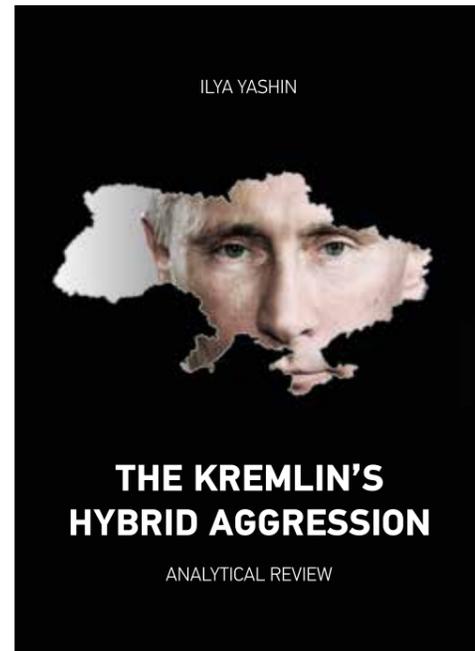


ILYA YASHIN



THE KREMLIN'S HYBRID AGGRESSION

ANALYTICAL REVIEW



«The Kremlin's Hybrid Aggression»
 An independent analytical review

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Author: Ilya Yashin
 Artist: Pavel Elizarov

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Photo: Reuters

THE UKRAINE THAT THE KREMLIN NEEDS

The breakup of the Soviet Union was a painful experience for the Russian society. A sizable part of the population of Russia perceived the loss of enormous territories as national humiliation. By the end of the 1990s a socio-psychological phenomenon took form in Russia, one based on revanchist sentiments and nostalgia for the empire lost.

Yegor Gaidar, Russia's former Prime Minister and market reforms architect, referred to this phenomenon as Russia's «Weimar syndrome» (using the analogy of the revanchist sentiments which engulfed Germany after her defeat in World War I). In 2006 he warned that in the conditions

of a weak democracy such nostalgia for an empire becomes a formidable political weapon in the hands of populists¹.

The most influential Russian populist who capitalized on these painful sentiments of the Russian society was Vladimir Putin. As early as 2005 he called the breakup of the USSR «the largest geopolitical catastrophe of the century,»² which caused rapture among those radical Russians who were harboring dreams of reinstating borders of the USSR.

Soon the Russian president demonstrated that his imperial populism was not limited by bold statements. In 2008 Russian Armed Forces engaged in combat with the Georgian army on the territory of the self-proclaimed republic

THE MOST INFLUENTIAL RUSSIAN POPULIST WHO CAPITALIZED ON THE PAINFUL SENTIMENTS OF THE RUSSIAN SOCIETY WAS VLADIMIR PUTIN. AS EARLY AS 2005 HE CALLED THE BREAKUP OF THE USSR "THE LARGEST GEOPOLITICAL CATASTROPHE OF THE CENTURY", WHICH CAUSED RAPTURE AMONG THOSE RADICAL RUSSIANS WHO WERE HARBORING DREAMS OF REINSTATING BORDERS OF THE USSR

of North Ossetia. The result of that five-day war was the recognition of Abkhazia's and North Ossetia's sovereignty by Russia who provided military and political support for the territories' de facto secession from Georgia. In essence, these republics became unrecognized Russian regions governed by Moscow and funded mostly on the Russian budget.

2014 brought with it a rapid exacerbation of Russian-Ukrainian relations ultimately resulting in a full-scope war between our countries. The Ukrainian people's choice in favor of joining Europe – which was embodied by the confrontation on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti and the ousting of president Yanukovych – was perceived in the Kremlin as a challenge to and pretext for military aggression.

The reason for this lies in Vladimir Putin's way of seeing the geopolitical picture of the world. A KGB «graduate,» he long has been and still remains a person with Cold War-era mentality. Per Putin's logic, the planet should be divided into spheres of influence between the largest states – above all, the USA and Russia.

Putin is convinced that all the former USSR territories by definition comprise the Kremlin's sphere of influence, and the

sovereignty of the former Soviet republics should be purely formal in nature. The Ukrainian society's aspirations toward western integration are interpreted in the Kremlin as overt animosity which must be countered by any means, including military.

By waging war on Ukraine the Russian president was solving several issues at once:

First, he strengthened his personal power within Russia. By 2013 his popularity started to gradually dwindle. Large scale demonstrations took place in Moscow and other major cities where the protesters were demanding the president's resignation. More and more frequently Putin was associated with corruption scandals involving people from his circle.

The attack on Ukraine, and especially the annexation of Crimea, allowed him to radically change the domestic political agenda. In the eyes of the majority of the population he transformed from a politician up to his neck in the swamp of corruption into a «gatherer of the Russian lands.» This led to the skyrocketing of Putin's popularity.

Second, the war with Ukraine allowed Putin to claim the industrial assets in the east of the country. The Kremlin set on purposefully and systematically destroying

the economic infrastructure of Ukraine, in particular by means of transporting out into the Russian territory industrial businesses from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which found themselves under control of the Russian army and guerrilla fighters loyal to it.

More than twenty businesses were exported from Ukraine, including «Topaz» State Company, Luhansk Ammunition Factory, Luhansk Machine-Building Plant, Khartsyzk Machine-Building Plant, and others. It is known that several of these factories were relocated to new facilities in Chuvashia and the Rostov region³. Furthermore, Ukraine possesses rich reserves of shale gas, and an attack on Ukraine drastically weakens it as a potential competitor to Russia's Gazprom national gas corporation.

Third, the war with Ukraine changed the foreign policy agenda. In essence, the annexation of Crimea and the installation of military control over a part of eastern Ukraine put a question mark over the Cold War outcomes. Putin's route towards revising those outcomes exacerbated the Kremlin vs. the West standoff and provoked the imposition of sanctions against Russia.

On the other hand, Putin's aggression demonstrated that the Western community does not possess functional mechanisms of defending those countries whose sovereignty the Kremlin was taking a bite at. Whether such mechanisms will appear in the near future is now an open question, but it will greatly affect at a minimum the structure of All-European security.

