

**RUSSIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS AGAINST THE
UKRAINIAN STATE AND DEFENCE FORCES: APRIL-DECEMBER
2014 IN ONLINE NEWS**

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ABSTRACT. The aim of the current article is to provide analysis of information operations of the Russian Federation performed against the Ukrainian state and defence forces from 1 April until 31 December 2014. Russia uses ideological, historical, political symbols and narratives for justifying and supporting their military, economic and political campaigns not only in Donbass but in the whole of Ukraine. The article concentrates on the various means of meaning-making carried out by Russian information operations regarding the Ukrainian state and military structures.

Introduction

Researchers have recognised the importance of media in war situations, especially after the recent western wars (McQuail 2006), but the “honour” of being the first mediatised war is attributed to the Crimean War of 1853-1856 (Keller 2001, p.251). Thus it is befitting that we explore the procedures of modern hybrid war in Ukraine¹ that is characterised by the plurality of features of

¹ About the Ukraine crisis, see more Pabriks & Kudors 2015.

information operations and psychological operations, where the key role belongs to the media and Internet. Russia uses information as a tool to destabilise the situation not only on the front in the Donbass region, but in Ukraine as a whole.² The main goal of Russian information campaigns in Ukraine appears to be spreading panic among Ukrainians and mistrust between the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian army, mistrust between the government and people, and to demoralise the Ukrainian soldiers and their commanders (Lebedeva 2015, Melnyk 2015).

While mediatising war can be dated back a while ago, scholars would argue that mediatisation as a process implies a longer lasting process where cultural and social institutions are changed as a consequence of media influence (Hjarvard 2008, p.114). Denis McQuail (2006) explains that increasing power and internationalisation of media institutions, the idea of access of reporters to war and the perception that war requires effective public communication can be seen as part of raising the importance of media in war situations. Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin (2010, p.5) see that war is transformed and reconstructed so that all aspects of war need consideration of media. This also means that war, critical exploration of war and conflict coverage have gained the attention of media scholars. Most attention, however, in media scholarship is paid to war as a spectacle from a relatively safe distance to observe (McQuail 2006). The process of mediatisation of war has several directions – on the one hand, media can be considered an important player in depicting war, but at the same time, fighting war means deploying media as an informational and psychological weapon. This paper focuses on the latter part and looks at how Russia uses its media outlets, linguistically available to most Ukrainians, to support military operations.

² See more on this topic – Sazonov, Mүүr, Mölder 2015.

In the 2014 conflict in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea (see more Mölder, Sazonov & Värk 2014, p.2148-2161; Mölder, Sazonov & Värk 2015, p.1-28), Russian information operations were used at all levels starting with the political level (against the state of Ukraine, state structures, politicians) up to the military level. Many recent studies are focused on different topics related to Russian politics, hybrid warfare in Ukraine or Russian information warfare against the Ukrainian state generally (e.g. Berzinš 2014; Darczewska 2014, De Silva 2015, Galeotti 2014, Howard & Puhkov 2014, Pikulicka-Wilczewska & Sakwa 2015, Winnerstig 2014). The aim of the given article is to contribute to filling the gap regarding the representation of the Ukrainian state and military structures in the Russian media.

This paper analyses information operations of the Russian Federation performed against Ukraine from April until December 2014. It examines and systematises the representation of Ukraine, its authorities and armed forces during their anti-terrorist operation in Eastern Ukraine, with the aim to provide empirical evidence about the varied nature of Russian propaganda. The media analysis presented is based on content analysis, which examines three Russian news outlets – *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda*.

Ukraine in Russia's geopolitical and informational sphere of influence

Before defining the aspects of modern information warfare, it is essential to understand the underlying reasons for the outbreak of the current Ukrainian crisis. Russia's painful reaction to the events in Ukraine unfolding with the EuroMaidan of December 2013 (Koshkina 2015, Mukharskiy 2015), is well explained by Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997, p.46) who already two decades ago described Ukraine as an “*important space on the Eurasian chessboard*”, the control

over which is a prerequisite for Russia “*to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia*”.

Ukraine’s independence in 1991 was a shock too hard to swallow for the patriotically-minded Russian political groups as it meant a major defeat for Moscow’s historical strategy, which attempts to exercise control over the geopolitical space around Russia's borders. The return of geopolitics has always been an important factor for Russia in performing its international politics after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Brzezinski (1997, p.92), losing Ukraine decreases Russia’s possibilities to rule over the Black Sea region, where Crimea and Odessa have historically been important strategic clues to the Black Sea and even to the Mediterranean. Throughout history, Ukraine has always been an essential part of narratives related to Russian nation-building (e.g. Yekelchuk 2012). Ukraine holds a special place in Russian national myths as Kyiv has traditionally been regarded as the “mother of all Russian cities” – also brought out by Russian President Vladimir Putin in his 18 March 2014 address to the members of State Duma and Federation Council (President of Russia 2014). Therefore, Ukraine does not only play a pivotal role in Russian geopolitical strategic thinking but also holds a symbolic value hard to underestimate as the homeland of the Russian civilization (see e.g. Grushevskiy 1891, Gayda 2013).

After the fall of the pro-Russian President Yanukovich on 22 February 2014, the Kyiv government set on a more determined path towards integration with the West. In Moscow, the possibility of losing Ukraine from its geopolitical sphere of influence was seen as a catastrophic defeat (Brzezinski 1997, p.92), probably even more than the collapse of the Soviet imperial system in 1991. In order to prevent that from happening and to keep Ukraine, or at least part of the country, under its control, Russia occupied Crimea in March 2014 and destabilised the predominantly Russian-speaking Eastern Ukrainian regions (Mölder, Sazonov & Värk

2014, p.2148-2161; Mölder, Sazonov & Värk 2015, p.1-28). Russia has not taken any initiative favouring international or regional crisis management, though it would have had good tools for mediating between the Ukrainian government, recognised by Russia, and unrecognised People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, had it wished so.

During the course of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the role of actual military interventions has remained low in comparison to different tools of asymmetric warfare (information warfare, economic measures, cyber war and psychological war on all levels) – often referred to as hybrid warfare. According to Andras Rácz (2015, p.88-89), in hybrid war, “*the regular military force is used mainly as a deterrent and not as a tool of open aggression*” in comparison to other types of war. However, hybrid war as such is not a new phenomenon, as its principles were also characteristic to Soviet military thinking. What was new in 2014, was the “*highly effective, in many cases almost real-time coordination of the various means employed, including political, military, special operations and information measures*” that caught both the Kyiv government and the West off the guard in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (Rácz 2015, p.87). The current empirical research focuses on one part of the hybrid war – information warfare.

