



A Ukrainian mural in Kyiv's Independence Square proclaims to the world in English a Ukrainian view on the country's future. In 2013–2014, protesters massed in Maidan against a Russian-sponsored dictatorship. Security forces opened fire on the protesters, killing scores. Maidan became a symbol of Ukraine's defiance of Russian interference and domination. (Photo courtesy of the author)

# Russian Preinvasion Influence Activities in the War with Ukraine

Ian J. Courter

**T**he February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was unsurprising to many longtime analysts and regional experts as the conflict fit a clear pattern with roots going back centuries. Furthermore, a broad swath of academic and military literature published since the 2014 Russian takeover of Crimea

and the proxy war in Donetsk and Luhansk describes in detail the specific activities and methods the Russian government would likely use.

Current U.S. and allied military doctrine, academic publications, and journalists use a variety of labels for state-conducted influence efforts. Much of the literature

this article cites includes terms like hybrid warfare, information warfare, information operations, political warfare, and equivalents for activities executed to affect and shape the behavior of individuals and groups. For simplicity and clarity, this article uses the general term influence activities to describe Russian efforts.

There are two aspects of prewar preparation that aid understanding of Russian influence in the current conflict. First, Russia's government employed a well-established methodology to set conditions. Analysis of a wide range of publications shows a consistent and predictable pattern that helps demystify Russian operations.<sup>1</sup> A key point about Russian influence is *the primary target is always the Russian population, both inside and outside of the Russian Federation*. All other targets are secondary and not necessarily to be persuaded but rather neutralized as impediments to achieving objectives.<sup>2</sup>

Second, Ukraine is a special case where its ancient linguistic, cultural, and religious ties to Russia arguably surpass those of any others among the Slavic nationalities. Therefore, the depth of Russian attention and the levels of vitriol directed toward Ukraine likely exceed what other countries experience.

Finally, the following discussion is a preliminary analysis of a war barely a few months old. Future research and analysis of Russian influence activities may alter some of the points raised. Still, it is highly unlikely Russian actors will significantly deviate from traditional methods and techniques as they are deeply ingrained and difficult to alter; organizations and processes tend take on their own momentum and resist change. Russian military failures to date suggest a range of entrenched processes that defy change, to include influence activities.

## Context

The idea of employing influence activities in military operations against an opponent is very old, but there is nothing particularly "hybrid" or irregular about such integration than what exists in traditional warfare.<sup>3</sup> While categorizing hybrid and the other supposed types of warfare as distinct forms may be debatable, the idea of required areas for success in modern warfare is not: the conventional battleground, the indigenous population, the "home front," and the international communities.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the invasion, the Russian government saturated all areas as part of a

concerted, integrated effort to place itself in the most advantageous position possible, but the home front was most important. Russia inherited this methodology from the Soviet Union, so it is unsurprising the current regime employed it.<sup>5</sup>

When the Soviet Union dissolved in December 1991, the successor Russian Federation lost its status as a world superpower in both concept and in real terms; other than possessing nuclear weapons, the new Russian state was a third-rate power at best. To compensate and retain any chance of achieving foreign policy objectives, and upon appointment as acting Russian president in 1999, Vladimir Putin began a modernization of Russian military capabilities. Nevertheless, aside from newer delivery platforms and employing the most recent communication technologies, the basic Russian influence tactics, techniques, and procedures remain consistent with the past, but executed far more aggressively.

Russian aggression makes its influence activities dramatically different from those of free and open Western countries. Old cultural beliefs coupled with inherited Marxist-Leninist thinking about Western threats means that leaders in Moscow firmly believe that they are engaged in an ongoing war where entire social structures and the minds of populations are appropriate targets.<sup>6</sup> It is a total and zero-sum war in which all options are potentially viable. Consequently, Russian influence actors execute operations with a nearly complete disregard for international rules of conduct and norms.