“A STRANGLING EMBRACE”

Putin's infringements upon the Ukrainian sovereignty surfaced a long time before the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass. From his first years in the Kremlin he has been exerting pressure on Ukraine by means of economic blackmailing, as well as by consecutive attempts to fill the chair of the Ukrainian presidency with a loyal politician who would basically submit to Kremlin's orders. During the 2004 Ukrainian presidential elections Putin banked on the candidacy of Viktor Yanukovich who should have performed this role.

Support of the Yanukovich election campaign was both organizational and political in nature. As confirmed by Andrey Illarionov who was at that time advisor to the President of Russia, the Kremlin «seriously invested» into Viktor Yanukovich. Many Russian specialists, political experts, and consultants worked at the candidate's election headquarters. Russian musicians toured all over Ukraine in support of Yanukovich – every region held concerts in which Filipp Kirkorov, Iosif Kobzon, Nadezhda Babkina, Nikolay Baskov⁴, and other stars performed. One of the key specialists from the «Moscow team» that was formed for the occasion, political consultant Sergey Markov frankly admits, «We have always worked for the Russian administration and we have stated that. And in Ukraine we always spoke of that: our chief client, our top boss was Administration of the President of Russia.»⁵ On the eve of the elections, Putin personally traveled to Ukraine seven times to support Yanukovich.



Photo: Reuters

FROM HIS FIRST YEARS IN THE KREMLIN PUTIN HAS BEEN EXERTING PRESSURE ON UKRAINE BY MEANS OF ECONOMIC BLACKMAILING, AS WELL AS BY CONSECUTIVE ATTEMPTS TO FILL THE CHAIR OF THE UKRAINIAN PRESIDENCY WITH A LOYAL POLITICIAN. IN 2004 PUTIN BANKED ON THE CANDIDACY OF VIKTOR YANUKOVYCH WHO SHOULD HAVE PERFORMED THIS ROLE

One of Yanukovich's key campaign promises was the intention to integrate Ukraine into the Single Economic Space – the precursor of today's Eurasian Customs Union (in essence the plan was to bring Ukraine into the domain of the Kremlin's political and economic influence). The opponent of Yanukovich was Viktor Yushchenko, a candidate from the Democratic Coalition, who declared that his intended direction was towards the European integration of Ukraine.

The elections were marked by large-scale electoral fraud to benefit Yanukovich, which was recorded by multiple election monitors. The fraud techniques were very primitive: convoys of buses traveled across the country taking around people who voted several times each using fake absentee ballots. In spite of this, Yanukovich failed to win the first round.

During the run-offs Yanukovich was declared winner; however, the Coalition



Photo: Reuters

headed by Viktor Yushchenko refused to accept the election results, instead declaring them fraudulent. Hundreds of thousands of protesters marched the streets of Kiev and other Ukrainian cities.

«Putin did not have the desire for Yushchenko to come to power,» says former President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma. Vladimir Putin visited Kuchma and discussed with him «how to achieve such election results that would have protected the Kremlin's interests.» According to Kuchma, Russia's leader «hinted» at using force to disperse the protesters. «Putin is a stern man. There were hints made. This is not a secret,» says he⁶.

Bloodshed was avoided that time. The Central Election Commission yielded to the protesters' pressure: the Commission

admitted fraud and resolved to hold the run-off vote again. By the result of that election, Viktor Yushchenko became President of Ukraine. Those events became known in Ukraine's history as the «Orange revolution.»

The defeat of a pro-Kremlin candidate in the Ukrainian presidential elections disappointed Putin greatly. According to Andrey Illarionov, it «led to a drastic turnaround of Vladimir Putin's state of mind, his view of the world on the international arena.»⁷

However at the next elections the Kremlin managed to strike back. The schism within the pro-European coalition that had come to power, the Ukrainians' disappointment in it, and the sharp decline in Yushchenko's popularity allowed

VLADIMIR PUTIN VISITED KUCHMA AND DISCUSSED WITH HIM "HOW TO ACHIEVE SUCH ELECTION RESULTS THAT WOULD HAVE PROTECTED THE KREMLIN'S INTERESTS." ACCORDING TO KUCHMA, PUTIN "HINTED" AT USING FORCE TO DISPERSE THE PROTESTERS. "PUTIN IS A STERN MAN. THERE WERE HINTS MADE. THIS IS NOT A SECRET," SAYS HE



Photo: Reuters

Yanukovych to reign victorious after the presidential elections of 2010.

The Kremlin's influence on Ukrainian politics noticeably increased thanks to a Kremlin-loyal president coming to power. An important moment was the signing in April 2010 of the so-called «Kharkiv Accords.» The document provided for the extension of the term the Russian Black Sea Fleet could remain on the Ukrainian territory for an additional 25 years starting on May 28, 2017, with subsequent automatic five-year renewal options. The Kremlin, in its turn, provided Ukraine with a discount on the cost of natural gas in the amount of \$100 per 1000 m³.

In the opinion of the opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, the «Kharkiv Accords» were in essence reduced down to Putin buying Ukrainian military and political loyalty with money. «I believe that when a military-political issue is traded for money it is a disgusting precedent. Disgusting because it perverts both sides. Everything is being bought and sold. For many Ukrainian citizens it is a question of national humiliation,» stated Nemtsov.⁸

Dmitry Medvedev, who was President of Russia at the time, after signing the Accords promised that the fleet would never participate in military aggression. «Will Russia use the Black sea fleet to attack adjacent states? No, it will not. Guarantees of that are the system of international relations, our obligations within the UN in accordance with international conventions.»⁹ However, it was that very Black sea fleet naval base that in 2014 served as the staging area for the military and technical operations which provided for the annexation of the Crimean peninsula to the territory of Russia. In the course of those operations, contrary to Medvedev's guarantees, a whole series of Russia's international obligations was violated including, in particular, those framed by the «Budapest Memorandum» and the «Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between the Russian Federation and Ukraine.»