According to Ulrik Franke (2015, p.9), information warfare is about achieving goals, e.g. annexing another country, by replacing military force and bloodshed with cleverly crafted and credibly supported messages to win over the minds of the belligerents. However, for Russia, information warfare is not simply an accidental choice of instruments in a diverse toolbox of weapons. The new Russian military doctrine from December 2014 (Rossiyskaya Gazeta 2014) explicitly states that in the modern war, information superiority is essential to achieve victory on the physical battlefield. Or, as Army General Valery Gerasimov (2013, pp.2-3), Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia explains: “*Information warfare*

opens wide asymmetric possibilities for decreasing the fighting potential of an enemy". Russian scholars Chekinov and Bogdanov (2011, p.6) use the term *strategic information warfare*, which forms a vital part of supporting different military and non-military measures (e.g. disrupting military and government leadership, misleading the enemy, forming desirable public opinions, organising anti-government activities) aimed at decreasing the determination of the opponent to resist. Starodubtsev, Bukharin and Semenov (2012, p.24) point out that it is already in peacetime when successful information war can result in decisions favouring the initiating party.

Compared with the 2008 war in Georgia, where Russian information operations were not so successful (see e.g. Niedermaier 2008), Russia has now paid more attention to the role of information in the high-tech world, strategic communications and modern warfare (Ginos 2010). In 2008, Russia misjudged the importance of information warfare and lost the war of narratives to the West. Georgia lost the war, but Russia was not able to exploit its military advantages, much more due to the disorganisation of the Russian troops than Georgia's resistance (Gressel 2015). In 2014, the dramatically increased pressure by Russia's information operations against Ukraine played a significant part in the hybrid warfare carried out on the territory of Eastern Ukraine, which confirms that Russia has made its lessons learned from the previous campaign (Berzinš 2014, De Silva 2015, Galeotti 2014, Howard & Puhkov 2014, Gressel 2015).

The extensive use of special operation forces that produce public discontent in the crisis area and manipulate public opinion can be clearly identified during the Ukrainian crisis. Russia stimulates a proxy war in Eastern Ukraine, where the local pro-Russian separatists have been used as military tools of Russia's political goals. Russia offers them its extensive support, but this support is thoroughly calculated and tied to Russia's national interests. In

conducting its operations against Ukraine, Russia follows the guidelines of hybrid war or non-linear war. It appeared first in the article of Valeriy Gerasimov (Gerasimov 2013), which became known in the West as "Gerasimov doctrine" and which brought Russian military thinking closer to that of Sun Zi³ than to the Western understanding of conducting wars (see Sun Zi 1994).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Russian information operations against Ukraine are not of new origin. Vitalii Moroz (2015), Head of New Media Department at Internews Ukraine, and Tetyana Lebedeva (2015), Honorary Head of the Independent Association of Broadcasters, point to the years 2003-2004, when Russian propagandists started to create the idea of dividing Ukraine into two or three parts. Moroz (2015) associates it with the events in Russia at the same time – oppression of the *NTV* news channel and the appearance of political technologists in the Russian media space. Some of these technologists were simultaneously hired by the team of Yanukovich to work against the Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko (Moroz 2015). According to Lebedeva (2015), Russian information activities started to creep in already during the presidency of Leonid Kuchma, but the impact of the “first Maidan” – the Orange Revolution of 2004 – made the Russian rulers uneasy to maintain their influence over Ukraine. Back then, the Russian information operations were not as massive, aggressive, influential and visible as they are now. Dmytro Kuleba (2015), Ambassador-at-Large at the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, considers a more aggressive wave of Russian information campaigns to have started approximately one year before the annexation of Crimea, in 2013. The overtake-process indicates that this was a well-prepared action and Russia was militarily ready to conduct the operation in Crimea.

The Russian information operations in 2014 were carried out at all levels starting with the political level up to the military level.

³ Sun Zi was a Chinese strategist, philosopher and general, lived 544-496 BC.

According to Jolanta Darczewska (2014, p.5), an unprecedentedly large-scale exploitation of Russian federal television and radio channels, newspapers and online resources was supported by diplomats, politicians, political analysts, experts, and representatives of the academic and cultural elites. After the occupation of Crimea and the Donbass region, Ukrainian TV channels became prohibited there so that it was possible to watch mainly Russian and local separatists' channels funded by Russia (Moroz 2015). New propaganda-oriented channels were also founded that started as online news portals, but which by now have become influential TV channels, such as *LifeNews* (Moroz 2015). Despite partial censorship of Ukrainian online news portals in Donbass, the population still has access to Ukrainian sites (Moroz 2015).

In these circumstances, the image of the Ukrainian army, as put forward by the Russian information operations, portrays them as murderers, criminals and Nazi perpetrators. These images are created methodically, using a very aggressive and emotional rhetoric (Kuleba 2015).

Methodology

To find answers to the questions on how Russia uses the media as part of information warfare, integrated content analysis was used. Content analysis is both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative benefits of content analysis allowed for systematising the meaning-making regarding the different target groups – the Ukrainian government, army and its leadership. After that, the quantitative aspect of the analysis provided statistical output to depict various trends in using different keywords and narratives. Although content analysis is “*reliable (reproducible) and not unique to the investigator*” (McQuail 2010, p.362), the results still depend on the coding manual, the creation of which includes an inevitable aspect of subjectivity on behalf of the researchers. Nevertheless, it still

enables to provide structure to the various elements exploited by Russia in its propaganda.

The empirical material was gathered from three Russian news outlets – *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Regnum*, *TV Zvezda* – during the research period from 1 April until 31 December 2014. The period after the annexation of Crimea by Russia was chosen because it includes the intensification of Russian-backed military activities in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics against the Ukrainian civil authorities and Defence Forces in Eastern Ukraine.

Although not representative of the entire media landscape of Russia, these three outlets were of interest to us due to various aspects. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* is one of the most widely circulated newspapers, which is targeted not only at the Russian audience but also has many readers in Ukraine (especially in Eastern Ukraine), Moldova, Belarus, and in other countries with large Russian diasporas, including the Baltic States. Historically, during Soviet times, the ranks of “journalists” working for *Komsomolskaya Pravda* were often filled with officials from the intelligence services and KGB. Even in the 1990s, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* had about a dozen foreign correspondents out of whom only one was not related to the intelligence services (Earley 2009, p. 244). *Regnum* represents an information agency, which focuses on events in the post-Soviet space or the so-called “near abroad” (Regnum 2015). Vigen Akopyan, the former editor-in-chief of *Regnum*, declared that the agency would oppose Russian investments in any country whose politics are hostile to Russia or which is supporting the rehabilitation of fascism (Baltija.eu 2012). *Regnum* is also connected to the Russian government. For example, Modest Kolerov, the co-founder and present editor-in-chief of *Regnum* worked in the administration of the Russian President (2005-2007) and is one of the most prominent political technologists in Russia (Obshchaya Gazeta 2015). *TV Zvezda* (our analysis concentrated only on the

online news part of the channel) is owned by the Russian Ministry of Defence and is therefore of interest to us in terms of reporting the military aspects of the crisis.

The coding manual was developed based on qualitative analysis and expert discussions with the attempt to investigate the variety of themes and tools of information warfare. We focused on historical narratives and the use of them in the modern context as the preliminary qualitative analysis indicated that Russia often tries to undermine the historical nation-building process with re-utilising important narratives as part of the propaganda.