Instead of viewing influence activities as a military operation or even a whole-of-government activity, Russian leaders appear to adhere to a totalitarian model where the ruling elite work to mobilize any and every part of society that can aid the effort. Instead of Marxist-Leninist

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A Soviet World War II propaganda poster portraying the Soviet conquest of Polish Ukrainian ethnic-majority areas as liberation. The Ukrainian text reads, "We held out our hands to our brothers for them to straighten their backs and to throw the despicable kingdom of whips into the darkness of the ages." The Soviet soldier is striking a caricature of a Polish soldier as two stereotyped Ukrainians escape. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

ideology, now the unifying construct is shared Russian ethnicity. Mobilization includes recruiting civilian individuals and groups residing in Russia and those in the Russian diaspora around the world. As of early April 2022, recruitment efforts reportedly convinced over twenty-eight thousand Russians to join the online effort against Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> Historic patterns show Russian leaders appeal to patriotic feelings that feed on long-standing cultural beliefs, even paranoia that Russia is isolated and subjected to foreign power persecution and targeting. For these reasons, any description of Russian influence activities leading up to the invasion cannot focus solely on the military component but must address the wider Russian view to be informative.

Russian views on conflict illustrate how they view peace and war as having no distinction, merely a state of perpetual conflict that varies in intensity at any given time and across numerous simultaneous operations.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Russian influence activities directed against opponents are fundamentally destructive, especially in the case of democratic and liberal societies that represent an alternative to autocracy and dictatorship.<sup>9</sup> Liberal democracies are disadvantaged due to adherence to rules-based systems of behavior as a defining characteristic. Autocracies such as Russia do not adhere to such restrictions, so they have an inherent advantage compared to Western opponents.<sup>10</sup> Leaders in Russia and the United States may share the common goal of influencing each other, but their thinking and many of the means used are so different they almost defy comparison.

Russian leaders also believe they have both a right and requirement to involve themselves in neighboring countries (what they term as "The Near Abroad"), especially ones formerly part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Among former Czarist and Soviet territories, Ukraine holds a unique position above all others. Ukraine, specifically the capital Kyiv, comprises the heart of the ancestral ancient Rus state and is where the Russian Orthodox Church began. However, Ukrainian identity and culture diverged from the original Kievan Rus and from the equally divergent Russian identity and culture. In fact, significant parts of modern Ukraine like the oblasts (provinces or regions) of Lviv'ka, Zakarpats'ka, Ivano-Frankivs'ka, and Chernivts'ka only more recently fell under Russian domination (1939–1941/1945–1991). Before those relatively brief periods, for centuries they were Polish, Austro-Hungarian, and Czechoslovakian territories.

Western Ukrainian exceptions aside, the profound cultural and religious ties most of Ukraine has with Russian society and culture perpetually marks it for special attention. The loss of other former Soviet republics like the Baltic, Caucasus, and Central Asian states was a blow to Russian national pride, but the loss of Ukraine struck at the core of Russian perceived identity and being. To many Russians, the profoundness of Ukraine's loss may be comparable to how many Greeks feel about the loss of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) and Jews regarding Jerusalem.

While Russian leaders have actively interfered in Ukrainian internal affairs since 1991, they have usually

been careful to maintain at least the illusion of plausible deniability. Denial was a key tactic in 2014 where Moscow disavowed the presence of Russian forces (little green men) in Ukraine's eastern provinces when evidence clearly showed they were there. Also, Russia has used a combination of cyberspace operations and disinformation to rewrite history, reinterpret culture, and other factors for specific goals and objectives.<sup>11</sup> The current conflict appears to be no different.

In terms of overt activities, Russian messaging has traditionally exploited the psychological effects of military exercises to influence internal and external targets, demonstrate possession of a credible military, and deter opponents. More importantly, Russian leaders have repeatedly used exercises to mask preparations for military operations.<sup>12</sup> Numerous Western analysts and intelligence public releases asserted in late 2021 that ongoing Russian military exercises were likely cover for an attack, which subsequently occurred on 24 February. Russian officials were careful to call the attack a *special military operation* rather than an invasion. Most in the West rejected the distinction, but widespread media reporting suggests that large numbers of Russians appeared to at least initially accept this framing of the invasion, a possible indicator of the effectiveness of Russian influence on domestic populations.

## Influence Types

Influence activities in a conflict scenario are frequently psychologically affective in that their purpose is more than just persuading a target to change a belief or attitude. Messaging in wartime frequently consists of unifying and destructive efforts, the latter includes divisive messaging. Unifying messaging serves to solidify domestic or potentially sympathetic external support and promotes active participation in the war effort or at least minimizes dissent and opposition. Destructive efforts consist of the most psychologically corrosive efforts where deliberate actions and deception are integral and inseparable from typical messaging.

