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Hybrid Warfare and Informational Strategies: Russia's Campaign in Ukraine (2014)

In recent years, the concept of "hybrid warfare" has transcended academic discussions and become a stark reality on the battlefield. The gradual annexation of territories by Putin's regime raised questions among experts about the emergence of a "new" era of warfare, distinct from the conventional ideas proposed by *Clausewitz* or *Mao Zedong.* The pivotal moment that triggered this shift was Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, followed by its aggressive actions in the Donbas region of Ukraine. These events have had a profound impact on the perception and approach to security in Europe. Despite the growing acknowledgment of hybrid warfare, there remains a lack of consensus within NATO regarding its precise definition and the diverse forms it can assume. Nevertheless, the lessons derived from the conflict in Ukraine have prompted a critical reassessment of security strategies, leading to the development of a fresh framework for conceptualising European security. As hybrid warfare continues to evolve, it presents distinct challenges that demand a comprehensive understanding and proactive response from NATO and its member states. Establishing a shared understanding of hybrid warfare and its various manifestations is crucial to effectively counter this multifaceted and ever-evolving threat.[2] However, upon deeper analysis, the term "hybrid era" reveals its essence in the interconnectedness of two distinct components: military warfare and the civilian home front. While the involvement of civilians or the targeting of civilian infrastructure during conflicts is not a new phenomenon, the methods, capabilities and tools employed to exert civilian and public influence have undergone significant transformations. This unique convergence of military and civilian domains presents a perplexing departure from traditional military history. The evolving nature of hybrid warfare has witnessed notable changes in the ways civilian populations are impacted and utilised as part of the conflict strategy. This encompasses a wide array of tactics aimed at influencing public opinion, manipulating information and leveraging

[1] Bar-Ilan University.

[2] Bilal 2021.

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technological advancements to exploit vulnerabilities within the civilian sphere. The unprecedented scope and scale of civilian involvement and its effects distinguish the hybrid era as an unprecedented phenomenon in military affairs. As the hybrid era continues to unfold, it becomes increasingly crucial to comprehend the dynamics and implications of this interconnected relationship between military and civilian aspects. By understanding the distinct characteristics and intricacies of hybrid warfare, policymakers, military strategists and society as a whole can better navigate the complexities and devise effective responses to safeguard both military and civilian interests in this evolving landscape.[3] Accordingly, the concept of hybrid warfare had already garnered attention within the Russian General Staff by 2014, but its roots can be traced back even further within U.S. military thinking. Defense Secretary Robert Gates had recognised the significance of "hybrid warfare" in relation to counterinsurgency and proxy conflicts in the Middle East as early as 2009. Prior to that, esteemed military scholars, notably Frank Hoffman in the early 2000s, had explored the concept of hybrid warfare and related ideas. These academic contributions aimed to shed light on U.S. strategies in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, while acknowledging the inherent hybrid nature of conflicts throughout history. The NATO alliance had also been actively engaged in strategic discussions on hybrid threats well before the Ukraine campaign. In 2010, NATO initiated its comprehensive approach through the work on "NATO's Military Contribution to Countering Hybrid Threats", which later informed the 2010 Strategic Concept. These early efforts by NATO demonstrate the recognition and understanding of the evolving nature of warfare and the need to address hybrid threats in a coordinated and comprehensive manner. By tracing the origins of the concept and its integration into military thinking, policymakers and strategists can gain valuable insights into the complexities and challenges posed by hybrid warfare. This historical context underscores the importance of continued reflection, adaptation and collaboration to effectively counter hybrid threats and ensure the security and resilience of nations and alliances.[4]

[3] Chivvis 2017; Pynnöniemi–Jokela 2020.
[4] NATO 2010.

