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**INFORMATION WARFARE OVER CRIMEA: EXPLORING UKRAINE'S  
INFORMATION CAMPAIGN**

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**Summary:** The thesis examines the information warfare regarding the issue of Crimea since the annexation of the peninsula in 2014. As Russian propaganda aims to justify the annexation through its constructed narratives, the efforts by Ukraine to counter these threats in an informational space is essential. This paper uses strategic theory/strategic communication theory and agenda-setting theory to guide the research and analyze Ukrainian information campaign aimed at delegitimizing annexation of Crimea by Russia. As a consequence, major frames regarding Crimea in the Ukrainian state-related media are identified.

## Confirmation

I confirm that I am the author of submitted thesis: **Information Warfare Over Crimea: Exploring Ukraine's Information Campaign**, which has been prepared independently and has never been presented for any other course or used in another educational institution, neither in Lithuania, nor abroad. I also provide a full bibliographical list which indicates all the sources that were used to prepare this assignment and contains no un-used sources.

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## Introduction

In its aggressive foreign policy, together with the conventional military aspect, Russia incorporates complex hybrid-warfare strategies, of which information warfare is of great significance. This was also the case when Russia moved to seize Crimea from Ukraine.

To underline the importance of the chosen topic, it should be noted that March 2014 saw one of the most important events of the 21st century in international politics. Clearly, the Kremlin performed a “punitive operation” on Ukraine in the aftermath of Maidan Revolution that ended the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich. As he considered the revolution to be an illegal coup, Putin was asked to provide support<sup>1</sup> who subsequently moved to intervene in Ukraine and annex Crimea. One might say that the international community had not witnessed a territorial seizure of this kind since World War II. In addition to the fact that the annexation of Crimea is a gross violation of international law and sovereignty of Ukraine, it has great geopolitical significance. With the annexation of Crimea, Russia has captured the port of Sevastopol, making the vast waters of the region accessible and, consequently, consolidated its positions in the Black Sea. Thus, Crimea became the main platform for Russia to project its power not only in the Black Sea, but also in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>2</sup>

The significance of the topic also implies the conflict of interests between Russia and the West. NATO has begun retaliating against the annexation of Crimea. NATO brigade has been formed in Romania, the Alliance has launched a naval patrol program in the Black Sea, moved to strengthen Black Sea airspace protection, and more.<sup>3</sup> Despite NATO's growing role in the region, it is unable to effectively counterbalance Russian power.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Losing control over the peninsula led to an overall vulnerable security environment in Ukraine, which in turn creates obstacles for the country's stable economic growth.

Considering the ongoing Russian military aggression against Ukraine (starting on February 24, 2022), Ukraine's failure to persuade the West to act more decisively with regard to the Crimean question gains additional critical meaning. If Ukrainian Information Warfare (IW) had been

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<sup>1</sup> BBC News, “Ukraine crisis: Crimea leader appeals to Putin for help”, 2014. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26397323>> [2022 03 19]

<sup>2</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), “Crimea's Strategic Value to Russia”, 2014. <<https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/crimeas-strategic-value-russia>> [2022 03 19]

<sup>3</sup> Pavel Anastasov, “The Black Sea region: a critical intersection”, NATO, 2018. <<https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2018/05/25/the-black-sea-region-a-critical-intersection/index.html>> [2022 04 01]

<sup>4</sup> Michael Petersen, “The Naval Power Shift in the Black Sea”, 2019. <<https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/the-naval-power-shift-in-the-black-sea/>> [2022 04 01]

more successful against Russian propaganda, a unified and strong response from the West could have brought heavy damage to Russia for violating Ukraine's territorial integrity. A devastating blow to the Russian economy through imposing sanctions in the aftermath of the annexation would be able to perhaps make Putin rethink his plan for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As we currently observe, the latter resulted in a truly unprecedented response from the West in both supporting Ukraine, as well as putting immense pressure on Russia through imposing sanctions and other means. Many aspects could explain the difference between the two responses of the West, including the scale of the conflict. However, one could claim that, unlike current information warfare where Ukraine arguably has an upper hand, the case of Crimea demonstrated an arguable strength and sophistication of Russian propaganda. It is therefore relevant to study the case of Crimea and find how effectively Ukraine was working to counter Russian propagandistic narratives that might have affected the Western stance.

This brings forth the research problem. In the context of the seizure of Crimea by the Russian Federation, it is important to note that the information warfare over Crimea was a significant aspect in an attempt to legitimize the annexation of the peninsula and make sure that it brings minimal damaging consequences for the aggressor. If Russia wanted to evade much difficulties as a result of violating international law so openly, a major blow in the information sphere had to be implemented. As Russia succeeded in achieving the final goal with relatively small effort and without sufficient Western response, we could assume that the response by Ukraine in information warfare was arguably problematic. In other words, the ease with which Russia managed to seize Ukrainian territory and the amount of effort it has put to legitimize this action through disinformation brings forth the need to evaluate the Ukrainian information campaign regarding Crimea. A more effective informational response by Ukraine that would push the West to abandon its moderate stance could have served as a deterrent factor in the long-term, meaning it might have contributed to the deterrence of future aggressions, like the one that Ukraine witnessed in February 2022. If Ukraine managed to unify the West in 2014, Moscow might have changed its plans for 2022. But at that time, it was clear for Putin that the annexation of Crimea would not spark a significant response from the Western democratic world, and he was right in this regard. The West could have imposed sanctions similar to those happening at the moment (the 2022 invasion), as this would have harmed the Russian economy and potentially work for future deterrence. However, this did not occur, leading Moscow to believe that territorial seizures by force are still possible and profitable, further highlighting the need

for a more effective information campaign by Ukraine directed towards the international community.

Russian victory regarding the question of Crimea changed the security situation in the region and shifted the balance of power in favor of Moscow. As a result, the security of Europe and the eastern flank of NATO came under a serious threat and as some argue, Ukraine's possibility to become a member of the Alliance shrunk.

Taking into account the significance of Russian use of soft power relating to the Crimean annexation and Ukraine's need to counter its propaganda, the **research question** is as follows: **How did Ukraine respond to Russia's information warfare over Crimea with regard to the international community?**

Therefore, the **research goal** is to evaluate Ukraine's conduct of information campaign directed towards a broad audience in the West and analyze it through the lens of the chosen theoretical framework. This analysis is aimed at evaluating the efficiency of Ukrainian IW, which may entail discovering potential weaknesses (and strengths), finding the instances where its response lacked efficiency. While a lot of research has been done to describe Russian strategy and its propaganda regarding the problem of Crimea, there is much less work done to evaluate how Ukraine tried to defend itself. Therefore, trying to fill these gaps is an important objective of the research. New findings of the research might serve as a piece of useful information that could be applied to other similar conflicts. For instance, Russian information warfare is also aimed in a similar way at the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, attempting to justify the aggression against yet another sovereign country. Therefore, the knowledge gained by analyzing the information campaign conducted by Ukraine may have a useful value, as it can be applied to these other similar developments in the international system.

### **Literature Review**

An important step in the research is to review the scientific literature that will help to better understand the topic and more effectively proceed to answer the research question. In order to successfully analyze the Ukrainian information campaign, a necessary step is to gain insights into Russian information warfare strategies. This is indeed the primary focus of this chapter, while also briefly covering the literature regarding the concept of information warfare in general, as well as reviewing a quite limited amount of research that is concerned with Ukraine's information warfare.



According to the information warfare expert, George J. Stein<sup>5</sup>, information warfare, in its broadest sense, can be defined as simply the use of information as a means to further the country's national interests. The author predicts, quite rightly so, that informational space is where the "future nation-against-nation conflict at the strategic level is most likely to occur." Stein further clarifies, that even though information warfare is mainly conducted through communication networks, it is not essentially about "satellites, wires and computers". It mainly has to do with influencing people and the choices they make. Here the author makes a distinction between "pure" information warfare, where information is used as a primary way of influence, as opposed to what at present is referred to as cyber-warfare. In this regard, the concept of information warfare as defined by the author, which is the concept used for this thesis, can be linked to a concept of "psychological operations" (PSYOP), the term mainly used in the US, where the target is the human mind. The strategic level information warfare is considered to "shape the political context of the conflict", creating an "integrated battlefield", which in line with the Clausewitzian understanding (which is discussed in the theoretical framework), connects the military and political aspects of one's strategy.

Russian military analysts, Colonel S. G. Chekinov and Lieutenant General S. A. Bogdanov, in their publication with the title "The Nature and Content of a New-Generation War"<sup>6</sup> argue that in a modern world, the role of nonmilitary means has significantly increased in terms of achieving political and strategic objectives. Subsequently, they are often far more potent than the direct use of military force. The authors stress that future wars will not be won until one side gains informational superiority over the other, as modern technologies give greater importance to information campaigns, even though information warfare has always been utilized as a way to further one's foreign policy objectives.

"Understanding Russia's Concept for Total War in Europe" by strategic analyst Martin Murphy<sup>7</sup> analyzes the set of beliefs formulated by the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Valery Gerasimov, which has been named Gerasimov Doctrine and is in line with the observations made by Chekinov and Bogdanov. The Russian Army General observes that the rules of conducting a war have changed, making direct use of military force more difficult, as well as often unnecessary. Instead, nonmilitary means became often more

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<sup>5</sup> George J. Stein, "Information Warfare". *Airpower Journal*, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Sergey G. Chekinov and Sergey A. Bogdanov, "The Nature and Content of a New-Generation War". *Military Thought*, Issue 4, 2013, 12-23.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Murphy, "Understanding Russia's Concept for Total War in Europe". The Heritage Foundation, 2016. <<https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/understanding-russias-concept-total-war-europe>> [2022 05 29]

reasonable and effective in achieving strategic objectives, and an essential aspect of this “new generation warfare” (NGW) is considered to be information warfare. As this approach seems to be abandoned by Russia considering the 2022 invasion, it was quite aligned with Russian strategy in relation to Crimea in 2014.

A security policy paper “Russian Hybrid Warfare: A Success In Propaganda” done by Germany’s Federal Academy for Security Policy analyses Russia’s strategy in the information warfare that backs its war on Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> The paper underlines Russia’s notable investments in TV and social media that are aimed both at the local population and the Western audience. The article argues that NATO and the EU are currently unable to effectively resist Russia’s proficient media campaign. Russia’s campaign is described to be focused on online media, of which “Russia Today” seems to be the most influential and successful. The objective of Moscow is to reach the broad public of the Western world for which refining the language skills of the media campaign is another focus for investment. An important measure taken by Russian authorities in the information sphere regarding Crimea was to make sure that Russian social media spreads information that does not contradict the official positions of the Russian state for which suppressive media regulations were introduced. Also, efforts have been made to deprive the local population of easy access to Western media outlets. This way alternative information sources for the Russians are relatively inaccessible. The paper also notes that Moscow’s official positions regarding different events are well covered in Western media as well and while knowledgeable people can easily see the defects of Russian propaganda, those who are not so well informed may easily be manipulated with the campaign which Western media ensures to report to its own audience.