Besides, the Kremlin was actively drawing Ukraine into the Customs Union and, naturally, blocking the processes of the European integration started by the previous president Viktor Yushchenko. However,



THE REFUSAL OF YANUKOVYCH TO TAKE COURSE ON EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROVOKED MASS STREET PROTESTS. THE AUTHORITIES REACTED HARSHLY: ON NOVEMBER 30 MVD SPECIAL FORCES POLICE DISPERSED THE PROTESTERS ON MAIDAN NEZALEZHNOSTI

many Ukrainians strived to see their country become closer with Europe. It was difficult for the government to ignore that.

In 2007 the European Commission started talks with Kiev regarding a base agreement «on the EU - Ukraine Association.» 2008 saw the beginning of negotiations to develop a document regarding a deeper-reaching and more comprehensive free trade zone as part of this agreement. Aiming to solidify his popularity, Yanukovych, who had by then assumed office, caught on the pro-West rhetoric and the ongoing inert foreign political processes. In November 2011 the association agreement text was approved. The next year it was initialed. For its final

ratification the Ukrainian parliament, the majority of which was controlled by the President's administration, had to adopt a packet of «Euro-integration» laws. However, that didn't happen.

THE REVOLUTION OF DIGNITY

On November 21, 2013, the Cabinet of Ministers announced that Ukraine was suspending the preparation for the association with the EU. One week later the document was not signed at the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, which the Ukrainian President attended. According to the Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaite, European leaders



ON DECEMBER 17, 2013, YANUKOVYCH MET IN MOSCOW WITH THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENT AND NEGOTIATED A 30% DISCOUNT ON RUSSIAN NATURAL GAS. FURTHERMORE, PUTIN AGREED TO PROVIDE THE UKRAINIAN GOVERNMENT WITH A \$15 BILLION USD LOAN

Photo: Reuters

could not convince Viktor Yanukovych that it was necessary to execute the association agreement; no arguments could convince the Ukrainian President.

Based on the information held by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden Carl Bildt, the reason for Yanukovych's refusal to sign a previously agreed-upon document was pressure from the Kremlin.¹⁰

The refusal of the Ukrainian President to take course on European integration provoked mass street protests in Kiev and multiple regions in Ukraine. The authorities reacted harshly: on November 30 Special Forces of the police dispersed the protesters on Kiev's main square –

Maidan Nezalezhnosti. The protesters at that moment were mostly students. That event became the turning point after which the situation got out of control of President Yanukovych and his handlers from the Kremlin. The very next day a new demonstration in Kiev brought together more than 15,000 people. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) head Vitaliy Zakharchenko apologized for the excessive brutality of his subordinates¹¹, but ten days later he undertook a second attempt to use force to disperse a protesters' campground – this time unsuccessfully.

The Maidan demonstration became a continuous event. Along with pro-European slogans the protest leaders used increasingly



CONTRARY TO THE EXPECTATIONS OF THOSE WHO INSTIGATED THE BLOODY MAIDAN SUPPRESSION, DEATH OF THE PEOPLE DID NOT STOP THE PROTESTS BUT RATHER RADICALIZED THEM. FEARING BEING ARRESTED, THE TOP LEADERSHIP INCLUDING PRESIDENT YANUKOVYCH FLED THE COUNTRY

more anti-Putin rhetoric and called on the country to pull out from under the Kremlin's influence. Among the demands, for example, was for Ukraine to refuse joining the Customs Union with Russia.

Vladimir Putin tried using economic measures to break down the growing anti-Kremlin sentiments. On December 17, 2013, Yanukovych met in Moscow with the Russian president and negotiated a 30% discount on Russian natural gas, which the Kiev officials had been unable to achieve for a number of years. Furthermore, Putin agreed to provide the Ukrainian government with a \$15 billion USD loan from the Russian National Welfare Fund (however, Yanukovych managed to receive just the first transfer of \$3 billion USD).

Opponents of Putin and Yanukovych saw in those agreements signs of political corruption. One of the protesting Ukrainians' leaders, parliamentary Arseniy Yatsenyuk openly called the loan extended to the Ukrainian government a «political bribe.»¹² The Novaya Gazeta newspaper reporter Yulia Latynina stated that Putin «[was] trying to buy Ukraine by paying Yanukovych.»

«Step number one: threaten the Ukrainian economy with such sanctions that Yanukovych will be forced to refuse from alignment with the EU. Step number two: support Yanukovych with a loan which he will never be able to repay. Step number three: in exchange for the writing off or restructuring the loan finally grab a hold of Ukrainian businesses. By hook or by crook,» wrote Latynina to describe the Kremlin's plan for Ukraine¹³.

However, Putin's plan did not work: the discount on natural gas and the generous loans did not calm down the Ukrainian opposition, and the mass protests downtown Kiev were gaining force. In order to rein in the protesters, the parliamentary majority loyal to Yanukovych by manual vote passed a legislative package aimed at suppressing the protests. The laws were partially based on Russian practice and, for example, introduced the concepts of «extremist activity» and «foreign agents.» Former Minister of Justice of Ukraine Serhiy Holovaty openly said that this package was «the Russian FSB think tanks' work product.»¹⁴

The Ukrainian public was outraged by that new oppressive legislation, and three days later about half a million protesters gathered downtown Kiev demanding resignation of the Ukrainian President. Two months of standoff between the protesters and the government ended in tragic bloodshed: the protesters were fired upon with live ammunition, and in the course of two days more than 50 people were killed.

Following an investigation, Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine found President Yanukovych liable for the shooting of the protesters; according to the Office, he gave the order to use weapons to his administration and the Ministry of Internal Affairs brass.¹⁵ Head of the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) Valentyn Nalyvaichenko added that the plan of the violent suppression of the demonstrations was developed by Russian special services, and Russian FSB operatives were directly involved in its implementation.¹⁶



Photo: Reuters

PUTIN'S REVENGE

Contrary to the expectations of those who instigated the bloody Maidan suppression, death of the people did not stop the protests but rather radicalized them. Fearing being arrested, the country's top leadership including President Yanukovich fled the country. Representatives of the pro-European opposition in Kiev formed a temporary transitional government.

