WHAT IS MEMETIC WARFARE AND HOW DOES IT THREATEN DEMOCRATIC VALUES?

Dmytro Zolotukhin

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Russia will conquer Europe not with tanks and jets

On March 5, 2016, Jānis Sārts, director of NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, based in Riga, Latvia, told the *Observer* that Russia had a track record of funding extremist forces in Europe, and that he believed there is now evidence of Russia agitating in Germany against Merkel.

Insisting that he could talk only as an expert, and not as a spokesman for NATO, Sārts said:

> [Russia] is establishing a network that can be controlled. You can use it as they have tried to do in Germany, combined with the legitimate issue of refugees, to undercut political processes in a very serious way. Angela Merkel has been a very adamant supporter of continued sanctions against Russia. If it was just punishment, that would be OK – but it is testing whether they can build on pre-existing problems and create a momentum where there is political change in Germany.

As I've been monitoring the process of the promotion of Russian narratives in the European information space, this is at least the fourth affirmation of the fact that Russia is interfering in the internal affairs of European countries, a fact that is ignored by European society.

In October 2015, Jānis Sārts said[1] that NATO suspects that a third party, working in secret, is fomenting xenophobia in Europe. Information warfare experts have tried to find those behind the campaign, though it is obvious who would benefit from the weakness of Europe.

Many Ukrainian and German experts have assumed that the New Year's Eve sexual attacks on women on the Cologne railway station square were

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[1] **Dagens Nyheter** 2015. Nato: Främlingshatet kan gödas av främmande makt. Published 27.10.2015, <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/nato-framlingshatet-kan-godas-av-frammande-makt/> (accessed March 14, 2016).

planned and organized by the third party. And their main aim was to change[2] the attitude of Germans towards the migrants.

The alleged rape of a 13-year-old Russian-speaking girl in Berlin in the end of January 2016, supposedly by asylum-seekers, has fuelled[3] anti-migrant protests from Germany's large Russian community. They have demanded a change in the politics of Angela Merkel, and even her resignation[4].

Members of the Netherlands parliamentary party D66 have called for an inquiry[5] into the question of Russia's influence on Dutch policy because of the deep concern that has emerged in response to US-based investigations[6] on European parties being funded by Russia.

As I can see, the participants of almost every conference on propaganda issues are trying to define and figure out the narratives of Russian propaganda towards European countries. There are many of them, but the most efficient ones are very simple and widespread. They are based on the primary needs of every human being – safety and security. And to activate these needs in people, you have to persuade them that a real threat is imminent. This is how the Kremlin is using the refugee crisis to scare Europeans and cause them to be guided by fake ideas, such as "refugees attack, insult and rape women".

Memetic warfare

One of the contributors of the Defense Strategic Communications journal issued by NATO Stratcom COE, Jeff Giesea, defines[7] memetic warfare as "competition over narrative, ideas, and social control in a social-media

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[2] **BBC** 2016. Cologne sex attacks: Is Germany's attitude to migrants changing? Published 21 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35377196> (accessed March 14, 2016).

[3] **Damien McGuinness** 2016. BBC News. Russia steps into Berlin 'rape' storm claiming German cover-up. Published 27 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-eu-35413134> (accessed March 14, 2016).

[4] **Meduza, Репортаж «Медузы»** 2016. «Русский мир» пришел в Берлин Как история об «изнасилованной девочке» взбудоражила немецкую столицу. Published 25 January 2016, <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/01/25/russkiy-mir-prishel-v-berlin> (accessed March 14, 2016).

[5] **Kees Verhoeven, Member of the Parlament of Netherlands** 2016. Published January 18, 2016, <https://twitter.com/KeesVee/status/689090609479561220> (accessed March 14, 2016).

[6] **Peter Foster, Matthew Holehouse** 2016. The Telegraph. Russia accused of clandestine funding of European parties as US conducts major review of Vladimir Putin's strategy. Published January 16, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/12103602/America-to-investigate-Russian-meddling-in-EU.html> (accessed March 14, 2016).

[7] **Jeff Giesea** 2016. It's time to embrace memetic warfare. – NATO Stratcom COE Academic journal Defence Strategic Communications, Vol. 1. Published February, 2016, <http://www.stratcom-coe.org/academic-journal-defence-strategic-communications-vol1> (accessed March 14, 2016).

battlefield. One might think of it as a subset of 'information operations' tailored to social media. Information operations involve the collection and dissemination of information to establish a competitive advantage over an opponent".

In Giesea's opinion "memetic warfare could also be viewed as a 'digital native' version of psychological warfare, more commonly known as propaganda. If propaganda and public diplomacy are conventional forms of memetic warfare, then trolling and PSYOPs are guerrilla versions".

Giesea also says that this methodology is being actively used in political campaigns. This is true. The most interesting recent cases of spreading memes to change a political situation are, for example, the Twitter hashtags #Make-DonaldDrumpfAgain[8], when American comedian John Oliver launched an anti-Trump campaign, or #BundyEroticFanFic[9], when American actors tried to prevent the glorification of farmers who used their guns to fight for their land (which was a perfect illustration of how the USA was built).