Our coding manual first scrutinised the main topics of the articles. Secondly, we examined what kind of attitudes (if applicable) the articles conveyed about the Ukrainian defence forces, the army leadership and the Kyiv government. By doing this, we intended to investigate how negative propaganda is used as a tool in information warfare. The target groups were scrutinised against the appearance of the following keywords or themes:

- parallels with Third Reich – fascists, Nazis, neo-Nazis, Bandera etc.⁴
- humiliating and belittling the Ukrainian soldiers – criminals, rapists, drug addicts, cowards, violence and chaos in the army etc.⁵
- execution squads, punitive units (*karatel'i*)⁶
- genocide, fratricide, terrorists⁷
- Kyiv junta and its followers⁸

⁴ e.g. “Chairman of the Ivano-Frankivsk oblast council Vasily Skripnichuk suggested following the example of Hitler in road constructions in the region” (Regnum 2014)

⁵ e.g. “Nazis-perverts of the Ukrainian subunit “Tornado” established 360-degree defence positions” (Boyko 2014)

⁶ e.g. “Siloviki started a punitive operation in south-eastern Ukraine under the command of Kyiv more than a month ago” (Zvezda 2014a)

⁷ e.g. “Ukrainian siloviki shot wounded people in the hospital” (Zvezda 2014b)

⁸ e.g. “Troops of the junta started preparations for an offensive on Luhansk” (Demchenko 2014)

- Russophobia – discrimination, nationalism, xenophobia⁹
- Ukrainians as “false Russians”, little brothers, failed state¹⁰
- Ukraine as the West’s puppets¹¹

In addition to these negative images, other possibilities were also included in the coding manual. For example, the texts could also be conveying a positive image of Ukraine, either by the author himself saying something supportive towards Ukraine or referring to someone doing that, e.g. “*We believe that the Ukrainian government is acting in accordance to the laws in their country*” – she [Jennifer Psaki] noted at the briefing in the White House” (Zvezda 2014d). If not positive, the articles could have also taken a justifying stance - not being directly supportive of the Ukrainian army or the government but nevertheless giving an explanation or excuse, e.g. “*He fought not for long – he was wounded and captured. And only there he realized what the siloviki had turned the towns in south-eastern Ukraine into*” (Zvezda 2014e). An important category was that of neutrally presented articles which simply stated events or facts (whether true or not), but without explicit judgements – e.g. “*This night the military leadership of Kyiv, DPR and LPR met for the first time*” (Zvezda 2014f). If the article had a negative tonality, which did not fall under any of the above-mentioned negative categories, it was coded as “other negative”. For example, “*Because the mind refused to believe that people in normal condition could so cynically taunt the corpses of their compatriots*” (Grishin 2014a). The analysis did not include and aim at examining the share of true and fake stories.

⁹ e.g. “*The core of the Bandera movement is not to glorify Bandera. Its essence is to kill Russians.*” (Danilov 2014)

¹⁰ e.g. “*Russian with an Ukrainian – twin-brothers*” (Skoybeda 2014)

¹¹ e.g. “*According to the minister [Lavrov], the conflict in Ukraine is a direct consequence of the short-sighted and prevocational politics of the alliance of Western countries led by the US*” (Zvezda 2014c)

The results are divided into four phases according to different stages in the military events on the ground:

- I – Provoking the military conflict – April 2014
- II – Escalation of the military conflict – May-June 2014
- III – Direct intervention in the military conflict, changing the situation – July-September 2014
- IV – Stirring up the military conflict – September-December 2014

Altogether, the data sample comprised of 418 articles, the breakdown of which according to the phases and outlets is shown in Table 1 below.

	<i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i>	<i>Regnum</i>	<i>TV Zvezda</i>
Phase I	10	9	15
Phase II	33	34	34
Phase III	34	35	36
Phase IV	51	70	57
Total	128	148	142

Table 1. Breakdown of the data sample according to phases of the military conflict in Ukraine (2014).

In order to cover the research period of 1 April – 31 December 2014, each week was examined as shown in Table 2 below.

Channel	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
<i>Regnum</i>	X		X			
<i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i>		X		X		
<i>TV Zvezda</i>					X	X

Table 2. Principles of data sampling.

From each day two relevant news stories – the first and the last – were analysed by using the coding manual. Only online news from each news channel was used.

The final coding was done by three people, using GoogleForms in a survey mode where each of the three coders filled out a “coding survey” for each article in the sample. Later, spreadsheet tools were used for data analysis. Formal intra-coder validation was not used, with several seminars and discussions including joint coding sessions being used instead.

Results of media analysis

The analysis of the three online news channels under investigation – *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda* – brought out a range of approaches how Russian information campaigns construct a predominantly negative image of Ukraine. Although the three channels under scrutiny are not representative of the entire spectrum of Russian media, the study revealed how the anti-Ukrainian approach can take different forms and relies on various nuances. By using different channels with different approaches,

Russia's information warfare manages to cater for different audiences with different tastes and needs for media consumption.

Comparative overview of news channels

Different target groups – Ukrainian soldiers, army leadership and the government – received the most judgemental treatment by *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. For example, 86% of the articles in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* conveyed a negative attitude towards the Ukrainian army, while the same figures for *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda* were 23% and 43% respectively. The Ukrainian government was approached in a critical way in 62% of the articles in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 43% in *Regnum* and 31% in *TV Zvezda*. The Ukrainian army leadership got significantly less attention than the army as a whole or the government. While 44% of the articles in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* criticised the command authorities of the army, then only 14% and 6% of the articles did the same in *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda* respectively. Therefore, when reporting the Ukraine crisis, the focus was mostly on the army as a whole and from the leadership point of view it was the government not the military command authorities that received the most attention.

Out of those articles that dealt with any of the three target groups (leaving aside the articles that did not touch upon these topics), the share of neutrally presented non-judgemental articles was considerably higher in *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda* than in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (see Figure 1).

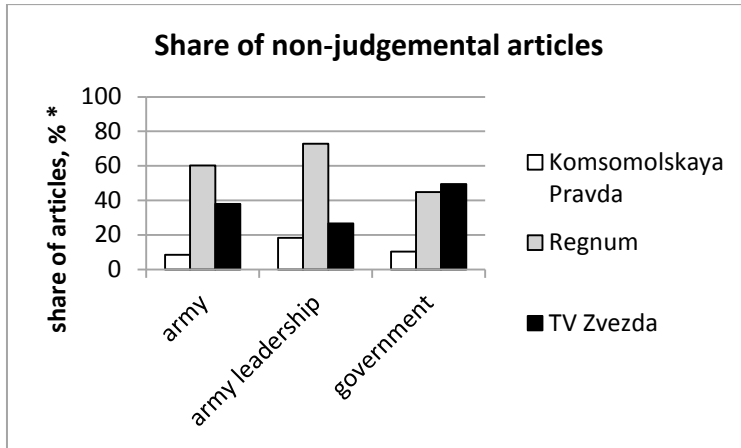


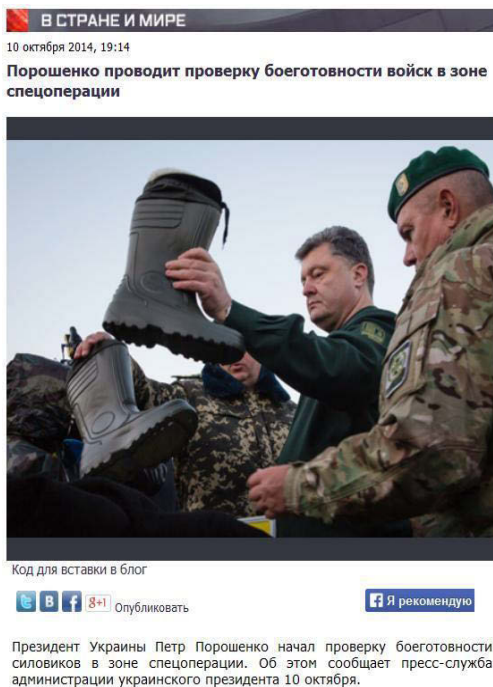
Figure 1. Share of non-judgemental articles.