Previous Russian actions against Ukraine involved the application of any relevant military, informational, political, and economic means to achieve objectives. Russian influence activities increased dramatically in the last ten years as Ukrainian leaders and large segments of the population increasingly looked west for their future. A large component of those activities

has been through official Kremlin propaganda outlets to promote Russian ideology and the grand idea of a Russian world that fully absorbs Ukraine.<sup>13</sup>

One of the key tools Russian leaders use is deception, much of which aligns with Magruder's principle, which maintains it is far less difficult to deceive a target within an existing belief than attempting to do so through acceptance of a new opposing or different belief.<sup>14</sup> Internally, deception shapes Russian thinking to increase already strong cynicism about the world and strengthen existing distrust of government organizations, encourages existing tendencies to believe conspiracies, and erodes beliefs in Western liberal institutions as viable alternatives to current Russian government structures. Specific psychological effects sought include apathy, political malaise, general distrust, and heightened paranoia.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar way, Putin's objectives for foreign targets are less about convincing and persuasion to elicit support for Russia and more about increasing doubt and uncertainty, fomenting turmoil, and exploiting any distrust and divisions between competing groups within and among states opposing Russian actions, particularly within and among NATO and European Union countries.<sup>16</sup>

## Targets

A critical task in conducting influence activities is the matter of selecting targets. Persuasive actions and messages are typically far less effective if they fail to exploit the unique vulnerabilities of a particular individual or group. Selective and precise targeting simply yields more predictable results. For influence activities in general, targeting is the foundation of influence in the same way that populations are central to modern warfare. So, targeting ethnic Russians with appeals to unity, Russian-speaking Ukrainians with messaging to confuse their national identity, and Ukrainians with demoralizing messages to erode morale all serve different near-term objectives but serve the long-term objective to decrease resistance to Russian actions.

Readers unaccustomed to thinking from an influence perspective tend to identify Ukrainians as the primary targets. As stated earlier, Russian propagandists first look at internal targets—internal in the sense of being ethnic Russians regardless of their location. Russian propagandists make no distinction between

Russians residing in Russia proper and those living in Ukraine or anywhere else in the world. Russian television and radio sources treat Ukrainian national boundaries as arbitrary and irrelevant since the reach and programming content make no distinction between internal and external Russians.

The proliferation of internet-based information sources has only increased Russian media reach and

to suppress any sense of a separate identity and patriotism in young Ukrainians.<sup>17</sup> Russian messaging over the last several decades reflects that and related objectives include ideas that *Ukraine is an artificial construct* and *Ukrainian is not really a separate language*.<sup>18</sup> The implication is that Ukraine and Ukrainians are just outgrowths of Russia rather than related, but separate and distinct.

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saturation. Russians in Crimea and Russians in Eastern Ukraine receive much of the same messaging as Russians inside the Russian Federation.

Evidence of Russian-focused targeting may lie in the messages calling opponents fascists and Nazis. Those labels appear to have far less impact on non-Russian populations in that part of Europe than for Russians since the negative connotations have been so ingrained in each upcoming generation of Russian youth. Propagandists intended those appeals mostly for Russians in Ukraine to mobilize more active participation among the Russian diaspora.

In contrast, *from the ethnic Ukrainian historical perspective*, forced russification, centuries of oppression, mass deportations, and Soviet (read Russian) atrocities during forced collectivization and mass starvation in the 1920s and 1930s may rival anything the Nazis did during World War II. Russian influence attempts using Nazi and fascist references are far less likely to affect Ukrainians than counter messaging reminding Ukrainians how badly Russian authorities have historically treated them. In a twist on Magruder's principle, any examples of Russian brutality in the current conflict may only reinforce existing Ukrainian beliefs.

Aside from influence directed at ethnic Russians, Ukrainians have been a close second in focus for years. A key Russian objective for that focus has been

## Objectives

Ethnic Russian-focused objectives are primarily unifying and mobilizing in nature to achieve greater levels of support for Russian actions and unity. Achieving objectives among internal Russian populations and the foreign diaspora is comparatively easier than with non-Russians for the simple fact that appeals from Russian sources resonate with ethnic Russians who frequently feel set apart from local majority non-Russian populations. Decades of Russian propaganda appear to have significantly shaped the minds and perspectives of Russians in other countries. Psychological vulnerabilities resulting from a sense of isolation (self-induced or otherwise), perceived persecution, and other factors make them fundamentally more susceptible to Russian influence efforts.

