

INTRODUCTION: THE BACKGROUND AND ANATOMY OF RUSSIAN MILITARY AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE

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The current volume entitled “The Background and Anatomy of Russian Aggression” is the first volume of the announced series “Putin’s war in Ukraine” which will discuss issues and topics related to Putin and Russian military aggression in Ukraine, especially focusing on the background of this large-scale war which Russia launched on 24 February 2022. However, the Russian war against Ukraine started back in 2014 (annexing Crimea and creating the terrorist quasi-states the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Lugansk People’s Republic in the Donbass region).¹ No war has been this large, caused this much destruction or forced this many people to live as refugees since 1945, after the Second World War ended in Europe.

The war unleashed by Russia’s authoritarian leader (essentially a dictator) is unprecedented in today’s world. Russia has been preparing for it for a long time, probably for years, if not decades. We saw that the so-called Russian media (controlled by the Kremlin) has been conducting massive disinformation campaigns to discredit Ukraine, its people and governmental institutions. Russia most probably attacked Ukraine with the aim of conquering and asserting control over it, at least over its eastern and southern parts. The Kremlin desired to replace power in Kyiv and, apparently, their aim was to establish a puppet government in Ukraine, headed by someone obedient to the Kremlin (possibly Ukrainian ex-president Viktor Yanukovich).²

¹ Current volume published with the support of project 253 (O-014) “Strategic Narrative as a Model for Reshaping the Security Dilemma” (Estonian Military Academy). For more see, e.g., **Howard, C.; Puhkov, R.** (eds.) 2014. *Brothers Armed. Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*. Minneapolis: East View Press; **Pynnöniemi, K., Rácz, A.** 2016. *Fog of Falsehood: Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine*. FIIA – The Finnish Institute of International Affairs; **Rácz, A.** 2015. *Russia’s Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy’s Ability to Resist*, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs. June 16, available at <https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/fiiareport43.pdf> (visited 20.12.2022).

² **Davidzon, V.** 2022. *A Putin puppet government will fail*. – UnHerd, 4 March. <https://unherd.com/2022/03/a-putin-puppet-government-will-fail/> (visited 19.12.2022).

An interview with Kremlin ideologist and political technologist Vladislav Surkov on 26 February 2020 underlined that Ukraine does not exist. “There is no Ukraine... There is a brochure “Samostiyna Ukraina” [*Independent Ukraine*], but there is no Ukraine.” The fact that Ukrainians and Russians are one and that there is no Ukrainian nation has also been stated in propaganda speeches by dictator Putin. Surkov stresses that Russia’s relations with Ukraine have always been difficult and that “forcing it into fraternal relations is the only method that has historically been proven to be effective towards Ukraine.” Surkov’s imperialist and war-justifying concepts are being applied in Ukraine by Putin’s regime, including through war, terror and genocide (especially in 2022), which Vladislav Surkov has justified and which he has called, among other things, “the constant expansion of Russia”.³ For example, pro-Kremlin journalist Andrey Medvedev claimed to his 150,000 followers on social media that “the Ukrainian nation does not exist, it is only a political orientation. /.../ All this can be stopped only through the liquidation of Ukrainian statehood in its current form.” According to analysts at the Institute for the Study of War, the “genocidal rhetoric” of pro-war commentators and politicians is “openly exterminatory and dehumanizing and calls for the conduct of a genocidal war against the Ukrainian state and its people, which notably has pervaded discourse in the highest levels of the Russian political mainstream.”⁴

Influencing activities can be considered a type of military activity in the modern security environment, which the Russian Federation has used extensively since 2014 in escalating the crisis and then war in Ukraine to support the Kremlin’s military actions.⁵ The large-scale war launched against Ukraine in 2022 is a consequence of the gradual escalation of long-term Russian influence. To justify the war and war crimes against Ukraine and the

³ **Украинская правда** 2022. Сурков заявил, что “Украины нет” и что для Донбасса быть в ней – “унижение”. Украинская правда, 26.02.2020. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/02/26/7241702/> (visited 20.12.2022).

⁴ **Ellyatt, H.** 2022. Putin’s supporter call for the liquidation of Ukraine as ‘genocidal rhetoric’ swells. – CNBC, Europe Politics. November 25. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/11/25/putins-supporters-call-for-the-extermiation-of-ukraine.html> (visited 20.12.2022).

⁵ **Ramsay, G.; Robertshaw, S.** 2019. Weaponising News: RT, Sputnik and Targeted Disinformation. London: King’s College London; see also **Hinck, R. S.; Kluver, R.; Cooley, S.** 2018. Russia Re-envisioning the World: Strategic Narratives in Russian Broadcast and News Media During 2015. – Russian Journal of Communication, Vol. 10(1), pp. 21–37; **Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Kerikmäe, T.; Chochia, A.** (eds.). 2021. The Russian Federation in the Global Information Warfare. Influence Operations in Europe and Its Neighbourhood. Springer Nature.

