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# Russia's rising military and communication power: From Chechnya to Crimea

Media, War &amp; Conflict

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## Abstract

Most scholars working on Russia's use of strategic narratives recognize the importance of the Russian state. Nevertheless, the authors argue that much of the attention on strategic narratives has given insufficient appreciation for how Russia has developed its military and media policies in a coordinated manner: learning from its mistakes and failures as it went along, and becoming more efficient each time. In making their case, they examine three theatres of Russian military activity and their accompanying media coverage: the wars in Chechnya in 1994–1995 and 1999–2000; war with Georgia in 2008 over the separatist territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; and Ukraine, especially Crimea, since 2014. The Russian leadership addressed the shortcomings on each occasion, with the news media being increasingly weaponized as time went on. The authors argue that scholars should see Russia's evolving uses of those military and media power resources as part of a single strategic process. How the Russian state goes about its media policy can accentuate the military intervention for better or for worse as far as its image is concerned.

## Keywords

Chechnya, conflict, Crimea, Georgia, media, military, Russia

In a 2012 interview with the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, RT, Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan declared that 'it's impossible just to start making guns when the war has already started! Therefore, the Ministry of Defence is not fighting now, but is ready

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for defence. So are we' (Gabuyev, 2012). Her statement captures how Russia's military resurgence and its use of international news and social media have become inextricably linked. Yet many scholars working on Russia's use of international news and social media under-appreciate this relationship. They do recognize the importance of the Russian state in Russia's use of strategic narratives. After all, states are significant – if not the most significant – political actors that use strategic narratives in order to communicate their values, to influence others, and to strengthen their own international or domestic appeal. Nevertheless, we argue that scholars must pay greater attention to how hard power and soft power not only co-vary, but can work together.

In this article, we show how Russia has deliberately developed its military power and media policy in tandem, with these two foreign policy instruments supporting one another while helping to project a certain image of the country. By Russia, we mean the administration of President Vladimir Putin, and the ministries, especially of Foreign Affairs and Defence, which implement its foreign and security policy. In driving the policy agenda, the Kremlin can use hard military power, but it is not simply the case that 'the use of military force, for example, can be understood to be part of the narrative projection of a state' (Roselle et al., 2014: 75). The way the Russian state uses what Castells (2009: 268) termed 'communication power' – especially where 'the key mechanisms of state control over the media take place through bureaucratic and financial controls of media networks, either directly or indirectly' – can accentuate military intervention for better or for worse, as far as its image is concerned.

Our article proceeds as follows. We first argue that scholars have neglected the 'communication power' dimension of how Russia seeks to exert influence in military conflicts. We then show how military power and communication power have interacted in the Chechen wars, the 2008 Russian–Georgian War and Russian activities in Ukraine since 2014. In each case, we identify Russia's strengths and weaknesses in terms of its military capability and analyse how the Russian government and armed forces sought, or did not seek, to control and to influence the media reporting of their military campaigns.

## **Hard, soft and communication power in Russia's wars**

Hard power typically denotes the military capabilities that a state can use to affect outcomes in war and diplomacy. Soft power, in Nye's (2004) original formulation, refers to how states can leverage the appeal of their own institutions, values and cultural products to exert influence upon others, whether to create policy consensus or to advance a common understanding of how to address shared challenges. As Roselle et al. (2014) note, however, exactly how soft power operates in shaping outcomes has been unclear, especially with regard to which resources states use to generate soft power. Accordingly, they advocate the study of strategic narratives, arguing that strategic narratives belong to the communication process that a state cultivates in order to convey how it understands the world, what interests it has, and how it frames its decisions vis-à-vis multiple audiences. Strategic narratives can be deployed alongside hard power. Because of advances in literacy and communication technology, states are compelled to make investments to control an increasingly contested discursive environment (Roselle et al., 2014: 77–78).

Much of the literature to date on Russia and strategic narratives understates the role of the state and how soft power is a force multiplier with respect to hard power. Of course, an awareness exists that ‘great-powerness’ is a motif in Russian strategic narratives and that the Kremlin interprets this status as a vital national interest (Feklyunina, 2016; Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2017). In empirical studies, however, the state plays largely a background role, with hard power being more of a contextual variable than one that bears directly on the analysis. Makhtorykh and Sydorova (2017) usefully describe how pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian online communities on Vkontakte produce different framings over the course of the Donbas conflict, with pro-Russian groups consistently focusing on civilian suffering and malfeasance committed by Ukrainian authorities. Yet their study does not consider how state authorities on either side of the conflict might be pushing such frames. Koltsova and Pashakhin (2019) contrast Russia’s Channel 1 coverage of the war in eastern Ukraine with that of Ukraine’s Channel 5 between September 2013 and September 2014, owned by then Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. They find that the content of their reporting diverged, with Channel 1 highlighting more often refugee problems in eastern Ukraine and violent clashes in Ukrainian cities. These results demonstrate that news coverage can track with how a conflict spirals, suggesting that media policy may simply be a reflection, or even an artifact of state behaviour. Another study of Channel One – owned by close associates of Russian President Vladimir Putin – confirms that its portrayal of Ukrainians ‘underwent modification in accordance with the agenda of the Russian political elite’ (Khaldarova, 2019: 2). Arguably, the scholarly focus on variation in media framings obscures the role of the state. If this variation is endogenous to state behaviour, as these studies apparently confirm, then we should study instead state behaviour.

