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**Where the East Meets the West:
How Western Internet and Modern
Communications Technology Helped
Soviet-style Propaganda in Donbass**

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Where the East Meets the West: How Western Internet and Modern Communications Technology Helped Soviet-style Propaganda in Donbass

“We must spread our principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda”

- Mikhail Bakunin (1870)

Perhaps nowhere has information warfare been as pronounced and aggressive in the last couple of years as in Ukraine. Since 2014, the Ukrainian government in Kyiv has been battling against separatists in Donbass on both the military and informational fronts. There should be no surprise therefore, that the country has turned into a “cyber safe haven”, with the ongoing political, economic and military crises providing little hope that Ukraine will climb down in the world's top cyber crime list in the foreseeable future.² The separatists have not only managed to disrupt the central government's infrastructure and its presence in the digital space. They have also manipulated distant constituencies through the use of digital media. Since politics nowadays is being played out in the “public space of the media”, Ukraine has become a perfect example of how a pyramid of state power and control proved ineffective in countering alternative communication networks and “mass self-communication”.³ With Kyiv slowly losing a battle of images and ideas to the two self-proclaimed republics in the east, it had become clear that the powermaking in the country was in part determined on a sub-state level.⁴ The inability of the Ukrainian government to effectively influence digital space and propaganda inside and outside of its borders proved critical to the separatists being able to outmanoeuvre the state and become a legitimate party to the negotiations in Minsk.⁵ The separatists' usage of social networks, propaganda and “fascist threat” narrative

¹ Mikhail Bakunin. *Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis*. September 1870, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/1870/letter-frenchman.htm>

² Nadiya Kostyuk. *Ukraine: A Cyber Safe Haven?* in *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression against Ukraine* (NATO CCDCOE Publications, Tallinn 2015), https://ccdcoe.org/sites/default/files/multimedia/pdf/CyberWarinPerspective_Kostyuk_13.pdf, p. 114

³ Neville Bolt. *Unsettling Networks: Review Essay* (The RUSI Journal//Vol. 154//No. 5, October 2009), p. 36

⁴ Anna Matveeva. *Through Times of Trouble: Conflict in Southeastern Ukraine Explained from Within* (Lexington Books, London and New York 2018), p. 2

⁵ Financial Times. *Full Text of the Minsk Agreement*. 12 February 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/21b8f98e-b2a5-11e4-b234-00144feab7de>

portrayed the former as victims of state persecution and the central government as being out of touch with reality and common sense.⁶

By the 1990-s, globalisation had become a ubiquitous term in the daily lexicon of political commentators and economists. For the majority of humanity, the phrase represented shrinking physical distances and bringing people and places closer together. New technologies that accelerated the transfer of currencies, people and information, such as mobile phones, satellite TV and internet, became arteries of globalisation. Forces of liberal capitalism and democracy were swiftly entering previously unknown territories. These changes, however, did not mean that the world was freed from the social, political and economic inequalities that had existed beforehand, including within the “newly-emancipated” societies.⁷ Simultaneously, a different revolution was therefore taking place in parallel with the horizontal spread of ideas, identities, and technology.⁸ A decline in the power of the nation state, although never complete, resulted in the resurrection of guerrilla warfare but in a modernised and technologically advanced way.⁹ This happened not only as a political reaction to the fall of the Soviet Union and the vacuum it had created, but also as a consequence of the spread of information technologies and digital media.¹⁰ And so, the so-called “netwar”, that was accompanying a war on the physical ground, contributed to the rise of the “network forms of organisation, doctrine, strategy and technology”.¹¹

Ukraine is one of the former communist states that had fairly quickly experienced the intrusion of capitalism and democracy in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Empire. As with other fellow Soviet space countries, it has always had a pool of highly educated IT experts and famously produced some of the world's best mathematicians.¹² So when the Union was unraveling, a whole generation of hackers who were in need of money suddenly became available for the cyber market and security services. With cyber regulations being almost non-existent and with the government sector paying minimal salaries, the majority of the IT specialists went to work in the private sector.¹³ According to Ukrainian cyber security experts, some of these, more recently in the past decade, moved to the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk republics, including those from