Russian authorities have also purposely sown discord between local populations in neighboring countries and ethnic Russians residing there in the hopes of eliciting a backlash that Russian authorities can cite as proof of persecution and serve as justification for intervention on their behalf (a false flag type of tactic). Russian rationalizations for the 2014 seizure of Crimea and interventions in Donetsk and Luhansk are examples of this tactic where false allegations of Ukrainian atrocities against ethnic Russians provided justification. Russian media even



disseminated faked imagery as supposed proof of Ukrainian actions.

The objectives in Ukraine-type operations can include mobilizing ethnic Russians in a foreign population, increasing support in Russia for external intervention (if required), and forcing specific changes in foreign nation behavior that favor Russia. Several recent journal publications on regional security discuss these types of objectives and Baltic governments' concerns about Russian agitation efforts among minority Russian populations in those countries.

Objectives applied to non-Russian targets superficially appear to include persuasive messaging to garner sympathy for Russia but on a deeper level seem more devoted to creating division and disunity in other countries aligning with Ukraine. In other instances, possible objectives may be sowing confusion through misdirection, eliciting slowed reaction time to Russian actions, and keeping opponents off balance.

Decades ago, anti-Soviet Russian military theorist Evgeny Messner described similar objectives as lowering morale through decreasing an adversary nation's unity, eroding opponent nation capabilities required for resistance, neutralizing centers of gravity having

The Ryazan Municipal Culture Center displays the "Z" symbol on 2 May 2022. The Z symbol began appearing throughout Russia as a sign of support for the claimed effort to "liberate" fellow Russians and aligned with the liberation theme, denazification efforts, and other propaganda claims. (Photo by Alexander Davronov via Wikimedia Commons)

psychological value, taking or destroying vital objects, and gaining new allies while dividing an opponent from its allies and fracturing the alliance itself.<sup>19</sup>

A central feature of war in the modern era is that populations are the critical requirement above all others. A failure to influence key populations to some advantage significantly affects, if not determines, success or failure. Messner's list of objectives aligns with the modern population-centric understanding of warfare. Russian leaders are also very aware of this reality and attempt to operate within that context while remaining capable in traditional warfare.

## Primary Themes

Russian preparatory themes promoted a glorified and highly selective reading of history that emphasized supposed Russian inclusivity regarding non-Russians,

especially Slavic brethren in the historical Russian-led states, united economic progress and scientific advancement, and Russia's central place in the Slavic world with a status of first among equals.<sup>20</sup> In making these claims, Russian propagandists ignored historical realities of military conquest, forced russification, and the violent repression of any dissent and resistance to Russian dominance.

all other supporting influence efforts drew their themes and messages. Russian state media parroted Putin's list of demands and repeated threats against Ukraine if those demands remained unmet.<sup>22</sup>

One of the key themes about Ukraine that Russian propaganda pushes is the idea Ukraine itself, the language, and culture are nothing more than products of Russian history and culture. This theme has roots

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Putin's regime relies on nationalist themes and narratives to persuade ethnic Russians that a state of siege exists so the government can use oppressive methods to protect the nation against threats, both internal and external. The same themes and narratives also provide justification for external wars and sacrifices in the near abroad to maintain friendly buffer states that create a layered defense against external threats.<sup>21</sup> In the latest conflict, the Russian military inadvertently created a key symbol in the non-Cyrillic letter Z painted on invasion vehicles that came to embody Russian forces and the operation in general. The Z symbol began appearing throughout Russia as a sign of support for the claimed effort to “liberate” fellow Russians and aligned with the liberation theme, denazification efforts, and other propaganda claims.

While the Z symbol was a potent symbol for Russians as a unifying theme, themes concerning non-Russian targets are the most strident in tone against one border state in particular—Ukraine, the result of the previously discussed key historical factors.