Another problem is that the concept of ‘soft power’ can still lack analytical precision even when incorporating notions of ‘strategic narratives’. Saying that Russian strategic narratives serve the Kremlin’s agenda is insufficient. As shown below, Russia’s use of media policy has co-varied with the effectiveness of its military power. We argue that ‘communication power’ is a more helpful concept. After all, ‘soft power’ can encompass Fabergé exhibitions, Tolstoy novels and the Bolshoi ballet tour. These cultural goods allow Russia to project a particular international image of itself and to generate international sympathy, if not affection. However, they do not advance, for example, Russian aims in a military conflict with Ukraine. In our view, ‘communication power’ is a component of ‘soft power’. It involves the concerted use by state institutions of media outlets and media content to craft a certain image or narrative related to that state’s military and foreign policy goals. ‘Communication power’ is not relational insofar as it can reflect an ability to manipulate a target audience, but it can be a force multiplier for military power by helping to broadcast favourable views about one’s security goals.

‘Communication power’ can augment, or weaken, military campaigns in two ways. The first is to enhance the perceived legitimacy of the state and its efforts while denigrating those of the adversary. The ultimate aim could be to build international and domestic support for the state’s cause. However, because such causal connections are hard to determine, we are agnostic as to the effectiveness of ‘communication power’. The second way is to project an image of state power. Controlling media coverage can itself be a show of strength. Lacking that control not only concedes the narrative contest but can

also exemplify state weakness. Note what communication power is not. It is not what Couldry (2001: 157) calls ‘media power’, which denotes the symbolic power that media institutions have relative to other actors in society (see also Couldry and Curran, 2003). Nor is it ‘reflexive control’ – a term that analysts use to describe purported psychological operations that seek to alter the perceptions of target decision-makers so that they end up making decisions that are unfavourable to themselves (Thomas, 2004). Communication power is not necessarily the public diplomacy efforts or information operations that state security services or military organizations may direct, which are of interest to many studies of how armed forces perform strategic communications (Cioppa, 2009; Diebert et al., 2012). Whether communication power is effective or not, what matters is that the state deploys media resources to advance narratives and images that align with its foreign policy interests.

Below, we show that communication power has been a stock variable with respect to Russia’s use of military force since the 1990s. States have communication power when they exert a high level of control over domestic news media, as in the case of Russia given what Castells (2009: 268–277) documents: use of international news outlets or subsidiaries abroad to promote messages and narratives; committing additional resources to those media outlets; and imposing strict controls on the activities of international correspondents in conflict zones where its military forces operate. We see these attributes of communication power develop across different military campaigns: over time, the Russian state has come to see that ‘the main battlefield in today’s warfare is perception’ and accordingly has gained control of media outlets, used RT to broadcast preferred narratives and restricted correspondents’ movements (Adamsky, 2018: 40). Certainly, states can cultivate communication power for various reasons, whether because of domestic politics, global technological developments (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2015), or, as flagged here, a strategy for shaping narratives surrounding military campaigns and state power. These factors appear in the cases below. Similarly, developing military power can reflect a separate logic based on what adversaries have, past military performance, social preferences, or some mix thereof (Brooks, 2007).

Our central contention is that, at least in the Russian context, media policy cannot be separated from military power. Although they perform an invaluable service by recording and analysing conflict narratives, the problem with many studies to date is that, once we take this perspective, their findings are often unsurprising: Russian media outlets would, of course, favourably and prejudicially report a military conflict waged by the Kremlin. That is the point of communication power. Nevertheless, we want to show below that the Russian state’s nurturing of communication power has been historically contingent and, indeed, has co-varied with the development of military power.

## **Methodology and case studies**

Our article is exploratory. Although we use empirical data to substantiate our claims, we do not engage in hypothesis testing *per se*. Our goal instead is to advance the concept of ‘communication power’, which we argue is distinct from ‘soft power’ and can serve as a complement to ‘military power’, and to demonstrate that the Kremlin has emphasized how its military actions are reported. Our purpose here is to explore this relationship

rather than test specific hypotheses, and so we rely on secondary sources, journalists' recollections and interviews. We examine how Russian communication power developed throughout the Chechen Wars, the 2008 war against Georgia, and the military campaign against Ukraine since 2014. These illustrative cases thus constitute 'plausibility probes' that showcase the potential utility of our approach. As Jack Levy (2008: 6–7) explains, the 'aim is to give the reader a "feel" for a theoretical argument by providing a concrete example of its application, or to demonstrate the empirical relevance of a theoretical proposition by identifying at least one relevant case.'