*percentage of articles regarding the specific target group, not the entire data sample

Regnum and *TV Zvezda* relied more on simply presenting events in a neutral style (whether or not these facts were actually true) that did not draw explicit conclusions and were, therefore, more reserved – for example, “*The Ukrainian security services detained 15 people during the course of a large-scale special operation in the Luhansk oblast*” (Zvezda 2014g). On average, almost two-thirds of the articles in *Regnum* (59%) and more than one-third (38%) in *TV Zvezda* did not include explicit judgements, while the same figure was only 12% for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. Regarding its treatment of the Ukrainian army leadership, *TV Zvezda* was percentage-wise more similar to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* but this is explained by the overall significantly lower level of importance of this topic in *TV Zvezda*. It was only 10% of the articles in *TV Zvezda* that referred to the command authorities of the Ukrainian army, while the same figure was 54% for *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and 55% for *Regnum*. Thus, this topic was, in fact, largely missing in *TV Zvezda*. The share of positive or justifying references to any of the three target groups was marginal and therefore negligible.

The different nature of the outlets' treatment of the Ukraine crisis can also be explained by the different genres used. *TV Zvezda* and *Regnum* focused on newsworthiness of different events and fast facts (whether or not these were actually true). Virtually all articles in *TV Zvezda* were news stories (140 out of 142). *Regnum* had adopted an interesting approach by relying mostly on two genres: news and statements. The latter mostly took the form of quoting statements, speeches etc. of different politicians, officials and institutions; thus attempting to gain additional credibility by relying on external authority of prominent figures. The share of opinion pieces in *Regnum* was less than 5% and non-existent in *TV Zvezda*. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, on the other hand, used the greatest variety of different journalistic genres. While about 40% of the articles were news stories and 23% were statements, the rest divided relatively equally between opinion pieces, interviews and reportages, thus allowing for a greater extent of offering their readers the "full package" of events, facts and explicit judgements.

Although the present analysis did not go in-depth with textual and discourse analysis, differences in stylistic means also folded out when conveying, for example, critical attitudes. It was *Komsomolskaya Pravda* that relied more on emotional and even aggressive rhetoric when describing the crisis and its counterparts. For example, the title of an article dealing with Ukrainian army states that the "Nazis-perverts of the Ukrainian subunit "Tornado" established 360-degree defence positions" (Boyko 2014).



Picture 1. “Poroshenko is checking the military preparedness of troops in the zone of special operations”. (Source: *TV Zvezda*).

However, when it comes to portraying different groups of adversaries – Ukraine, its military and government institutions – attention must be paid to the subtler ways that, for example, *TV Zvezda* has adopted to convey its anti-Ukrainian approach. The stories that simply describe events but do not carry explicit judgements (50% of the stories in *TV Zvezda* regarding the Ukrainian government and almost 40% of those regarding the Ukrainian army) seemingly leave it to the readers to independently draw conclusions. Each news story taken separately seems, at first glance, to follow the technical logic of solid journalistic production – referring to sources, devoid of extravagant display of emotions,

reserved in its choice of linguistic means. Nevertheless, when looked upon as a whole, the anti-Ukrainian stance becomes apparent as *TV Zvezda* does have its ways of “helping” the reader to reach that viewpoint. One of the ways for that is, for example, the choice of photos. For instance, a news story that states in its title that Poroshenko is checking the readiness of the troops in the zones of special operations (Zvezda 2014i) has Poroshenko on a photo holding a pair of rubber boots in his hands (see Picture 1). As a result, the article can easily succeed in giving a discrediting impression of Ukraine – whether targeted specifically at the military supplies of the army, the ability of Poroshenko or the Ukrainian government to provide that to the troops, or contributing generally to the overall negative tonality.

Main topics of the articles

In our research, we focused on different military aspects of the crisis. Figures 2-4 show the distribution of the **main topics** across the three outlets. In all cases, the list of main topics of the articles is dominated by different war-related events – combat activities, violence and terrorism. However, differences in accentuation fold out.

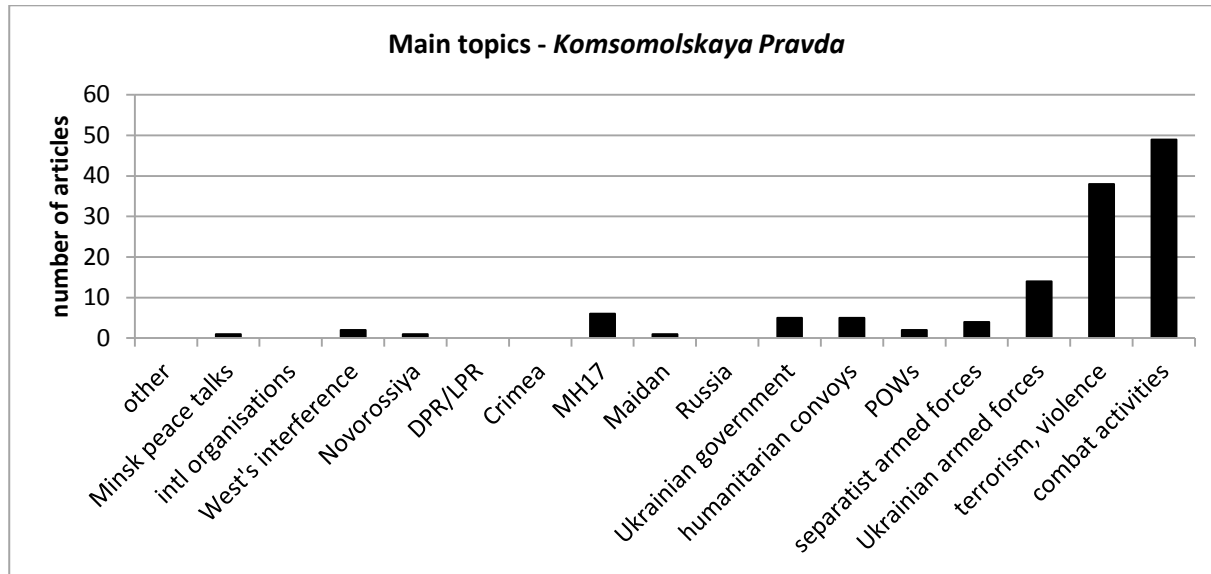


Figure 2. Main topics of the articles in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.