“Russian Information Warfare: Implications for Deterrence Theory” by Strategic Studies Quarterly describes Russian strategy in the information conflict and notes that one of its goals is to present Russian behavior as defensive in nature.<sup>9</sup> Moscow sees Western internet media as a significant threat to its national security and chooses a defensive tone in the media campaigns to later display the aggressive behavior as a necessary act of self-defense. An important aspect of the campaign is to accuse Western media of being biased in criticizing Russia and additionally, of spreading principles that contradict and violate Russian traditional values. The paper identifies several tools used by Russia in information warfare, including: exploiting

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<sup>8</sup> Keir Giles, “Russia’s Hybrid Warfare: A Success in Propaganda”. Federal Academy for Security Policy, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Media Ajir and Bethany Vailliant, “Russian Information Warfare: Implications for Deterrence Theory”. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2018, 70-89.

global social media (for instance, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube); controlling western media outlets (taking advantage of openness of Western media and newspapers); lobbying western society (through financing western political parties or PR agencies), etc. Through disinformation, a nation state may be able to discredit the reputation of a particular country's government, and increase the legitimacy of a particular event which would lay the foundation for a subsequent use of military force.

“An Alternative War: The Development, Impact, and Legality of Hybrid Warfare Conducted by the Nation State” describes modern tools of hybrid warfare which also includes information warfare as a mechanism to alter the adversary society's views regarding international relations.<sup>10</sup> The paper points out that while preparing the annexation of Crimea, a well-tested Russian IW tactic “Reflexive Control” was used. The aim of this method is to manipulate the opponent through information in such a way that the target voluntarily makes a decision that is actually desired by the initiator. Thus, by managing to conceal the identity of Russian Special Forces in Crimea, Moscow successfully altered the adversaries' perception of reality and hid their true intentions. This way, Ukrainian and Western governments voluntarily made a decision not to take decisive action and fell into the Russian trap. Appropriate categorization of this tactic is briefly discussed in the chapter “Theoretical Framework”.

In “Russian Information Warfare: Lessons From Ukraine” Margarita Jaitner points to the conflicting news coverage by Russian and Ukrainian media, the former referring to the insignia-less soldiers in Crimea as “friendly people” who treat the local citizens well, while the latter described them as “little green men” and alerted for the Russian invasion.<sup>11</sup> Russian President, as well as the Russian Defence Minister, denied the involvement of Russian soldiers in Crimea for weeks until they finally admitted the truth. The author argues that Russian IW abilities are superior not only to that of Ukrainian, but to the capabilities of the West as well. In her estimation, Russian disinformation campaigns played an even greater role than the cyber-attacks in the war against Ukraine.

The journal article called “Whose is Crimea? Contested Sovereignty and Regional Identity” discusses the question of Crimea seen from the perspective of the two nations.<sup>12</sup> Both sides

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<sup>10</sup> Jack Brown, “An Alternative War: The Development, Impact, and Legality of Hybrid Warfare Conducted by the Nation State”. *Journal of Global Faultlines*, Vol. 5, No. 1-2, 2018, 58-82.

<sup>11</sup> Margarita Jaitner, “Russian Information Warfare: Lessons from Ukraine.” NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Austin Charron, “Whose is Crimea? Contested Sovereignty and Regional Identity”. *Region*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2016, 225-256.

present arguments (historical, ethnic, cultural, legal, etc.) that they find legitimate which points to the belonging of the peninsula to either of the countries. Based on the survey done in 2011, the article argues that in terms of territorial identity, the Crimean local population mainly identifies itself to neither of the nations, but to Crimea itself. However, the political loyalties or preferences for either Ukraine or Russia are much less evident based on the above-mentioned survey. The article also argues that even though Ukraine might have an upper hand in the IW when it comes to arguments based on international law and the support of the international community, it lacks the advantage of historical and ethnic arguments that Russia utilizes to legitimize its military actions in the region.

“Analysis of Russia’s Information Campaign Against Ukraine” of NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence authored by Elina Lange-Ionatamišvili was published shortly after the annexation of Crimea and explored the strategic narratives used by Russia, the increasing importance of social media and derived lessons from these developments.<sup>13</sup> The report points out that the change in Russia’s positioning in the international system is well reflected in national documents such as Foreign Policy Review of 2007, State Security Strategy of 2009 as well as Foreign Policy Concept of 2013. The first of the mentioned documents contains a notion of “Compatriots Abroad” which emphasizes the necessity to protect the rights of Russians who suddenly found themselves in a different country after the fall of the Soviet Union. In order to provide the protection of these people’s interests, the document advocates for aggressive and decisive action from the state. Putin also explained that the compatriots are those whose first language is Russian and also those who consider themselves to be Russian (thus not necessarily ethnic Russians). This narrative inevitably argues that the rights of these people are systematically violated in other countries, hence the need for decisive measures by Moscow. As a result of the state’s effective control over the mass media, the narratives - such as a claim that Crimea belongs to Russia, that Ukraine should be united with Russia or the necessity to fight the neo-Nazis - have been successfully utilized to shape public opinion.

In addition<sup>14</sup>, the state-controlled media has actively used methods to falsify events in a way that serves the primary state narrative. One of the significant narratives that were actively preached by Aleksandr Dugin can be defined as Eurasianism, which considers Ukraine to be central to pursuing the unification of the Orthodox civilization. This approach paints

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<sup>13</sup> Elina Lange-Ionatamišvili, “Analysis of Russia’s Information Campaign Against Ukraine”. NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, Riga, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> The same.

Ukrainians and Russians as one people although emphasizes the superiority of the Russian nation. Dugin calls Belarusians and Ukrainians “Little Russians” while the Russians themselves constitute the “Great Russians”. This can also be considered as a message to the West that Russia which possesses immense military power will not put up with them “stealing” Ukraine. Along with putting a question mark on the statehood of Ukraine itself, Russia pushed the narrative of “Nazis” orchestrating the Euromaidan Revolution already in 2014. These new “Fascists” were accused of planning to use violence and confiscate the properties of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. The prohibition of the Russian language was also put forward as a threat that needed to be addressed. With regard to international community, Russia also chose to create an illusion of being a country whose actions are guided by international law, in particular the right of nations to self-determination. By holding a referendum in Crimea, Russia moved to show the “legitimacy” of its subsequent annexation. In justifying its aggressive behavior, Russian narrative continually presented accusations to the West of perpetrating unlawful interventions in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Another accusation is focused on NATO being a promise breaker in terms of not expanding the alliance into the Central-Eastern part of Europe. Another prevailing theme in the propaganda is portraying Russia as a close and familiar country to Ukraine (to say the least), while the West is portrayed as a stranger to them. In this regard, the common historical experience and the Orthodox faith as a strong binding aspect are emphasized.

Russian and Ukrainian IW capabilities are discussed by Glib Kanevsky in the article “Putin’s Propaganda Machine and Ukraine’s Informational Weakness”.<sup>15</sup> The specialist at the Center of Political Studies and Analysis argues that the Crimean population, unfortunately, came under the influence of powerful Kremlin propaganda which aggravated their desire to join Russia. The fact that the residents did not fully boycott the unlawful referendum points to the effectiveness of Russian media which planted the fear of fascists determined to violate the interests of the locals. The focus on increasing the effectiveness of propaganda was demonstrated when in 2009, President Medvedev approved a list of TV and radio channels which would be mandatorily aired throughout Russia. The list included such channels as the First Channel, Rossiya and NTV. In addition, Putin established a new state program “Information Society” targeting all Russian-speakers around the world. The article emphasizes

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<sup>15</sup> Glib Kanevsky, “Putin’s Propaganda Machine and Ukraine’s Informational Weakness”. Euromaidan Press, 2014. <<https://euromaidanpress.com/2014/04/08/putins-propaganda-machine-and-ukraines-informational-weakness/>> [2022 05 30]

the financial superiority Russia enjoys over Ukraine with regard to funding information campaigns. The aforementioned “Information Society” is said to be receiving 4.06 billion US dollars per year, which equals to 10 percent of Ukraine’s entire national revenue (in 2013). By analyzing the relevant figures, Ukraine happens to spend around 215 million US dollars on IW capabilities, which in 2013 was 18.7 times less than Russia. Additionally, the author criticizes Ukrainian media for placing much of the focus on the domestic struggles for power, instead of pursuing the formation of strong information policy aimed at strengthening the country’s national interests and pursuing strategic objectives internally, as well as externally.

In an article called “Communicating the Foreign Policy Strategy: on Instruments and Means of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine”<sup>16</sup>, Ukrainian scholars argue that the concept of public diplomacy has been neglected for a long time by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, which is the main communicator of the country’s strategic interests to the international community. It is noted that Ukraine only started to pay attention to this approach since 2015. Namely, the ministry established the Department of Public Diplomacy, which eventually became the Department of Communications and Public Diplomacy. The researchers mention the brand “Ukraine NOW” developed by Ukrainian authorities that launched the website “Ukraine.ua”, aiming at forming a positive image of the country with regard to the international community. The article stresses that Ukraine is in the process of strengthening its informational efforts through the digital platforms, where the main focus is on combating anti-Ukrainian propaganda and stereotypes that may exist among foreign audiences. Ukraine launched several information campaigns in social media, one of which is #CrimeaIsUkraine, quite active on Twitter and Facebook. The authors describe the Ukrainian MFA’s communication strategy as overall incoherent, emphasizing the need for more efficiently coordinated, unified communication practices.

The review of the literature showcased several significant observations, including the growing role of non-military activities for fulfilling a certain political end, the superiority of Russian information machine thanks to its excessive investment in propaganda, the utilization of certain narratives for subsequent aggressive policy, etc. What this chapter also illustrated is a notable lack of academic literature exploring Ukraine’s informational efforts in general, as well as in relation to the “Crimean question”. Thus, the need to conduct this research becomes clearer.

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<sup>16</sup> Natalia Sheludiakova et al., “Communicating the Foreign Policy Strategy: on Instruments and Means of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.” *SHS Web of Conferences*, Vol. 100, 2021.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding the research are based on two major theories, the first one being strategic theory.