However, in my humble opinion, memetics is a far broader issue then a social media management method.

Vladimir Vernadsky, the first president of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, is considered the founding father of the noosphere[10] theory. This is the environment which encompasses the whole conscious intellectual activity of mankind. It is believed that a third-party unceremonious intervention in this environment, which is not fully studied and understood, carries a great danger. Just like human intervention in the processes of nature is a serious threat to the ecological environment.

Implantation of ideas is an ancient practice of humanity. Perhaps only for this reason was religion created, not to mention things like hypnosis, NLP or "black PR". The main charm of implanted ideas is that the "object of the implanting" considers these ideas as his own. And that's why they have such a devastating effect. After all, people are often willing to die, and more often – to kill, for their beliefs. This destructive force is shown in Christopher Nolan's film *Inception*.

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[8]   **The Guardian** 2016. John Oliver launches anti-Trump campaign: #MakeDonaldDrumpfA-gain. Published March 1, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/mar/01/john-oliver-last-week-tonight-donald-trump-hbo-drumpf> (accessed March 14, 2016).

[9]   **Brian Ries** 2016. Mashable. Steamy #BundyEroticFanFic imagines what happens in militias after dark. Published January 7, 2016, <http://mashable.com/2016/01/07/bundyerot-icfanfic-hashtag-tweets/#_Rp1pTh5nEqO>, (accessed March 14, 2016).

[10] The **noosphere** (/ˈnoʊ.əsfɪər/; sometimes **noösphere**) is the sphere of human thought. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noosphere> (accessed March 14, 2016).

Memetics is a theory of mental content based on an analogy with Darwinian evolution, originating from the popularization of Richard Dawkins'[11] 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*[12]. The meme, analogous to a gene, was conceived as a "unit of culture" (an idea, belief, pattern of behaviour, etc.) which is "hosted" in the minds of one or more individuals, and which can reproduce itself, thereby jumping from mind to mind. Thus what would otherwise be regarded as one individual influencing another to adopt a belief is seen as an idea-replicator reproducing itself in a new host. As with genetics, particularly under a Dawkinsian interpretation, a meme's success may be due to its contribution to the effectiveness of its host.

Naturally, the most "powerful" and adapted to the environment memes survive. This fact brings us to the idea that if we can shift an organism's genetic material by manipulating environmental conditions in the biosphere, then we can also change the noosphere, introducing new leading ideas beneficial to us, which will change people's behavior.

Richard Dawkins himself says: "Strictly speaking, the idea of parallels in the evolution of language and of living organisms was first expressed by Charles Darwin in the 14th chapter of his *Origin of Species*."

Weaponization of information space

While investigating the use of memetic technology in the modern world, I came across the phrase "memetic weapon" in Irina Lebedeva's (a Russian anti-American publicist) article[13] on the website of "Strategic Culture Foundation" (Russia). Back in December 2011, Lebedeva says that Gene Sharp (known for his "colored revolutions") and his colleagues participated in the development of memes, with an aim to achieve regime change in Russia.

For example, the author says that one such "combat" meme was the phrase "The party of crooks and thieves". This refers to the ruling Russian political

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[11] **Clinton Richard Dawkins** (born 26 March 1941) is an English ethologist, evolutionary biologist, and writer. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Dawkins> (accessed March 14, 2016).

[12] **The Selfish Gene** is a book on evolution by Richard Dawkins, published in 1976. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Selfish_Gene> (accessed March 14, 2016).

[13] **Ирина ЛЕБЕДЕВА** 2011. Меметическое оружие, или Вашингтонский демократизационный шаблон. Published December 10, 2011. <http://www.fondsk.ru/news/2011/12/10/memeticheskoe-oruzhie-ili-vashingtonskij-demokratizacionnyj-shablon-11775.html> (accessed March 14, 2016).

force "United Russia". This meme was very actively broadcasted by Aleksey Navalny during his presidential campaign.

Obviously, in modern society, memes have been used as a weapon to incite hatred in Russia and Ukraine. Since 2011 Russian information space has been propagating the idea of "European decaying values and Russian spiritual buckles". The story[14] of Irina Bergseth, when she accused her Norwegian husband, his relatives and Norwegian authorities of pedophilia, became the basis for this idea.

From 2011–2013, Russian media and internet connected homosexuality and pedophilia very closely with Europe. This was mainly due to the homophobic feelings and views among the majority of Russian people. In fact, Russian political and media establishment have been indirectly encouraging homophobic tensions in Russian society. This became a basis for the hatred of anything connected to European countries and their values.

Since the second half of 2013, subjects of fear, disgust and aversion have been tightly linked to homosexuality and pedophilia using online media. A majority also perceived it as inherent attributes of "European values".

