



Hybrid operations: Lessons from the past

by Jan Joel Andersson

The security situation in and around Europe has changed dramatically over the past two years. The conflict in Ukraine and the success of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the Middle East and North Africa have put territorial defence and homeland security back on the agenda in Europe.

Hybrid threats and operations against the EU and its partners are real and urgently need to be addressed. After some 20 years of focusing on overseas crisis management activities, the EU and its member states are now facing the challenge of building capabilities to protect and defend security at home. During the European Council summit in June 2015, the EU Heads of States and Governments acknowledged the importance of hybrid threats, and now both the EEAS and the EDA are engaged in assessing their implications for capability development in Europe.

The new hybrid

Hybrid warfare is generally considered to include hostile campaigns conducted below the level of traditional warfare that combine both conventional and non-conventional, military and non-

military, overt and covert actions aimed at creating confusion and ambiguity on the nature, the origin and the objective of these actions.

Until the Russian operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine began in 2014, the assumption of many analysts was that hybrid operations were primarily a strategy used by non-state actors such as separatists in Chechnya, and terrorist organisations like Hizbullah or ISIL.

However, Russia's successful employment of hybrid tactics in Ukraine has raised the stakes. By effectively combining deception, (dis)information campaigns, economic coercion, local corruption and covert military action, Russia was able to swiftly gain control of Crimea in March 2014. The tools used were all well-known, but Russia demonstrated the strategic impact of hybrid warfare by seizing territory while sowing confusion and discord in Kiev and among its Western allies.

Wars of words

A key component of hybrid warfare is the use of disinformation, lies and deception to influence target audiences. The goal is to cause confusion



and to undermine local governing structures which, in turn, may lead to weakening the resolve of political elites as well as the population at large to defend their country. By using both traditional and social media with a strong on-line presence and communicating in a variety of languages (including English, Spanish, Arabic, German and French), Moscow has managed to spread the Russian narrative of an illegitimate 'fascist' regime in Kiev oppressing Russian-speaking minorities in 'Novorossiya' and throughout the world.

Russia's current success in its info-war against the West builds on a concerted effort by Moscow over the past several years to control media and direct online debate and commentary, both within Russia and abroad. Today, virtually no independent media exists in Russia. Instead, a growing number of journalists work for state or state-backed media organisations actively promoting the government's line.

In addition, scores of foreign language-trained and social media-savvy members of the Kremlin's so-called 'troll army' are active on online discussion boards, social networks, Twitter and in the comment sections of international newspapers, driving home Moscow's messages and suppressing and diluting any debate criticising Russian policies or actions.

Despite being ridiculed by Western experts for its contradictions, half-truths and implausible explanations of events on the ground, the Russian information war has scored points. The sheer intensity, magnitude and persistency of the Russian arguments make it hard even for the most respected international media to resist reporting them. The fact that many reports are clearly inconsistent or implausible to any expert observer is irrelevant, as the goal is to spread confusion and doubt among the target populations and thus to undermine trust in all objective reporting and especially official statements of Western governments.

Countering the type of focused information warfare currently being waged by Moscow is difficult. In liberal societies with a free media, it is assumed that both sides of an argument should be heard. The emphasis on balance and lack of editorial resources has therefore led to continuous

reporting by Western media of Russian explanations of events, even when clearly far-fetched. Meanwhile, the online activities of Moscow's 'troll army' of internet bloggers ensure wide circulation of the Kremlin's version of reality by interacting directly with audiences across the world in their own languages.

Strategic communication

There has been growing concern at the highest levels of the EU with the disinformation and propaganda aspects of hybrid warfare. In the conclusions from its meeting in March 2015, the European Council stressed the need to challenge in particular Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns and invited the High Representative, in cooperation with member states and EU institutions, to prepare an action plan on strategic communication.

On 22 June 2015, the EU presented its action plan and announced the formation of a strategic communications team to coordinate EU activities in this field and monitor implementation. The overall objectives of the EU's action plan are: (1) effective communication and promotion of EU policies and values towards the Eastern neighbours to better show their positive impact and benefits to the people in the region; (2) strengthening of the overall media environment and support for independent media organisations; and (3) increasing public awareness of external actors' attempts to spread disinformation while promoting media literacy at all levels in society.

The EU's action plan on strategic communication is a step forward in the development of new capabilities to defend against hybrid threats. The plan, however, focuses primarily on how to improve the EU's external messaging and support of media freedom and independent media organisations among the Eastern neighbours. Very little is said in the plan about how to increase awareness of disinformation activities conducted by external actors among the general public or who should be responsible for this key mission.

Given the considerable resources deployed by the Kremlin and the widespread media and information freedoms in the West, the EU has little



hope to compete in offensive media operations. To counter the concerted efforts of Moscow (and of such organisations as the Islamic State) to spread disinformation and propaganda in the West, the EU would be well-advised to focus as much on building up its defences at home as it does on organising media campaigns abroad.

Lessons from the past

NATO Supreme Allied Commander General Philip Breedlove described Russia's campaign in Crimea as 'perhaps the most amazing [...] *Blitzkrieg* we have ever seen in the history of information warfare'. Today's debate on how to counter hybrid threats and operations, however, demonstrates a certain lack of institutional memory.

While not called 'hybrid' then, the threat of covert Soviet action, both military and non-military, and subversion designed to influence and intimidate domestic audiences and undermine governing political structures was very real in the West during the Cold War. Concern about Soviet propaganda and its impact led several countries in Western Europe to establish countermeasures alongside their military and economic defences to fight against external subversion and disinformation.