Having lost its ability to affect the situation in Kiev, the Kremlin started to implement its Plan B aimed at breaking off southern and eastern regions of Ukraine.

As early as February 21 – the day Yanukovich fled – the hotbed of tension

moved from Kiev to Crimea. First in Simferopol and later in Sevastopol local pro-Kremlin parties organized rallies demanding the secession of Crimea from Ukraine. Soon armed people in Russian military uniforms (but without insignia) appeared on the territory of the peninsula, gained control over the primary infrastructure sites and blocked off Ukrainian military bases. With those forces' support the so-called «Crimean Independence Referendum» was held on March 16, and already on March 18 Russia officially announced that the peninsula was now its part.

The Russian authorities initially claimed that they had nothing to do with the actions of the armed people in Crimea. For example, on March 4 Vladimir Putin,

ARMED PEOPLE IN RUSSIAN MILITARY UNIFORMS (BUT WITHOUT INSIGNIA) APPEARED ON THE TERRITORY OF CRIMEA, GAINED CONTROL OVER THE PRIMARY INFRASTRUCTURE SITES AND BLOCKED OFF UKRAINIAN MILITARY BASES

answering the question asked by an American journalist, stated that «they were local self-defense forces.»¹⁷

Soon, however, Putin exposed his own lie. In his interview for the documentary «Crimea: The Way Home» – shown on the state-run Rossiya TV channel – the Russian president openly admitted to have personally directed the actions of the Russian armed forces in Crimea.¹⁸ He also spoke about how and under what circumstances he gave the order to commence the annexation.

Here are Putin's three key quotes:

«It was the night of February 22 – 23rd; [we] finished [the meeting] about 7 AM, I let everyone go and went to sleep at 7 AM. And, saying goodbye, I must admit, saying goodbye, before everyone left, I told all my colleagues – and there were four of them – that the situation in Ukraine has developed in such a way that we were forced to start working on returning Crimea to Russia.»

«In order to block off and disarm 20,000 people – well armed people – a certain composition of personnel is necessary – not just quantity-wise, but also quality. Specialists who knew how to do that were needed. Therefore, I issued instructions and directives to the

Ministry of Defense, I must admit, to deploy Special Forces units of the Main Intelligence Directorate and Marines under the guise of fortifying the defense of our military sites in Crimea.»

«Our advantage -- you know what it was? It was me handling that [operation] personally. Not because I did everything right, but because when top state officials do it, it's easier for the executives to work.»

After the takeover of Crimea separatist actions were organized in a number of Ukrainian regions. Armed people started seizing administrative buildings in Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Mariupol. In April, by the Kremlin's script, People's Republics were proclaimed in Donetsk and Luhansk regions declaring their independence.

«Why does Putin want foreign lands? Who needs that? Why make an enemy out of the friendly Ukrainian nation? Putin is avenging Ukraine for Maidan. Most likely, he is scared mad that Maidan may take place in Russia as well,» stated the Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov in March 2014.¹⁹

A de facto war broke out between Russia and Ukraine. Since spring of 2014



2.5 YEARS OF WARFARE TURNED THE INDUSTRIALLY DEVELOPED DONBASS, NOW ESSENTIALLY CONTROLLED BY THE KREMLIN, INTO A SEMI-DESTROYED, DEPRESSED REGION

Photo: AP

combat has been taking place on the Donbass territory which the new Ukrainian administration declared an «anti-terrorism operation zone.» The Ukrainian army in the east of the country is confronted by well-equipped fighters who have received access to Russian munitions and military equipment (including tanks and artillery). The Kremlin denies participating in the military operations carried out by the official armed forces; however, over the many months of the confrontation volumes of evidence have been collected to prove the fact of the direct invasion into the Donbass territory by active units of the Russian army.^{20,21}

2.5 years of warfare turned the industrially developed Donbass, now essentially controlled by the Kremlin, into a semi-destroyed, depressed region fully dependent on Russian subsidies.

European leaders have made multiple attempts to regulate the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. For instance, in February 2015 Minsk was the site of talks attended by presidents of Russia, Ukraine, and France, and the Chancellor of Germany. The result of these talks were the so-called «Minsk Accords,» obligating Putin to ensure the withdrawal of armed units from Donbass and return to Ukraine the complete control of its eastern borders. However, the terms of the Accords have still not been observed.

The world community interprets Putin's actions as aggression against Ukraine. On March 27, 2014, after the annexation of Crimea to Russia, the Assembly General of the United Nations adopted a resolution by which it supported the sovereignty and territorial integrity



IN FEBRUARY 2015 MINSK WAS THE SITE OF TALKS ATTENDED BY PRESIDENTS OF RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND FRANCE, AND THE CHANCELLOR OF GERMANY. THE "MINSK ACCORDS" WERE RATIFIED, OBLIGATING PUTIN TO ENSURE THE WITHDRAWAL OF ARMED UNITS FROM DONBASS AND RETURN TO UKRAINE THE COMPLETE CONTROL OF ITS EASTERN BORDERS. HOWEVER, THE TERMS OF THE ACCORDS HAVE STILL NOT BEEN OBSERVED

Photo: AP

of Ukraine and did not recognize the legitimacy of attaching Crimea to Russia. On December 19, 2016, the UN Assembly General adopted one more resolution, according to which Russia, «occupying Crimea, violates and abuses human rights by imposing on the Ukrainian peninsula its [Russia's] legal system.»

The resolution talks about murders, kidnappings, politically motivated criminal

prosecution, as well as oppression of the freedoms of opinion, faith, and beliefs.²²

At the same time, the conflict in eastern Ukraine remains in a «frozen» phase, which is used by the Kremlin as an effective mechanism to blackmail and pressure the political leadership of Ukraine and the West. After all, Putin still retains all the abilities to shift the military conflict into an active phase regardless of the world's reaction.