⁶ Andrew Wilson. *Ukraine Crisis: What it Means for the West* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2014), p. 125

⁷ Bolt: p. 35

⁸ John Mackinlay. *The Insurgent Archipelago: From Mao to Bin Laden* (Hurst and Company, London 2012), p. 93

⁹ Mary Kaldor. *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Polity Press, Cambridge 2012), p. 3

¹⁰ David Betz. *Cyberpower in Strategic Affairs: Neither Unthinkable nor Blessed* (Journal of Strategic Studies//Vol. 35// Issue 5//2012), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2012.706970>, p. 692

¹¹ John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt. *The Advent of Netwar (Revisited)* in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime and Militancy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1993-2003), p. 2

¹² Alissa de Carbonnel. *Ex-soviet Hackers Play Outsized Role in Cyber Crime World*. 22 August 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/net-us-russia-cybercrime/ex-soviet-hackers-play-outsized-role-in-cyber-crime-world-idUSBRE97L0TP20130822>

¹³ Kostyuk: p. 115

Russia.¹⁴ The need for money, however, only partly explains why military and cyber professionals and volunteers were motivated to join the information war in Donbass. A large number of people made their decision to take part “in a collective violent action”, including in cyberspace, based on certain ideas and narratives and not on material rewards.¹⁵ Moises Naim would call them “micropowers” who are changing the world with their ability to challenge the “megaplayers”, i.e. state institutions and hierarchies.¹⁶

The war between the Kyiv government and the separatists in the east illustrates the capacity of the information and communication technologists to disseminate propaganda and moralize the war itself. It also shows that the technologies available to separatists affected their ability to mobilize resources. One of the advantages for separatists has been the fact that through means of communication and digital media they could easily target geographically dispersed audiences. As a result, there have been plenty of foreign fighters and volunteers who entered Donbass from various parts of the former Soviet Union and beyond.¹⁷ The motivation for those can be explained through one image that was widely distributed online, initially by the “Vostok” battalion’s commander Alexander Khodakovsky, on almost every social platform existent online. It shows eight Soviet pilots from the *Only Old Men Are Going to Battle* movie, standing shoulder to shoulder and representing *Druzhbba Narodov* (friendship of Peoples).¹⁸ The movie is a 1973 Soviet war drama about the Second World War and was produced in Ukraine. Needless to say, it was very popular in the Soviet Union and won many prizes at the time. The image has a message on it – “For them there were no Khokhols, Moscals and Churkas. Therefore, we are alive today”. The derogatory terms that the image alludes to (for Ukrainians, Russians and Caucasians respectively) re-emerged in the last years of the existence of the Soviet Empire, when nationalism was on the rise and the wars of independence were fought in various parts of the country. They are much in use today.

This image - with its suggested interpretation - embodies values and ideals, which, if publicly pronounced by a politician or written in a newspaper, would perhaps be perceived as archaically Soviet and politically biased. For Western observers, the message of the Donbass separatists, found on Khodakovsky’s Instagram page, would most certainly represent a call for the return of the Empire. At the same time, its power lies in the immediate and long-lasting effect it produces, i.e. the feelings of common

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Matveeva: p. 2

¹⁶ Moises Naim. *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States. Why Being in Charge Isn’t What It Used to Be* (Basic Books, New York 2013), in *The Decay of Power: Is it New? Is it True? So What?*

¹⁷ Arwa Damon, Michael Pearson, and Ed Payne. *Ukraine: Photos Show Undercover Russian Troops*. 22 April 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/21/world/europe/ukraine-crisis/index.html>

¹⁸ Instagram of Alexander Khodakovsky. 9 March 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BgGsUlth2JM/?tagged=ополчение>

identity and belonging.¹⁹ It “condenses shared grievances and aspirations, often outrages and tragedies of people previously unknown to each other”.²⁰ In this case and according to one of the propagandists’ narratives: the tragedy of the fall of the Soviet Union and what it had produced in Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine and could possibly produce elsewhere. That is exactly what Anna Matveeva meant when she warned that the narratives and solidarity that Donbass unleashed “should make us pause and think that it may be something more complex than the narrative which holds the conflict to be little less than an unmitigated act of Russian aggression perpetrated by the ugly regime of Putin”.²¹ Such a mass political mobilization of connected individuals “allowed them to surge together and out-flank the controlling devices of a vertical bureaucracy” of the Ukrainian state.²² It may well outlive Mr. Putin as well.