### *The Chechen wars*

The two Chechen wars concerned the political status of the Chechen Republic after the Soviet Union collapsed (Sagramoso, 2007). Amid political instability in Moscow, Chechen leaders perceived an opportunity to gain national independence for the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. For their part, authorities in Moscow wished to preserve federal control over the North Caucasus, partly to stem further territorial losses of the sort that attended the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Holding such objectives, the Russian military opted to fight a conventional war in its first major attempt to quash the rebellion in 1994 and 1995. Russia's campaign strategy involved using its advantages in manpower and firepower against Chechen rebels, hoping to capture the capital city of Grozny and to decapitate their leadership (Arquilla and Karasik, 1999: 208). The economic dislocations that Russia suffered in the early 1990s adversely affected the military. Its personnel went unpaid and saw benefits cut as Moscow adopted drastic economic reforms aimed at reducing the government deficit. Russia even disbanded the last of those units that had specialized in urban warfare (Galeotti, 2014: 24). The output of the Russian defence industry fell about 80 percent between 1989 and 1999 (Izyumov et al., 2000: 216). Thus, when Russia's military campaign in the North Caucasus began in December 1994, it was enfeebled by poor morale and equipment.

Fighting in and around Grozny exemplified the conflict. The Russian Army besieged the city with a major bombardment and attempted to enter it with columns of heavy armour. Nevertheless, Russian regular forces found themselves unable to use their heavy weapons effectively in Grozny and were vulnerable to Chechen guerrilla fighters' ambushes, roadblocks and hit-and-run tactics (Arquilla and Karasik, 1999). When the assault on Grozny began, the chaos in command resulted not only in massive casualties, but also in unrestricted access for journalists – with the result that they were able to tell and to show the story in all its bloody disorder. The French photographer Patrick Chauvel later recounted how he had seen Chechen fighters hunting down hapless Russian soldiers 'with swords, knives, and pistols' (Gall and De Waal, 1997: 9). He also 'estimated he saw 800 dead Russian bodies' (p. 12). The Russian army eventually subdued Grozny but only after decimating it, incurring significant casualties and suffering poor morale. In August 1996, Chechen rebels infiltrated the city and used their familiarity with the terrain to regain control of it, thereby leading to a ceasefire that ended the First Chechen War. This first stage of the campaign was, for Russia, a military disaster widely reported by international correspondents.

For, if the military operation lacked planning and strategic appropriateness, the media policy was non-existent. Correspondents who covered that conflict use the phrase ‘free for all’ to describe the kind of access that they had to the theatre of military operation (Rodgers, 2020: 153). ‘You could just fly to Chechnya and do whatever you wanted. You wouldn’t have access to the Russian army, but you certainly were able to move around freely and have access to the rebels’, remembers Mark Franchetti (2019) of the London *Sunday Times*. Lawrence Sheets (2019), who reported on the conflict for Reuters, recalls similar working conditions: ‘The first war was total chaos, so nobody cared what you were doing, and they did not have the ability or the inclination to sort of monitor everybody. It was a free-for-all, right?’

There is an important political point about media control here: if international correspondents felt that the Russian state did not care what they were doing, then they were in effect enjoying extensive freedom to operate. Russia’s ‘communication power’ in this period was far less significant than it would be later on, as was the desire to deploy it, even had it existed. Russian journalists then also ‘told of the Russian army’s incompetence and the atrocities carried out by its troops’ (Service, 2003: 533). That they did so shows how that incompetence extended to a lack of control over the media. The spirit of media freedom characteristic of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period still endured. As Ilya Kiriya (2019: 12) argues, this period saw a confluence of economic pressures that ‘pushed the media into the hands of big oligarchs’. Nevertheless, during the First Chechen War, their grasp was not yet completely tight.

The armistice following the First Chechen War proved unstable. Chechen authorities failed to maintain local political control as in-fighting intensified among local warlords and religious militants tried to invade neighbouring Dagestan. Terrorist bombings attributed to Chechen separatists also rocked Russia in 1999. President Boris Yeltsin’s newly appointed prime minister – Vladimir Putin – made Chechnya a priority and participated in planning for a new military operation aimed at restoring federal control over the breakaway republic (Lapidus, 2002: 41–43). Beginning in August 1999, the Second Chechen War saw Russian military tactics improve despite various budgetary and manpower difficulties. It launched a major air campaign that bombarded Chechen militant positions before undertaking a slow ground advance on Grozny, implementing various coercive measures designed to curb the insurgency. Although Russia established direct rule over Grozny in May 2000, an insurgency continued for another decade. Morale and equipment problems persisted, but the Russian military did not experience the major tactical failures and strategic reversals as in the First Chechen War (Kramer, 2005).