Nonviolent civilian defence

In addition to its camouflaged nature, Russia's hybrid war has also depended on Putin's strategy of plausible deniability. This deniability shows itself in many questionable claims before February 2022: according to Moscow, there was no interstate war to which Russia is a party, merely internal ethnic conflict; Russia was not shipping weapons to parties in Ukraine; they were sold, bought, or stolen by private parties; there were no Russian troops on the ground, merely unaffiliated local militias; if there were Russians with military backgrounds engaged in combat fighting, they were off-duty army personnel, retired army veterans or armed civilian volunteers.[5] Beyond "maskirovka"[6] and plausible deniability, there was another, no less significant, component of Putin's hybrid warfare that was generally disregarded. This was the Kremlin's cynical use of collective nonviolent, civilian-led mobilisation and actions in support of its military campaigns. The popular nonviolent uprisings in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003) and finally, the successful 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine all made the Kremlin worried about the possibility of a similar outburst of popular discontent in Russia and encouraged Putin to borrow from the repertoire of nonviolent organisations to strengthen his own defence.[7] To mitigate the possibility of a people's revolution, the Russian regime created a seemingly grassroots civic movement of pro-government youths known as "Nashi" ("Ours"). It was subsequently deployed whenever the Kremlin needed to organise the protest, counterdemonstrations, anti-opposition rallies, disruption of opposition events, or harassment of pro-opposition figures or diplomats. The Kremlin has used the loyal crowds of unarmed civilians to organise what became to be known as "Putingi" (a neologism combining "Putin" with "mitingi", the Russian opposition's word for protest). In 2012, the Kremlin convoked its Putingi when the opposition-held demonstrations to protest rigged parliamentary elections. It did it again during the 2014 peace marches and rallies in Moscow and elsewhere in the country. After the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine, seemingly grassroots groups of citizens and "patriotic groups" in Russia launched an "anti-maidan".[8]

5 Gunneriusson 2019.
6 Bouwmeester 2017.
7 Bartkowski 2015.
8 Bartkowski 2015.

In 2014 the Kremlin took another critical step when it elevated nonviolent civil actions from an arguably defensive domestic asset for propping up the regime to an aggressive foreign policy and military tool. In doing so, it took lessons from the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine. The Euromaidan was a widespread upheaval that, after 92 days of largely nonviolent mobilisation and campaigns, led to significant loyalty shifts within the regime's political, business and security pillars. These defections, combined with ongoing massive civil disobedience, sealed the fate of the pro-Russian president Victor Yanukovych who fled Kyiv on 21 February 2014.[9] The two main lessons for the Russian security services were that the Ukrainian military would rather disobey orders than shoot unarmed civilians and that at least a semblance of popular grassroots support would be necessary for the ultimate success of the subversive operations that Russia planned in Ukraine. While Russia's hybrid warfare still depends on "hard power elements", there is no doubt that many of its warfare elements is based on propaganda "maskirovka", plausible deniability and civilian-led collective nonviolent action against the enemy. During the conflict in Ukraine, the Kremlin has excelled in promulgating propaganda with effectiveness not seen since the heyday of the Soviet Union. This information warfare conducted in social and mainstream media is designed to deceive adversaries, blur the line between reality and fantasy, drive a wedge between Western allies and keep the Russian population in the dark. It became a crucial instrument in a larger strategy of the Russian Government's "maskirovka". This Russian term refers to a broadly defined "action plan" deployed as a form of "camouflage, concealment, deception, imitation, disinformation, secrecy, security, feints, diversions and simulation" against an adversary. The Russian state has deployed maskirovka on the strategic, operational and tactical levels of its military and nonmilitary campaigns to disguise its actions going back to the Napoleonic Wars. It particularly honed these skills during the Soviet period.[10] Maskirovka is indeed a concept deeply rooted in Russian military doctrine, encompassing various tactics and strategies aimed at deception, disinformation and concealment. In the context of the Ukrainian conflict, maskirovka has been utilised by Russia to hide the presence of regular Russian soldiers and military equipment on Ukrainian territory. The objective has been to prevent the publication and dissemination of reports on soldiers' deaths in Russia, thereby maintaining a façade of deniability regarding direct Russian involvement. While these efforts initially aimed to

[9] BBC News 2014.