Of all the former Soviet republics within the family of Slavic peoples, Ukraine has probably been the most frustrating for Russian leaders as the country slipped increasingly out of Moscow's control and influence in the 2000s. Those frustrations echoed in threats and intimidating actions that only increased in number and intensity before the invasion. Putin's statements and official Russian media were the foundation from which

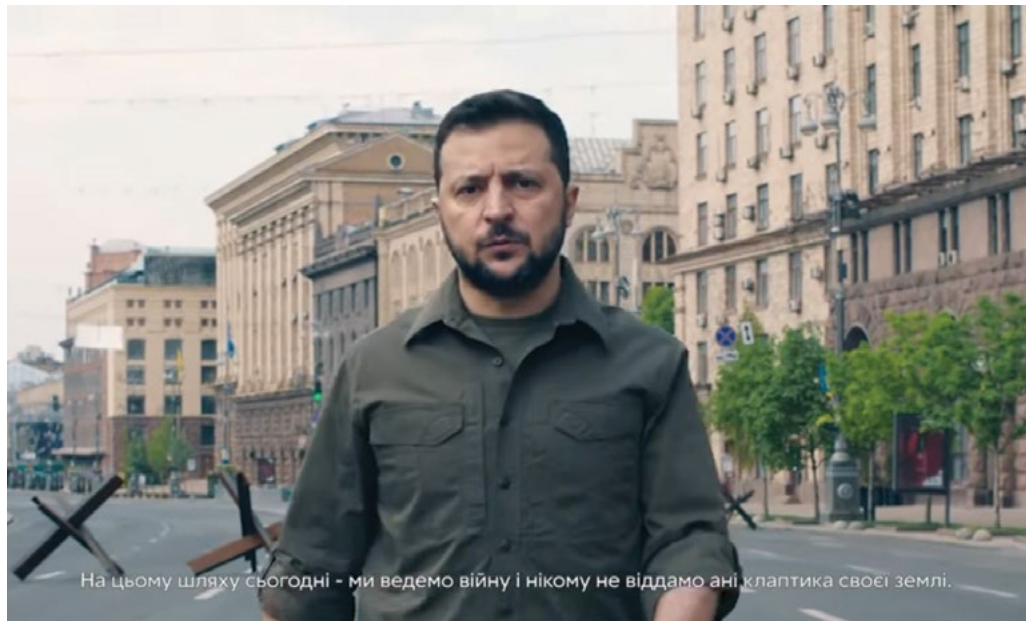
in the centuries-old russification efforts to destroy Ukraine as a separate and distinct society and culture.

One of the most contentious issues regards the Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox churches. Distorted myths portray the Russian struggle as protecting orthodoxy, maintaining the unity between a single people and their church, and reinforcing the argument Russians and Ukrainians are one people. Russian messaging has continuously attacked the Ukrainian church as illegitimate unless subordinated to the Moscow-based Russian Orthodox church.<sup>23</sup>

Past Russian justification for the annexation of Crimea and interference in Ukraine's internal affairs included statements about shared religion and culture. Once the Ukrainian church declared independence from the Russian church after 332 years, the Russian church and the government claimed the departure was illegitimate.<sup>24</sup> Two key parts of the Russian argument are that the Moscow-based church has held legal authority over the Ukrainian church since 1686 and, perhaps most importantly, Kyiv is the birthplace of the Russian church, so the two are inseparable.<sup>25</sup>

Another theme is military focused. In previous military exercises, messaging emphasized Russian military advances in command and control, communications, the ability to execute complex, multiprong operations and effectively combat the actions of advanced military competitors with a modern military-industrial system in place to ensure wartime continuity.<sup>26</sup> The obvious psychological effects of *perceived* capability

cause increased concern among governments around the world about Russian intentions and capabilities as a supposed superpower. Yet, any misgivings and fears Russian influence activities had generated rapidly disappeared once the invasion forces began suffering horrendous casualties (including twelve generals as of June 2022), substan-



tial equipment losses, lost momentum, and otherwise demonstrated incompetence that numerous ex-military media consultants compared to third world militaries. The myth of Russian military prowess was shattered and Russian themes touting capabilities seem to no longer guide messaging significantly.

As previously mentioned, one theme that shows no signs of dying out in Russian messaging is Nazism/fascism. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Estonian analysts noted the use of this powerful theme directed toward Russians.<sup>27</sup> It draws upon the powerful imagery and emotions instilled in Russians from an early age about the World War II fight against Nazi Germany in which over twenty million Soviet citizens died.