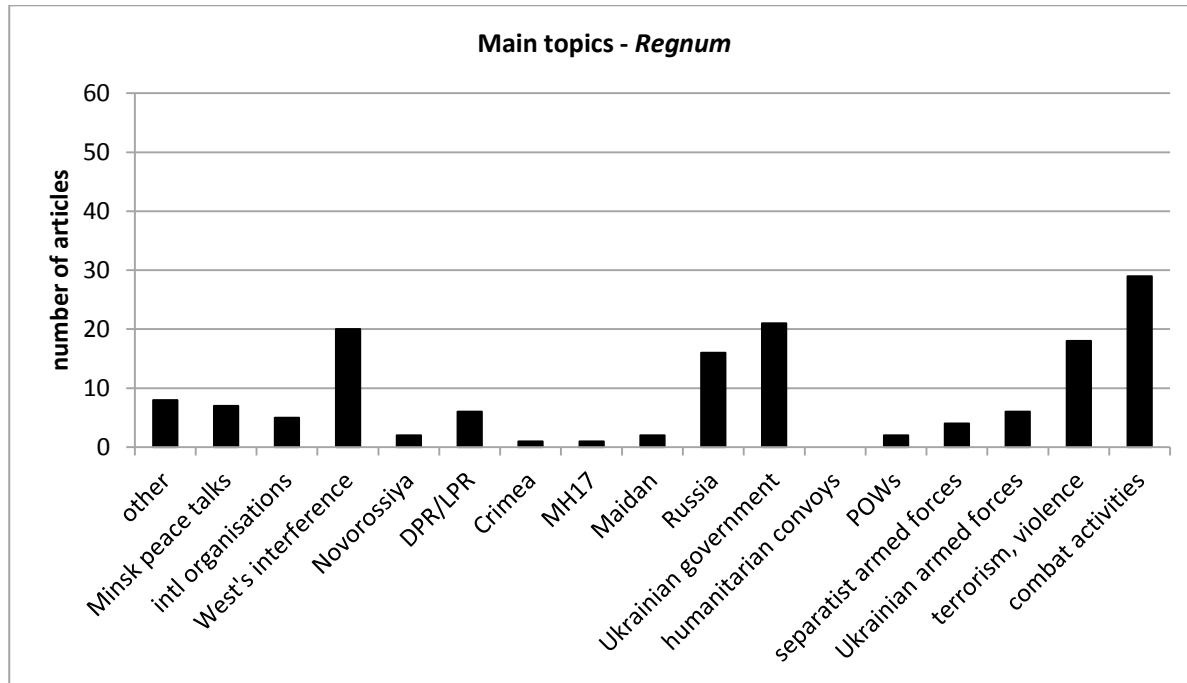


Figure 3. Main topics of the articles in *Regnum*.

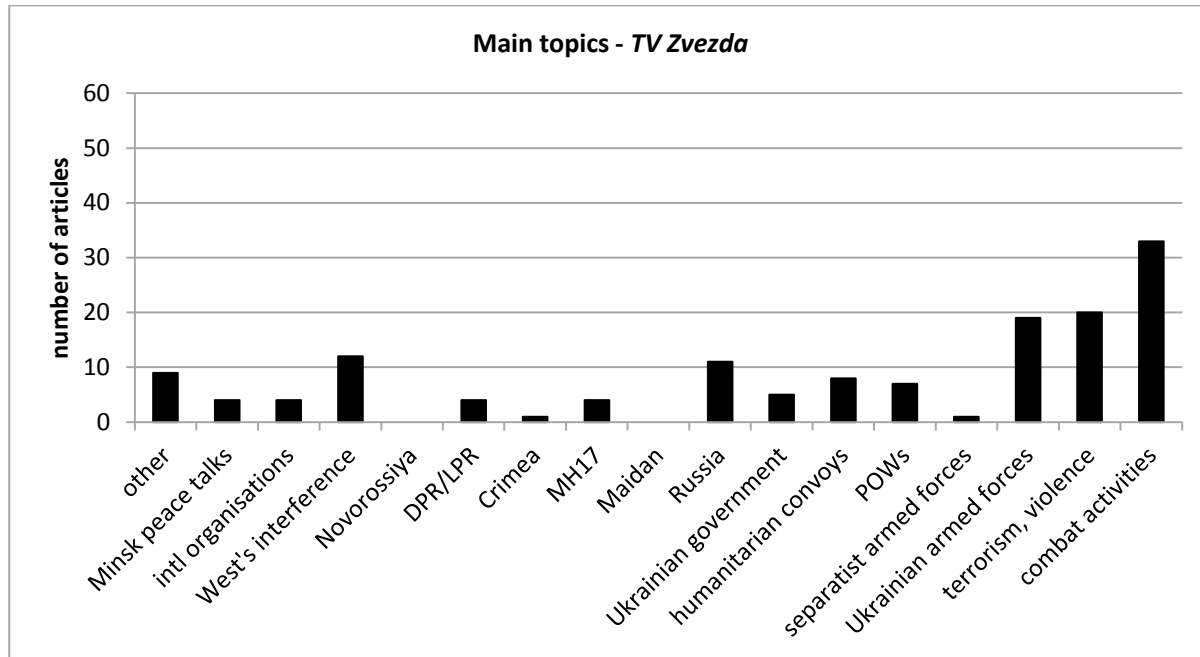


Figure 4. Main topics of the articles in *TV Zvezda*.

The prevalence of different counterparts of the conflict on the ground – Ukrainian and separatist armed forces, as well as prisoners of war (POWs) – is evident to a smaller extent. Nevertheless, in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (see Figure 2) and *TV Zvezda* (see Figure 4), the Ukrainian armed forces are still the third most frequent main topic. These two outlets pay considerably less attention to the separatist armed forces. In *Regnum* (see Figure 3), on the other hand, the armed forces, whether Ukrainian or separatist, figure to equally little extent.

Out of the three outlets it is *Regnum* that focuses the most on the political aspects of the conflict by including stories that deal with the Ukrainian government, the West's interference in Ukraine, and Russia as the main topics. These main topics are also present in *TV Zvezda* but to a lesser extent. Interestingly, they are virtually non-existent in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.

Importantly, topics related to separatists – the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR/LPR), so-called Novorossiia, and Crimea – are present to only a very small degree as main topics across all three outlets. This shows that while reporting the military aspects of the crisis, even if the articles deal with Eastern Ukraine, the main focus was rather on specific events (battles, shootings, violence etc.) than on broader questions regarding the separatist entities.

All in all, it is *Komsomolskaya Pravda* that stands out with the narrowest range of main topics, concentrating largely on the events on the ground, leaving the political level of the crisis in the background. *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda* have a more even distribution of main topics.