Ukrainian people, the Russian Federation continues to use various propaganda narratives and messages in its influence activities. Russian information war narratives are largely based on Russia's opposition to Ukraine and, more broadly, the Western world (United States, Europe) and its institutions (EU, NATO, etc.).⁶

An important tool for information influence is strategic narratives. Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin have argued that the soft power of the 21st century is strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are stories disseminated to the public that are used by political actors (e.g., various organizations, states, etc.) as a means of shaping the common past, present and future of international politics to shape the perceptions and behavior of domestic and international actors.⁷ A. Antoniadis et al. have argued that strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative means by which the political elite seeks to give purposeful meaning to the past, present and future in order to achieve political goals.⁸ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle stress that strategic narratives can affect the following dimensions:

- the international system, expressing how a political actor (state or international organization(s), interest group, etc.) shapes perceptions of the organization of international relations;
- policies (e.g., the desire of political actors to influence international arms control negotiations or, for example, interfere in political disputes over the management of armed conflicts);

⁶ **Ventsel, A.; Hansson, S.; Madisson, M.-L.; Sazonov, V.** 2021. Discourse of fear in strategic narratives: The case of Russia's Zapad war games. – *Media War & Conflict*, Vol. 14(1), pp. 21–39; **Mölder, H.** 2021. Culture of Fear: the Decline of Europe in Russian political imagination. – Krouwel, A.; Önnersfors, A. (eds.). *Europe: Continent of Conspiracies. Conspiracy Theories in and about Europe*. London: Routledge, pp. 231–252; **Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.** 2020. Kremlin Information Campaign in the Baltic States During the COVID-19 Pandemic Escalation of Spring 2020. – *Modern Management Revue XXV*, Vol. 27(4), pp. 83–97. [**Mölder, Sazonov** 2020]

⁷ **Roselle, L.; Miskimmon, A.; O'Loughlin, B.** 2021. Strateegiline narratiiv: pehme jõu uus käsitlus. – *Sõjateadlane (Estonian Journal of Military Studies)*, No. 17, pp. 13–32. See more on strategic narratives **Miskimmon, A.; O'Loughlin, B.; Roselle, L.** 2013. *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. Routledge.

⁸ **Antoniades, A. et al.** 2010. *Great Power Politics and Strategic Narratives*. Global Political Economy Center of Sussex University, p. 5.

- identity, i.e., how political actors want to project their identity in international relations.⁹

The strategic narratives created and disseminated by the Russian Federation are aimed at various target groups, including anti-US, anti-EU groups and other movements, establishments, etc. In spreading these kinds of strategic narratives, several populist political movements and politicians in the Western world are also exploited. As a revisionist and imperialist power, Russia is trying to influence not only the post-Soviet space (including the Baltic States, Ukraine, Central Asia, etc.) but is also trying to shape opinions outside the post-Soviet space.¹⁰ During this war in Ukraine, the Kremlin has not changed its strategy and is continuing to try influence the Western world and to harm the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. For this purpose, various strategic narratives have been created by Kremlin and pro-Kremlin forces that would amplify or shape perceptions of the world and political preferences in accordance with the foreign policy goals of Russia and its imperialistic agenda.

The Kremlin's strategic narratives have tried to dehumanize Ukrainians, and their aim is to justify the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Therefore, Russian information campaigns spread hatred and ethnic division, essentially calling for war among its own domestic audience.

In addition to the information war and all its components, Moscow has used its entire arsenal of hybrid warfare to destabilize Ukraine, including espionage, political and economic pressure and blackmail, threats, bribery, as well as terrorist actions, etc.¹¹

⁹ **Miskimmon, A.; O'Loughlin, B.; Roselle, L.** 2013. *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. Routledge; **Roselle, L.; Miskimmon, A.; O'Loughlin, B.** 2014. *Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power*. – *Media, War & Conflict* 2014, Vol. 7(1), 70–84; **Miskimmon, A.; O'Loughlin, B.; Roselle, L.** (eds). 2018. *Forging the World. Strategic Narratives and International Relations*. University of Michigan Press.

¹⁰ **Mölder, Sazonov** 2020.

¹¹ See, e.g., **Sazonov, V.; Saumets, A.; Mölder, H.** (eds.) 2016. *The Crisis in Ukraine and Information Operations of the Russian Federation*. – *Sõjateadlane (Estonian Journal of Military Studies)*, No. 2; **Müür, K.; Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, P.** 2016. *Russian Information Operations Against the Ukrainian State and Defense Forces: April–December 2014 in Online News*. – *Journal of Baltic Security*, Vol. 2(1), pp. 28–71; **Westerlund, F.; Norberg, J.** 2016. *Military Means for Non-Military Measures: The Russian Approach to the Use of Armed Force as Seen in Ukraine*. – *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 29(4), pp. 576–601; **Тымчук, Д.; Карин, Ю.; Машовец, К.; Гусаров, В.** 2016. *Вторжение в Украину: Хроника российской агрессии*. Киев: Брайт Стар Паблшинг; **Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.** 2018. *Information Warfare as the Hobbesian Concept of Modern Times – The Principles, Techniques, and Tools of Russian Information Operations in the Donbass*. – *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 31(3), pp. 308–328.

