



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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INFORMATION WARFARE AGAINST GEORGIA

GIORGI TARGAMADZE

EXPERT OPINION



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Introduction

No matter how diligently we attempt to soften and select our vocabulary – Georgia is currently in a state of war with Russia. The occupation and annexation of 20% of the country's territory may indeed be more deserving of the definition of a frozen conflict rather than an all-out war. Indeed, perhaps there is no thunder of cannons... and the sound of Kalashnikovs fired to hunt ethnic Georgians along the line of occupation hardly reaches Tbilisi, not to mention European capitals. But if it comes exclusively to the definition of war, there is thunder, and a great deal of it: it will suffice to monitor the content of Russian TV channels freely broadcasting across Georgia to find oneself faced with classic information and psychological warfare. Taking into consideration a country building liberal democracy and the primacy of one of its key principles – open and unlimited information space – the choice proves difficult to make: should we call this phenomenon by its name and act as a country in a state of war must, or should we stock up on popcorn, continue staring calmly at the screen and wait until we are turned into victims of aggressive information warfare?

The Increasing Significance of Information Warfare in a Post-Modern Era

The fact that, in the post-modern world, the concept of warfare has qualitatively changed is no longer a novelty for the educated public. Unlike the traditional and industrial societies, in the information age, it is essential not only to have knowledge of the number of missiles, tanks, troops, combat aircraft and ships, but also to possess data on the specifics of target audiences of global or local media in a given country, including public attitudes, as well as the identity and ideological stance of opinion-makers.

Information warfare can be perceived as a series of attacks on the civilians and military officials of the opponent country using misinformation and propaganda in order to achieve specific political and military objectives. It is significant to understand information warfare in a wider context which, due to its content, can also be viewed as a type of "soft war." Information warfare is extremely closely linked with psychological warfare which, through employing various weapons and mechanisms, aims to influence the faith and values as well as the emotions and judgment of the population. Thus, we refer to information and psychological warfare which has become an additional component of conventional combat operations in post-modern geopolitics.

The entire complex of operations conducted by the Russian Federation against Ukraine has become a paradigmatic example of information warfare. While it was necessary to engage military force and armaments to

achieve the objective, over the years the stage was actively being set through the use of financial, economic, information and psychological technology as well as a weak and corrupt government.

A tragic example for us is the 2008 Russia-Georgia war where, prior to its active phase, during as well as after the military operations, the Kremlin's propaganda actively worked on the establishment of the myth of "thousands of Ossetians obliterated by the Georgian fascists" which was in turn succeeded by a large-scale military intervention and the recognition of separatist republics following in the footsteps of accusations of "genocide."

Military operations conducted with the use of weaponry and the enforcement of trade and economic sanctions entail enormous losses for the country and the population; however, it is even more harmful and dangerous to lose a battle for human minds and faith; i.e., an information and psychological war. As a result, due to the loss of rational thought, the enemy may not even have the need to conduct a large-scale military intervention or the opponent may prove to be so disoriented and demoralised that their martial ardour and capacity will not even be taken into account.

The Objectives and Resources of Information Warfare Waged against Georgia by Russia

Russia's information warfare waged against Georgia has several objectives:

1. Demoralisation and disorientation of the Georgian population, government agencies and army.
2. Establishment of Georgia's image in the eyes of the Russian population as that of a puppet of the US in order to feed the idea of the Russian state fighting the imperialistic West.
3. Disorientation of the international public opinion in order to weaken the charge of solidarity towards Georgia exhibited by democracies largely dependent on it.

As evidenced by observations of Russian media broadcasting in English, as well as the Georgian information and public space, the achievement of these objectives actively and rather effectively employs relevant weapons, human resources, communication language and the ideological context required for the conduction of information warfare, which has multiple branches, starting with a seemingly irrational religious factor and ending with a relatively rational one – the prospect of social welfare. Although, let us proceed sequentially.