When it comes to the breakdown of main topics across the four phases of the conflict, then the first phase (April 2014 – provoking the military conflict) stands out with *Komsomolskaya Pravda* dealing only with topics related to combat activities and separatist armed

forces. During phases II and III, the relative share of topics related to combat activities and terrorism is the highest across all outlets, which expectedly coincides with the most acute phases of the military conflict. In *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the combined share of both of these topics was about 75% for both phases, in *Regnum* the same figure was about 40%. In *TV Zvezda*, it was 70% for Phase II and 40% for Phase III when other main topics started to enter the scene, such as the Ukrainian government, Russia and the so-called humanitarian convoys. The variety of main topics is the greatest in phase IV. This illustrates how the Russian information campaigns against Ukraine have become broader in their scope.

Ukrainian armed forces and their command authorities

Throughout the period under scrutiny, it is phase I (April – provoking the military conflict) that stands out from the rest when portraying the Ukrainian armed forces (see Figure 5). This is evident by the highest share of non-judgemental articles (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Regnum* – 60% and 55% of the stories respectively) and the lowest share of articles mentioning the Ukrainian armed forces (*TV Zvezda* – 40% of the articles) in comparison to the later phases. After April, during phases II-IV, the share of articles critical towards the Ukrainian armed forces is always at least half of the data sample. There are virtually no articles presenting anyone's positive or justifying viewpoints of the army.

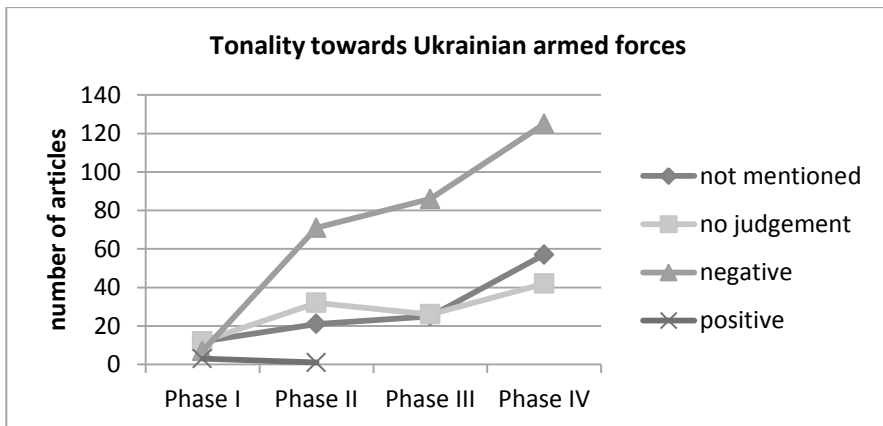


Figure 5. Tonality towards the Ukrainian armed forces in the articles throughout Phases I-IV.

Out of all the different negative approaches that the articles convey towards the Ukrainian army, the overall picture of different narratives also becomes more diverse during phases I-IV across all outlets (see Figure 6). Therefore, the Russian information campaigns intensified only during phase II, together with the escalation of the actual military conflict. The most frequent narratives used associate the Ukrainian army with violence (including terrorism) and label them as execution squads (*karateli*). *Karateli* is the most frequent association with the Nazis and their crimes. More explicit associations with the Nazis, such as parallels with the Kyiv junta and fascists, are always present to a lower level. The share of articles arguing for Russophobia stays the lowest throughout all the four phases.



Figure 6. Critical approaches towards the Ukrainian armed forces throughout Phases I-IV.

When it comes to portraying the Ukrainian armed forces, it is also *Komsomolskaya Pravda* that offers the most colourful and explicitly negative approach. A great deal of articles concentrates on executions, killings and torturing of civilians, including Russian-speaking people, by Ukrainian forces. For example, an article describes how “*One of the videos, published by militia, shows fresh burials. Bodies have not been buried in the ground but simply scattered. Everyone’s hands have been tied behind their backs. Judging upon the wounds in the heads, they had just been put on their knees and shot*” (Kots 2014). More than 10% of the data sample in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* portrayed the Ukrainian armed forces as fascists or Nazis. Moreover, about 40% of the articles in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* show the Ukrainian soldiers as *karateli* who also kill and rape people, among them women and children. For example, an article states that “*Bodies of brutally murdered women were found in the camp of karateli near Donetsk*” (Ovchinnikov

2014). Humiliation and belittling of the Ukrainian soldiers is also common (12% of the articles) – authors of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* often portray the army and its volunteers as criminals, rapists, drug addicts, alcoholics, robbers and cowards, who taunt and torture children, women and old people. Ukrainian armed forces are shown as revolting due to miserable conditions in the army and not wanting to shoot civilians. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* claims that the “*Moral condition of the Ukrainian army makes us worry more and more. But the moral condition of the authorities of the army is a laughter through tears*” (Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014).

As opposed to the overwhelming approach of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the Russian information operations can also take a more reserved approach to portray the Ukrainian army. For example, the style used by *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda* was more restrained by putting emphasis on facts (whether true or not) and not playing directly on emotions. There were no colourful metaphors for labelling the Ukrainian armed forces – *siloviki* (“persons of force”, representatives of the security or military services) was probably most frequently used strongest negative label for indicating the Ukrainian fighters in the Eastern Ukraine. For example, “*Ukrainian siloviki are carrying out a special operation in Mariupol against supporters of the federalisation of Ukraine*” (Zvezda 2014h). Despite the Russian information campaigns often relying on drawing parallels between Ukraine and Nazi Germany, the respective associations were largely missing in *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda*, whether in the form of referring to past events or describing the Ukrainian government, army or its leadership. Although the term *karатели* was sometimes used, it remained rather low-profile in terms of frequency. While in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* about 40% of the articles referred to the Ukrainian soldiers as *karатели*, the respective term was used only in 7% of the articles in *TV Zvezda* and only in one article in *Regnum*.

TV Zvezda, compared to *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, also relies on subtler ways of constructing a negative image of the Ukrainian army. For

example, when reporting a brutal crime against innocent people, the article then casually mentions that a Ukrainian army base happens to be located in the same town (Zvezda 2014j; see Picture 2). Technically the article does not accuse anyone but it does require an effort of critical thinking on behalf of the readers not to associate these two separate statements with each other, which might not become the case.

В СТРАНЕ И МИРЕ

31 октября 2014, 12:22

Тела 286 женщин обнаружены под Красноармейском

Код для вставки в блог

[т](#) [В](#) [f](#) [g+](#) Опубликовать[Я рекомендую](#)

За последнее время в районе города Красноармейска Донецкой области были обнаружены тела 286 женщин. Об этом со ссылкой на премьер-министра самопровозглашенной Донецкой Народной Республики Александра Захарченко сообщает РИА Новости. Всего пропавшими без вести на территории ДНР числились 400 человек в возрасте от 18 до 25 лет.

«Почти 400 женщин в возрасте от 18 до 25 лет пропали в Красноармейске без вести, где расквартирован батальон «Днепр-1». 286 тел женщин были обнаружены вокруг Красноармейска изнасилованными», - цитирует Захарченко агентство.

