military immediately encounters the ethical constraints referred to above.

In short, Russia as a state and a society is ideally suited to employing reflexive control against its adversaries, while those adversaries in the West are constitutionally, morally and legally prevented from effectively responding in kind. This simple fact further underlines the critical importance of defending Western societies and values systems against pernicious Russian influence.

For the Canadian context specifically, potential applications need to be separated into the strategic, the operational and the tactical level as any strategic level application of reflexive control is not in accordance with Canadian and international law.

The Strategic level

“The civilian population and individual civilians shall enjoy general protection against the dangers arising from military operations.” “To give effect to this protection [...] in all circumstances [...] the civilian population as such, as well as individual civilians, shall not be the

object of attack. Acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population are prohibited.”<sup>133</sup>

Article 13 — Protection of the Civilian Population, Geneva Convention

The laws of war, as agreed upon in the Geneva Conventions, and signed by Canada on August 12, 1949 prevent the targeting of any civilians as part of military operations. Breaches of the law incur up to 14 years of prison if no civilians die of the attack or if there are fatalities, a life sentence may be given. Accordingly, any CAF member participating in attacking the civilians can face at least up to 14 years of prison.

Any kind of application of Russian reflexive control is therefore not only unlawful for CAF members but would lead to severe penalties in the event civilians are targeted. As the influencing of the mindset of citizens is the crucial mechanism that triggers desired actions of a target audience during RC – and the civilian population will always be the largest part of such a target audience – on a strategic level, any kind of CAF adaptation of RC is impossible without breaching the Geneva Conventions.

Part of the success of Russian activities in this space is that the Kremlin does not respect international law. Russia does not only disrespect the rules of international law and the laws of war but increasingly appears unfettered by rules whatsoever in implementing its ‘weaponization of everything’.

This is, of course, no desirable development that a government of any democratic state can support. Democracy builds on the expression of the will of the people. It is no longer possible to identify the will of the people if the people are deceived and through reflexive control led to express preferences of a specific actor rather than their own will.

As such any kind of applications of reflexive control that target civilians is – and rightly so – no option for the CAF.

The argument has been made that fire must be fought with fire. In this context interested parties claim that we are ‘losing the battle’ if we do not engage in using the same weapons. Above, we have shown that there are many effective ways of countering reflexive control. Even more so if multiple approaches are combined. If we do the same as the adversary, we do not defeat the adversary, we just replace him. Also, how new is RC really? RC is a form of deception. Military deception has always existed. New technologies like social media make RC mechanisms more easily implemented, more effective and also at least initially unattributed, but with these technologies come opportunities to exploit them as well. As in the case of ISIS, actors that excel

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<sup>133</sup> Geneva Conventions Act (1985): Geneva Conventions Act R.S.C., 1985, c.G-3, Justice Laws Website. <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/G-3/FullText.html#h-6>.

in the use of social media can be effectively combatted and their operations can be crucially influenced without having to resort to the same tactics.

### Effectiveness

Questions remain also about the effectiveness of RC mechanisms. There is no doubt that there can be considerable short-term benefits if an actor succeeds in exploiting reflexive control mechanisms and a target audience unknowingly acts in the intended way it otherwise would not have without interference. We have shown multiple examples above. Questions remain about the long-term success of these measures. What happens if the target audience learns after the fact that it was misled to an undesired action? How does it then perceive the actor who exploited RC against the TA? Are they equally likely to fall for another RC campaign after having gone through the experience? Likely not. What if the TA is warned against and trained to identify RC campaigns? There is ample evidence to suggest that RC campaigns needs to be undetected and unexpected to achieve the intended effect. RC activities – after achieving success manipulating the 2016 US elections and the Brexit vote – were no longer able to garner a similar success in subsequent elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany.

We also hear a lot about how today's battles are really battles for the hearts and minds. If that is any indicator, the countries most well-known for exploiting reflexive control mechanism appear not to be prime destinations attracting talent from around the world. Instead Russia is facing a severe brain drain. The reputation of countries like Russia and China compare very unfavorably to Western countries that do not engage in manipulating the perceptions of civilian populations – domestic or foreign.

### Potential use forms of similar mechanisms for influence

In very limited and targeted operations, similar mechanisms are already being used as part of military deceptions operations; however, they do not include targeting of civilians. Similar mechanisms can be applied within international law requirements. A famous Canadian example that is taught in Canadian PSYOPS courses is the use of music on the battlefield. During the onset of the war in Afghanistan, Canadian forces playing really loud music in breaks between heavy artillery attacks on the Afghan soldiers. When the music came, the soldiers started to get used to the attacks stopping. Until at one point this assumption by the adversary was used to move in and take over territory instead of a new artillery attack. This is a similar mechanism – although on a much smaller level, much more targeted and limited. Such use – if one wants to call them reflexive control mechanisms – are acceptable for use by the CAF as long as they can be implemented without targeting civilians. The concept of 'nudging' from the field of behavioral economics is another area where similar mechanisms are exploited that can be used in military operations.

## Tactical level

Different from the strategic level on which the Russians famously use RC, there are application possibilities on the tactical level. At the tactical level, there are various means with which to attempt to predetermine and influence adversarial behaviors. These include rumor campaigns or loudspeaker operations to support a mission, or to confuse the enemy's OODA loop (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) regarding future activities that will occur. An example for this is the use of loudspeaker audio to pre-empt kinetic strikes. When repeated applied, they can create a behavior of the adversary which can be exploited. This exploitation can disrupt the adversary's battle rhythm or pattern of life.