In this regard, it is useful to look at the concept of hybrid warfare seen through the lens of strategic theory.<sup>17</sup> The term has enjoyed a growing usage in the context of international conflicts as we will come across this concept in the strategic papers of different think-tanks, international organizations like NATO or EU, or in the media discussing the hot topics of the hostile international environment. The above-mentioned viewpoint, however, argues that presenting hybrid warfare as a distinct concept, unknown or non-existing in the earlier history of conflicts, is a mistake. Instead, it is an integral part of policy making which forms a grand strategy encompassing complex aspects of economic, social, military, informational and diplomatic components. Each of these aspects should not be explained separately, but only in connection to other aspects of the grand strategy. The unnecessary categorization might lead to a narrow analysis of adversary's tactics, instead of exploring a primary strategy and its effectiveness. Hybrid warfare is just a specific type of war which aims at achieving a certain political goal. According to the viewpoint, therefore, hybrid warfare is subject to the same universal principles of warfare which have been long researched and well established, and its analysis is only effective through the strategic theory.

When applying strategic theory in the process of research, it is important to define the term strategy in order to clarify what types of information campaign can be considered strategic. Carl von Clausewitz, a pioneer in military theory, offers a definition according to which strategy is “the use of the engagements for the object of the war”.<sup>18</sup> Elaborating on this definition, US Army Colonel Arthur F. Lykke provides three phases forming a strategy: policy ends, strategic ways and military means.<sup>19</sup> This approach seemed rather narrow which is why contemporary understanding of strategy entails expanding its meaning to incorporate other aspects that form a more complex “grand strategy”. Contemporary strategic theory - which will be used in this paper – argues that politics (policy) leads to a grand strategy, which encompasses economic, social, military, informational and diplomatic aspects, where a military component additionally extends into operational and tactical dimensions (Figure 1). Even though classical

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<sup>17</sup> Murat Caliskan, “Hybrid Warfare through the Lens of Strategic Theory”. *Defense and Security Analysis*, 35 (1), 2019, 40-58.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 74.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Mihara, “Strategy: How to Make it Work”. *Infinity Journal*, Vol. 3, Issue No. 1, 2012, 19-22.

definitions have now shifted from being military-oriented towards incorporating non-military elements, the holistic vision - which states that all aspects of warfare (propaganda, IW, cyber-warfare, etc.) constitute different parts of a grand strategy - has been arguably re-acknowledged by the defense community since the annexation of Crimea.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, a classical Clausewitzian approach still maintains its relevance, including for this research, as strategic information warfare in the case of Crimea is aligned with his military-oriented view.

**Figure 1.** “Grand strategy and key features” - Caliskan, M. (2019). “Hybrid Warfare through the Lens of Strategic Theory”



A significant postulate of strategic theory is the emphasis on interdependency in the decision-making. Namely, decision-making is “influenced by the existence of a willful adversary (or adversaries) set on achieving its (or their) own ends”.<sup>21</sup> In addition, strategic theory considers the political actor as the central unit of analysis, so it mainly focuses on states or state-connected entities.

To clarify some of the observations made in the introduction of this research, it should be emphasized that information warfare is not considered or perceived to be a sole aspect by which deterrence can/could be achieved. In the context of Crimea’s annexation, it is not claimed that solely effective information campaign by Ukraine would be sufficient to result in greater Western response against Russia, or successful deterrence, for that matter. As shown on Figure

<sup>20</sup> Caliskan, 40-58.

<sup>21</sup> M.L.R Smith and John Stone, “Explaining Strategic Theory”. *Infinity Journal*, Issue No. 4, 2011, 27-30.



1, information campaign is only one element of the grand strategy, which consists of many other aspects and dimensions. Therefore, all those aspects play their own part in the development of matters such as the objective to push the Western community for stricter response, or the deterrence of the future aggression. Informational aspect of the grand strategy, however, is a significant one, the important role of which is argued throughout this research, including in the literature review. Therefore, the quality of Ukrainian information campaign does have a certain degree of influence on these developments, hence the need to analyze it.

Moreover, strategic communication cannot be simply defined as a purposeful communication by an entity to achieve its mission, as it is not precise enough. It is important to distinguish strategic communication from tactical/operational communication, as the latter is also purposeful, but it is not strategic. Strategic theoreticians maintain that something is strategic when it “becomes substantial or significant for an organization’s or other entity’s development, growth, identity or survival”.<sup>22</sup> This substantiality of an issue is to be assessed in retrospect, in order to constitute an objective assessment. Strategic theoreticians also emphasize that the term strategic has two opposite terms: tactical and operational. To translate these meanings into the context of IW over Crimea, it can be argued that, for instance, the Russian “Reflexive Control” tactic mentioned in the literature review is indeed a tactical measure, therefore does not constitute strategic communication. Ukraine’s information campaign, on the other hand, that aims to fight Russian disinformation attempting to legitimize annexation of Crimea is indeed strategic, as it is vital for the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Strategic communication is often considered a part of public diplomacy, which can be defined as “an open instrument of statecraft where successful outcomes are driven by perceived believability and trustworthiness.”<sup>23</sup> It involves governments’ efforts to influence public opinion in other countries, including public opinion on these countries’ foreign policies. When it comes to strategic issues of war, public diplomacy, or the so-called “total diplomacy” can mean putting informational effort that “forces” other countries to choose which side they are on.

In distinguishing strategic information campaign from non-strategic, it is possible to combine the postulates of strategic theory and observations made by security scholar Keir Giles, who

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<sup>22</sup> Ansgar Zerfass et al., “Strategic Communication: Defining the Field and its Contribution to Research and Practice”. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12 (4), 2018, 487-505.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Snow, “Public Diplomacy in a National Security Context”. Book: Myriam Dunn Cavelty and Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

argues that Russian approach to information warfare is “all-encompassing, and not limited to wartime”, while the Western information warfare is more limited to “tactical information operations carried out during hostilities”.<sup>24</sup> It can be argued that this distinction points to the focus of Russian IW on strategic communication, while the Western one is oriented more towards tactical communication. An example of tactical informational measure can be “providing an adversary military commander with false operational information on which to base his decision”, which in essence, is what happened during the annexation of Crimea with “little green men”.<sup>25</sup> However, as Giles claims, Russian approach is more than just denying where its troops are located, it exploits “history, culture, language, nationalism and more” in its disinformation campaigns. In support of this distinction of strategic and non-strategic approaches, the author cites Latvian analyst, Jānis Bērziņš, who points out that Russian information operations “have reached a point where they can take on strategic tasks”.<sup>26</sup>

Strategic researcher Miroslav Mitrovic<sup>27</sup> outlines steps for a strategically planned response to a hostile propaganda. Some of them include identification of sources, which entails identifying initiators of propaganda and their motives; recognition of their core values, which are “constituent factors of stereotypes and prejudice genesis upon which counterpart propaganda builds antagonism”; identification of primary communication channels, meaning the target audience, which “could provide recognition of weakness spot in campaign [...] as well as open space for defense propaganda actions”; development of counterpropaganda strategy, which means “the development of strategic communication campaign and its implementation”.

The second theory that has been chosen for the research is agenda-setting theory, which is intended to complement strategic theory for the purpose of this research. As strategic theory is used to distinguish what type of communication is of strategic importance, agenda-setting theory is used to conduct the analysis of Ukrainian media discourse and to evaluate its strategic information campaign regarding the issue of Crimea.

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<sup>24</sup> Keir Giles, “The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare”. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Kathy Lally, “Putin’s remarks raise fears of future moves against Ukraine”. The Washington Post, 2014. <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/putin-changes-course-admits-russian-troops-were-in-crimea-before-vote/2014/04/17/b3300a54-c617-11e3-bf7a-be01a9b69cf1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/putin-changes-course-admits-russian-troops-were-in-crimea-before-vote/2014/04/17/b3300a54-c617-11e3-bf7a-be01a9b69cf1_story.html)> [2022 06 02]

<sup>26</sup> Keir Giles, “The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare”. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Miroslav Mitrovic, “Genesis of Propaganda as a Strategic Means of Hybrid Warfare Concept”. *Vojno Delo*, 1/18 (1), 2018, 34-49.

Agenda-setting Theory was first developed in a systematic way by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. Through the studies, they showed a strong correlation between the media agenda and populations' opinion on what are the most important issues. In other words, the theory describes how the news media influences the significance placed on certain issues on the public agenda.<sup>28</sup> It outlines the methods used by the media to influence viewers and create a hierarchy of news importance.<sup>29</sup>

Maxwell McCombs cites Walter Lippmann's "Public Opinion"<sup>30</sup>, when arguing that news media is the main source of the mental images that are formed in the minds of the population, who is not directly in touch with the affairs covered in media. As the author claims, "priorities of the media strongly influence the priorities of the public."<sup>31</sup> The significant level of influence is evident as McCombs puts forward evidence that indicate strong correlation between "how issues are ranked on the media agenda and how the public ranks the importance of these same issues".

Placing high importance on a certain topic is only the initial step of the agenda-setting. The next step is shaping public's "understanding and perspective on the topics in the news."<sup>32</sup> The author puts forward the concepts of *objects* and *attributes*. The object is defined as the content itself that is placed on the agenda, meaning the topics. "The objects are the things on which the attention of the media and the public are focused".<sup>33</sup> In turn, each of the objects contain attributes, meaning "characteristics and traits that describe the object". Each topic on the media agenda has its own agenda of attributes, which entails emphasizing some of the displayed attributes and giving less attention to others, while some of the attributes receive none of the attention. This is an important technique that is utilized by the news agencies in order to push the opinion of a target audience in the desired direction. Therefore, the difference between the agenda of issues/objects and the agenda of attributes is that the former deals with *what* the target audience thinks *about*, while the latter influences *how* the audience thinks and perceives these issues. The latter step is often referred to as second-level agenda-setting. As theoreticians explain, "the first level of agenda setting is [...] the transmission of object salience. The second

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<sup>28</sup> Maxwell McCombs and Amy Reynolds, "News Influence on Our Pictures of the World". Book: Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (ed.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002, 1-19.

<sup>29</sup> James Dearing, and Everett Rogers, "Agenda-Setting Research: Where Has It Been, Where Is It Going?" Book: James A. Anderson (ed.), *Communication Yearbook 11*, New York: Routledge, 1988, 555-595.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*. New York: Macmillan, 1922, 29.

<sup>31</sup> Maxwell McCombs, "The Agenda-Setting Role of the Mass Media in the Shaping of Public Opinion", 1972.

<sup>32</sup> The same, 5.