A vital part of Russia's anti-Nazi narrative concerns the fact that in much of the Soviet non-Russian territory that German forces held in the war, there were large numbers of local collaborators who actively worked against and fought to prevent Soviet reconquest. Such was the apparent hatred many people in the Baltic republics, Ukraine, and Belarus had for the Soviet Union in general and Russians in particular, that after the war numerous insurgencies continued resisting Soviet rule well into the 1950s. Current Russian propaganda exploits the fact many anti-Soviet resistance heroes from that period collaborated with or fought for German forces, such as Ukrainian Stepan Bandera. Several resistance leaders were also anti-Semitic, which provides further Russian justification for labeling current adversaries as Nazis. Russian propagandists

A video shows Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy walking through the streets of Kyiv as he delivers a May Day message to the Ukrainian people. (Screenshot from UATV via YouTube)

then simply portray populations in those countries as still harboring Nazi sympathies.<sup>28</sup> Putin's regime used the theme and narrative during the 2014 Crimea and Eastern insurgency and widely invoked it again prior to the 2022 invasion.<sup>29</sup>

All of this is not to say independent former Soviet states do not commemorate the defeat of the Nazi regime. Ukraine has traditionally held a parade every May to memorialize the loss of Ukrainians in the war. In response to the Russian claims, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke on UATV, an official Ukrainian government YouTube channel, and directly called upon Ukrainians to "take back" the May Day commemoration. "We are fighting for our children's freedom, and therefore we will win. We will never forget what our ancestors did in World War II, which killed more than eight million Ukrainians. Very soon there will be two Victory Days in Ukraine. And someone won't have any. We won then. We will win now. And Khreshchatyk will see the victory parade—the Victory of Ukraine! Happy Victory over Nazism Day! Glory to Ukraine!"<sup>30</sup>

The final theme and accompanying messaging involve one area in which Russia surpasses all other powers in the world—nuclear weapons. Shortly before





A screenshot from *Solntsepyok*, a Russian propaganda film set in the Donbas intended to evoke an emotional reaction toward Ukraine by accusing Ukrainian forces of atrocities against ethnic Russians. (Screenshot from Kinoman via YouTube)

the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, Russia conducted large-scale nuclear drills in October 2019. This coincided with unusually open pronouncements about tests of Russian hypersonic weapons. Specifically, Russian leaders, influencers, and domestic mass media communicated that Russia was ready to escalate nuclear warfare as needed, was integrating strategic and tactical nuclear weaponry into planning, and ongoing modernization was making it the predominant nuclear power in the world. This implied Russian leaders were able and willing to wage full-scale nuclear war.<sup>31</sup>

## Execution

A revolution in Russian influence activities seems to have accelerated following the 2008 Russian intervention in Georgia. Since then, the activities have advanced beyond the comparatively primitive Soviet approach of the Cold War. Russian propagandists still use Soviet-style ambiguity and confusion, but the sheer number of communication means and platforms combined with overt use of half-truths, blatant lies, and a complete lack of concern for consistency all far exceed anything prior.<sup>32</sup> Individual messages seldom exist in isolation, but reside within a framework of a greater influence effort to create psychological effects in targets.<sup>33</sup> Contemporary Russian influence methodology includes traditional media of television, radio, and newsprint as well as

more recent internet-based platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, using bots and trolls that spread misinformation and disinformation to destabilize and demoralize opponents.<sup>34</sup>

All things considered, current Russian

influence activities are a continuation of Czarist and Soviet thought but have evolved far beyond in reach and capability. A siege mentality, the belief in perpetual conflict, even the belief that war with the West is the normal state of relations combine with a legacy of Soviet political warfare and propaganda to create a state and culture that has few equals in the refinement of propaganda techniques and effectiveness.<sup>35</sup>

Before, during, and after the 2014 Crimea campaign, Russian messaging primarily focused on the home front, then Crimean Russians.<sup>36</sup> Secondary targets included Ukrainian Russians, Ukrainians, and then all others in that order. This spectrum of targets conforms to predictable patterns that primarily focus on ethnic Russians to justify and maintain support for operations in Ukraine or elsewhere. Russian media mirrored official themes and messaging in attacking Ukrainian opposition, both official and civil society by labeling them extremists, terrorists, Nazis, and fascists.<sup>37</sup> The use of specific words with strong emotional connotations exploits the Russian fixation on the “Great Patriotic War” (World War II) that still weighs heavily on the national psyche after nearly eighty years. Much of the messaging reaching external actors with such terms are not intended for non-Russian as they lack any real weight, but many Russians in foreign countries are susceptible to such imagery, especially older generations.