Perhaps most clearly articulated in the Nordic countries, and particularly in neutral Sweden, the origins of the Cold War 'psychological defences' phenomenon in Europe can be found in the 'total defence' concept developed during and after the Second World War. Mirroring the concept of 'total war', total defence encompassed all aspects of society, including the media.

The *Styrelsen för psykologiskt försvar* ('Board for Psychological Defence'), a civilian body under the ministry of defence, evolved out of an organisation originally established in 1953: it was founded as a reaction to Nazi propaganda and its infiltration of the Swedish media during the Second World War, and also in response to concerns about the extent of domestic censorship. The realisation that liberty and democracy at home can be threatened not only by armed invasion but also by disinformation and propaganda

was further emphasised across Europe by the 1948 communist *coup* in Czechoslovakia.

As late as in 1989, the Swedish government planned to distribute leaflets to all Swedish households warning that in the event of war or occupation, 'the enemy will try to trick us, make us uncertain and confused'. In previous years such leaflets had been regularly distributed (reprinted in the national phone directories that were annually delivered to every Swedish home): they also emphatically stated that 'any announcement of surrender is false', that resistance was everybody's duty and should continue until all of Sweden's territory was liberated.

A key aspect of the Swedish approach was that the Board for Psychological Defence should neither be a military organisation nor an instrument for government propaganda. In order to be credible, both at home and abroad, official

messages had to be truthful, and the regular media had to continue to operate as freely as possible also in crises and wartime.

Working closely with Swedish media and civil society organisations, the Board for

Psychological Defence had four main missions during the Cold War. The first was to protect the country's main television and radio transmission sites and in the event of war to evacuate the main media organisations to safe locations, as well as to store sufficient quantities of paper and printing ink to allow uninterrupted production of newspapers and other periodicals.

The second mission was to do research and regularly carry out public opinion surveys on topics such as the population's willingness to defend the country, their trust in public officials and government, and to detect any signs of defeatism or destabilising rumours. Led by respected university professors, major research programmes on information credibility, the national will to resist, the impact of foreign propaganda, and crisis communication were also conducted and funded.

The third mission was tracking and analysing propaganda and disinformation transmitted by external actors as well as providing facts and information on Swedish security and defence

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policies to both domestic and foreign audiences. A central task of this mission was analysing radio broadcasts emanating not only from the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact members but also from China, Albania, North Korea and the Middle East, since conflict in these regions could impact the security situation in Europe. This mission required building and maintaining an extensive network of foreign language and culture experts at Swedish universities, drawn from the relevant immigrant communities.

A fourth mission was to serve and facilitate the operation of domestic and foreign media in Sweden in times of crises and war. The underlying logic was that if Sweden was attacked and required outside help, the rest of the world must be told about its struggle for independence.

However, the most important contribution of the Swedish Board for Psychological Defence during the Cold War was arguably to bring about an awareness of disinformation and how to detect propaganda among the population at large. As early as in 1957, the Swedish National School Board published a booklet on teaching counter-propaganda and societal solidarity in schools. Cooperation with the national school system was central in providing information and awareness of the purposes and function of the country's security and defence policy and institutions. During the Cold War, hundreds of journalists, advertisement executives and lobbyists were also trained in how to recognise disinformation and deception efforts targeting them from abroad.

As part of the wide-ranging defence reforms following the end of the Cold War, Sweden closed down the Board for Psychological Defence in 2008. Today, there is no agency in charge of tracking or countering disinformation and propaganda campaigns aimed at Sweden.

A critical mind

Much has changed since the days of the Cold War. Not only is the media landscape completely transformed by digitalisation, the internet revolution, and the emergence of social media, but the West's social and cultural make-up is much less homogeneous and less constrained by public oversight.

What has also changed since the Cold War era is that, in today's globalised, complex and diverse media landscape, individuals must take on

greater responsibility for their own media literacy and ability to critically analyse media messages and identify their sources. The wide availability of 24/7 'news' and the speed of its distribution mean that journalists and newsrooms are under increasing pressure to quickly publish and disseminate stories that may or may not have been fully fact-checked.

No doubt, the newly-established EU strategic communications team is an important step in addressing hybrid threats. According to EU officials, the new team (which will include up to ten Russian-language experts from the member states) will monitor Russian media and develop communications products and media campaigns to better explain EU policies to the Eastern neighbours.

However, the limited scope and size of the team itself and its focus on improving the media strategies of the EU institutions can hardly match the resources deployed on the opposing side. To prevail against current hybrid threats and operations, the EU and its member states need to also think more actively about how to develop capabilities to help their own populations defend themselves against disinformation and deception.

What remains as true today as during the Cold War is that a society's ability to defend itself crucially depends on its population having a critical mind. An important lesson from the psychological defence initiatives of the Cold War is that critical thinking and source criticism methodology must be continuously taught in schools as well as in colleges of journalism, but that these also need to be paired with a basic knowledge and understanding of one's own country's security and defence policy to be effective against hostile (dis)information campaigns.

Finally, not unlike vaccination campaigns against communicable diseases, a significant minimum number of the population needs to be inoculated in order for the population as a whole to be protected. In a world where disinformation is so pervasive and such a potent weapon, it is high time for this inoculation campaign to begin.

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