<sup>33</sup> The same, 5.

level of agenda setting is the transmission of attribute salience.”<sup>34</sup> This second-level process is sometimes called *framing*, although McCombs and his like-minded colleagues maintain that framing is the extension of the agenda setting process. Media researcher Robert Entman describes the concept of framing in the following way: “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”<sup>35</sup> This research is mainly focused on the second-level agenda setting, as the battle of narratives about Crimea is fundamentally the battle between attribute agendas/frames.

The theory also puts forward the notion of the need for orientation (i. e. “the need to understand the environment around us”), in order to explain the efficiency of agenda-setting on the target audience. Higher the need for orientation of the public, higher the influence of the media on the target. This need for orientation is in turn defined by two primary aspects: relevance and uncertainty. High relevance of a specific topic/object on the agenda increases the need for orientation. In addition, high degree of uncertainty regarding the topic further augments the need for orientation. In the context of this research, these postulates show the importance of conducting information campaign in a way that is relevant for the Western audience, while containing certain level of uncertainty as well. Ukrainian information warfare strategy should aim at showing the western democratic world that the annexation of Crimea requires response not only because it is unjust for a variety of reasons, but because it is also relevant for *them*, the Western states, not just for Ukraine; it should also provide information that is not necessarily well-known for the target audience, in other words, contains uncertainty.

### **Methodology – Content Analysis**

The thesis is using a **qualitative research method**, namely Content Analysis<sup>36</sup>.

As for the content analysis, the process involves studying Russian narratives and collection of data from Ukrainian media outlets, articles, journals, or statements by the political leaders. The collected data from the above-mentioned sources should contain the messages of the information campaign that the adversary countries seek to convey to the public regarding the

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<sup>34</sup> Maxwell McCombs et al., "Candidate's Images in Spanish Elections: Second-level Agenda-Setting Effects". *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 74(4), 1997, 703-717.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm”. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 1993, 52.

<sup>36</sup> Kimberly A. Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis Guidebook*. 2nd edition. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2017.

question of Crimea. The public, in the case of this research, can be defined as the Western, democratic international community. As the primary purpose of Ukrainian information warfare/strategic communication is to contribute to deterrence of Russian aggressive behavior by pushing the Western partners to hold Russia accountable, the democratic west (as the audience) can be further defined as NATO and EU countries as they have the most relevant potential means to serve Ukraine's strategic objectives.

The goal of the content analysis is to sort and compare data in a way to find a pattern of action and response between the media campaigns of the belligerent states. The aim is to analyze and assess how Ukraine debunks Russian disinformation campaign and discover if it perhaps pursues proactive information campaign as well (which can be considered as an offensive in IW). Ukrainian informational effort, in this case, is applied to the media, academia, as well as politicians – any entity that is attempting to counter Russian propaganda in accordance to the national interests of Ukraine.

The chosen timeframe for the analysis of data is to be set from the annexation of Crimea (in 2014) until the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (in 2022). This research timeframe provides an opportunity to assess the Ukrainian strategic communication in between the two acts of aggressions by Russia. As the importance of this research question is highlighted by the need to push the West to strengthen deterrence policy against Russia, the end of the timeframe is set to be the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, because the opportunity to deter by peaceful means ends here. The process of analysis is inductive in nature, as specific set of observations in this particular information war can be turned into general propositions in decoding Russian IW tactics and generating insights for smaller countries on activating efficient counter information campaigns. This way the data can be converted into useful information, presenting significant findings in the process of IW regarding Crimea and identifying the trends and relationships between particular information agendas and narratives. Content analysis seems to be the right instrument for this topic because the research question requires a method that is descriptive-analytical in nature.

As for the **research tasks**, Before exploring Ukraine's information campaign, the initial step is to analyze Ukraine's state documents that show the country's strategic approach in terms of informational warfare, in order to see what is the formal understanding and attitude to the problems outlined in this research.

The first step in the campaign analysis is to identify the major Russian narratives that aim at legitimizing its seizure of Crimea, based on which Ukrainian counter-narratives are to be researched. The identification of Russian narratives is mainly conducted by studying Vladimir Putin's major speech on 18 March, 2014, the annexation of Crimea being its central theme (which, hereinafter, may be referred to as "Crimean speech"). As certain narratives developed by Putin in his speech are also on the top agenda of Russian media propaganda (as confirmed by the secondary sources that studied Russian media), they are considered to be the major narratives against Ukraine with regard to Crimea, in the context of this research.

The next step is to explore Ukraine's attempts in the informational sphere to address these narratives and respond in a way that would in turn delegitimize Crimea's annexation. Therefore, as defined by the Agenda-Setting Theory that was discussed in the theoretical framework, the goal of the research is to identify the main frames in Ukrainian strategic communications in relation to Crimea. These frames are to be explored through researching Ukrainian media, particularly the state-related media outlets, as they reflect the state's strategic communication implementation. As the information warfare, in the context of the chosen research question, is dealing with the Western international community as a target audience, Ukrainian media that is selected for the data analysis had to provide its content in English language. Sample selection was arranged based on the chosen timeframe and certain keywords - depending on the narrative analyzed - were specifically searched for when looking for articles/publications on the Ukrainian media websites. As already mentioned, one of the criteria for sample selection was being state-related. Therefore, among others, a major media source that has been selected is the Ukrainian state-run information agency "Ukrinform", as it best meets all the criteria set for the analysis. In addition, other media platforms have also been used, for instance "Suspilne" (national public broadcaster), the webpage of the Crimea Platform, and the "Ukraine NOW" webpage.

To clarify the choice of the criteria, it can be noted that the English-language criterion is required for exploring information warfare targeting the Western audience (As Ukrainian, Russian or other language would not serve appropriately). The second criterion, connection to the Ukrainian state, is necessary to make sure that the thesis explores state positions and its effort in delegitimizing Crimea's annexation. Non-state media analysis would not demonstrate Ukrainian strategic communication and would be overall incompatible with the strategic theory which considers states as central actors.

The primary limitation of the research happens to be the relative lack of access to Russian propaganda media, since the ongoing military aggression against Ukraine triggered significant restrictions. For instance, “Russia Today” – which is perhaps the most influential state-controlled media that targets Western audiences – has been banned in the European Union. However, as the content of Russian disinformation is well studied by the Western researchers and is still available in their content, these difficulties and restrictions can be partially compensated through the secondary sources for the purposes of this research. However, as already mentioned, Putin’s speech (which is accessible) was mainly used for identifying Russia’s main narratives. On the other hand, the content of Ukrainian information campaign – which is the main focus of the work – is perfectly accessible and thus the process of research in this regard is by no means hindered.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Ukraine’s Information Warfare Strategy**

As a first step in evaluating Ukrainian conduct of information campaign regarding Crimea, it is important to look for documents issued by Ukrainian authorities that outline its strategy in terms of information warfare.

Since the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine approved twice the “National Security Strategy of Ukraine”, one of which was approved by President Petro Poroshenko in 2015, while the other one was approved by President Volodymyr Zelensky in 2020.

The 2015 document<sup>37</sup> emphasizes the existing threats to national security of Ukraine, which among other dangers, include: information and psychological warfare, humiliation of Ukrainian language and culture, disinformation about Ukrainian history, Russian mass communication which aims to provide the world with the picture of altered reality. It is also noteworthy, that the document admits the lack of coherent communication policy of Ukraine, as well as insufficient level of media culture. As one of the main directions of state policy, the strategic document emphasizes the need to promote quick and effective exchange of information with NATO and EU member states, to improve informational and analytical activities and processing of open sources of information. Some of the specific steps that are outlined in the document designed to ensure information security are following: formation of

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<sup>37</sup> President of Ukraine, “УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №287/2015”, 2015.  
<<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/2872015-19070>>

an integrated system of information threat assessment; countering information operations against Ukraine; identification of subjects in the Ukrainian informational space that is created or used by Russia to conduct information warfare against Ukraine and restriction of their activities; creation of institutions that will be responsible for information and psychological security, etc.

As the annexation of Crimea occurred in 2014, approving this particular document a year later seems adequate, as the need for renewed strategic approach was evident. The strategy also adequately addresses the problem of information warfare, and advocates for specific steps to counter Russian disinformation. It rightly notes that Russian information warfare targeting international community in particular represents a threat to Ukrainian security. What this strategic document fails to capture, on the other hand, is the use of Russian information warfare particularly targeting Crimea. The problem of Crimea is only assessed through military perspective, not incorporating informational/psychological warfare conducted with the aim of legitimizing its annexation.

Ukraine's National Security Strategy of 2020<sup>38</sup> also heavily emphasizes the dangers posed by Russian disinformation and the need to counter it. The document claims that the lack of comprehensive information policy of the state and the weakness of strategic communications system make it difficult to eliminate this threat. The strategic document advocates for the creation of a strategic communications system.

Firstly, it should be noted that the observation about the lack of comprehensive information policy is repeated in the 2020 document, even though the problem was already outlined in the strategy document adopted 5 years before. This may point to either lack of action or inefficiency demonstrated by Ukrainian authorities in this 5 year period to implement the main directions put forward in the National Security Strategy. The issue of Russian disinformation aimed specifically at Crimea is also absent from this latest document. Unlike the previous text, the 2020 document does not provide specific steps to ensure security of informational space, however as one of the final provisions, it advocates for the development of additional strategic documents, one of which is information security strategy. Even though this approach prolonged the process, requiring separate document exclusively focused on information security

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<sup>38</sup> President of Ukraine. “УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №392/2020”, 2020. <<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3922020-35037>>



demonstrates the realization of Ukrainian authorities about the essential need for more in-depth information warfare strategy.