The Weapons of Information Warfare

The sociological studies conducted by international organisations, such as IRI and NDI, have determined that Georgia has one of the most television-dependent societies (according to a study conducted in September 2014, 95% of respondents indicate television as the principal source of information). Thus, despite the rapid development of new media and technology, television remains one of the most accessible means for disseminating information as well as the most effective agent of information and psychological warfare.

State-controlled Russian TV channels broadcast without any restrictions or technical setbacks via cable networks active across the entire territory of Georgia (in places such as Akhalkalaki, two Russian channels are being transmitted with broadcasting frequency with no obstruction). This signifies that watching Dmitri Kiselyov's Sunday programme, *Vesti Nedeli*, which has long become the primary face of Putin's propaganda, is as easy for audiences in Tbilisi or Marneuli as viewing the newscasts from the Georgian Public Broadcaster.

Given the scale, capacity and quality of the TV production of leading Russian channels, as well as the professional qualifications of the producers which, in this case, contrary to the basic principles of journalism, is manifested in the production of propagandistic material which differs from reality, RTR and NTV and other channels pose serious competition for Georgian broadcasters while in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities, such as Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, they represent unrivalled sources of information (not to mention the unoccupied territories where Russian TV has been completely dominant for years). In short, even throughout the occupied territories of Georgia, the principal weapon of information warfare – state-controlled Russian TV broadcasters have been given a *carte blanche* which they have put to effective use.

Due to a loyal approach to this utterly non-conspiratorial weapon of modern warfare, the Russian propaganda machine; namely, *Rossiia Segodnia*, an international news agency and a successor to RIA Novosti, has decided to go further and officially opened its structural unit in Tbilisi – a plan which it fulfilled and commenced radio broadcasting. Indeed, several days following a stir caused by part of the public, transmission was discontinued; however, not on the grounds of any official decision but due to a completely unidentified indirect pressure. This speaks to the fact that the Georgian authorities are either entirely unable to assess information and psychological warfare as a threat or, if they are able to do so, they still lack any coherent strategy to neutralise it.

A clear dominance of anti-Western sentiment among a segment of Georgian television channels is notable; and in the best case, neutrality and, even to a greater extent, integration into Russia's sphere of influence one way or another is openly and widely considered as a positive alternative to this. Of course, freedom of speech and expression in Georgia is one of the most significant values guaranteed by the Georgian Constitution and legislation and there has been no need thus far to note this fact in the calls for censorship of expression in current television. However, the trend is undoubtedly noteworthy for two reasons: 1) In terms of psychological attitude: until recently, expression of sympathy towards the occupant state in the public discussion space was extremely uncommon and led to the marginalisation of this subject and 2) Due to high competition on the Georgian television market, it is almost impossible for new players to achieve financial profitability; and, as a rule, the budget deficit is filled from other legal or clandestine sources. Furthermore, it is not difficult to deduct what is ordered by those who pay if we listen attentively to the masterfully orchestrated melody of anti-Western propaganda.

An even more evident example of information warfare is a segment of newspapers published in Tbilisi whose circulation is not-so-small by local measure. The aforementioned criticism of Western society and institutions would seem like a lullaby if you became familiar with the headlines and hate speech used in some of the issues of these newspapers.

These activities are not limited to traditional media. Websites, as well as active groups of trolls and "independent" bloggers, which attempt to give a desired direction to internet discussions on the country's orientation or other significant topics, are also being vigorously exploited as weapons.

Public Opinion-Makers

If so far we have been focusing on the technical resources of information warfare, it is now time to mention the human resources which, through employing the weapons listed above, convey the message to the target audience and the public. In order to influence public opinion, the individuals selected to perform this function must, of course, meet certain requirements: they must be well-known, possess basic skills and experience of communication with the audience and enjoy a positive attitude from the public. Thus, it would not be unexpected if we note that these individuals are generally representatives of the so-called intelligentsia (elite), actors, directors, singers and others for whom the Russian artistic environment, in terms of the language barrier or financial success is, to say the least, more attractive than the European or American environment where they feel entirely alien and non-competitive. As for the value, people in these

professions are, or used to be, successful in their respective fields because they have a good command of professional skills in artistry and juggling concepts. All in all, the answers to the questions – For what? But how? – are most significant and a matter of mastery.