Perhaps, the separatists and *Novorusskies* (imperialists who want Ukraine to merge with Russia) explain their power better than any expert on insurgency would do. To take the words of Khodakovsky himself, accompanied by the romantic picture of himself and his fellow soldiers on Instagram: “There are so many things happening in the world, but at this local site the concerns are the same in the snow and in the rain. Who knows, perhaps, no less depends on these concerns and the site than on global politics”.²³ Indeed, what has been happening for the last four years in Donbass has had both military and informational consequences. In January 2015, the separatist-connected organization, *CyberBerkut*, claimed responsibility for hacking the German government’s websites prior to Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk’s visit to Berlin.²⁴ The hackers even explained their reasoning, saying that “the war has already taken thousands of lives, and Yatsenyuk will kill more for your [German] money”. The message continued: “That’s why we appeal to all people and to the government of Germany to stop financial and political support of the criminal regime in Kyiv, which unleashed a bloody civil war”. It is important to recall that *Berkut* was a Ukrainian special police force that the interim government accused of being traitors and of killing anti-Yanukovych protesters during Euromaidan. As a result, the majority of the *Berkut*

¹⁹ Megan MacDaffee Metzger and Joshua A. Tucker. *Social Media and Euromaidan: A Review Essay* (Slavic Review 76// No. 1//Spring 2017), https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/D4AF4BDCBE35D03421456EA26CA7F528/S003767791700016Xa.pdf/social_media_and_euromaidan_a_review_essay.pdf, p. 172

²⁰ Neville Bolt, David Betz and Jaz Azari. *Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Understanding the Phenomenon* (RUSI, Whitehall Report 3-08, 2008), p. 5

²¹ Matveeva: p. 16

²² Mackinlay: p. 138

²³ Instagram of Alexander Khodakovsky. 28 January 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BefzhcuH9Ry/?tagged=ополчение>

²⁴ Stefan Wagstyl. *Ukraine Separatists Claim Cyber Attack on German Government Sites*. 7 January 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/08270324-9678-11e4-a40b-00144feabdc0>

forces moved to Russia to avoid state prosecution.²⁵ It is notable that *CyberBerkut's* logo has a message on it saying, “We will not forget. We will not forgive”.²⁶ The official website of the group shows videos of the Ukrainian army committing war crimes against innocent civilians.

Although the separatist-orchestrated cyber attacks and cyber espionage did not critically change the military outcome on the ground, they, nevertheless, represented “the power against the wishes of the state and usually outside of the former's jurisdiction” with very little chance to be traced.²⁷ The exercising of this power has been humiliating for Kyiv's nationalist posture, since it exposed the inability of the government to effectively crush it. The particular episode of the attack on the German government's internet infrastructure previously referenced can also be viewed as an opportunity to push the international community and the government of Ukraine to recognise the separatists as legitimate power holders in Donbass. It also very much resembled the tactics advocated by Navin A. Bapat as “internationalisation of terrorist campaigns”, with a view to transforming a purely domestic contest into an international issue.²⁸ That does not mean, of course, that *CyberBerkut* physically moved to Germany by having attacked the government's infrastructure, but such a tactic indirectly forced both Berlin and Kyiv into negotiations. Were “the terrorists [to] remain purely domestic, the target would attack the terrorists without negotiating”.²⁹