## Operational level

On the operational level there are also examples of allied reflexive control which can indicate use forms. OP MINCEMEAT, and the US assault into IRAQ using leaflets to deceive the Iraqi Army into believing there would be an amphibious assault in the form of a land assault via Kuwait is an example of potential operational level exploitation of RC mechanisms. Any use case beyond the tactical and operations level would be difficult, if not impossible, to implement without targeting civilians and breaching the Geneva Conventions.

However, the above describe operations on the tactical and operational level are only informed by small parts of what Russian RC campaigns contain. As such it would be incorrect to describe them in any form as RC mechanisms as the core element of RC is a large coordinated approach of many activities over time to affect the world view of a larger target audience.

## Conclusion

This paper has discussed the theoretical concept of Russian reflexive control, how it was further developed into what is today in Russia referred to as ‘managed reality’ and how its implementation has worked in the most pertinent cases of its implementation in the past 10 years. The discussion of its application in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria has demonstrated that the Russian application of reflexive control entails a far broader and more complex approach than pure deception, or providing an adversary commander with false operational information on which to base his or her decision. Instead of consisting simply of disinformation, reflexive control implies a compound program of targeted decision-making through multiple vectors, accounting for not only the adversary's logical processing of information, but also the emotional, psychological, cultural and other frameworks within which decisions are made. Reflexive control is therefore a very complex concept and its implementation depends on many coordinated efforts over a very long time-frame.

We have also shown that many activities appear to be in the mode of reflexive control but are actually not. Our discussion of such cases shows that coordinated activities can easily be seen as part of a larger coordinated effort without this actually being the case. Parts of the concept are difficult to separate from ‘regular’ deception or distraction operations. It appears as if it is rather easy to overestimate the success of reflexive control campaigns, thereby giving Russian operations more credibility than they actually deserve.

The complexity of the concept – and particularly the various elements of it that have to be coordinated effectively for the long-term effect to be achieved – offers many avenues to counter reflexive control operations. As demonstrated, while reflexive control is a long-term game, it appears to be a rather fragile operation that is fairly easy to counter, once identified, if target audiences are made aware of the concept, how it works and who may be exploiting it against them.

The authors have also shown that, besides the high complexity and fragility of RC operations, the fairly effective countermeasures speak against most forms of its potential application in the CAF. Particularly, in any application of RC on the strategic level, civilians would be targeted – leading to a breach of the Geneva Conventions. Many questions remain about what (if any) implementation in the CAF could look like.

Finally, the question remains, why the CAF would even want to alter the general world view of a target audience long term? Any population – if able to decide freely, would truly opt for what is best for it, which is the rule by the people. As such there is no need as a democracy to influence the general worldview of an adversary to make the Canadian concept of governance look more attractive than it already is. Autocratic systems such as Russia need to resort to such manipulation in an attempt to make their political system appear less unattractive compared to

that of their adversary. This is something – at least on a strategic level – Canada is not in need of implementing. On every possible level, living conditions are far more favorable to the general population in Canada and all Western countries compared to authoritarian states like Russia and China. Therefore, there is also simply no need to influence the worldview of target audiences without their knowing in our favor. This can be done totally openly as our political system is far more attractive than those of our adversaries.

Any covert activities to influence worldviews of target audiences could also backfire severely in democracies. This matters far less in authoritarian political systems. Any covert strategic level attempt to influence the worldview of a target audience would hardly pass *The New York Times* test. Democracies tend to want to spread democracy openly and not influence other populations unknowingly – as they would not want to be influenced unknowingly themselves either.

Applications may be possible on a much smaller and specific scale in the battlefield as long as civilians are not targeted, though this would then be very close to classic PSYOPS and not be the same reflexive control mechanism as applied by Russia. Such operations could include motivating adversary soldiers to defect, or efforts to influence adversary moral and determination. However, if done on a larger scale, the vast countermeasures make the application of such operations rather fragile.

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13. ABSTRACT/RÉSUMÉ (When available in the document, the French version of the abstract must be included here.)

Russia is increasingly applying methods of reflexive control (RC) to influence political decision-making through election manipulation as well as undermining the trust of citizens in political institutions and political systems of targeted countries. Russia is employing RC not only domestically and in neighboring countries such as Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland but also more and more in NATO countries such as the US, Germany, France, Great Britain, and Canada. For the CAF to be able to develop effective countermeasures, it is essential to achieve a deeper understanding of RC as it was used traditionally during the Cold War and particularly how it has been further developed to be used in current Russian operations. This report discusses the concept of Russian reflexive control, how it has evolved into its current iteration, the mechanics of how it works, and how to identify possible countermeasures to RC.

This RMCC research report addresses the following research questions:

1. What is Russian reflexive control?
2. In what instances has RC been successfully applied?
3. What were the underpinning mechanisms by which it worked?
4. What are possible countermeasures to RC?
5. What are possible applications of RC mechanisms by the CAF?

The paper concludes that reflexive control in its current form implies a compound program of targeted decision-making through multiple vectors, accounting for not only the adversary's logical processing of information, but also emotional, psychological and cultural frameworks within which decisions are made, over a long time-frame. The complexity of the concept offers avenues to counter reflexive control operations. It appears to be a fragile operation that is fairly easy to counter, once identified, if target audiences are made aware of the concept and how it works. In addition to moral and legal concerns, the high complexity and fragility of RC operations, along with fairly effective countermeasures to RC, suggest the CAF should not apply RC mechanisms in operations.