THE PRIMARY MEANS OF AFFECTING THE UKRAINIAN PUBLIC OPINION WAS BY PROPAGATION OF THE KEY KREMLIN TV CHANNELS PRACTICALLY ALL ACROSS THE TERRITORY OF UKRAINE VIA SATELLITE. HERE WE ARE NOT TALKING ABOUT FREEDOM OF SPEECH OR OFFERING AN ALTERNATIVE POINT OF VIEW, BUT RATHER ABOUT AN AGGRESSIVE INFORMATION WAR WHICH MASS MEDIA CONTROLLED BY PUTIN WAGE AGAINST UKRAINE

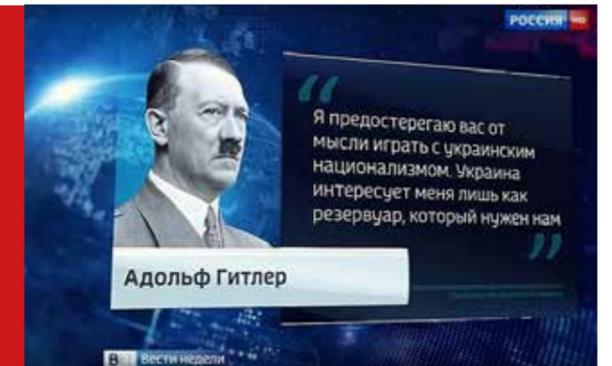


A HYBRID OCCUPATION

Simultaneously with the external aggression against Ukraine, a «hybrid occupation» of the country was begun. After a new Ukrainian President and parliament were elected in 2014, the Kremlin organized a whole series of measures to weaken the sociopolitical situation within the country. In the Kremlin's arsenal were propaganda mechanisms, political provocations, and corruption of Ukrainian opinion leaders.

The primary means of affecting the Ukrainian public opinion was by propagation of the key Kremlin TV channels practically all across the territory of Ukraine via satellite. Here we are not talking about freedom of speech or offering an alternative point of view, but rather about an aggressive information war which mass media controlled by Putin wage against Ukraine.

In covering Ukrainian politics they use three key methods:



1. Using «hate language»

Russia accepted the results of the Ukrainian elections, and Vladimir Putin has met multiple times with the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and is conducting official talks with him. However, this does not prevent Russian TV channels from continuously referring to the Ukrainian leadership as the «Kiev junta» that came to power «illegitimately.» Ukrainian troops participating in military operations against separatists in the east of the country are called by the Kremlin propaganda by names none other than «hit squads» and «Banderites» [or «Bandera's goons»]. Armed supporters of the self-declared Donbass republics, on the contrary, are respectfully called «people's militias.»

Often the rhetorical attacks on Ukraine on Russian television channels are closely intertwined with anti-American rhetoric. For example, in April 2016 it went so far that the Kremlin's nefarious propaganda mouthpiece Dmitry Kiselyov compared the USA's politics in regards to Ukraine with the politics of the Nazi Germany and showed during the broadcast a portrait of Adolf Hitler along with a quote attributed to him.

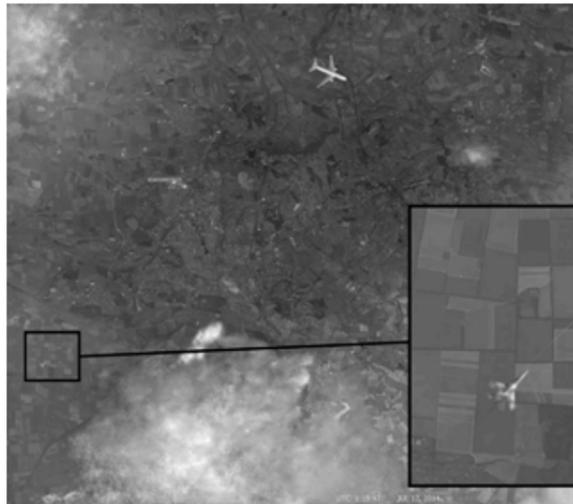
2. Disinformation

The Kremlin mass media systematically manipulate and fabricate facts in order to mislead or deceive their audience.

A prime example of this was the coverage of the tragic incident when the Malaysian Boeing was shot down in the sky over Donbass on July 17, 2014. The international Joint Investigation Team concluded that the airliner had been downed by a missile fired from a Russian Buk missile system from the territory controlled by separatists, after which the system returned to the territory of Russia.²³

In turn, the Kremlin propaganda offered a theory that the Boeing was shot down by a Ukrainian fighter jet.

Propaganda reporter Mikhail Leontyev demonstrated in a Russian TV broadcast a satellite image that allegedly captured the moment of the attack. Uncovering the lie did not take long; it turned out that a Google map image taken two years prior to the tragedy was being used for that photo. Besides, the airplane captured in that image was a Su-27, rather than a MiG-29 as Leontyev had represented. Furthermore,



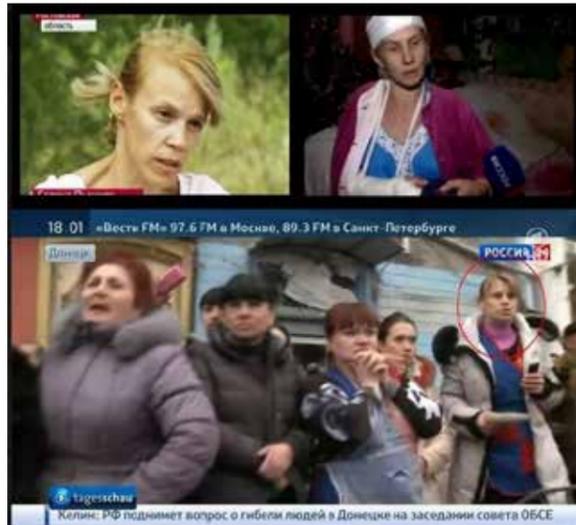
experts noticed that the dimensions of the aircraft did not correspond to the dimensions of objects on the ground, and the time and place of the incident did not match the reality. Besides, the Donetsk airport was seen in the image, whereas the Boeing was shot down 50 km away from it.²⁴

3. Provocative Lies

Covering Ukrainian events, the Kremlin propaganda often create deceptive news stories aimed at invoking hatred towards the Ukrainian military and officials. This is not just disinformation but rather lies that breed hatred.