In other instances, *CyberBerkut* claimed to have hacked Ukraine's Central Election Commission during parliamentary elections, leaked secret data on statistics of losses and desertions from Ukraine's Ministry of Defence and blocked the official website of President Petro Poroshenko, to name but a few.³⁰ In the words of Theodore Roszak, information technology at the hands of guerrilla hackers “made its closest approach to becoming an instrument of democratic politics”, which the separatists have been deprived of by the government in Kyiv.³¹ According to another source, the hackers'

²⁵ Ria Novosti. “*Berkut*” *God Spustya: Mi Ne Predavali Ukrainu*. 18 February 2015, <https://ria.ru/interview/20150218/1048315480.html>

²⁶ *CyberBerkut's* official website, <https://cyber-berkut.org/en/>

²⁷ David J. Betz and Tim Stevens. *Cyberspace and the State: Toward a Strategy of Cyber Power* (Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, New York 2011), p. 39

²⁸ Navin A. Bapat. *The Internationalization of Terrorist Campaigns* (Conflict Management and Peace Science, 24:265-280, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group 2007), <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/07388940701643607>, p. 265

²⁹ Bapat: p. 270

³⁰ Vitaly Shevchenko. *Konflikt v Ukraine: Hakeri Vedut Virtualnuyu Voynu*. 22 December 2014, http://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/ukraine_in_russian/2014/12/141222_ru_s_ukraine_hackers_war

³¹ Tim Jordan and Paul A. Taylor. *Hactivism and Cybermars: Rebels With a Cause?* (Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, London and New York 2004), p. 13

army has systematically undermined all sectors in Ukraine, including those beyond the virtual playground, such as transport, military and energy.³²

The Kyiv government's attempts to obtain popular support through state media did not only run into a problem of cyber-attacks. It was also losing the battle of images and symbols, narratives and propaganda. Manuel Castells was correct in saying that “in our society, politics is primary media politics”.³³ For Donbass' civilians, who were losing homes, relatives and friends, the Ukrainian state embodied a political class who, from their cozy mansions, were implementing the policies of fascism. “We are fighting to free our lands from dirt and parasites”, were the words shortsightedly expressed by President Petro Poroshenko on his Facebook account in 2014.³⁴ Suffice to say that the message was instantly spread across social networks.

The fascist narrative did not, of course, start with Mr. Poroshenko – the nationalist and far-right *Svoboda Party* was founded in 1991 and is based on the ideas of Stepan Bandera.³⁵ The Azov battalion of the Ukrainian army, however, used Nazi symbols and its soldiers believe that Ukraine should be a “clean nation”, with “one state, one people, one country”.³⁶ Such images and symbols have had a great emotional impact on the population because “they conveyed a functional facsimile of reality as opposed to a mere description”.³⁷ As a result, Kyiv failed doubly: in preventing those symbols from spreading and by not creating a counter-narrative that would have justified the government's military presence in Donbass without targeting the Russian-speaking population – something that Kyiv, to its detriment, ignored to consider.

The Donetsk self-proclaimed republic, on the other hand, has its own website in English. If Soviet content was meant to recruit support from the former communist states, the narratives that are framed for an international audience can be found at www.dnnews.com. The website is run by a Finnish Chief Editor, Janus Putkonen. As an example of the kind of propaganda it specializes in, a dramatic act of political violence was captured by the news agency on March 10, 2018, showing a soldier of the

³² Andy Greenberg. *How An Entire Nation Became Russia's Test Lab for Cyberwar*. 20 June 2016, <https://www.wired.com/story/russian-hackers-attack-ukraine/>

³³ Manuel Castells. *Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society* (International Journal of Communication//No. 1//2007), p. 240

³⁴ Haaretz. *Russia Urges Ukraine to End Renewed Military Operations*. 1 July 2014, <https://www.haaretz.com/russia-urges-ukraine-to-end-renewed-military-operations-1.5254036>

³⁵ Youtube of Ollie Richardson. *Leader of "Svoboda" Oleg Tyagnibok: Ukraine Must Be Only a Banderist State!* 1 January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P98LNmUQnn8>

³⁶ Matt Florence. *How Prevalent Are Far Right Nationalists in Ukraine*. 26 January 2017, <https://medium.com/@mattflorence/how-prevalent-are-far-right-nationalists-in-ukraine-c04b9fb5b3d9>