When the Second Chechen War began in the autumn of 1999, the situation was already different. Under the new prime minister, the Russian government exercised communication power in the form of greater control over, and restrictions on, the activities of foreign journalists. ‘During the second war, it was really difficult’, Sheets (2019) remembers, ‘because the Russians had gotten smart, to be honest with you, and you needed like 18 documents and officially you had to go on official trips.’ The time of the ‘free for all’ was over. Franchetti (2019) agrees. He sees the kind of coverage that resulted from the first war as the reason for the changes, especially once the Russian government

realized that, actually, this is a lot of bad press coming out of Chechnya they started – in the second war, certainly – becoming much more organized. So, you had special passes, you were supposed to have accreditation, you were not supposed to go to Chechnya unless it was some organised tour by the Foreign Ministry.

These restrictions, part of what the Kremlin described as a ‘counter-terrorist operation’, remained in place until 2009 (Solovyev, 2009).

Inevitably, the coverage changed. Correspondents were unable to travel as freely into Chechnya as they had 5 years earlier. Many based themselves in the neighbouring region of Ingushetia – also the destination of refugees escaping from the war zone. The refugees’ second-hand accounts were a valuable source for the reporting of a conflict from which correspondents were deliberately kept at a distance (Lagnado, 1999). There were other hazards like kidnapping. Earlier in 1999, four foreign telecommunications engineers – three British, one New Zealander – had been beheaded by their captors after ransom negotiations failed (Reeves and Buncombe, 1999). Despite these obstacles and dangers, some independent reporting from inside Chechnya was possible. Sheets says that he went on the official tours, and would ‘then go back to Chechnya on my own trip, which was expensive, you needed a personal guard’. His experience, along with that of other reporters such as Maggie O’Kane and Amelia Gentleman of *The Guardian*, who also got into Chechnya, shows that the ban was not total. As Sheets (2019) says of the Russian authorities, ‘of course they knew what was going on.’ Even if the rules were inconsistently enforced, Franchetti (2019) sees their very existence as a significant shift in policy:

We all broke those rules and there weren’t really any consequences. But what’s interesting is that they started having those rules. And they started monitoring more what we were doing, what we were writing, and they were trying to control us more.

This process continued throughout Russia’s revival as a military force.

### *The 2008 Russian–Georgian War*

Russia fought a brief war with Georgia in August 2008. The causes of this war were complex. Georgia struggled to maintain territorial control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia when the Soviet Union collapsed, leading to two separate wars in the early 1990s that ended favourably enough for those breakaway regions to enjoy Russian support and to remain largely free from direct control by Tbilisi. This uneasy equilibrium persisted until the early 2000s when, following the Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili became president, with the goal of strengthening Georgian state institutions while pursuing a pro-Western foreign policy (Mitchell, 2006). Indeed, he sought Georgian membership in NATO and a restoration of its territorial integrity. Such ambitions put him in conflict with Putin, who had spent the previous 8 years consolidating executive power while rebuilding the Russian military. The balance of power between the two historical antagonists was in flux. Although NATO declined to offer Georgia an institutional pathway towards

membership earlier in 2008, tensions intensified, with each side accusing and counter-accusing the other of bad faith (Fawn and Nalbandov, 2012).

The military strategy that Russia used against Georgia had several features. Already, by summer 2008, Russia did have some military personnel positioned in Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the pretext that they were a peacekeeping force. These forces not only advised local paramilitary forces that would eventually fight Georgian regular forces, but also provided training and combat support. When Georgia launched an attack near Tskhinvali, a move that drew controversy over whether Georgia was an instigator or a victim (Cheterian, 2009), the Russian military mobilized and fought Georgian forces in and around South Ossetia. Russian forces subsequently launched airstrikes against Gori and Tbilisi in addition to imposing a naval blockade on the seaport city of Poti. They also participated in an Abkhaz attack on the Kodori Gorge – the one area of Abkhazia that Georgia controlled before the war (Vendil Pallin and Westerlund, 2009: 404–407). Contemporaneously, in probably the first cyber-attack during an active war ever, Georgian internet servers and government websites were hacked. After four days of fighting, Georgia and Russia reached a ceasefire agreement, with the then Russian President Dmitri Medvedev declaring that ‘the security of our peacekeeping brigade and civilian population has been restored. The aggressor has been punished and suffered very heavy losses’ (quoted in Nichol, 2009: 11).