[10] Keating 1981; Roberts 2015.

obfuscate the Russian military's role in Ukraine, they eventually became less effective as evidence of their presence became more apparent in the West. Western observers and governments increasingly recognised the involvement of Russian forces, undermining the effectiveness of maskirovka as a deception strategy. Nonetheless, it is true that the Russian strategy of maskirovka in the Ukrainian conflict was also intended to divide public opinion in the West and maintain support for the Kremlin's position on Ukraine. By sowing doubt and confusion through disinformation campaigns and other means, Russia sought to create a narrative that blurred the lines of responsibility and portrayed the conflict as more complex than a straightforward Russian invasion. Regarding public opinion in Russia, it is worth noting that Putin's approval rating did experience a significant boost in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.[11] However, it is important to approach these approval ratings with caution, as they can be influenced by various factors, including the media landscape, state propaganda and limited political alternatives.[12] Russian operations in Crimea began soon after Yanukovych's departure. In an interview on 4 March 2014, a week after the arrival of Russian troops in Crimea, dressed in green uniforms without insignia whom Ukrainians sarcastically referred to as "little green men", Putin openly discussed the strategy of using nonviolent demonstrations led by local civilians to neutralise the Ukrainian military. "Listen carefully. I want you to understand me clearly: if we make that decision [to send the Russian army to Ukraine], it will only be to protect Ukrainian citizens. And let's see those [Ukrainian] troops try to shoot their own people, with us behind them – not in the front, but behind. Let them just try to shoot at women and children! I would like to see those who would give that order in Ukraine."[13] Russia used the unwillingness of Ukrainian troops to fire on fellow citizens to stage successful occupations, sit-ins and seizures of Ukrainian army garrisons in Crimea. This also created favourable conditions for desertions and defections among the members of the Ukrainian army. Instead of facing an overt armed assault that would have killed Ukrainian soldiers and raised their feelings of unit cohesion and battle spirit (as happened later in the conflict in the eastern

[11] A Gallup survey conducted from 21 to 27 April revealed that 82.8% of the Crimean population believes that the results of the referendum accurately reflect the views of the majority of Crimeans. Additionally, 73.9% of Crimeans expressed the belief that Crimea's integration into Russia would improve their own lives and the lives of their families, while a minority of 5.5% disagreed with this viewpoint.

[12] Levinson 2022.

[13] President of Russia 2014.

part of Ukraine), the troops faced unarmed civilians.[14] Moreover, the Russian side offered financial and institutional incentives to Ukrainian soldiers. For example, they were promised that they could keep their ranks and receive higher salaries if they switched sides.[15] Consequently, less than 25% of the Ukrainian troops stationed in Crimea stayed loyal to their state; 50% defected to Russia and the rest deserted.[16] Collectively, these measures allowed the armed "little green men" to take control of the Ukrainian military sites without facing much resistance. In fact, the relatively peaceful takeover of Crimea earned Russian soldiers in Putin's media and among the Russian public a nickname of "the polite people".[17]At the same time, Putin publicly acknowledged that seemingly nonviolent actions were, in fact, an adequate cover for lethal force. According to the Russian president, "you can do much more with weapons and politeness than just politeness".[18]

Russia's hybrid strategy in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine

Following the contentious Crimean referendum on 16 March 2014, Russia turned its focus to eastern Ukraine, specifically the Donbas region comprising Luhansk and Donetsk. In contrast to western Ukraine, the Donbas population exhibited limited political engagement and remained disconnected from civic activism. Even on sensitive issues like the ban on the Russian language, only a small fraction of Donbas adults expressed a willingness to participate in demonstrations against the ban.[19] The Russian Government, under Putin's leadership, employed a hybrid strategy combining armed and unarmed tactics, including coerced "legitimised voting", to annex Crimea and destabilise southeastern Ukraine. The unarmed aspect of this campaign aimed to erode loyalty to the national government among a mobilised minority, leveraging existing mistrust, fear and discontent while manipulating the genuine desire for significant political change. This strategy capitalised on the limited civic engagement, particularly in the Donbas region, where political apathy, passivity, and a lack of political awareness facilitated the influence of sophisticated Russian propaganda. Under Putin's leadership, the

[14] Luhn 2014.
[15] Reevell–Sneider 2014.
[16] Interfax Ukraine 2014.
[17] Reuters 2014.
[18] Roth 2014a.
[19] Matveeva 2016; Kudelia 2014b.