³⁷ David J. Betz. *Cyberspace and Insurgency* in *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency* (Routledge, New York 2012), p. 56

Donetsk Republic's army being killed by the Ukrainian military.³⁸ Yevgeny Toropkin's body, according to the medical examination, showed "pronounced anemia, fatal injuries in the head and bodily injuries of intravital nature". This description was followed by a picture of the deceased man with severe trauma of his skull bones: an image that far outlives the spoken argument of the separatists. It clearly shows that the "insurgent planners and news editors recognized that violence sells – if it bleeds, it leads".³⁹ In the words of John Mackinlay, the purpose of such propaganda is in "arousing the population from a state of sullen endurance to uncontrollable passion by committing visible acts of violence".⁴⁰ In this case, the separatists were using the images of violence perpetrated by the enemy and not by themselves. They did so to compromise the Ukrainian military forces, to arouse the act of retaliation, and to justify their own strategy of self-defence against the authoritarian counterinsurgency exercised by Kyiv.

In contrast, one of the earlier propaganda videos on YouTube showed another and now deceased insurgent commander of the "Somali" battalion Mikhail Tolstykh, known as Givi. In the video, Givi is forcing captured Ukrainian soldiers to eat the cloth of the Ukrainian flag attached to their uniforms.⁴¹ He engages in abusive and derogatory conversation with them, at one point screaming, "This is my land – I was born here!" In one part, which is not shown for graphic reasons, the separatists kill the Ukrainian soldiers on camera. This video, which had gathered 243,048 views at the time of accessing, exemplifies the Donetsk separatists taking full advantage of digital media and communications. The propaganda of the deed, showcased in the video, although initially shocking, was aimed at provoking Kyiv into violence. Its force lay in "its ability to resonate, not just shock or provoke, and through resonance to attach itself to underlying grievances in populations, ultimately mobilising and expanding these newfound constituencies".⁴² Although Givi himself did not use social networks, he had what he called a "press office". Givi's popularity was unquestioned and, quite possibly, contributed to his death.⁴³ His charisma and a young-Sylvester-Stallone-like appearance were both promising and uncompromising. He was becoming well known also in the West, thanks to the Internet, global media and social networks.⁴⁴ And his death is likely to immortalize him contrary to what some experts suggest.⁴⁵

³⁸ Donbass News Agency. *Blood Runs Cold: DPR Soldier Tortured to Death in Ukrainian Captivity (18+)*, <https://dninews.com/article/blood-runs-cold-dpr-soldier-tortured-death-ukrainian-captivity-18? utl t=tw>

³⁹ Bolt, Betz and Azari: p. 5

⁴⁰ Mackinlay: p. 56

⁴¹ Youtube of Kazzura. *UAF POW's Abused By Givi and Taken to Parade Through the City Destroyed by UAF Artillery*. 27 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FD15bxM3mTc>

⁴² Bolt, Betz and Azari: p. 15

⁴³ Andrew E. Kramer. *Assassins Are Killing Ukraine's Rebel Chiefs, but On Whose Orders?* 8 February 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/world/europe/ukraine-russia-mikhail-tolstykh-dead.html>

⁴⁴ Youtube of Graham Phillips. *Givi, As I Knew Him*. 21 February 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RnPtXltOFlg>

⁴⁵ Pavel Kazarin. *Faceless Donbass*. 15 February 2017, <http://uacrisis.org/52632-le-donbass-sans-visage>