Therefore, this volume will examine Russia's hybrid activity in Ukraine and more broadly in the West, along with Russian military preparations (e.g., reforms). This first issue (Vol. 1) will introduce and analyse the historical, political-strategic, ideological, religious and information war background of Russia's military aggression and invasion in Ukraine, along with the first implications of war in the abovementioned spheres.

The collection begins with an article written by Dr. Viljar Veebel, Dr. Illimar Ploom and Dr. Vladimir Sazonov about Putin's mad man strategy. The article is entitled HOW TO OUTPLAY A "MAD MAN" STRATEGY: LESSONS FROM RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE. This article focuses on the hypothesis that Russian authoritarian leader Vladimir Putin is a rational person who is behaving like the Russian version of a "mad man". In this case, the mad man strategy and other game theory models could be used to force Russian leaders to comply with Western demands, with analysis of which advantages and disadvantages the Russian version of the mad man strategy would offer to Russia and how the West could respond to it. Why did Putin eventually choose to act in this manner, and does the West have other more beneficial or less violent options on the table? These and other questions are discussed in this article.

The second article in this issue, RUSSIAN CAPABILITIES IN CONVENTIONAL HIGH INTENSITY WARFARE. LESSONS FROM THE 2022 INVASION OF UKRAINE written by Dr. Anton Paier is an insight into the Russian Federation's ability to conduct high-intensity warfare. The author shows that Russia is one of the world's largest military powers today for which strategic nuclear forces are the most important component of the Russian military machine. But conventional forces are also a key factor in Russia's defense and strategic policy, and this article briefly describes the post-Soviet development of Russia's conventional forces and their capabilities and effectiveness in the light of the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022. One of the themes of the article is that current war operations in Ukraine have shown major shortcomings in Russia's organization and combined arms tactics, suggesting that reforms in the Russian military have only been partially successful. They also suggest that problems inherited by today's Russian armed forces from their predecessors persist, which may be linked to their historical military legacy and to aspects of Russian society that go far back into the past.

The article by famous Ukrainian political scientist and expert in hybrid warfare Dr. Yevhen Mahda, THE MAIN WAR OF THE CENTURY: PRELIMINARY RESULTS focuses on the initial results of the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as on a pilot analysis of a new phase that began on 24 February 2022

with a large-scale invasion. The author of the article describes and explains the main features of the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, highlighting propagandistic and diplomatic components as well as the humanitarian aspect of the biggest and bloodiest war of the early 21st century.

Dr. Mahda's article is followed by a study from famous Ukrainian researcher Prof. Georgy Pocheptsov who, in his article *RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA WARS: RUSSIA-UKRAINE 2022*, examines Russian propaganda against Ukraine in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war.

In the article entitled *POLAND AS A FRONT-LINE NATION IN THE WAKE OF RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE*, Colonel (ret.) Prof. Zdzislaw Sliwa points out that the outbreak of Russian aggression against Ukraine has created an existential threat for Poland. This article discusses specific aspects of Poland's developing awareness of Russia as an aggressive state that uses military force to alter existing state borders, violates international law and human rights principles, and commits war crimes against the civilian population.

The collection continues with a discussion concerning the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in this Russian hybrid war against Ukraine, and conflict between Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox churches. These issues are brought into focus by Dr. Alar Kilp in his article *PATRIARCH KIRILL AND METROPOLITAN HILARION ON RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND SECULAR WAR IN UKRAINE: A DIACHRONIC STUDY OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS' MESSAGES*.

Last but not least, this volume terminates with an article from Estonian military historian Dr. Igor Kopõtin about the *FOCAL POINTS OF UKRAINIAN HISTORY*. In this article, Dr. Kopõtin discusses how Vladimir Putin is using his interpretation of Ukrainian history to justify Russia's military aggression against Ukraine.

Russia's (military) aggression against the Ukrainian state and Ukrainian people has been going on for years (and in the informational environment even for decades), as is evident from the articles in this collection. Russian aggression is multidimensional and has been planned for years. To this end, Russia has carried out military reforms in its own country, subjugating the media as well as the writing of history to the central Kremlin propaganda machine and to the ambitious imperialistic plans of authoritarian Putin's regime. And all this has been done by Russia with a single aim: to increase Russia's influence in the region, and, more narrowly, to swallow up Ukraine

and destroy Ukrainian statehood. This is why our European and, more specifically, our Estonian security environments have a lot to learn from Russia's military aggression and the hybrid war against Ukraine (and the West more broadly) that the Kremlin is waging with the aim of destroying Western unity.

Wishing you pleasant reading and cogitation,

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Editors