Russian Government utilised a hybrid approach that encompassed both armed and unarmed tactics to annex Crimea and sow instability in southeastern Ukraine. In addition to the use of military force, an unarmed aspect of this campaign focused on coercive and manipulated voting processes to erode loyalty to the Ukrainian Government. This strategy exploited existing mistrust, fear and discontent among a mobilised minority, while capitalising on genuine aspirations for political change. The sophisticated Russian propaganda machine took advantage of low levels of civic engagement, particularly in the Donbas region, where political apathy, passivity, and a lack of political awareness created fertile ground for their influence. During the Euromaidan revolution, the political apathy of residents in the Donbas region became apparent, as there were no actual demonstrations either in favour or against the Maidan movement. This lack of engagement allowed a minority of separatists, backed by Russia, to exploit existing fears and distrust among specific segments of the Donbas population. These separatists portrayed the new central government as a "violent fascist junta" responsible for the removal of President Yanukovych. By amplifying these sentiments, they aimed to undermine support for the central government and justify their separatist agenda.[20] In general, "unarmed civilians" played a significant role in the strategy employed by Russia and the separatists to gain control over the Donbas region.[21] This involved the initial actions of armed groups, lacking identifiable markings, who forcefully took control of local government buildings and security installations. Subsequently, unarmed civilians actively joined these groups, serving as human shields and publicly demonstrating their support for the rebels. Despite constituting a minority within the local population, these unarmed civilians added a sense of legitimacy to the rebels' cause, as portrayed in pro-Russian narratives. Similar incidents occurred in various cities across southeastern Ukraine, where civilian-led pro-Russian rallies, attempts to capture administrative buildings and calls for referenda were witnessed.[22] As expected, these events were labelled by the Russian media, officials and pro-Russian civilians as the "Russian Spring". However, a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in February 2014 indicated relatively low levels of support for joining Russia in the Donetsk region (33%) and Luhansk region (24%), as well as other southeastern regions of Ukraine.[23]

[20] Bartkowski 2015; Kühn von Burgsdorff 2015.
[21] Kudelia 2014a.
[22] Kushch 2014; Bartkowski 2015.
[23] Giuliano 2018; Katchanovski 2016.

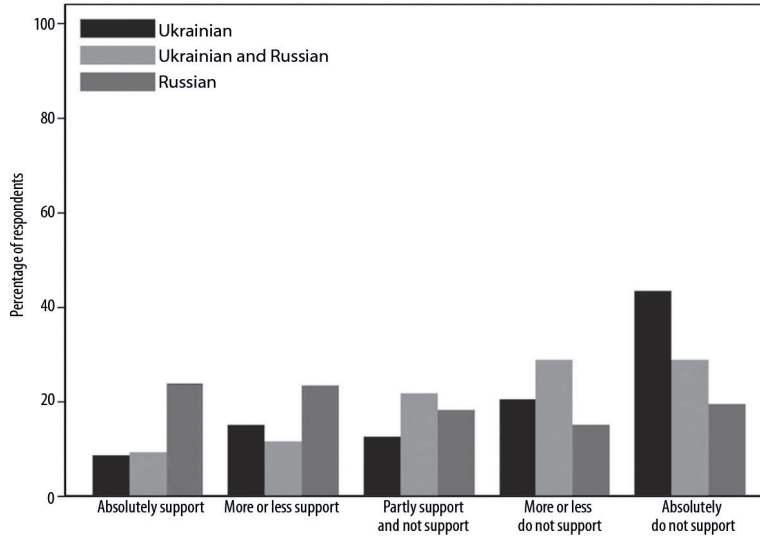

Figure 1: Support for separatism by nationality in Donbas
Source: Giuliano 2018: 166

Within this context, humanitarian convoys played a critical role in Russia's nonviolent strategy.[24] By organising and dispatching these convoys without permission, Russia aimed to present itself as a benevolent provider of aid to the occupied cities, diverting attention from its military intervention and occupation of Ukrainian territory. This approach allowed Russia to manipulate international public opinion, maintain the appearance of nonviolence and deflect criticism.[25] The Ukrainian authorities faced a dilemma in responding to the convoys, as any aggressive action would have played into Russia's propaganda and potentially escalated the conflict. Consequently, Ukraine chose to let the convoys pass, unintentionally creating unofficial "humanitarian" corridors that Russia could exploit for military purposes. Additionally, reports indicated the transport of stolen machine parts from Ukrainian industrial facilities back to Russia within these convoys.[26]

[24] Scrinic 2014: 77–88.
[25] Rácz 2014.
[26] Lister–Fylyppov 2022.