Then, after this, the information space gradually focused on the European choice in Ukraine. The associative chain lined up (one of them) very clearly: "Ukraine wants to integrate into Europe and in Europe they have "European values", which consist of pedophilia, homosexuality and incest. That is why Ukraine is for incest and homosexuality".

The same technology was used for the Crimea annexation. Russian professionals in communications, public relations and non-governmental organizations used enormous financial resources from the Russian budget to create the perception that everything connected with Maidan was caused by ultra-right nationalists and neo-Nazis who were paid by American and European governments to weaken Russia.

One of the key points in the Crimea annexation story was the meme about the "friendship train". In February 2014, Igor Moseychuk, former representative of one of the right-wing organizations (now in jail for corruption) said on TV that his counterparts would come to Crimea "to teach locals how to be faithful to their Motherland". This meme, passed from mouth to mouth among the Russian-speaking people in Crimea, nurtured precisely the theme of fear, which is one of the most powerful drivers of behavior. Almost every Crimean was frightened by this news.

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[14] **Norway News** 2011. Russian boy torn between three countries. Published September 21, 2011. <http://www.norwaynews.com/en/~view.php?72U3454RL94824v285Tgf844RJ388bW K76FCp253Jci8> (accessed March 14, 2016).

Actually this was a repetition of an old story about another "train" of right-wing activists that went to Crimea 23 years ago. In 1992 the main organizer of the "friendship train" was the UNSO – an ultra-right organization of Ukrainian nationalists, which had close connections with Dmytro Korchynskiy, who often appeared in the information space during Euromaidan and even declared war on Russia when the situation in Crimea started. In 1992 they could not even get to the peninsula, because they were stopped on the border of the region. But, in 1992, there was no mass propaganda on TV nor social media with its current level of development to "roll hysteria" around the need to "defend against the Nazis". Although it took 23 years, the power of traditional and social media have made this small incident as significant as the attack on Pearl Harbor or the Battle of Tsushima.

Constructive and destructive memes

Jeff Giesea, in his article for Defense Strategic Communications journal, says: "memetic warfare can be offensive, defensive, or predictive. It can be deployed independently or in conjunction with cyber, hybrid, or conventional efforts."

I believe that, in the broadest sense, memes can be *constructive* and *destructive*. Destructive memes, such as "fascists" and "banderovtsy" (for Ukrainian nationalists), "gayropa" (for European norms of tolerance), "crucified boy" and "Liza – the raped girl" (for spreading the unreal threat), are made to incite hatred among people, based on the security needs from the perceived threats. And these memes are crafted to deepen the fear of those they are aimed at (Europeans, refugees, Ukrainians).

Constructive memes are made mostly naturally. They are born in the information space themselves; people just start to use them. In Ukraine constructive memes are: the "Heavenly Hundred" (for those who gave their lives on Maidan for the freedom of Ukrainian people), and the "Cyborgs" (for Ukrainian volunteers and soldiers who died defending the Donetsk airport from terrorists and Russian Special Forces' attacks).

The most famous European meme is "Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood", but, as we see, it lost its power long ago.

Their constructive role is very significant. For example, the "legend" says that the "Heavenly Hundred" is watching us not only to defend us from the enemies, but also to prevent us from giving and taking bribes. This seems childish, but this story is still spreading in Ukrainian social media, saying that the Heavenly Hundred will punish you if you misbehave while building a new country.

Although research has not been done on the subject, in my opinion, constructive memes are much more efficient than destructive ones, and more than that – constructive memes, if they are accepted by society, do not need any resources for spreading them in media, because they have very high virality.

The place of memetic warfare in modern society

As we know, Strategic Communications subdivisions were made by NATO and the European Parliament to counter the threat of Russian propaganda spreading. But, let's face the truth, they still cannot find their place and mission in the modern European information space. The overwhelming majority of their statements are made as "independent experts", not as representatives of the EU or NATO. Almost every message from them is accompanied by a disclaimer.

On the other hand, they have made a huge effort in launching this discussion in the Western world and bringing some terms and definitions to it. For example, the definition of "narrative" and "master-narrative" is very widespread. Experts all over the world are trying to figure out what narratives Russia is spreading and what counter-narratives Europe has to defend the territory of its senses.

Actually, it could be said that the memes and the narratives are the same, but memes have more obvious and objective features to describe and explain them. A new project of the Concept of Information Security of Ukraine has another term to express it: *strategic content* (along with "strategic communications").

Thus, memes have power that far exceeds social media. They contain answers to questions like: "Why should we defend our Motherland?", "Why should we not give or take bribes?", "Why do we have to be tolerant of other nations, races, genders or views?", "Why should we care about who is managing our country and how he or she is doing this?"

These are some of the most significant and important questions for not only Ukrainian society, but for any community that intends to develop in a democratic way. And that's why memetics and the possibility of purposefully developing constructive memes is the biggest interest of the Institute for Postinformation Society.

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DMYTRO ZOLOTUKHIN, M.I.B, Director of the Institute for Postinformation Society, Advisor to the Minister of Information Policy of Ukraine