Here's one flagrant example of such lies: a Channel One story in which the viewers were told that Ukrainian armed forces that took control of the city of Sloviansk executed a child by crucifying him in the central square while his mother and city residents watched. Journalists went to the city and questioned multiple locals but could not find a single piece of evidence that a child had been executed. On the contrary, Sloviansk residents spoke of the tactful behavior of the

Ukrainian troops who took over the city after the separatists had retreated.²⁵ As a result a scandal broke out, and Channel One admitted that it held no proof of the «crucified boy» information it had published but refused to offer any apologies.²⁶



«They are screaming nonstop, on every channel, that fascists have taken over power in Ukraine, that those fascists are now marching on Crimea, threatening the Russian population, that they soon will be in Russia. This is the hysteria,» says former Russian Union of Journalists secretary Igor Yakovenko.²⁷

In order to protect its country from aggressive propaganda and disinformation the Ukrainian government banned the broadcasting of Russian channels. That prompted the Kremlin to support Ukrainian mass media loyal to Russia and able to serve the interests of the Russian ruling elite.

And so Channel 112 appeared in Kiev. Vitaliy Zakharchenko – who headed the



MVD in the government of Yanukovich – has been named its actual owner (it was his subordinates who participated in the forceful suppression of the Maidan protests).²⁸ After President Yanukovich fled, the head of the MVD also left Ukraine; he is currently wanted by law enforcement. Zakharchenko controlled Channel 112 through his close associate Viktor Zubritsky, a media manager who was at one point suspected of kidnapping Maidan activists.²⁹

Observers noticed many times that the coverage of Ukrainian events was done by the channel according to the Kremlin propaganda standards. In 2015 the channel received an official warning from the National Council of Television for airing propaganda aimed at stirring up hatred in the Ukrainian society.³⁰

The information attack on Ukraine is held on the international level, too. The flagship of Putin's propaganda – state-owned Russia Today – continuously discredits Ukraine in English, Spanish, and Arabic language broadcasts.

This TV channel, for example, was noted for using crude disinformation during the coverage of the Malaysian Boeing crash.

Russia Today was the first to accuse the Ukrainian government of attacking the airliner, referring to a Twitter message posted by some Spanish dispatcher named Carlos who allegedly had been employed at the Borispol airport in Kiev.

«Military airplanes were flying next to the 777 three minutes prior to its disappearance from the radar screens, just three minutes,» the channel quoted «Carlos.» Subsequently this theory was aired by other Kremlin mass media as well. However, Ukraine officially refuted the existence of such employee; moreover, it turned out that the law prohibited any person who did not possess Ukrainian citizenship from working in air services.

«Carlos'» Twitter account (@spainbuca) was soon deleted, and no journalist was ever able to contact him. The Novaya Gazeta noted that the mysterious Spanish dispatcher first appeared in the information field on the Russia Today website on May 9, 2014, where, against the background of a photograph with the face covered up, the channel ran a story about a dispatcher who was a foreigner and was allegedly threatened in Kiev for expressing his thoughts.³¹



LIVE


**DEFENCE MINISTRY: AT POINT OF CRASH
WE DETECTED ANOTHER AIRCRAFT**

MOSCOW

15:03 INTERNATIONAL INVESTIGATORS IN UKRAINE AFTER #MH17 CRASH REMAIN IN KIEV

RUSSIA TODAY WAS THE FIRST TO ACCUSE THE UKRAINIAN GOVERNMENT OF ATTACKING THE AIRLINER, REFERRING TO A TWITTER MESSAGE POSTED BY SOME SPANISH DISPATCHER NAMED CARLOS WHO ALLEGEDLY HAD BEEN EMPLOYED AT THE BORISPOL AIRPORT IN KIEV

It should be noted that Russia Today TV channel receives enormous funding from the Russian government. For example in 2017 the TV channel will receive from the Russian budget 18.7 billion rubles (more than \$300 million USD). According to Russian economist Vladimir Milov's calculations, this money allocated for propaganda could have been used to increase Russia's spending on funding basic sciences by a third.³²

From the look of things, neither does the Kremlin skimp when it comes to supporting radical political groups operating on the Ukrainian territory. According to the SBU head Vasyl Hrytsak, «Ukrainian special services have recorded multiple instances of certain Ukrainian politicians secretly meeting

with representatives of former Ukrainian political elite who fled to Russia and receiving financing from foreign special services as well as from those who fled from Ukraine. These funds are later used to destabilize the situation inside our country.»³³

For example, such accusations are aimed at the Ukrainian nationalist party Svoboda which failed to win any seats in the Ukrainian parliament during the most recent elections. Member of Parliament [from the Democratic Alliance] Serhiy Leshchenko has stated that Svoboda was receiving financing from the Party of Regions which was headed by Viktor Yanukovich. After the latter fled, Leshchenko gained access to documents containing the second set of

SVOBODA'S CRITICS SAY THAT RADICAL ACTIONS ORGANIZED BY THE PARTY UNDER NATIONALIST SLOGANS DO A FAVOR TO THE KREMLIN PROPAGANDA WHICH ACTIVELY PUBLICIZES "THE ATROCITIES OF UKRAINIAN NAZIS"



Photo: Reuters

books, the so-called «black ledgers» of the Party of Regions. «In those documents where Yanukovich's political consultant Manafort was listed we saw a payment to Svoboda in the amount of \$200,000,» reported Leshchenko.³⁴

Svoboda's critics say that radical actions organized by the party under nationalist slogans do a favor to the Kremlin propaganda which actively publicizes «the atrocities of Ukrainian Nazis.» The most recent example: the Svoboda activists beat up a Russian voter in front of the Russian embassy building in Kiev where he had been trying to vote in the parliamentary elections on September 18, 2016. The story about this incident was aired by the Ukrainian TV channel 112 and was actively rebroadcast by the Kremlin media.³⁵

Radicals from Svoboda also periodically attack their compatriots in Kiev. For example on August 31, 2015, during protests in front of the Ukrainian parliament a party activist threw a live grenade at the police as a result of which four law enforcement officers guarding the perimeter were killed.³⁶

After Viktor Yanukovich fled the country the Party of Regions headed by him was dispersed. So, prior to the 2014 parliamentary elections the Kremlin needed a new loyal political force which would represent its interests in the Ukrainian politics and the future Verkhovna Rada.