Ukraine's Information Security Strategy<sup>39</sup> was adopted in December 2021, a few months before the beginning of Russia's full-scale war. The implementation of this strategy is planned until 2025. The text places focus on strategic communications, defined as coordinated use of the state's communication capabilities – public diplomacy, public relations, military relations, informational and psychological measures aimed at promoting the state's goals. The document states that the information policy of Russia poses a threat not only to Ukraine, but also to other democratic countries. By emphasizing this, the document highlights the *relevance* of Russian IW for other countries, which is the right strategy, considering the concepts of agenda-setting theory. Unlike the two national security documents that has been reviewed above, the Information Security Strategy mentions Russia's information warfare against Ukraine that aims to influence international community, as a way to legitimize the annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. This perfectly corresponds to the research question and the research problem of the thesis, yet the rarity of focusing on this aspect of information warfare among international scholars or even among the documents adopted by Ukraine is quite noticeable. This is the first time Ukrainian strategic document addresses Russian disinformation campaign of international nature, and also disinformation justifying the annexation of Crimea. It is once again noted in the document, that countering information aggression by Russia is hindered by absence of effective system of strategic communications. It is also argued that the state has implemented some practical measures to strengthen this capacity, but there is no effective mechanism for coordination between all state authorities. The document emphasizes the need to conduct informational/psychological operations aimed at preventing and deterring military aggression by Russia against Ukraine; to increase the level of media culture; pursuing strategic communications to inform international community about events in Ukraine and its occupied territories. One of the specific steps that are outlined notes that the foreign broadcasting system of Ukraine will be ensured by creating and distributing information through satellite, terrestrial analog and digital broadcasting channels outside Ukraine, specifically in English, Russian and other languages. The strategy advocates for distribution of positive narratives and information campaigns abroad, which will increase the

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<sup>39</sup> President of Ukraine. “УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №685/2021”, 2021.  
<<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/6852021-41069>>

level of knowledge and better understanding of Ukraine among foreign audiences. This document clearly shifted to the right direction in many aspects (emphasis on information warfare of international nature, highlighting disinformation regarding Crimea, providing specific steps to address the main challenges). However, it becomes clear that Ukraine took too much time before it finally adopted a useful document focusing on important strategic issues. Crimea was annexed in 2014, the strategy for informational security was only adopted in 2021, which happens to be quite overdue (taking into account the fact that the implementation requires five additional years), as it did not manage to be used for the deterrence of the next Russian aggression.

### **Countering Russia’s “Historical Argument”**

As mentioned in the literature review, one of the main narratives that are present in Russian propaganda as a way of justifying the seizure of Crimea is a claim, that Crimea has been historically a part of Russia – a narrative we can refer to as a “historical argument”. This argument is evident in Putin’s “Crimean Speech”<sup>40</sup> where he addressed Russian officials shortly after the referendum on Crimea’s status. During the speech Putin claims that “to understand the reason behind a choice it is enough to know the history of Crimea and what Russia and Crimea have always meant for each other”. Putin also negatively assesses Nikita Khrushchev’s decision to transfer Crimea to Ukrainian SSR in 1954, considering it as a “clear violation of the constitutional norms” and a source of “historical injustice”. This line of argumentation was elaborated by Vitaly Churkin, Russia’s representative in the UN who addressed the General Assembly in March 2014, noting that: “Historical justice has triumphed. For ages Crimea has been an integral part of our country, we share history, culture and, the main thing, people. And only the voluntarist decision by the USSR leaders in 1954, which transferred Crimea and Sevastopol to the Ukrainian Republic, although within one state, has distorted this natural state of affairs”.<sup>41</sup> The legal logic is clearly absent from this argumentation, as certain historical circumstances are presented as a factor that somehow undermines Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. The rhetoric using history as a way to legitimize annexation of Crimean peninsula “harkens back to pre-UN Charter norms.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kremlin. “Address by President of the Russian Federation”, 2014.  
<<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>>

<sup>41</sup> Dainius Žalimas, “Russian Justification of the Annexation of Crimea and Nazi Propaganda: Great Similarities and Minor Differences.” *Ukrainian Journal of Constitutional Law*, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Christopher J. Borgen, “Law, Rhetoric, Strategy: Russia and Self-Determination Before and After Crimea”. U.S. Naval War College, 2015.

Therefore, Ukrainian response to this narrative could only entail demonstrating the absurdity of this argumentation in legal terms, using the basic principles of international law, and it may be enough to render Russian propaganda unconvincing. However, this strategy would mean evading the specific claims made by Russia in its “historical argument”, as it would counter historical arguments with legal arguments. Even though it is justified and serves the Ukrainian cause, it would not be as effective if the historical narratives were debunked by historical clarifications as well, in other words if Ukraine would try to defeat Russia in its own game. The battle of legal narratives is explored in one of the following chapters, this chapter however is designed to explore whether or not (and to what extent) Ukrainian information campaign provides historical counterarguments that undermine “Crimea as a historical part of Russia” narrative. It should be noted that Russia’s “historical argument” is not entirely historical as it possesses a legal element as well, namely the notion that transferring Crimea to Ukraine during Soviet era was illegal. This opens up a possibility for Ukraine to address both the vague historical claims and questionable legal claims of the narrative.

The importance of this can be explained by its potential influence on the target audience as defined in the paper. As certain countries in Europe are concerned about escalating tensions with Russia, their commitment to respond adequately to Russian aggression may be influenced by historical argumentations. If the Western leaders are persuaded that Crimea was indeed an inseparable historical part of Russia, and therefore constitute an essential part of Russian state identity, Russia’s passionate eagerness to legitimize Crimean annexation may not look worth resisting. If the Western leaders are convinced that Khrushchev’s decision may indeed have been illegal, putting much effort in a dispute between the two countries that is a “matter of debate” may not be considered a necessary action.

The article published on the “Ukraine NOW” platform named “Origins & History of Ukraine”<sup>43</sup> very briefly mentions the issue of Crimea in a historical context. It highlights the state that was established by Crimean Tatars (in 15<sup>th</sup> century) and points to the fact that Crimean Tatars have fought together with Cossacks in one coalition throughout the history of the Crimean Khanate, as well as the fact that they have been drawn into conflict with each other. The article emphasizes the role of Russian Empire in ending the existence of Crimean state. Even though the article points out a relationship between Crimean Tatars and Cossacks to be mixed, it still highlights a positive historic relationship and union between the two peoples before Crimea’s

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<sup>43</sup> Ukraine NOW, “Origins & History of Ukraine”, updated in 2022.  
<<https://ukraine.ua/explore/origins-history-of-ukraine/>> [2022 09 01]

annexation by Russia in 1783<sup>44</sup>. On the other hand, it does not put greater focus on the positive aspect of these historical circumstances and does not elaborate on the Crimean-Cossack union.

The official website of the Crimea Platform – an international consultation and coordination format initiated by Ukraine – provides a more detailed overview on the history of Crimea.<sup>45</sup> The article puts an emphasis on the events of 1917, where Crimea experienced democratic changes, strengthening ties with Ukraine (referred to as “Ukrainization”) and the “revival of the Crimean Tatar national statehood.” It is noted, that after Crimean national government was formed, in January 1918 the Red Army occupied the peninsula and “launched the Red terror.” Here, it is emphasized that the Bolshevik occupation of Crimea was defeated in April 1918 “as a result of the joint military effort of the Ukrainian army led by Petro Bolbochan, the German army and Crimean Tatar protesters”. In addition, it is stressed that this positive relationship turned into the negotiations about uniting Crimea with Ukraine, which continued until the autumn of 1918. However, as the article underscores once more, this effort was crushed by another military aggression of the Bolshevik Army, which resulted in Crimea becoming an autonomous administrative unit of Russia in 1921. It is argued that after regaining Crimea from German occupation, Russia accused Crimean Tatars of collaborating with the Nazis without substantial evidence, and started mass deportations of Crimean Tatars, namely more than 200 000 people were deported to different Soviet regions. This De-Tatarization of Crimea is assessed as a genocide, as the process led to the deaths of 20-25 per cent of Crimean Tatars.

These historic descriptions are clearly aimed at deflating Russian historic narratives about Crimea, as Ukrainian position demonstrates historic ties between Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians and showcases the brutal oppression Crimean population has faced from Russian Empire. This illustrates the fact that Crimea being a part of Russia is a consequence of the nature of Russian state behavior that persists to this day, particularly, invading foreign territories by military force. Thus, Kremlin’s narrative of Russia and Crimea being inseparable is exposed to be nothing but an attempt to cover up Russia’s historical aggression against Crimea and its people.

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<sup>44</sup> M. S. Anderson, “The Great Powers and the Russian Annexation of the Crimea, 1783-4”. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 37, No. 88, 1958, 17-41.

<sup>45</sup> Crimea Platform, “The Historical Background”.

<https://crimea-platform.org/en/krim-do-okupaciyi/istorichnij-ekskurs>

The article<sup>46</sup> proceeds to address the events of 1954, when Crimea was handed over to Ukraine, and argues that this decision by Soviet leadership was reasonable and was predicated on genuine necessities. Namely, Russia was unable to support Crimea's normal economic life, as nearly all supplies on the peninsula came from Ukraine. This argumentation is supported by the quotation of the Soviet leadership, which stated that the choice was made "with consideration of economic proximity, territorial proximity and close trade and cultural ties between Crimean oblast and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic." This section is quite strong, as it provides Soviet statements (which would be difficult to be assessed as biased against Russia) which confirms Ukraine's superiority over Russia with regard to Crimea, in practically all major aspects: economic, territorial and cultural. Not only does the article counter Kremlin's claim that the move by Khrushchev was unfair, but it also retaliates the legal argument developed by Russian propaganda. In particular, the account on Crimean history addresses the legality question of Khrushchev's decision and points out that the unification was conducted in compliance with all legal standards – "The governments and parliaments of the Soviet Union, Russia and Ukraine consequently adopted the necessary legal rulings. The republican constitutions were also amended with the necessary provisions." As Russia's historical argument is overall quite rhetorical and abstract, the only potentially convincing layer in it could be the claim about illegality of Crimea's transfer to Ukraine. Therefore, it is vital to respond to this particular element of Russian propaganda, as it has the most realistic possibility to influence the target audience. Through this article, Ukraine rightly addresses this problem in an adequate and fact-based manner.

One of the concluding paragraphs in this historical overview, it is stated that despite the efforts by Russian propaganda to persuade the international community that Crimea was "eternally Russian", it is a false notion. The article maintains that "Crimea was part of Russia for a relatively short period of time", namely from 1783 till 1917, and later from 1921 until 1954 (excluding the German occupation in 1941-1944). This indeed demonstrates that from a historical perspective, approximately 164 years that Crimea belonged to Russia in total, is not long enough to make claims about it being eternally Russian and therefore, the "myth about the so-called ages-long "Russianness" of Crimea simply does not stand", as the article states. To make this observation more convincing, a reportage by Ukrinform television news channel

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<sup>46</sup> The same.

“UATV” provided a more easily perceivable historical calculation, pointing out that Crimea was a part of Russia for only 5.5 per cent of its entire history.<sup>47</sup>

Overall, Ukrainian response covered all major aspects of Russian narrative and provided persuasive, fact-based counterarguments. It also used a method described in Agenda-Setting Theory, as it emphasized all those historical developments that supports Ukrainian strategic interests, and paid minimal attention to those that would undermine it.