An old wine in a new bottle?

Most experts and military personnel ask whether there is any justification for calling the era of the current war "the same" or "different" and whether there is any justification for calling it a hybrid era. For this, we must examine the introduction of the term "second hybrid warfare late in the 2000s", which has been brought into the public eye by Frank G. Hoffman's research in 2007 and received great interest after Russia took over the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and fought in eastern Ukraine for hundreds of years. However, even when we try to understand the term's origin, we run into a sharp disagreement starting with the fact that the Russians themselves do not adopt the term and there is no general agreement on the meaning of the term. However, it is generally accepted that it includes the use of actions that are "below the threshold" of war to achieve accomplishments (political or otherwise) without paying the price associated with an overt act, without the need to take direct responsibility, all the while preventing the adversary from imposing such responsibility. To a large extent, the inability to clearly define "what is hybrid warfare" makes it so. Therefore, one must be careful not to give the impression that this is a complex and sophisticated doctrine used by many and that it is precisely the simple use of well-known but skilled elements and elements that have undergone manipulations and innovations that increase the threat, which is easy to understand but not to deal with: "Russia's (2021) aggression against Ukraine has launched a process of destroying the system of European and transatlantic security."[27] Despite the challenges, there may be a bright spot that allows us to understand the development of the term, and it lies in one of the few agreements – and that is the change in the face of digital and social communication since the 2000s with the rise of the digital age. Before the advent of media and social networks, mass communication was nothing new, the use of propaganda and psychological warfare was abundant, and the number of wars and operations that were used was almost infinite. But even when we look at the most "magnificent" examples of the use of propaganda to influence the home front and the citizens, among them the First and Second World Wars, the First Palestinian Intifada, the Iran–Iraq War, Algiers and France, and more, we see that most of the capabilities promoted depended to a large extent on the means of technology which were at their disposal at the time.[28] The combat unit's technological capabilities

[27] Bratko et al. 2021: 147.

[28] Yevstafiev–Manoilo 2021; Perry–Schleifer 2006.

depended on the means of communication that Laz had at their disposal: telegrams, telegraphs, loudspeakers flying on top of helicopters, cardboard dolls in the shape of tanks, or even classic mass communication of radio and television. However, already at the end of the 1980s, during the first Iraq War, the concept of the "CNN effect" developed, which in fact marked the beginning of the global news and mega-media era that allowed the citizens of the world to join any operation or war that will break out in the world. The peak was the social media age, in which the citizens, who saw and observed the vacillation, began to form positions, opinions and feelings towards the warring parties even though the war was taking place far from their country's borders. This phase is called the information age, and it opened the first window for introducing the "ordinary" citizens to the battlefield in a way that had not been seen at the time. In this, the theories of the strong effects of the media from the first models of Laswell and McQuail were brought back, and concepts such as "global media agenda", or "public opinion", "number of viewers" and "ratings" became old currencies in the new digital consciousness age.[29] The "Information Age" is a historical period that began in the mid-20th century, characterised by a rapid epochal shift from traditional industry established by the Industrial Revolution to an economy primarily based upon information technology. Therefore, and if we assumed that the technological information is the one that gives the information age its character and capabilities, then it is easy to understand why since the 2000s when social networks burst into our lives and certainly redefined "technological communication", something happened and something fundamental changed. Today, digital communication and social media have become available, fast and accessible to almost every person in our world, something that has shrunk space and time in a way we did not know in the era of previous wars. The speed of technological communication in previous eras cannot be compared to the digital information age. This has some major consequences, firstly, digital civil networks have been created that on the one hand consume a lot of information from everywhere and at any time and in endless quantities and on the other hand, they are able to produce information in the same way. That is, the citizens of the world can organise and generate information but in the same way be exposed and need information. This concept was called "peer-to-peer networks" that have become generators and information needs in a way that bypasses the countries and are able to communicate with each other even in different cultures and

[29] Sapienza et al. 2015.