Picture 2. “Bodies of 286 women found near Красноармейск”.¹ (Source: *TV Zvezda*)

¹ The main body of the article says: “Bodies of 286 women were recently found in a district of the Красноармейск town in the Donetsk oblast. This was reported by RIA Novosti with reference to 55

As for the command authorities of the Ukrainian armed forces (see Figure 7), the articles focus on them to a considerably lower extent than to the armed forces in general. All throughout the four phases, the share of articles that does not mention the army leadership is always the highest. While during phases I and II, the share of non-judgemental articles was slightly higher than those conveying a negative approach, then during phases III and IV it is the other way round. The share of articles presenting positive or justifying opinions is, similarly to the armed forces, practically non-existent. Overall, the Russian information operations tend to take a more lukewarm stance on the military leaders.

the Prime Minister of the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk Alexander Zakharchenko. Altogether, 400 people aged 18 to 25 have been reported missing on the territory of DPR. "Nearly 400 women aged 18 to 25 years went missing in Krasnoarmeysk, where the battalion "Dnepr-1" is quartered. 286 bodies of women were found around Krasnoarmeysk raped", - the agency quotes Zakharchenko." (Zvezda 2014j)

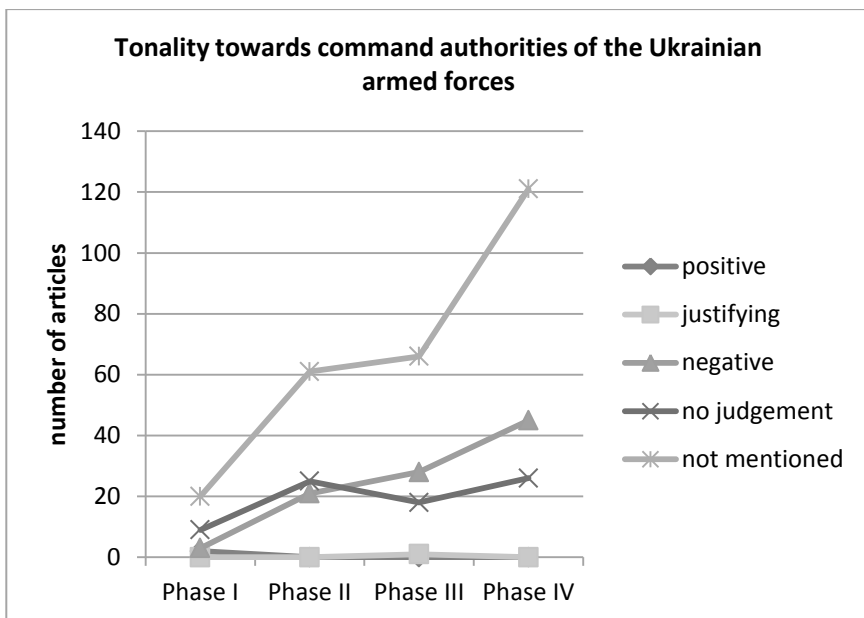


Figure 7. Tonality towards the command authorities of the Ukrainian armed forces in the articles throughout Phases I-IV.

When comparing the different negative attitudes, then no drastic dynamics emerge (see Figure 8). The share of various other unspecified negative attitudes is the highest. Association with violence is very low in phase I but becomes the second most frequent criticism by phase IV. In comparison to the negative attitudes towards the entire army, then the associations with Nazis – fascists and junta – have a higher share (despite the absolute number of articles being considerably lower). The stance on the Ukrainian army leadership also depends on the outlet. *TV Zvezda*, despite presenting a varied selection of narratives, nevertheless mentions the Ukraine army leadership significantly less than *Regnum* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. When comparing the latter two, then

Regnum is mostly non-judgemental, while *Komsomolskaya Pravda* offers a variety of negative approaches.

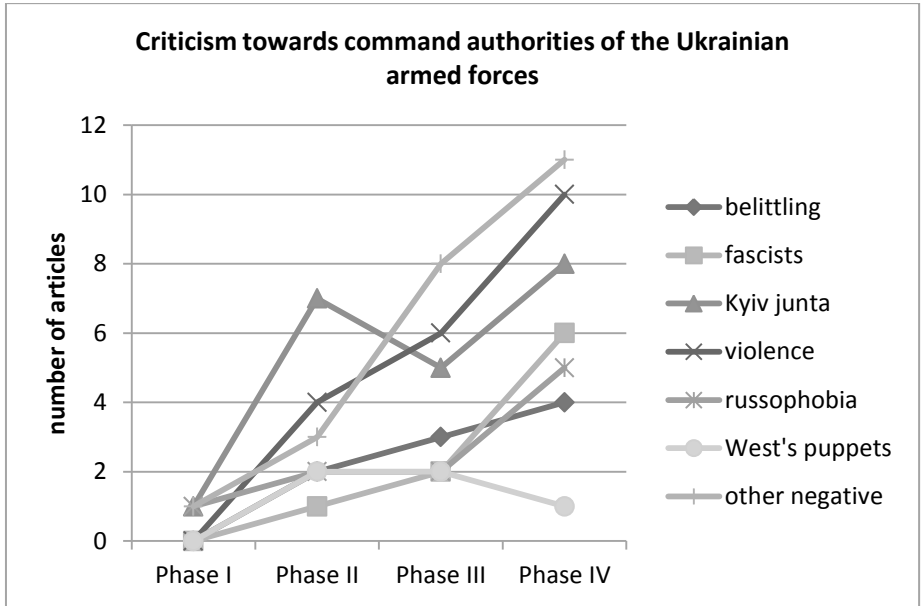


Figure 8. Critical approaches towards the command authorities of the Ukrainian armed forces throughout Phases I-IV.

Ukrainian government

When it comes to tonality towards the Ukrainian government (see Figure 9), it is always dominated by negative attitudes, except for in phase II when the negative stance on the government figures less in the articles. Similarly to the Ukrainian army and its leadership, there are hardly any positive or justifying references.

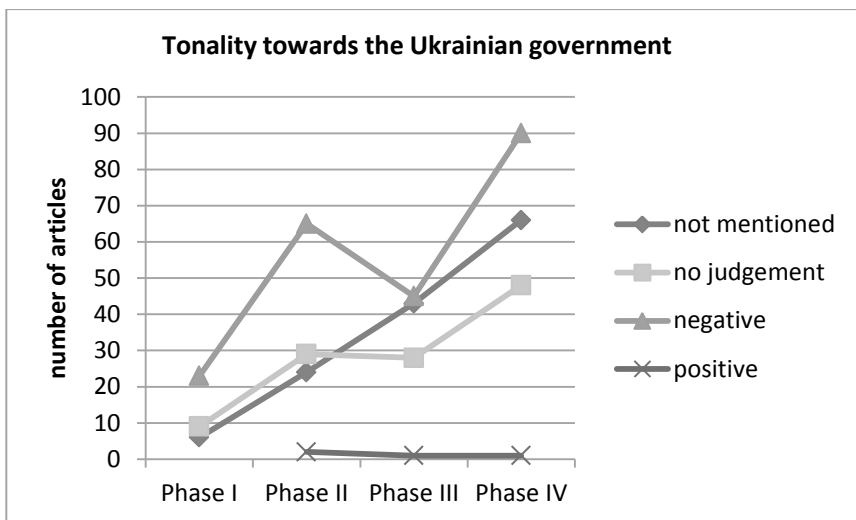


Figure 9. Tonality towards the Ukrainian government in the articles throughout Phases I-IV.