After analyzing primary messages present in the Ukrainian position on this matter, the major frames, or in other words, set of attributes towards Crimea, that have been identified is as follows:

1. The territory and its indigenous people have had positive historical relationship with Ukraine and its people.
2. Crimean people have been oppressed by Russia throughout the history (including genocide).
3. Ukraine provided essential support to the peninsula during Soviet era, while Russia could not, therefore the transfer to Ukraine was justified.
4. The transfer to Ukraine was legally valid.
5. Better territorial, economic and cultural ties with Ukraine.
6. Crimea was a part of Russia only for a short time (from a historical perspective).

### **Countering Russia’s “Ethnic Argument”**

The ethnic aspect of Crimean question is quite challenging, as it is used by Russia as yet another tool for justifying seizure of Crimea. We can look for the major points of this “ethnic argument” in Putin’s “Crimean speech” again. Putin describes Crimea’s ethnic composition in a following way: total population of the peninsula is 2.2 million people, “of whom almost 1.5 million are Russians, 350 000 are Ukrainians who predominantly consider Russian their native language, and about 290 000-300 000 are Crimean Tatars, who, as the referendum has shown, also lean towards Russia.”<sup>48</sup> Putin further elaborates the state’s mission to protect Russian populations that ended up being outside of Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union, stating that millions of Russians became ethnic minorities in former Soviet republics. Putin makes a claim that Russian

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<sup>47</sup> UATV. “Debunking Russian Propaganda: Crimea is Russian”, 2019.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beaOKytzVHc>> [2022 09 02]

<sup>48</sup> Kremlin. “Address by President of the Russian Federation”, 2014.  
<<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>>

speakers in Ukraine, including in Crimea, were not treated “in line with the norms of international law”, instead their rights were systematically violated (for instance, their linguistic rights), which brought forth the need for intervention. The underlying theme of the speech is to establish a connection between the fact that majority of Crimea’s population consists of ethnic Russians, and the legitimacy of Russia’s military intervention in Crimea. It should be noted, as it was mentioned in the literature review, that Russia’s definition of Russian compatriot covers those people whose native language is Russian or generally identifies as Russian. It is also implied by Putin, that not only were the Russians of Crimea in favor of the annexation, but Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars as well.

The challenge of this particular issue is amplified by the fact that the general assessment that Crimea’s ethnic composition is dominated by Russians seems to correspond to reality. Western scholars have often referred to Crimea as “Ukraine’s Achilles’ heel”, as Russian influence on the peninsula is difficult to deny.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, Russian narrative regarding Crimea’s ethnic structure and subsequent legitimacy of the annexation requires strong informational response by Ukraine, which is analyzed in this chapter.

The Crimea Platform web portal addresses the ethnic issue, mainly through emphasizing the already mentioned De-Tatarization of Crimea under the Soviet rule. The article states that “starting from May 18, 1944, the Kremlin deported more than 200 000 people, including newborn children, to Central Asia and other inland Soviet territories”.<sup>50</sup> The subsequent development as described by the platform points to the artificial change of ethnic composition of Crimea by the Soviet Union. It is stressed that the Soviet leadership began replacing the deported Crimean Tatars (and other ethnic groups) with Kremlin-loyal population, mainly from Russia; Crimean Tatars were the majority ethnic group in Crimea until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, after which Russians organized repressions and mass deportations that led to Russians becoming the ethnic majority. The article also highlights independent Ukraine’s essential role in receiving Crimean Tatars back to their homeland and helping them settle down.

Ukrainian position once again utilizes historical and fact-based arguments, which does not deny Russia’s claim that by 2014 Crimean peninsula was dominated by Russians, but points to the artificial manipulation of the demographic situation in Crimea orchestrated by the Soviet Union, which is a legal predecessor to Russian Federation. This is, however, not sufficient as

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<sup>49</sup> Wojciech Kononczuk, “Russia’s Real Aims in Crimea”. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Crimea Platform, “The Historical Background”.

<<https://crimea-platform.org/en/krim-do-okupaciyi/istorichnij-ekskurs>>

a counterargument, because the cornerstone of Russia's ethnic narrative is the notion that intervention was required because of oppression of Russians in Crimea. The article on the Crimean Platform does not address this notion at all. Also, Russia's ethnic claim corresponds to the present circumstances, while Ukrainian response takes historical perspective, which is justified to be one element of a larger narrative, but seems to be insufficient as a sole element.

"Ukrinform" quite briefly addresses the issue of discrimination of ethnic Russians in Crimea.<sup>51</sup> It is argued based on the statements made by Ukrainian human rights organizations, that for decades these institutions have not received any reports of human rights violations of Russians or Russian-speakers on the entire territory of Ukraine, including in terms of their linguistic rights.

"Ukrinform" further makes a case that it is Russia that discriminates against other ethnic groups in Crimea, citing the report by UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.<sup>52</sup> Among the types of discrimination, "enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions and ill-treatment" is mentioned. "Ukrinform" dedicated several other articles to this particular issue, where it displays Russia's attempts of "cultural destruction" of Crimean Tatars<sup>53</sup>, documentation of facts of discrimination towards Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians<sup>54</sup>, and a research concluding massive discrimination against Ukrainians in Crimea<sup>55</sup>. Another article<sup>56</sup> states that as a result of intolerable conditions and repressions of a large scale, by 2020, 48 000 people moved from Crimea to the territories controlled by Ukrainian authorities. It is also showcased that the Soviet practices of forced alteration of demographic composition was repeated in Crimea since 2014, in addition with coercive deportations, persecutions and detainments of anti-occupation pro-Ukrainian activists, also by a way of imposing Russian citizenship on the people of Crimea.<sup>57</sup>

From researching Ukrainian state-related media content with regard to the ethnic question of Crimea, it becomes evident that Ukrainian side is largely evading Russia's accusations

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<sup>51</sup> Ukrinform, "Human rights activists see no impairment of rights of Russian-speaking citizens in Ukraine", 2014. <[https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-other\\_news/1627579-human\\_rights\\_activists\\_see\\_no\\_impairment\\_of\\_rights\\_of\\_russian\\_speaking\\_citizens\\_in\\_ukraine\\_318091.html](https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-other_news/1627579-human_rights_activists_see_no_impairment_of_rights_of_russian_speaking_citizens_in_ukraine_318091.html)> [2022 09 04]

<sup>52</sup> Ukrinform, "UN Committee: Russia continues to discriminate against Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians in Crimea", 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Ukrinform, "Foreign Ministry: Russia pursues policy of cultural destruction of Crimean Tatars", 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Ukrinform, "Facts of discrimination of Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians in Crimea documented – Ukraine's representative in ICJ", 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Ukrinform, "Ukrainians in occupied Crimea subject to massive discrimination – research", 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Ukrinform, "Over 48,000 citizens forced to leave occupied Crimea since 2014", 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Ukrinform, "Russia reloading language gun", 2021.



regarding the way ethnic Russians were treated in Crimea. There are certain references made to deny these allegations, however, they are quite superficial, and it seems this particular line of informational communication was not a top priority. Instead, the major focus was put on the claim that Russia itself is a perpetrator of repressions, persecutions and all sorts of discriminatory actions with regard to Ukrainians and Crimean indigenous populations since the annexation. Even though the latter approach is indeed required considering the well-documented facts of such discrimination, the neutralization of one of the primary arguments of Russian propaganda should not have received secondary attention from Ukrainian side. The overall informational response by Ukraine would have been stronger if it would put forward evidence that ethnic Russians or Russian-speakers of Crimea had not been discriminated against under Ukrainian rule. Even though this particular frame has been identified on the “Ukrinform” website, the salience, or the amount of attention that is given to this line of argumentation is noticeably minimal.

The major frames/set of attributes identified in Ukrainian media with regard to the “ethnic question” is as follows:

1. Formation of Russian-speaking majority in Crimea is a consequence of historical and artificial change of the peninsula’s ethnic/demographic structure by the Soviet Union.
2. No evidence for discrimination of ethnic Russians under Ukraine (minimal salience).
3. Under Russian occupation, Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars who live on the peninsula are subject to systematic discrimination (maximum salience).

### **The Legitimacy of Crimean Referendum**

The beginning of Putin’s Crimean speech showcases a cornerstone of Moscow’s attempts to justify the annexation of Crimea. Putin declares to Federation Council and State Duma members, as well as others, that “a referendum was held in Crimea on March 16 in full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms.”<sup>58</sup> Russia’s president provides the figures as well: over 96 per cent in favor of Crimea joining Russia, with over 82 per cent turnout. This is what we can call a “legal argument” presented by Russia, which is strengthened by claiming that Russian military forces “never entered Crimea”, but “they were there already in line with an international agreement”. To emphasize the “peaceful nature” of the annexation, Putin insists that the intervention occurred “without a single shot being fired”,

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<sup>58</sup> Kremlin. “Address by President of the Russian Federation”, 2014.  
<<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>>

with no casualties. In order to legitimize the annexation of Crimea, Putin exploits a principle of international law that enjoys consensus in the democratic world – namely the right of nations to self-determination. To make his argument more powerful, Putin argues that Ukraine used this very same right when it separated from the Soviet Union, “yet the residents of Crimea are denied it”. Putin also refers to the Kosovo case where western countries recognized Kosovo’s secession from Serbia as legitimate, even though this happened unilaterally, similarly as in the case of Crimea. Another emphasis is made on the statement by the United States which points out in the context of Kosovo case, that “declarations of independence may [...] violate domestic legislation. However, this does not make them violations of international law.”

Ukraine’s national public broadcaster, Suspilne, provided an article in English language that aims to undermine the “legitimacy” of Crimean referendum, elaborating on the tweet written by the British Foreign Office that puts forward five reasons why the referendum is illegal.<sup>59</sup>

The first claim is that the “referendum” in 2014 violated the Constitution of Ukraine, the article 73 of which, states that a referendum concerning a change in the territorial arrangement of Ukraine can only be held on the entire territory of the country, not in one particular region.

The second reason refers to the dominance of pro-Russian media in Crimea at the time of the referendum, as a result of oppressing pro-Ukrainian media. The article provides examples that showcase instances where Ukrainian journalists’ activities were obstructed, as well as Russian efforts to intimidate Crimean population.

The third point emphasizes the fact that the referendum was conducted under the occupation of the Russian military, the so-called “green men”. This argument further highlights the intimidation the citizens underwent while participating in the vote. In this regard, Ukrainian Foreign Ministry also stated<sup>60</sup> that the acknowledgement by Moscow that Russian troops were indeed in Crimea (which was denied for more than a month), “has finally buried a myth” regarding the legitimacy of the referendum.