During information warfare, besides this type of elite, in terms of human resources, there is a category of influential groups, a part of which is directly associated with the Russian markets and consumers through commercial interest. A holder of financial interest, this group is particularly authoritative on the local level since it is one of the principal employers on the highly deficient Georgian labour market.

A bitter example of yet another defeat at the frontlines of the information and psychological war, and of an attempt to deafen the government and the public, is the announcement of one of the prime symbols of Russian imperialism, VTB Bank, as the general sponsor of the pride of the national sports teams, and especially of the Georgian fans, the most successful National Rugby team. On the global stadium, Georgia defeated the Russian team but the winners' chests were still "adorned" by the symbol of Russian might.

Language of Communication

Along with the weapons and human resources, one of the most decisive factors in information warfare is the language of communication. In this regard, Russia holds a significant advantage since, after Georgian or, in the case of ethnic minorities, the native language, the main spoken language for the absolute majority of Georgia's population is Russian. For this reason, access of a large part of the population to English-language media resources is minimal which contributes to the efficiency of propaganda that establishes a distorted perception of Western civilisation. The Georgian media is, in fact, left alone in an unequal confrontation with the Russian information monster. Due to a widespread lack of knowledge of the Georgian language in regions populated with ethnic minorities, the Russian propaganda machine has no competitors whatsoever.

The Narratives of Information Warfare

We have now approached the most significant component of information warfare with relevant weapons, the authority of recognisable figures and communication language and channels being developed and utilised for the purpose of its circulation. This is the content, a string of narratives built on harsh contrasts, which can be referred to as the ideological axis of information warfare or the hunt for human minds and attitudes.

The menu is diverse in terms of the interests and tastes of various social groups:

- Monotheistic Russia and the enemy of Orthodoxy, sectarian West.
- Putin, the defender of traditional values and the perverted Europe, which even threatens to destroy the institution of the family.
- The Russian market – highly essential, well-known and accessible to the poverty-stricken Georgia, and the Euro-American stalls, inaccessible due to strict regulations and standards.
- While in affiliation with Russia, the Georgian cinema and the general culture flourished, however nowadays we have not been able to produce even a fairly decent film.
- Tbilisi Dinamo was able to achieve great heights of success although nowadays most Georgians experience seizures even at the mention of Georgian football.
- Most importantly, against the background of defeat in wars, regional instability and the feeling of insecurity, the powerful and persistent Putin (who, as frequently stated by his Georgian followers as of late, is «very fond of Georgians») and the weak West, limited to concern and living in luxury, which will not engage in a military confrontation with the Russian Bear and will not further burden its already heavy head by accepting Georgia into NATO.

In the footsteps of this sentiment, the old Georgian or foreign expressions come to mind: “If a bear overpowers you, call him ‘father,’” “In a struggle of camels, a Cossack was crushed,” “Before Peter came, Paul was skinned alive,” etc.

Targets

All of this, some of which is rather entertaining, and some of which – brutally tragic, is designed for various groups and strata of the population. However, the principal target and object of influence, a rather large segment of the local community born and raised under the Soviet system, is, therefore, not accustomed to a critical analysis of the information obtained and easily falls under the influence of propaganda. At the same time, a large part of this community is subconsciously prepared to perceive this propaganda as reality since, given the difficult and painful 23-year period of the country’s independence and rapprochement with the West, it is easy to stir up nostalgic feelings towards the boundlessness of the “careless, peaceful, and stable” Soviet space and a past beset with accessibility

to resources, especially when in the past everything seems better, albeit due to the fact that we were young.

The targets of information warfare include the most vulnerable groups – ethnic minorities. If focusing on alternatives to the Russian propaganda machine does not constitute a problem for those in possession of Georgian or English languages, at the current stage, the Georgian state does almost nothing to provide minorities with information (not counting 20-minute newscasts in different languages transmitted on the second channel of the Public Broadcaster whose degree of viewability is exceptionally low).