Russia achieved a strategic victory that resulted in newly established military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, its recognition of those breakaway provinces’ sovereignty and the removal of Georgians from those disputed territories. Nevertheless, the campaign exposed serious deficiencies in the Russian military. Command and control problems hampered operations, with key officials out of contact during the earlier phases of the conflict; obsolete communication systems stymieing units’ ability to talk to each other in the battlespace; electronic warfare capabilities inadequate to the task of knocking out Georgian air defences; and outdated intelligence equipment unable to track Georgian movements and to spot targets for artillery fire (McDermott, 2009: 69–70). The army and the air force were hardly interoperable (Vendil Pallin and Westerlund, 2009: 404). Many key weapon systems in the Russian arsenal went surprisingly unused (McDermott, 2009: 70). Russia appears to have won ultimately by dint of enjoying significant numerical superiority over an adversary in a conventional war. Accordingly, Russia embarked upon a new modernization program to enhance its military. Although the first effort stalled in part due to corruption, a more serious effort began in 2010 and has underpinned the revitalization of Russian military power observed in the last decade (Renz, 2018).

Accompanying this revitalization of military power has been a far more controlling approach to the media, both domestic and international. As Kiriya (2019: 13) observes, ‘Since 2005, there has been a clear increase in the share of state-owned television, as well as a quasi-takeover of all political media outlets by oligarchic groups close to the Kremlin.’ But even before 2005, Putin had moved to consolidate his grip over the media environment, targeting media moguls like Vladimir Gusinsky in order to gain control of the three most significant television channels in Russia (Lipman, 2009). After 2005, state pressure on media outlets intensified. Though state culpability remains unclear, assassinations of journalists like Anna Politkovskaya – known for her critical coverage of the

Second Chechen War – symbolized the dangerous environment in which the press was now operating. Television, print media and radio experienced either state domination or tight restrictions.

Leaders sitting in the Kremlin had often enjoyed engaging with foreign correspondents. Joseph Stalin gave interviews to *New York Times* reporter Walter Duranty (1930: 1) and to Eugene Lyons of *United Press*. Nikita Khrushchev met members of the Moscow foreign press corps ‘at diplomatic and Kremlin receptions – often as much as once a week’ (Rettie, 2006: 192). As part of his perestroika reforms in the 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev also engaged with international media. Early in his presidency, Putin tried a more contemporary version of the interview, a ‘webcast’ with the BBC, to which 24,000 questions were submitted. ‘The idea, I think, was to make him look like a globally connected Internet president’, says Bridget Kendall, who conducted the interview (Kendall, 2019). Such interactions with the international media were insufficient. Perhaps still reeling from over a decade of bad news stories of the economic chaos that followed the end of communism, Putin’s administration wanted to exert greater control over Russia and the way its story was told. In 2005, a new English-language television channel, Russia Today, was launched, aimed at an international audience. By the time Russian troops went into action in South Ossetia in 2008, the media campaign too had become more sophisticated. Deibert et al. (2012: 8) persuasively argue that ‘information-shaping operations occurred at the strategic level in the form of strategic communication channelled through traditional and new media. The Russian military entered the campaign in Georgia influenced by its recent experiences in Chechnya.’

Russia spent some of its soaring oil and gas revenues on Western public relations advice. In May 2006, the US public relations company Ketchum won ‘a multi-million dollar contract’ to help polish Russia’s image during its presidency of the Group-of-Eight (Buckley, 2006). However, it ended up enlisted to undertake media spin when Russia launched its South Ossetian campaign in 2008. The Georgian government had made similar preparations. A debate followed over which side started that conflict (Fawn and Nalbandov, 2012; Rodgers, 2012: 59–60). What matters here was the extent of the preparation. The Russian government and presidential administration wanted to convey their message. Not trusting their own abilities to engage directly with the international media, they employed Western spin doctors. The spin doctors used a Western approach – offering access to senior officials, pressing those who had the best command of English into service in the public relations war (Fawn and Nalbandov, 2012: 60). Russia Today was already part of Moscow’s media arsenal, but was only deployed in a limited way. While Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, on 9 August 2008, granted one-to-one interviews with the BBC, CNN and other international news channels, Russia Today was shut out. Instead, it simply rebroadcast Lavrov’s interview with the BBC, later posting a transcript on the Russian Foreign Ministry website (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008). Perhaps the Russian political establishment did not yet see their own media outlet as having anything like the influence of those western channels it sought to emulate and to challenge.