languages.[30] Second, the technological capabilities to communicate with any person or entity in our world have multiplied with the development of social networks and multiple applications together with smart phone devices that have given "ordinary citizens" or in military parlance, the civilian "home front" the ability to influence the media and global agenda. In other words, the citizens who have become more educated and informed in detail about every event that takes place in our world, are now able to repeatedly influence what is happening, react, create their own stories and try to compete for the hearts and minds of the world.[31] Thirdly, and in light of the previous two sections, the fact that citizens have become so digitised and have technological capabilities for multiple cross-border communications that encourage them to continue to be connected to what is happening, they become more and more vulnerable, they become the targets of information manipulation, mind engineering, fake news, interventions in democratic elections, the establishment of bots. The caller from a social network and implementer of technological impersonation capabilities for any person or company. Therefore, and considering all this, it is not for nothing that our age is not called the hybrid age or the digital age, but the age of "consciousness" or more correctly, the age of "consciousness re-engineering" that operates in a systematic way using the data taken from our increasing and exponential use of technological communication. For example, by means of our smartphone which has become "an organ of our body since the nineties" hidden actions are done by the developers of the applications and whose ultimate and clear purpose is to trap us inside it for their benefit. Transferring the entirety of our lives into the digital world means that every click and every form filled in is documented and analysed.[32] These digital footprints are today's gold and diamond mine. Data mining allows commercial companies to build a profile of each user, using algorithms that provide infinite psychological intelligence, and send him a flood of messages that match his personality, thereby engineering his every action, feeling and thought without the need for direct interaction with him. While most of us believe that the digital reality invites us to a lot of freedom of information and choice, the author of this paper reveals its illusory and disappointing face, and the sophisticated manipulations designed to entice the user to devote themselves to applications, to become addicted to content and social sites, and to spend more and more time and money on

[30] Yang–Chen 2008.
[31] Attias 2012.
[32] Myers 2021.

shopping sites. And in the absence of laws, regulations and brakes to protect digital users, a picture of a future reality emerges in which man is a "voluntary" prisoner in the absence of freedom of thought, will and choice.[33]

Conclusion

War has two essential components: one is complex, and the other is soft and nonviolent, which due to the changing media and digital environment has become multi-dimensional and rich in tools and tactics that are used in times of War and conflict against the "civilian front". Within the soft component, the citizen's consciousness has become a target for the bombardment of false information to damage the adversary's national strength. Unlike in previous eras, the damage is not only local. It aims to cause damage to the status of the state as well by lowering the level of legitimacy and international support and thus subtly harming the opponent.

On the civilian level:

- establishing filtering and fact-checking systems that will be available to as many citizens as possible
- initiating advocacy efforts for citizens regarding the importance of consuming reliable information
- publication of detected fake news messages

On the military level:

- establishing and improving bodies that deal with civilian information, the reliability of the information and the creation of reliable information from the battlefield
- increasing publications against fake news from the battlefield
- strengthening the relationship with civil networks to spread the message
- strengthening the relationship with journalists and opinion leaders

On the diplomatic level:

- building systems for checking information and facts regularly (not only during the war) in different languages against fake news
- establishing more cooperation and awareness to increase international synchronisation

[33] Tejomurti et al. 2018.

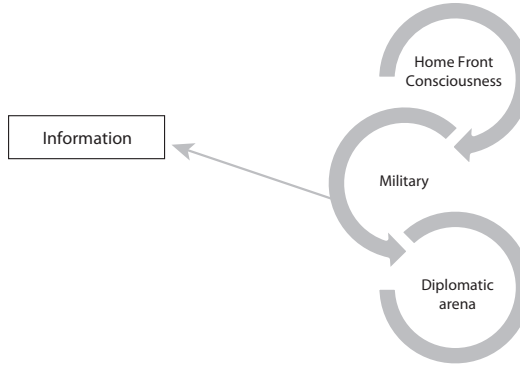

Figure 2: The 3 levels of joined information protecting model
Source: Compiled by the author

Questions

1. What is the digital face of hybrid warfare?
2. What are the new tools of deniability and civilian-led collective nonviolent action as presented in the 2021 Russian–Ukraine case study?
3. Why "legitimacy" has become so crucial in the hybrid warfare age, and what can we do about it?
4. What are the main steps we can take to strengthen our civilian front?
5. How the evolution of information age into a digital form has brought new threats to the warfare world?
6. How and why citizen's consciousness has become a target for the bombardment of false information to damage the adversary's national strength?

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