Several organizations competed for the position of the chief pro-Kremlin power.



IN SPITE OF A WAR BETWEEN UKRAINE AND RUSSIA, NAFTOGAZ CONTINUES TO ACTIVELY COLLABORATE WITH GAZPROM – THE RUSSIAN NATURAL GAS MONOPOLY THAT THE KREMLIN HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN USING AS A POLITICAL PRESSURE LEVER

In spite of a de facto war going on between Ukraine and Russia, Naftogaz continues to actively collaborate with Gazprom – the Russian natural gas monopoly that the Kremlin has traditionally been using as a blackmail and political pressure lever against Ukraine, as well as against countries of the West. According to observers, the Ukrainian natural gas corporation is neck deep in corruption schemes: supply of equipment and piping at inflated prices, speculation on extraction and sales of natural gas, manipulation with finances, and so on. Those schemes' primary beneficiaries remain the Ukrainian oligarchs who are affecting the political processes in their country now just like they did under President Yanukovich.

CRIME AND OLIGARCHS AT THE KREMLIN'S SERVICE

In spite of significant changes that have taken place since the new government has come to power, old problems remain in the Ukrainian society. Forces which have maintained their influence since the time of Yanukovich's rule considerably hinder development of the country and implementation of reforms. In essence these are members of the former President's circle whose interests are tightly intertwined with the interests of Ukrainian organized crime and supported by the Kremlin media.

Prime representative of such an establishment is Ukrainian parliamentary

Oleksandr Onyshchenko. When Yanukovich headed the country, Onyshchenko was a member of the Party of Regions. However, in the last elections he ended up in the Verkhovna Rada through a majority constituency and joined the People's Will parliamentary group.

Onyshchenko has long been connected to Yanukovich by business partnership. In Kiev Onyshchenko is considered the key oligarch in the sphere of gas extraction. According to Ukrainian parliamentary Tetiana Chornovol, Onyshchenko was a long-time manager in Yanukovich's team and oversaw his business in the area of natural gas extraction.

Chornovol notes that in 2008 Yanukovich's people started to transfer ownership of gas extraction businesses to shell companies so that state-owned wells could later not be returned to the state. «And that is when Onyshchenko first appeared in the public eye. He turned up as director of a company called Nadra Geocenter, which had been created in order for Yanukovich to receive income from the extraction of domestic natural gas,» says Chornovol.⁴

The Onyshchenko operating scheme was as follows. Private companies extracted gas under joint operation agreements with

Ukrgezdoobycha state company (itself a subsidiary of Naftogaz Ukraine). A joint venture was created, the state company transferred the use of wells to it, and a private investor brought in the funds and provided the labor, and also received the right to sell the extracted gas. That way instead of the state budget the money ended up in the pockets of those who controlled the joint ventures.

The aforementioned Nadra Geocenter Company where Onyshchenko was listed as director became part of the «Yanukovich Family» business empire and received from Ukrgezdoobycha control over dozens of wells. (It is notable that the last agreement to transfer control over wells was signed on the day the Maidan protests began.)

After the flight of Yanukovich, his minion Onyshchenko basically became the owner of gas extracting assets including Nadra Geocenter, Has, Karpatnadrainvest, Plast, Gazovy Alyans, and a host of other companies. That's how he became the key natural gas oligarch of Ukraine.

In the summer of 2016 Oleksandr Onyshchenko fell under suspicion of creating schemes to illegally sell gas and was named in a criminal case brought under the penal code section «grand scale embezzlement of state property.»



Viktor Yanukovich

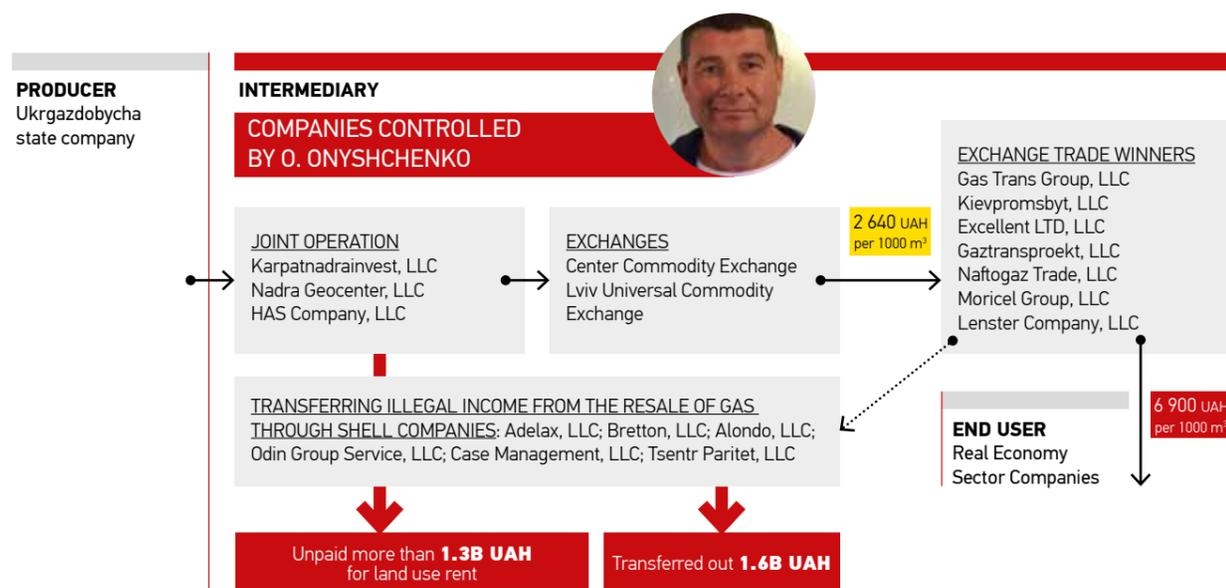


Oleksandr Onyshchenko



Naftogaz Ukraine





According to law enforcement, Onyshchenko's companies caused the state losses totaling 3 billion Hryvnia: 1.6 billion were proceeds from the sales of natural gas to middlemen and transferred out through shell companies, and more than 1.3 billion were unpaid land use rent. It should be noted that the implementation of such a scheme could be made possible only with the cooperation of Ukrgazdobycha and Naftogaz officials.