The fourth argument underlines the fact that the preparation for the vote lasted only 20 days, which eliminated any possibility for an appropriate campaign or public debate. It additionally

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<sup>59</sup> Олександра Сурган, “The 5 reasons why the "referendum" in Crimea is illegal”. Suspilne, 2021. <<https://crimea.suspilne.media/en/articles/45>> [2022 09 21]

<sup>60</sup> Ukrinform, “Foreign ministry: Putin buries own myths on legitimacy of 'referendum' in Crimea”, 2014. <[https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/1650870-foreign\\_ministry\\_putin\\_buries\\_own\\_myths\\_on\\_legitimacy\\_of\\_referendum\\_in\\_crimea\\_320433.html](https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/1650870-foreign_ministry_putin_buries_own_myths_on_legitimacy_of_referendum_in_crimea_320433.html)> [2022 09 21]

makes a rather vague statement according to which the ballot did not offer an option for Crimea to remain a part of Ukraine, although no additional clarifications are made.

The final reason that the article presents points to the absence of international independent observers during the referendum. It is further underscored that “neither Ukraine, nor the members of the European Union, nor the G7 group has recognized the occupation of Crimea.” The lack of observers is connected to the third point – Russian military presence. It is argued that as the referendum was conducted within the framework of a military aggression, already making it illegitimate, no country saw any point to send the observers.

The internet portal of the Crimea Platform utilizes the non-recognition of the referendum by the international community as a response to Moscow’s insistence that even if the annexation of Crimea violated Ukrainian legislation, it did not violate international law. The platform provides documents and resolutions<sup>61</sup> adopted by international organizations to emphasize the illegality of the annexation through referendum on the international level. For instance, among other documents, a resolution 68/262 adopted by the UN General Assembly on the “territorial integrity of Ukraine”, Opinion of Venice Commission no. 762/2014 which points to the incompatibility of the referendum with European constitutional principles is presented, as well as European Union’s position as non-recognition of Crimea’s annexation.

Ukraine’s national public broadcaster informs the audience about the casualties that were a consequence of Russia’s military intervention in Crimea, namely the death of Ukrainian soldier Ensign Kokurin, who was killed on March 18, during Russia’s attack on the Ukrainian military base in Simferopol. It is also mentioned that another soldier, referred to as “Captain Fedun” was wounded, while one more unidentified serviceman was severely injured.<sup>62</sup> Despite the small-scale nature of the incident, Ukraine has showcased the fallacy of Putin’s insistence on “no shots being fired”, and exemplified the fact that bloodshed did occur during Russian invasion of Crimea.

With regard to Russia’s exploitation of the self-determination principle, it should be noted that Ukrainian side does not focus on explaining why this principle is incompatible with the way Crimea was annexed by Russia. Instead, it mainly responds in a sort of counteroffensive manner, claiming that the annexation itself is the violation of Crimean people’s right to self-

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<sup>61</sup> Crimea Platform, “Analytics”.  
<<https://crimea-platform.org/en/analysis>>

<sup>62</sup> Андрій Черкасов, “Seven years of illegal occupation of Crimea by Russia. What happened”. Suspilne, 2021.  
<<https://crimea.suspilne.media/en/articles/46>> [2022 09 06]

determination. To showcase that the Crimean Tatar population views Russian actions as violation of this specific principle, Ukrainian media provides statements by Refat Chubarov<sup>63</sup>, the head of the Mejlis of the Crimea Tatar People, who as a representative of Crimean Tatars, condemns Russian attempts to occupy Crimea.

When it comes to linking the cases of Crimea and Kosovo by Moscow, no specifically arranged response in Ukrainian strategic communications could be identified which would undermine Russia's emphasis on the "hypocrisy" of the West as it has recognized the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia, while it does not recognize the joining of Crimea with Russia. Considering the fact that so far Ukraine has not recognized the independence of Kosovo, perhaps it would not be consistent for it to defend the Western position in this case. Therefore, responding to Russian propaganda utilizing Kosovo precedent as a means to legitimize the case of Crimea is perhaps something the West should focus on, not necessarily Ukraine.

There is no shortage of articles in Ukrainian state media on the illegality of the Crimean referendum, many of which provide the statements by the European Union regarding non-recognition of the referendum and the decision not to send any observers to Crimea.

Considering the principles of Agenda-Setting, Ukraine seems to have provided high degree of salience to those aspects that highlight the illegitimacy of the referendum, while practically no salience is demonstrated towards the Kosovo parallel, as well as the comparison with Ukraine's separation from the Soviet Union. The former, as argued above, seems quite reasonable, although the lack of clarifications to debunk the latter argument may be assessed as a drawback.

After researching Ukrainian position in terms of addressing the "legal question" regarding Crimea, the frames that have been identified can be put forward:

1. The "referendum" conducted in Crimea violated the Constitution of Ukraine.
2. The "referendum" was not properly conducted, as pro-Ukrainian media was oppressed and dominated by Russian propaganda.
3. The "referendum" was held under the Russian military occupation with citizens voting under the intimidation of the "little green men".
4. The military intervention was not conducted without confrontation and casualties.

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<sup>63</sup> Ukrinform, "Chubarov: Crimean Tatars won't allow anyone to define their place of residence", 2014. <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/1634167-chubarov-crimean-tatars-wont-allow-anyone-to-define-their-place-of-residence-318743.html> [2022 09 07]

5. The “referendum” did not follow the proper procedures, as it was prepared in 20 days, leaving no time for adequate campaign or discussion.
6. The “referendum” cannot be considered legitimate, as no international independent observers were present for assessment.
7. The annexation violates international law which is confirmed by the non-recognition of Crimea’s annexation by major institutions of the international community.
8. The annexation of Crimea violates Crimean Tatars’ right to self-determination.

### **Maidan as a Casus Belli for Crimea’s Annexation**

Despite the fact that the Maidan Revolution is not directly or specifically related to Crimea and comprises series of events that affect the whole of Ukraine, it was present on the top agenda of Moscow’s propaganda in 2014 that aimed at preparing as well as later legitimizing the annexation of Crimea. This is also evident in Putin’s “Crimean speech” where he claims that people who orchestrated the Maidan Revolution were “Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites”.<sup>64</sup> Putin assesses the overthrow of President Yanukovich as coup d’état, implying that the regime change was illegal. Russian president describes the violent nature of the February 2014 events in Ukraine, stating that the protesters “resorted to terror, murder and riots.” According to Putin, the change of government ensured that these “Nazis” kept the power and continued to rule the country. Putin needed to connect the issue of Maidan with the issue of Crimea in order to make it work as a legitimizing narrative. Therefore, he further elaborates how the opponents of the coup were repressed, and “naturally, the first in line here was Crimea, the Russian-speaking Crimea.” To complete the chain of logic in the context of annexation of Crimea, Putin claims that the people of Crimea turned to Moscow for assistance to protect their rights and security, which made Russia unable to leave them behind. Consequently, Putin effectively exploited the Maidan Revolution as a casus belli, in a way, to resort to the use of military force to take over Crimea.

Ukrainian information campaign on the Maidan issue does not seem to necessarily target these particular Russian narratives, instead it develops its own agenda which assesses the Revolution of Dignity in a positive manner. An article<sup>65</sup> on “Ukrinform” presents the intentions of Maidan

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<sup>64</sup> Kremlin. “Address by President of the Russian Federation”, 2014. <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>>

<sup>65</sup> Ukrinform, “Maidan shooting started six years ago”, 2020. <<https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/2878442-maidan-shootings-started-six-years-ago.html>> [2022 09 28]

protesters as peaceful, who organized the march known as “Peaceful Offensive”, aiming at pressuring the government to take necessary steps to overcome the crisis and amend the constitution to limit the President’s powers. In turn, the law enforcement authorities used excessive force and firearms to brutally suppress the protest, resulting in the deaths of about one hundred people, with more than one thousand people injured and “hundreds [...] arrested and tortured” (on February 18-20).

The same article also notes that, according to the Ukrainian Prosecutor General’s Office, the killing of the protesters was directly linked to the instructions provided by President Yanukovich. Another “Ukrinform” article<sup>66</sup> puts forward details of investigation that discovered eleven phone calls arranged between Yanukovich and Russia’s top leadership on February 18-20 in 2014. Ukrainian side here implies Russia’s involvement in the shootings on Maidan participants. Another evidence for Kremlin’s involvement in the violence is put forward, claiming that Moscow supplied Yanukovich eight types of gas grenades for free, which was used by Ukrainian authorities against the Maidan participants.<sup>67</sup>

Ukrainian side utilizes the European Court of Human Rights’ decision<sup>68</sup> confirming human rights violations during Maidan events as another proof of the fact that the Ukrainian authorities at the time were the primary perpetrators of violence, while the protesters were the primary victims. In addition, a testimony of an employee of the State Guard Department, a witness, is presented, claiming that no assassination attempts were made on Viktor Yanukovich - the President at the time - by the opposition protesters.<sup>69</sup>

Ukraine’s Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security provided an article in which it is argued in what ways the Revolution of Dignity has shifted Ukraine’s path towards modernity and democracy.<sup>70</sup> Yanukovich’s authoritarian traits are highlighted, while the post-

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<sup>66</sup> Ukrinform, “During Maidan shootings, Yanukovich phoned Putin 11 times – prosecutor”, 2021.

<<https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3352996-during-maidan-shootings-yanukovich-phoned-putin-11-times-prosecutor.html>> [2022 09 18]

<sup>67</sup> Ukrinform, “Russia supplied gas grenades to Yanukovich as "humanitarian aid" to disperse Maidan protesters”, 2015. <<https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-crime/1916965-russia-supplied-grenades-to-yanukovich-as-humanitarian-aid-to-disperse-maidan-protesters.html>> [2022 09 29]

<sup>68</sup> Ukrinform, “ECHR confirms human rights violations during Maidan protests”, 2021. <[https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/3175183-echr-confirms-human-rights-violations-during-maidan-protests.html?fbclid=IwAR1qnn3nZx\\_wQRn2Plj7akYsZoHrb57TKjuw2wVPSahxy6fIm2zxGc7rDEA](https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/3175183-echr-confirms-human-rights-violations-during-maidan-protests.html?fbclid=IwAR1qnn3nZx_wQRn2Plj7akYsZoHrb57TKjuw2wVPSahxy6fIm2zxGc7rDEA)> [2022 10 05]

<sup>69</sup> Ukrinform, “There were no attempts on Yanukovich’s life during Maidan – witness”, 2018. <[https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/2384738-there-were-no-attempts-on-yanukovichs-life-during-maidan-witness.html?fbclid=IwAR1SQeXRf69ul2piSZhgOe5i3rmz9l-YRACPrzHCn\\_jjNfMkuAE9MOW6fvk](https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/2384738-there-were-no-attempts-on-yanukovichs-life-during-maidan-witness.html?fbclid=IwAR1SQeXRf69ul2piSZhgOe5i3rmz9l-YRACPrzHCn_jjNfMkuAE9MOW6fvk)>

<sup>70</sup> Ukrinform, “How the Revolution of Dignity changed Ukraine: Ten achievements”, 2021.