Givi was also a typical leader of a “polycephalous tribe”, which Luther Gerlach would describe as “achieving his status by building a personal following and displaying abilities and characteristics pertinent to situational needs and the expectations of his adherents and potential recruits”.⁴⁶ His leadership was more charismatic than bureaucratic and he had other battalions’ leaders around him, which undermines the assumption of the insurgency having had a strict hierarchy – at least in its development stage. This flat command structure approach was what made it so attractive to the Russian speaking constituencies across the post-Soviet world, which on the one hand, were a minority in the former communist republics, and on the other, knew only too well about the repressive communist state control. Another celebrity like persona, Arseny “Motorola” Pavlov, was no less charismatic and according to *The Guardian*, was “one of the best known and controversial rebel commanders in east Ukraine”.⁴⁷ Some experts, as well as the Donbass citizens, believe both commanders were killed on orders from Moscow rather than Kyiv as they posed a threat to Russian ambitions in eastern Ukraine. According to Dmitry Oreshkin, “Putin needs an instrument to influence Kyiv, and the ideal instrument is a constantly smoldering conflict like those in the style of the Karabakh or Transdniestria”.⁴⁸

Modern technologies, as illustrated above, can also be a powerful weapon against the vertically structured state news industry. Another good example, which was one of the narratives used against the Ukrainian army, was a video of a captured Ukrainian soldier who agreed to “shoot” his comrade in exchange for staying alive.⁴⁹ Obviously, this was something that would have never been shown on state TV. However, the separatists presented the moral degradation of the Ukrainian army masterfully well. “What are you fighting for if you are ready to kill each other?” – asked one of the separatists and responded straightaway - “For your own hide. Haven’t you realized yet that you got fooled?” The Ukrainian soldier, clearly intimidated by the armed rebels, but also morally compromised, responded: “We do not know what we are fighting for when we are betrayed even by our own commanders”. The Donetsk separatists continued: “Our guys would never do anything like that what you just did, I swear. I am ready to sacrifice my life for every single one of our guys. Everyone would rather die”. This video, originally recorded on a mobile phone or a digital camera, had gathered 264,347 views on YouTube at the time of accessing.

⁴⁶ Luther P. Gerlach. *Movements of Revolutionary Change: Some Structural Characteristics* (American Behavioral Scientist//July-August 1971), p. 9

⁴⁷ Shaun Walker. *Prominent Rebel Warlord Arseny “Motorola” Pavlov Dies in Donetsk Blast*. 17 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/17/prominent-warlord-arsen-motorola-pavlov-killed-donetsk-blast>

⁴⁸ Paul A. Goble. *Putin Can't Annex Donbass, Two Russian Analysts Say*. 9 September 2015, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2015/09/09/putin-cant-annex-donbas-two-russian-analysts-say/>

⁴⁹ Youtube of Kazzura. *Militias Offer UAF POW to "Shoot" His Comrade In Exchange For Sparing Him and He Agrees*. 6 April 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Np9G5AhgZNE>

Finally, the way that the government in Kyiv was conducting the counterinsurgency by having totally failed to counter the separatists' "digital" narratives needs to be examined. When the conflict was at its initial stage, Ukraine's corrupt army could barely support its own troops, not to mention help the local population with humanitarian aid and provide it with some level of security. The constant shelling of towns, captured by modern technology and released through mass communications, was perceived by the civilian population as an occupation. The way the separatists portrayed the government via digital media looked more like Mikhail Tukhachevsky's approach to counterinsurgency, i.e. "the struggle must be waged not primarily with the rebel bands, but with the entire local population".⁵⁰ To put it mildly, that was counterproductive for winning the hearts and minds of the population. As a result, turning the Donbass civilians to the Ukrainian side proved very difficult and was, perhaps, considered unnecessary in the first place, which may explain the callous behavior shown.⁵¹

According to Jason Lyall, the Ukrainian government's failure to provide compensation directly after attacking the villages and to promote a successful counter-narrative "that clarified its intentions and could divide the groups on the ground" was fatal.⁵² The war with the separatists was almost completely based on the Russian threat narrative and how Ukraine should be a country for Ukrainians. It was also particularly strange on the part of the Kyiv authorities to ban the Russian opposition channel *TV Dozhd* that was, more or less, successfully countering the Russia-backed propaganda.⁵³ The reason for the channel's ban had to do with the fact that it recognized Crimea as part of Russia. According to its General Director Natalia Sindeeva, the channel was still available online for its digital subscribers via website, smart TV application and other channels of distribution. Nevertheless, such actions only reinforced the idea that the government was trying to tighten control of the media space and was not interested in the interests of its Russian speaking minorities – even those who may have been in opposition to the Russian government. There was, possibly, a fear that the information distributed by the separatists would become widely available on TV.