The Onyshchenko case illustrates how the Ukrainian criminal oligarchs' interests coincide with those of the Kremlin. Returning Ukraine back into the sphere of the Kremlin's influence is as beneficial to Putin as it is to oligarchs like Onyshchenko. The Kremlin's propaganda and the oligarchs' money hit the same target – the new Ukrainian government.

According to the former prime minister of Ukraine Arseniy Yatsenyuk, vast amounts of money were spent by Onyshchenko specifically to remove the government. «A mass media campaign was financed, politicians in the parliament were paid to come out to the podium and lie. For 10 months, \$3 million a month went toward removing the government. That was because the government did not give Onyshchenko the ability to implement corruption [schemes] in the energy and gas sector,» says Yatsenyuk.⁴²

After the criminal case was brought, Oleksandr Onyshchenko fled abroad. In December 2016 he stated that he was in possession of damaging information about the Ukrainian leadership; that allegedly he had secretly recorded negotiations with President Poroshenko and was planning to

SOON THE «DAMAGING INFORMATION» WAS PUBLISHED AS WELL. HOWEVER, INSTEAD OF THE PREVIOUSLY ANNOUNCED SECRET RECORDING OF NEGOTIATIONS WITH PRESIDENT POROSHENKO THE PUBLIC WAS PROVIDED WITH A RECORDING OF ONYSHCHENKO'S CONVERSATION WITH ONE OF HIS COLLEAGUES FROM THE UKRAINIAN PARLIAMENT IN SOME SHADY JOINT

make it public. The Kremlin's propaganda actively carried on this story.

However, it soon came to light that handlers from the Kremlin stood behind Onyshchenko's actions. Mass media published a video recording made immediately before Onyshchenko's broadcast on one of Russia's state TV channels. An instructor's voice is heard in the recording, preparing Onyshchenko for the interview and explaining exactly how the member of the Parliament should talk about his relationship with the Ukrainian President:

«I won't be asking questions right now because it will seem like they're leading questions, leading... That is, cannot ask leading questions. So now you start with a phrase like this. He will now turn on, pause – one second, and you say: 'But the situation where I considered him a partner then changed.' Because that's how it is... that is the truth. But the situation where I considered him a partner changed. And after what did it change. What did he force you to do, then he started taking away the company. He is the aggressor, you understand? And you were forced to toe the line. And now it appears like you are his partner who fled from him. But we need pressure here. Then I will ask you... I just won't right now... I will ask you

a question, when you will tell everything, I will say, well, how do you feel when you're speaking with statements like this, are you not afraid for your life, for the situation in general? You should say, in my life I have lived through so much and I understand that something needs to be left behind for the children, a memory of some sort, need to be honest, sit down and tell the truth straight to the face: I am being threatened, I am really receiving threats, you may say that, or you may not, but I have made a decision for myself – I will remain honest. That's it... And now when I wave my hand, simply... I stay quiet and in one and a half seconds the recording begins.»

Soon the name of the «instructor» became known as well. He turned out to be the aforementioned Viktor Zubritsky – creator of Channel 112 which is associated with the name of the former MVD head Zakharchenko.

Soon the «damaging information» was published as well. However, instead of the previously announced secret recording of negotiations with President Poroshenko the public was provided with a recording of Onyshchenko's conversation with one of his colleagues from the Ukrainian Parliament in some shady joint.

PUTIN'S OBVIOUS TARGETS ARE MOLDOVA, BELARUS, AND KAZAKHSTAN. HOWEVER, THERE ARE ALSO RISKS FOR THE BALTIC STATES, IN SPITE OF THEIR NATO MEMBERSHIP



Photo: Reuters

NATIONAL INTERESTS OF RUSSIA

Russia is critically interested in maintaining peaceful and good neighborly relations with surrounding countries. This guarantees our state economic advantages and political stability. And there is no doubt that it corresponds with the national interests of Russia.

However, instead of improving relations with the world around, Putin maintains a continuous policy of aggressively bringing to heel those countries which he sees as being in the realm of the Kremlin's geopolitical influence. A broad arsenal of means is used for that: persuasion by propaganda, financial support of loyal parties and journalists, corruption, economic pressure, political blackmail, and finally direct military intervention.

Such hybrid aggression casts a shadow of doubt on the effectiveness of the European security systems, the vulnerability of which became obvious

with the onset of Putin's campaign against Ukraine. It should be noticed that the Kremlin strategists skillfully use methods of external pressure on Ukraine as well as «agents» inside the country – above all, local oligarchs interested in the reinstatement of the old ways.

The outcome of the showdown between the Kremlin and Ukraine will also directly affect the future of Russia and Europe. If Putin's unrelenting pressure proves fruitful, and Kiev returns into the domain of the Kremlin influence, then there is no doubt that the Russian president will attempt applying the same methods towards other countries of the former USSR. Putin's obvious targets are Moldova, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. However, there are also risks for the Baltic States, in spite of their NATO membership.

Putin has proven more than once that he is a threat to his citizens as well as the surrounding countries. And the less counteraction he encounters, the more aggressive his actions will become ■

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“I don’t believe that friendship with Russia is bad. But I don’t like it when ‘friendship’ is forced by means of bribery and violence.”

BORIS NEMTSOV

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