Yanukovych era is regarded as a new opportunity that should transform the country from being the hybrid-regime to a fully functional democracy. The role of civil society, which is said to be strengthened after the revolution, is emphasized as an important aspect in the process of democratic transformation. Another achievement of the revolution is considered to be the reinforcement of the national identity, which entails a stronger distinction between Ukrainian and Russian identities. Other accomplishments presented in the article include: increasing the military capabilities of the country, decentralizing of the governance system, renewed fight against corruption, return to the European path, etc. The Orange Revolution, together with the Revolution of Dignity, is considered a demonstration of Ukrainian people's strong aspiration towards freedom and democracy.<sup>71</sup>

Ukraine accuses Russia of using the Maidan events as a pretext to conduct hybrid warfare against Ukraine, manifested in military actions and occupation of parts of Ukrainian land. According to the official Kyiv, Ukrainian people's aspirations towards freedom and European integration was answered with punitive reaction by Moscow, which represents flagrant violation of international law.<sup>72</sup>

Studying Ukrainian information campaign regarding the events of Maidan has showed that no special emphasis is made to address Russia's accusation about "Nazis" orchestrating the revolution. Also, informational efforts to refute the illegality of Maidan Revolution could not be identified in the selected samples. The strategy seems to be, instead of responding to disinformation, to erase the "Nazi" narrative from the media agenda and undermine it this way. Considering the nature of this particular accusation, it may be reasonable not to focus on it at all, as this demonstrates Ukraine's attitude towards what is considered as a ridiculous accusation. However, arguing for the legitimacy of Maidan Revolution could have strengthened the existing positive image that has been created in favor of this event in Ukrainian media.

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[https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3359977-how-the-revolution-of-dignity-changed-ukraine-ten-achievements.html?fbclid=IwAR0p22unkmBwUZ\\_hPiW7Qvw8nzUlwajaGKVpoRiXTEuD4pu-EamH1PryWj0](https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3359977-how-the-revolution-of-dignity-changed-ukraine-ten-achievements.html?fbclid=IwAR0p22unkmBwUZ_hPiW7Qvw8nzUlwajaGKVpoRiXTEuD4pu-EamH1PryWj0)> [2022 10 20]

<sup>71</sup> Ukraine NOW, "Origins & History of Ukraine", updated in 2022.

<sup>72</sup> Ukrinform, "Ukraine at OSCE: Russia reacts to Revolution of Dignity with hybrid war", 2019.

<https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/2823542-ukraine-at-osce-russia-reacts-to-revolution-of-dignity-with-hybrid-war.html>> [2022 10 21]

On balance, Ukrainian strategic communications have framed the Maidan Revolution in a following way:

1. Maidan movement sought the end of the crisis, democratic reforms, the end of corruption, etc.
2. The authorities under Yanukovych perpetrated brutal violence, while the protesters' initial intentions were peaceful.
3. Russia was involved in the violence against the protesters, including in the killings.
4. The Revolution of Dignity brought crucial achievements on the path to democratic transformation, and consequently in terms of European integration.
5. The Revolution of Dignity contributed in making the state function more effectively.
6. The Revolution of Dignity is a manifestation of Ukrainian people's civilizational choice.

### **Conclusions**

Taking into the account the excessive use of information warfare by Russia in an attempt to legitimize the annexation of Crimea, the need for exploring the efforts by Ukrainian side to combat it and to conduct its own information warfare aimed at delegitimizing the occupation of its territory becomes evident. The scholarly work which studies the former is vast, and rightly so. On the other hand, the latter is researched in an incredibly limited way, showcasing the gaps that needs to be filled. The objective of this research was to contribute to achieve this, and demonstrate that one-sided academic work does not constitute a reasonable way to address a variety of research problems that do exist in relation to Russia's strategies of hybrid-warfare. In order for countries which struggle against Russia's aggression to develop stronger resilience, and implement more efficient deterrence policies, it is essential that academic literature provides findings and insights that might be utilized for this cause.

Information warfare is one, but quite significant, aspect of the grand strategy that countries set in motion. It is an element that complements economic, social, military and diplomatic efforts, all of which is aimed at further enhancing one's national interests, or in other words, strategic goals. In order for the countries to achieve maximum efficiency in fulfilling their strategic ends, all of these aspects have to be activated in a way as effective as possible. This research aimed at exploring the informational aspect of Ukraine's grand strategy and find how it conducted its information war in relation to the issue of Crimea.



The study of Ukraine's strategic documents showed that throughout the chosen timeframe, the country lacked efficient and well-coordinated communication strategy, which is admitted in two of the national security strategy documents issued by the authorities (in 2015 and 2020). Despite its significance, Russian propaganda aimed against Crimea is not emphasized in neither of these two documents, instead it discussed Russian informational threats in much broader sense. Ukraine's Information Security Strategy of 2021 for the first time identified as a threat Russian information warfare regarding Crimea that is targeting the Western audience. Almost eight years after the annexation of Crimea, this document outlined measures that would more efficiently communicate the state's positions to the international community, raise awareness about Ukraine among foreign audiences, and combat Russian efforts to justify the seizure of Crimea.

The research identified four major strategic narratives pushed by the Kremlin and explored Ukrainian response to each, based on the principles of Agenda-Setting Theory.

The first narrative is referred to as a "historical argument", where Ukrainian state media provided frames that combat Russian set of attributes assigned to Crimea from a historical viewpoint. Ukrainian information campaign in this regard aims at undermining Moscow's narratives which frame Crimea as a historically inseparable part of Russia. All major aspects of Russian narrative are answered, while additionally underscoring Ukraine's historical closeness with Crimea and its indigenous people. The legal element of the "historical argument", namely the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine by Soviet leadership, is also addressed.

"The ethnic argument" – another one of Russia's major narratives – is combated mainly through a historical viewpoint, by underlining the Soviet Union's intentional and artificial manipulation of Crimea's ethnic composition. Another attribute that is linked with Crimea is the oppression of its people under Russian occupation since 2014, a sort of counteroffensive informational response. This particular agenda enjoys a very high level of attention, i.e. salience. The frame, according to which Russian speakers have not been oppressed under Ukrainian rule, on the other hand, possesses extremely limited amount of salience in the Ukrainian state-related media.

Kyiv has put sufficient informational effort with regard to the legitimacy of Crimean referendum. The frames regarding the referendum point to absence of its compliance with both Ukrainian legislation, as well as international law. Among other arguments, the military

intervention by Russia is emphasized. It is also argued that the referendum violated Crimean Tatars' right to self-determination.

The fourth narrative, the issue of Maidan Revolution, was mainly addressed in an indirect way. This research has identified the least amount of pattern of action and response, in terms of Russian and Ukrainian information campaigns concerning Maidan events. This means that Ukraine formulated its own agenda that is not necessarily aimed at fighting Russian narratives. Namely, Russia's accusations regarding "Neo-Nazis" (among other epithets) orchestrating Maidan Revolution, as well as the illegality of the revolution, is completely neglected. Instead, the brutality against Maidan protesters and the overall achievements of Maidan Revolution are highlighted.

Several possible directions or areas for further research can be recommended. Firstly, information warfare regarding Crimea can be examined with regard to Ukrainian or Crimean populations (instead of Western community). As many scholars point to the sufficiency of Russian influence on the people of Crimea, it would be particularly insightful to provide findings in this regard.

Secondly, another area for further research could be the deeper study of implementation of Ukraine's Information Security Strategy. As some of the most crucial problems are outlined in this document, it is important to assess the efficiency of its implementation.

Moreover, as Ukraine is currently facing another wave of invasion of much larger scale, the information warfare regarding the newly emerged Russian narratives which were not necessarily used in the case of Crimea, should be explored. The change of Ukraine's strategy in information warfare after Russia's large-scale invasion should also be studied in a comprehensive way.

And finally, similar study of strategic narratives can be conducted regarding Georgia and its occupied territories, where Russian propaganda aims at legitimizing the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in a similar way. The same can be considered about other target territories, namely, Ukraine's Donbas or Moldova's Transnistria.

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## Summary

The primary aim of the thesis was to explore Ukraine's conduct of information warfare against the backdrop of Russian propaganda targeting the question of Crimea. The need for this study is considered essential, as Russia has put significant investments in media campaigns which aim at influencing the perceptions of the Western countries and their subsequent positioning. The perceptions of the West affect the extent of support that is provided to Ukraine and pressure that is put on Russia as a response to its aggressive policies, which in turn affects the effectiveness of deterrence.

As existing relevant scientific literature was examined, it became clear that while Russia and its information warfare strategies are thoroughly studied, Ukrainian activities in this regard are largely under-researched.

In order to proceed with the research, strategic theory was used as a guiding tool, in terms of what constitutes strategy, strategic communication and what are their main features. In addition, agenda-setting theory was used to conduct frame analysis of articles present in the Ukrainian state-related media.

Through the lens of this theoretical framework, firstly, Ukrainian strategic documents were analyzed, namely the two national security documents and the information security strategy. The examination of these documents showcased the lack of well-coordinated strategic communications system in Ukraine.

Moreover, Putin's speech, complemented by the secondary sources on Russian propaganda, was used to identify Kremlin's core narratives aimed at legitimizing the annexation of Crimea. In turn, frame analysis of Ukrainian media explored the major set of attributes that are assigned to the problem of Crimea by official Kyiv. In this regard, four major narrative battles were analyzed, including: the historical circumstances that shape the general perceptions regarding Crimea, the narratives about the ethnic composition of the peninsula which constitutes a rather powerful instrument for the Kremlin, the legality of the referendum conducted in Crimea, as well as Maidan Revolution and its implications for Crimea.

The analysis demonstrated different ways in which Ukraine responded to Russian information war. As most of the above-mentioned narratives were addressed in a direct manner, the last

narrative concerning Maidan Revolution was mainly indirectly addressed, by generating Ukraine's own set of attributes assigned to these events.

The frame analysis fulfilled to major objective of the research and answered the primary research question. Consequently, the way Ukraine responded to Russia's information warfare regarding Crimea with regard to the international community is presented in a descriptive-analytical manner.