As for the negative stance towards the Ukrainian government (see Figure 10), then similarly to that towards the army and its leadership, the list is dominated by associations with violence. In absolute terms the government gets associated with violence the most all throughout the phases. However, in relative terms its share decreases as the usage of other narratives increases. Similarly to the army, different outlets also target the government differently. This also becomes evident when comparing the first phase with the later ones. While *TV Zvezda* remained relatively modest about the Ukrainian armed forces in April when compared to the other outlets, then it is in April when *TV Zvezda* associates the government the most with violence. *TV Zvezda* argues less for acts of violence during the later phases while *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, on the other hand, increases the usage of this narrative.

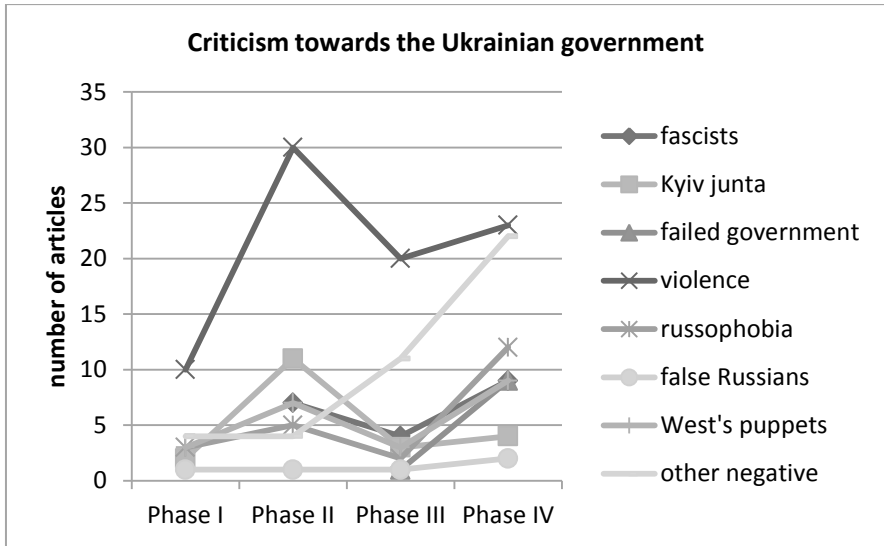


Figure 10. Critical approaches towards the Ukrainian government throughout Phases I-IV.

Overall, the usage of other different negative narratives increases during the second half of 2014 (phases III and IV). Interestingly, while the Ukrainian army leadership was quite visibly associated with following the Kyiv junta, then the level of labelling the government itself as junta, except for the rise in phase II, remains rather low-profile. On the contrary, it is the government that gets associated with Russophobia more than the army and its leadership, and the usage of this narrative also increases with time. The share of portraying the Ukrainian state and people as “false Russians” remains the lowest all throughout the four phases.

Similarly to other categories, the Russian information campaigns against the government take different forms in different outlets. The selection of narratives used by *Komsomolskaya Pravda* widens with time, while *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda* display more fluctuation. While all three outlets argue the most for violence on behalf of the

government, then *Komsomolskaya Pravda* often tied that with violence against the Russian-speaking people, e.g. that Ukrainian state policy is genocide. For that reason, Investigations Committee of the Russian Federation started a criminal case against Ukrainian armed forces, which killed more than 2.500 civilians (Grishin 2014b). Another article stated among other negative descriptions that “*Ukrainian TV channel Hromadske TV announced the planned killing of at least 1.5 million of Novorossiysans*” (Resnes 2014).

Regnum turns to Ukrainian and Western analysts that have critical views against the Ukrainian authorities or experts from other CIS countries that may produce opinions favourable for Russia. However, in its opinion-building *Regnum* usually avoids direct disparagement of opponents. Indirect belittling can be found, which makes the Ukrainian authorities responsible for the violence and human catastrophe in Eastern Ukraine and describes the Ukrainian crisis as a battlefield between Western and Russian civilization, where the Ukrainian authorities are the puppets of the West. At the same time, *Regnum* avoids calling the Ukrainian authorities and armed forces fascists, criminals or using other extreme expressions to describe them. While in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* there are altogether 30 articles (almost a quarter) that refer to the Ukrainian government as fascists or junta, the respective figures for *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda* are only 7 and 3 articles, thus marginal.

Conclusion

The analysis of Russian media confirms that media plays an important role in the management of conflict in Ukraine. Russia uses the influence and accessibility of Russian media outlets to undermine Ukrainian efforts with a variety of approaches that have intensified over time. The research showed that while the Russian information operations remained more modest during the initial phase of the military conflict, together with the escalation of

military activities, the information campaigns also reached a more intense level. Russian behaviour during the crisis has always been rational and calculated – there is no "mysterious Russia", which acts in an untold manner. While the Georgian campaign of 2008 focused principally on the demonstration of Russia's military power, then information warfare is besides the military activities a clue term for the current Ukrainian crisis and the military activities often just support the main battles conducted through media channels. There is much evidence that Russia tests its new military strategy, in which different non-military actions, popularly called hybrid wars or non-linear wars, are often used for achieving military goals.

The current study focused on outlets that represent the Russian mainstream media – *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda*. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* tends to be more aggressive against Ukraine as the majority of news, statements, reportages, and interviews are given with a strong judgement. *Regnum*, contrariwise, usually puts emphasis on facts and avoids provoking emotions. This can be explained by its specific role as an information agency, while newspapers are more oriented to opinion pieces. The majority of news is given without judgement, but at the same time it does not provide any criticism towards the Russian government. Similarly to *Regnum*, *TV Zvezda* is rather restrained in terms of portraying the crisis and its counterparts. In building negative images, *TV Zvezda* targets mostly the Ukrainian armed forces and the government.

The Russian information operations have as many faces as Russia has different media channels. These mass media channels are generally critical against the Ukrainian government and armed forces, and tend to support the political goals of the Russian authorities. In their information building, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Regnum* and *TV Zvezda* often refer to soft propaganda mechanisms and methods. Following Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010, p.19), we are entering the second phase of the mediatisation of war and more

research is needed on how war and media mutually shape each other.

Acknowledgements

This article was written with the financial support of the project “Information operations of Russian Federation 2013-2014 on examples of Ukraine crisis: Influences on Ukrainian Defence Forces” (Estonian National Defence College, leader of the project Vladimir Sazonov) and NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. We are very thankful for critical remarks to prof. dr. Triin Vihalemm, dr. Andra Siibak (University of Tartu, Faculty of Social Sciences and Education, Institute of Social Studies), 1st LT Andrei Šlabovič and reviewers.

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