The Kremlin may not have felt entirely pleased with the results. Saakashvili, perhaps having realized that the military campaign was lost, spent an extraordinary amount of time on English-language international news channels when he might have been expected

to be discussing military and diplomatic matters with his generals and ministers. The Georgian authorities also welcomed any international media wishing to cover the story from their side of the conflict. Russia's media policy combined different approaches. In Moscow, there were conference calls, emails and interviews with officials. Access to the theatre of military operations was a different matter. The Russian army did not permit any international reporters to accompany its troops or visit their positions, although they did so the following fall when they wished to show that they were relinquishing territory captured during the conflict (Rodgers, 2008). Those correspondents who approached Russian positions independently found no such slick media operation. Andrew Wilson (2019), of Sky News, found that he and his team were 'trapped on the wrong side of the Russian advance'. Trying to reach the Georgian city of Gori, then surrounded by Russian troops, Wilson and his team were robbed at gunpoint by South Ossetian irregulars, allies of the Russians. Russian tank crews nearby saw it all happen, Wilson says, 'and did absolutely nothing about it. They just watched it take place.' Correspondents covering armed conflict generally accept that they will face danger. When travelling with an army, they expect to be afforded some security. The inactivity of the soldiers on this occasion suggested, however, a willingness to let journalists not travelling with the army face grave danger alone. The military objectives in South Ossetia were achieved, even if deficiencies in the armed forces were exposed. Official policy no longer tolerated the media 'free for all' of the previous decade, but Russia still did not afford its own international news channel, then still called Russia Today, the same access it offered to established Western networks. Both shortcomings in Russian communication power, as we define it, would be remedied by the time conflict broke out with Ukraine in 2014.

## **Russia's war against Ukraine, 2014–present**

Russian military operations against Ukraine began in February 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. Shortly thereafter Russia started providing military support to insurgents in eastern Ukraine who had declared that the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics were now independent from Kiev.

This ongoing war began for several reasons. One background factor was that Russian leaders were never entirely comfortable with the notion of Ukraine being politically sovereign. From their perspective, Ukraine was best when its leaders aligned the country with Russian interests. Any strong assertion of Ukrainian autonomy provoked responses by Russia that critics alleged were tantamount to domestic meddling, as happened during the 2004 Orange Revolution (Kuzio, 2005: 505–509). The more proximate causes involved the mass movement that protested President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to reject suddenly an association agreement with the European Union in favour of joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. Protestors gathered around the country – most notably in and around Maidan Square in Kyiv – and stayed put despite increasingly strong repressive measures adopted by Yanukovich's government. After Yanukovich fled Ukraine, members of the political opposition took power. With its political legitimacy in question, given the extra-constitutional character of Yanukovich's overthrow, the new leaders in Kyiv had trouble projecting authority. One fateful action that the Ukrainian parliament undertook involved repealing language laws that gave regional

status to Russian and other languages. By this time Russia had already decided to annex Crimea (Treisman, 2016: 52), but further pretext was given to it for abetting an insurrection against Kiev in the eastern parts of Ukraine where Russia is predominantly spoken.

The ambiguous character of Russia's warfare against Ukraine prompted many observers to invoke various adjectives – the most common among them being 'hybrid' (see Lanoszka, 2016; Renz, 2016). This ambiguity served to give Russia a degree of 'plausible deniability' regarding its own military intervention (Allison, 2014). To annex Crimea, where many of its inhabitants had already reported pro-Russian sentiments in various opinion polls, unmarked armed soldiers – 'little green men' – had suddenly appeared manning checkpoints and taking over strategic sites around the main port city of Sebastopol and elsewhere on the peninsula (O'Loughlin and Toal, 2019). With pro-Russian demonstrations already underway, these masked troops assumed control of the Supreme Council of Crimea and installed a pro-Russian leader before announcing a referendum on the peninsula's territorial status. Such swift action was possible because Russia already had an extensive military presence thanks to its Black Sea fleet being stationed in Sebastopol. Pro-Russian protests swept cities in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine before armed insurgents began seizing key government buildings there. These insurgents aimed at establishing a new confederation in eastern Ukraine called Novorossiia. To restore political control, the Ukrainian army mobilized to fight the separatist forces. The scale of the involvement of Russian paramilitary forces in this insurgency remains unclear (Wilson, 2016). What is clear is that the Ukrainian military, with the help of so-called 'volunteer battalions', was able to fight effectively in early June. For this reason, Russia stepped up its assistance of the insurgents by way of convoys that most likely contained military equipment (Czuperski et al., 2015: 8). Shortly thereafter, insurgents regained what territory they had previously lost, pushing Ukraine to negotiate a ceasefire called the Minsk Protocol. This ceasefire would soon collapse due to more heavy fighting. A second ceasefire, called Minsk II, was announced. Much of the fighting since has been along the line of contact. Although it has been labelled a 'frozen conflict', it remains lethal, with at least 13,000 individuals killed since April 2014.