Russian influence efforts transcend governmental activities and comprise the whole-of-society strategy previously mentioned. As late as August 2021, top Putin supporter and billionaire oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin bankrolled the propaganda film *Solntsepyok* (*Sunbaked*) supposedly to glamorize his alleged private

mercenary force (the Vagner Group) accused of war crimes in overseas Russian proxy operations.<sup>38</sup>

The overt message in the video is likely an attempt to evoke emotion, but there is often a subtle, less obvious message in Russian influence that outsiders typically miss. In this case, the intent of the film could be to send a chilling message to residents of eastern Ukraine where the film takes place and to people from that culture who intuitively understand such messaging. Due to the Vagner Group's reputation for war crimes, a probable deeper message is to inspire terror in everyone in the east of the country to minimize potential resistance and maximize compliance—obey or face the Vagner Group. Before the movie's release, producers circulated an enigmatic trailer with a description that read, "Events will totally transform the lives of many people. Who will be broken by the new reality, and who will remain a human being until the end?"<sup>39</sup> This is only one example of innumerable messaging and influential activities Putin has directed against Ukrainians, both ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians.

## Concluding Thoughts

Determining success or failure in influence activities is more nuanced than mass media and governments acknowledge, and most may even understand. To increase understanding of those nuances, this article emphasized two primary Russian targets in the so-called information war—Russians and Ukrainians. This is not implying other targets, such as Europeans in NATO and the European Union, the United States, Asian powers, and others are irrelevant—they are just much lower priorities. Russian leaders will claim success if they are able to frustrate and slow other external actor responses to Russian actions. The home audience and the opponent are the immediate priority.

Western media and governments may claim success at competing with and supposedly frustrating Russian external messaging and achievement of objectives. However, even if true, it is irrelevant in an important way. Russian leaders are generally unconcerned about persuading and convincing non-Russians to change their beliefs and attitudes. Russian strategists seek to confuse, divide, and otherwise redirect non-Russian focus and resolve—anything beyond that is a bonus. Russian leaders primarily look to positively influence *Russians* to support the war effort and stifle internal dissent.

Western claims of thwarting Russian influence activities and objectives are both premature and, in a sense, immaterial. Available evidence suggests Putin's regime has been successful so far at both containing internal dissent and maintaining internal support for the war effort.<sup>40</sup> Even if only a slight majority of Russians support the war effort, effective suppression of internal dissent and opposition is success in Putin's likely view. That is exactly how the regime will probably frame the results in the end. Even so, there is evidence that while many Russians may oppose the war, they may not oppose Putin personally. The regime seems to keep a substantial amount of support despite ongoing setbacks since the invasion began.<sup>41</sup>

Another point is that it is possible highly skilled Russian propagandists are convincing westerners they are successfully countering Russian influence abroad. Convincing targets of this notion diverts attention away from the Russian primary goal of coalescing internal support. This fully aligns with the old Soviet notion of reflexive control where an enemy conducts a Russian-induced action all while believing it is doing so out of choice.

A final point to make is the lack of evidence in the psychology field whether malign influence elicits desired psychological effects among targets and what such effects would be.<sup>42</sup> There is a widespread assumption that malign influence affects targets, but there is no clarity as to how and to what degree or extent.

The lack of psychological evidence may be best illustrated by the Ukrainian response to Russia's attack. Prior to the invasion, the consensus appeared to be Russian influence efforts had a decidedly negative effect on Ukrainian morale and cohesion—Ukraine would fold in a matter of days. Once the actual invasion occurred, Ukrainian resistance surprised everyone, probably none more than the Russians. Zelensky and his administration adeptly countered Russian influence among ethnic Ukrainians and even reached into Russia to some degree. However, there is anecdotal evidence significant numbers of ethnic Russians in Ukraine succumbed to Russian influence. The current lack of verifiable data prevents definitive confirmation or refutation, but the Ukrainian government instituted population movement control in an apparent attempt to limit potential ethnic Russian fifth-column saboteurs and insurgents. Such concerns are valid as it is a long-standing Russian practice to

recruit and use external Russian populations in foreign countries as needed.

As for Russian failure to overcome Ukrainian resistance, it may be the Russians began to believe their own propaganda to the point it was delusional, such as the apparent surprise felt when Ukrainians did not welcome

Russian forces with open arms as was widely believed would happen. It is uncertain how many of the points raised here will continue to be plausible into the future as each side adapts to the other and modifies their efforts. It is a certainty that influence activities will continue to be fundamental to the ongoing conflict and beyond. ■

## Notes

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