As illustrated through the above instances, the separatists were not only challenging the state's control of the media production. Given the near-total dependence of the government on complex communication networks, the guerrilla hackers were targeting the government's infrastructure, thereby undermining the belief in the power of the state's institutions. The separatists also portrayed the state as an immoral killing

⁵⁰ Yuri M. Zhukov. *Counterinsurgency in a Non-Democratic State: The Russian Example* in *The Routledge Companion to Insurgency and Counterinsurgency* (Routledge, London 2010), p. 8

⁵¹ Jack Losh. *Can Ukraine Win Over Pro-Russian Citizens in the East – And Finally Win the War with Separatists?* 12 April 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/2017/04/21/ukraine-only-hope-east-may-building-homes-and-schools-582509.html>

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Christopher Miller. *Ukraine Bans the Broadcasts of Independent Russian TV Station Dozhd*. 12 January 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-bans-russia-tv-rain-dozhd/28228049.html>

machine, whose sovereign decision-making is undermined by legal international frameworks and commercial journalism selling “dissatisfaction” anyway.⁵⁴ The Kyiv government, being in a crisis of political legitimacy after the loss of Crimea, now also experienced a much more violent situation in Donbass, where its influence over its Russian-speaking citizens was weakening. By having seized the opportunities arising from the political turmoil in the country, the Donbass separatists have managed to erode the trust between the state and the Russian speaking population through their constant presence in the media space. By using one-on-one communication and personal initiative with their followers, their motives were perceived as having genuinely originated in the grassroots, which normally could not be found in bureaucratic state structures.⁵⁵

The Internet provided a platform for the separatists to change the landscape of internal politics, and transformed the separatists’ online activism into moral and psychological victory over the government. Firstly, the narrative of fascism and genocide against the Russian speaking population, often confirmed by the rhetoric of the representatives of the acting government and distributed through instant communication channels, made it increasingly difficult for Kyiv to hide or manipulate the released information. Secondly, the network of the separatists and their polycephalous nature motivated volunteers to join what they saw as a grassroots movement that was not restricted by hierarchical, top-down structures. As seen in the separatists’ communication channels, their network was not driven by the prospect of financial gain, but was instead characterized by adhering to the narrative and images of the former glory of the Soviet Union. This allowed many in Ukraine and volunteers from other former communist republics to indulge in a romanticisation of the old Soviet order.⁵⁶

The mass nature of communications contributed to the unity of action and instant reporting, which would have been difficult to achieve under the repressive conditions of Kyiv’s bureaucracy. At the same time, the global reach of the guerrilla hackers contributed to the internationalization of the war in Donbass and elevated its importance in the global agenda. No longer was Donbass the sole headache of Kyiv: it had also become an issue for the foreign states involved in negotiations with the government. The smart interplay of “online” and “offline” action, as Metzger and Tucker would put it, proved to be critical to a winning strategy of the separatists.⁵⁷ The solidarity and common cause instilled into the hearts and minds of the targeted constituencies is unlikely to evaporate. If Kyiv does not give up on counterinsurgency,

⁵⁴ Guy Debord. *The Society of the Spectacle* (Zone Books, New York 1994), http://www.antiworld.se/project/references/texts/The_Society%20Of%20The%20Spectacle.pdf, in *Unity and Division Within Appearances*

⁵⁵ Gerlach: p. 19

⁵⁶ Youtube of Kazzura. *Givi Answers Questions of Georgian Journalist*. 26 December 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bw7DMB37eA>

⁵⁷ Metzger and Tucker: p. 189

the insurgent energy may impact elsewhere due to the networked nature of the conflict. With the Internet remaining open and widely accessible, there is little chance that the narratives unleashed by Donbass will be effectively challenged in the future, and their continued resonance is therefore assured.