Despite the equivocal nature of Russia's involvement, the war in Donbas has been mostly waged conventionally. Despite frequent invocations of the term 'hybrid warfare', Bettina Renz (2018: 184) notes that 'there is very little similarity, from a strategic point of view, between the Crimea operation and the fighting in Donbas.' The former consisted of achieving surprise by way of a *fait accompli* and without the need to do battle. The latter mixed proxy actors with auxiliary fighters in a bid to prolong the war so as to sap Ukraine's military power and interest in fighting (Bowen, 2019). Accordingly, Russia has had mixed success. It seized Crimea quickly and almost bloodlessly, but Novorossiia failed as a political project. Indeed, Russia escalated its military involvement in eastern Ukraine because its proxy forces were losing. Still, if the aim has been to sustain a land war in the Donbas that will impose continuous costs on Ukraine such that it suffers economically and even politically, then Russia may have had some success (Grossman, 2018: 60). Although Ukraine eventually signed the association agreement that Yanukovych had negotiated and spurned, its likelihood of joining NATO remains slim despite receiving military aid from the United States and others.

The military resources committed to pursue Russia's objectives in Ukraine have been mirrored in those provided to the Kremlin-backed international media. It has been their task to tell the story of this success – limited though it may be. The annexation of Crimea prompted extensive Western sanctions, so Russia can hardly boast of a total triumph. In promoting their government's narrative to the world, Russian media have also striven to counter the accounts of those – such as the United States and the European Union – who judge Moscow's actions there to be a grave breach of international law. Russia Today was rebranded in 2009 as RT – perhaps to simplify its name in searches, perhaps to obscure its Russian origins. As the Kremlin placed increasing importance on how its actions were seen around the world, with mass communication being 'considered by the Russian leadership to be a crucial arena of the competitive struggle' (Szostek, 2016: 571), RT also benefited from significantly increased financial resources: budgets that might make editors at those Western news channels whose coverage it was intended to challenge swoon with envy. Figures quoted in *The Guardian* in early 2015 suggested 'greatly increased projected spending' with the television channel itself due to receive \$245m, and its sister organization, the state news agency Rossiya Segodnya (the name means 'Russia Today' in Russian) receiving the rouble equivalent of \$103m (Luhn, 2015). The latter, despite its more modest budget, is at least equally significant. Its social media accounts, including Twitter, where it suggests that it 'exists to tell the stories that aren't being told', are an example of another of the ways in which Russian media have adapted Western platforms to promote their own narratives. This is an openly declared policy. Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, published 2 years after the annexation of Crimea, and when the conflict in eastern Ukraine was also already 2 years old, listed among Russia's 'main objectives' in international affairs 'to bolster the standing of Russian mass media and communication tools in the global information space and convey Russia's perspective on international process to a wider international community' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016). In the case of armed conflict and annexing part of a neighbouring state, this aim echoes what Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2015: 1327–1328) call 'arrested war', a recent, more global trend whereby policy-makers and militaries have begun to appropriate and to leverage media against adversaries.

When the 'little green men' arrived in Crimea to take control, those Western correspondents who were there reported the presence of 'well-armed men in camouflage with no insignia who refused to identify themselves', as one journalist, Ben Hoyle (2014), noted. Hoyle was not fooled, but nor could he be completely sure. 'Thirteen Russian aircraft thought to be carrying up to 2,000 troops landed in Crimea last night', his report began. As Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2015: 1330) highlight, the footage of the 'little green men . . . may have originated through camera phone recordings but these soon reached mainstream media. Moreover, Russia was comfortable with this "leaked" footage appearing in mainstream television news.' Whatever the overall success or otherwise of the media strategies that Russia used to accompany its military operations in Ukraine, the tactic employed here did what was intended. The Russian Defence Ministry could have invited Western correspondents to accompany troops, or distributed official footage shot by a military cameraman. That would not have served the desired purpose at the time. The purpose of the 'little green men' was to allow the Kremlin to deny – however

implausibly – that they were the spearhead of a military operation, the ultimate objective of which was the annexation of Crimea. The ‘leaked’ footage served a parallel purpose: allowing the Russian army to show that it was taking over the peninsula, without specifically stating – yet – that it was actually doing so.

The original source of such material is hard to establish. Its nature would suggest it was either filmed by a serving soldier or by a civilian with the army’s knowledge. Its provenance is not the most important question. Its real significance is its existence and the nature of its distribution. It reached ‘mainstream television news’ without the Russian army having to engage directly with ‘mainstream television news’. Unlike in Chechnya, the Russian army in Crimea was in control of the situation, and so could not object to the world knowing what was going on, even if, at that stage, the world could only form very well-grounded suspicions of what was really happening. The dissemination of the Russian army’s message in this unofficial and unchallenged way may be seen as a use of communication power. Even so, the distribution of similar material risks backfiring. The Bellingcat investigation into the MH17 disaster used open-source material to conclude that Russian-backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine were responsible for the shooting down of the Malaysian Airlines passenger plane in July 2014 (Bellingcat, 2020). Hartmann et al.’s (2019) work on Twitter and disinformation in the aftermath of that disaster illustrates the difficulties of controlling narratives on social media.