Competition with the Russian information and propaganda machine in international media also constitutes a serious problem. Here too, the Kremlin has a competitive plan, the implementation of which is successfully underway with our not-so-unintentional support: 1) The policy of neutralisation of the Georgia-Russia conflict – its removal from the agenda or thematically placing it onto the back burner, and 2) Simultaneously working on the provision of consistent information resplendent with falsified historical or modern facts in order to introduce the myth of Georgia as the aggressor and persecutor of small nations and Russia as their liberator.

Recommendations

Here, we will list decisions whose implementation will significantly alter the current imbalance at the forefront of the information confrontation:

- It is crucial to openly discuss the aforementioned threats and develop a critical public opinion with regard to the information warfare against the country; to acknowledge the fact that these threats are very real and current.
- This must be urgently reflected in the national security concept and all accompanying documents.

Moreover, a negative-repressive method must be employed:

- Restriction of the broadcasting of Russian state-owned TV companies as well as sources of information affiliated with Russian media resources across Georgia.

As well as positive-constructive methods:

- Active and coordinated work with the national broadcasters in order to replace the myths established as negative clichés about the West with real information and interesting stories told in a language and form understandable to ordinary citizens.

- It is essential to once again clarify, assess and convey to the public the results of the impact of Russia's imperial policy on Georgia. This must occur not via the representatives of a hysterical and politicised society (articulated by biased politicians) but via the academic community with active usage of documentary and high-credibility formats.
- Permanent proposals of visualisations of short- and long-term economic and social effects of integration with the West.
- Demonstrating the commitment of the main segment of the Georgian political class towards the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration.
- Consolidation of the Georgian public around the idea, rather than politicians, which will also significantly impact the international arena by endorsing sympathy towards Euro-Atlantic values and an undiminished zeal for EU and NATO membership of our multi-ethnic nation with a diverse body politic.
- Conduction of permanent campaigns with the participation of prominent figures showcasing the idea of loyalty to the Georgian state and the advantages of Western values and institutions.
- Prioritising the state-run Georgian language programme for the purposes of the engagement and integration of ethnic minorities into the Georgian information space; rendering maximum support to its practical realisation.
- Intensive and qualified training of young journalists representing ethnic minority communities, encouraging their internships at central media and active utilisation of their resources and capabilities.
- This, on the one hand, will equip the majority of the country's population with the necessary, objective and, at the same time, not only negative information on the way of life, problems or achievements of a rather significant number of our fellow-citizens which will gradually reduce the magnitude of alienation and, on the other hand, an effect no less momentous: the local ethnic minority communities themselves will foster an important motivation to become familiar with materials about them produced by journalists representing their own communities and to engage in the common state information space.
- Prior to this and with immediate urgency, it is necessary to support media resources operating in the language of communication accessible to the majority of ethnic minorities with the intention that under conditions of the prohibition of Russian propaganda or, even more so,

its functioning, the local population has the opportunity to access alternative and actual media conveyed in a language comprehensible to them and to satisfy the hunger for information.

Conclusions

In the first half of the article, with the example of information warfare waged against Georgia, we described how the power of liberal democracy and open society can be used to undermine itself and how essential it is to acknowledge, analyse and enforce organised resistance to the destructive power of information warfare.

Taking the aforementioned steps calls for the correct and objective assessment of the risk-laden reality and the plan already put into action by the opponent; the stated political will: opposing it, not only as per your desire, but as a constitutional and national obligation.

A complex and scheduled plan is crucial whose implementation will actively include not only government but also civil and academic resources; and, certainly, funds, which are not as scarce to seem insufficient but given the interest and enthusiasm of international donor organisations, are rather meagre in comparison with the damage that the Georgian state and our future currently receive and are bound to receive in the future should we fail to offer a wise, courageous and vigorous response to this information attack.