As Russia’s military activities in Ukraine continued, Russian media also sought to promote less well-grounded versions of events, including some notorious examples, such as a gruesome – and untrue – story of a crucifixion (Stop Fake, 2014). For Neil Buckley (2019) of the *Financial Times*, who has covered Russia for many years, including a posting as Moscow bureau chief, atrocity stories such as these were ‘a real turning point’. Buckley cites the crucifixion ‘story’ and reports of refugees ‘streaming across into Russia because they were so afraid of this neo-Nazi regime that had come to power. It was complete rubbish. The borders were quiet.’ Post-Soviet Russia’s military operations began in Chechnya, where a catastrophic campaign and a chaotic media environment made a mockery of frequent official claims that all was quiet and that order was being restored. As Russian military power revived in the 2010s, the Kremlin developed a media strategy based on deception – one that availed itself of the communication power it had cultivated. The transformation from all but denying a mass exodus of civilians to creating reports of one where there was none was complete.

## Russian communication power in perspective

At least two observations regarding how Russia has undertaken military campaigns since the 1990s must be highlighted. One is that the First Chechen War saw the Russian military hobbled by various deficiencies while the Russian state exerted little to no control over the reporting of that conflict. By 2014, those weaknesses that characterized Russian military and communication power no longer existed: Russia had revived its military and had become more confident in using media outlets to project a certain image of its actions. Military effectiveness and communication power co-vary. The other observation is that, although communication power is a separate domain, it can complement military power. Different logics may have driven the development of each. A state like Russia

accumulates military power in order to deter or defeat adversaries on the battlefield, whether close to home or not. Military power also permits broader engagement in international affairs, especially by way of political interventions in other countries' conflicts. Communication power can reflect a desire to project certain images of the conflict or to promote one's political goals therein so as to build international and domestic support. However, the Kremlin has also nurtured communication power to consolidate its political authority at home while squeezing out the competition. Indeed, the cases highlight a slight chronological gap between the expansion of Russia's military and Russia's use of outlets such as RT as a vehicle for broadcasting its preferred narratives.

Note what we do not argue. Our conception of communication power does not rely on military doctrine or perceptions thereof. Many pundits and observers became enamoured with the now discredited notion of the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' – a military strategy often ascribed to Russia that envisions the use of subversion and disinformation prior to the employment of kinetic military force (Galeotti, 2019). In our view, the executive – in this case, the Kremlin – maintains and wields communication power independently of its military. Nor do we imply that our empirical discussion should be read as a history of how so-called Russian hybrid warfare has developed. After all, 'hybrid warfare' largely appears in Russian military writings as a description of Western activities aimed at Russia. It does not provide an accurate description of Russian military doctrine (Pynnöniemi and Jokela, 2020). Moreover, the Russian armed forces still go about their military campaigns on a largely conventional basis, with doctrine and weapons procurement aligned accordingly (Renz, 2018). Consider Russia's military operations in Syria. Much of how Russia has gone about them would look familiar to military experts (see Kofman and Rojansky, 2018), but evidence also exists of an effective social media campaign undertaken by RT to promote Russia's narrative of the war (Metzger and Siegel, 2019). To say that Russia wages hybrid warfare would obscure the tactical and operational continuities in how the war is being fought on the ground and in the air. To the extent that the concept might have analytical utility, it could refer to efforts to control military escalation by way of engaging in subversion while exploiting local military dominance (Lanoszka, 2016). Such efforts may or may not involve communication power, however.

Our exploratory study is only a first step. More research is needed on this subject. As suggested above, Syria is another case study that can investigate the complementarity of Russian communication power and military power. It would also be worth considering how our concept relates to other English-language international media channels – such as China Global Television Network or Al-Jazeera – that enjoy substantial financial support from states. Our approach is softly positivist and rationalist inasmuch as we argue that 'communication power' is a variable that, at least in the Russian context, co-evolves with military power and can be used instrumentally by the state to project certain images or narratives. Yet scholars could adopt a different approach, one anchored in more constructivist perspectives, to explore how discourses of power, more generally, have developed in Russian military and political writings since the 1990s, and how those very discourses illuminate the Kremlin's own interpretation of events and military choices. Alternatively, further research could explore the effects of communication power – something that we have consciously avoided. This endeavour admittedly faces many

challenges. Notwithstanding the role of chance, military outcomes hinge on the balance of power, leadership, appropriate army training, weather and other factors that also need to be considered. The use of communication power itself turns on reach and receptivity, the effects of which political prejudice and competition can dull (Lanoszka, 2019). Regardless of approach, to bring the state back in while distinguishing between communication power and military power, however, need not lead to problematic invocations of hybrid warfare. It simply reminds us that other parts of the Russian state are involved in the information domain during wartime, as Simonyan's quote at the outset of our article indicates. We should not conflate communication power with military power, but we should not ignore it either.

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