Missing in Action: Rhetoric on Cyber Warfare

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In Chapter 11, Liisa Past, a NATO CCD COE expert on strategic communications, analyses leadership discourse. Liisa Past reveals that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko have employed similar rhetorical strategies, including the development of an 'us vs. them' dichotomy in which the in-group is portrayed as constructive and solution-oriented, while the out-group is illegitimate and dangerous. In their current conflict, neither Russia nor Ukraine denies that cyberspace is a domain of warfare, but neither has stressed its importance. Russian political discourse has mostly overlooked cyber issues (which is in line with Russian military doctrine), while Ukraine has framed them within the larger concept of 'hybrid warfare'. The most notable difference in political rhetoric is Kyiv's clear orientation to the West and NATO, while Moscow is keenly focused on Russian national interests.

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1 Introduction

In the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, there has been much talk of 'hybrid warfare', encompassing every aspect of war including cyber operations. Much of cyber operations is classified and hidden from public view, but there are numerous ways in which information becomes known, including via intelligence leaks and open source analysis. This chapter focuses on leadership communications and what they can tell us about conflict in cyberspace.

In geopolitics, heads of state are the ultimate decision-makers, especially during a national security crisis. Leaders are expected to show rhetorical as well as executive leadership. The media takes it from there, but the public still struggles to find a consistent evaluation, primarily relying on experts and opinion leaders.[1] As the head of state seeks his or her 'rally around the president' moment,[2] domestic and international observers analyse their explanations and emotions – as well as their proffered initiatives and guidance.[3] From a national podium, heads of state have an inherent advantage, as their arguments are 'more likely to resonate with the public than the opinions of leaders voicing a more local outlook'.[4]

Communication and discourse analysis in international affairs rests on the idea that language cannot be taken at face value. Words carry definitional meaning, but dif-

1 Timothy E Cook. *Governing with the News* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
2 Birgitte Lebens Nacos. *Terrorism and the Media: From the Iran Hostage Crisis to the Oklahoma City Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
3 Jeffrey E Cohen. *Presidential Responsiveness and Public Policy-Making, The Public and the Policies That Presidents Choose* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).
4 *Ibid*, 32.

ferent audiences will perceive them differently. Critical analysis can yield insight into the true beliefs and motivations of any speaker, including policy-makers. Meaning is 'mediated through language'[5] and all words have 'social values'[6] that vary with context.

This chapter analyses Russian and Ukrainian leadership statements, speeches, press releases and other rhetoric from 2014 and 2015, especially the English-language elements, written for a global audience and printed in international media. The author also searched major international news outlets for the keywords 'Ukraine', 'Russia', 'cyber', and 'information warfare'. In all cases, focus remained on the rhetoric attributable to a head of state or other high-level political player,[7] with an eye toward uncovering their underlying motivations, beliefs, and ideologies.

2 Analytical Focus

This analysis is designed to yield insight into numerous areas of international concern. Above all, the world would like to understand more about the emerging threat of cyber warfare. New developments in research and technology, as well as in the means and methods of war, are usually far ahead of their codification in doctrine.

Computer network operations fit nicely within the concept of hybrid warfare that has been so characteristic of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Cyber attacks are similar to covert operations, information operations, denial and deception, false flag and no-flag attacks: they give national command and control structures some degree of plausible deniability. These aspects of war tend to be highly classified; therefore, an analysis of political rhetoric may yield significant insight into what politicians, soldiers and spies simply cannot discuss in public forums, namely, one of the most vexing challenges of cyber attacks: attribution.

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Political leaders must appeal to the hearts and minds of their domestic and international audiences, with the help of emotional and sometimes long-winded speeches. National security establishments must provide legal support for their actions through the release of press statements and promulgation of doctrine. With these in hand, analysts may be able to understand much more about the otherwise covert nature of cyber attacks. In 2015, Russia has a fairly well-developed military doctrine on cyber and information warfare, while that of Ukraine is still in its infancy. This analysis offers a deeper understanding of each nation's non-explicit political objectives related to cyber warfare.

5 Henrik Larsen. *Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis: France, Britain and Europe* (London: Routledge advances in International Relations and Politics, 1997), 11.

6 *Ibid*, 14.

7 Unfortunately, on the current 'President of Ukraine' website, documents and speeches by former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych cannot be found.

3 Russia

Since the turn of the century, Russia has been publicly admiring European values while simultaneously emphasising sovereignty and a strong national defence.[8] Moscow insists that 'each nation in the region should be given a right to experiment with its own democratic model that fits its national and international conditions'.[9] This tension may only grow stronger with time, and we may see further Russian moves away from shared values in the future as Moscow confronts not only Ukraine but also the West more generally, including in Syria.

Regarding Ukraine, Russia insists it is a bystander and even a victim. Putin said, 'There are still many threats and challenges in the world today. As you may know, in Europe, militant nationalism is raising its head here and there – the one that once led to the appearance of the Nazi ideology. I will not dwell on each of the hotspots separately – we all know where the danger is. Incidentally, the situation in our neighbouring brotherly Ukraine is an example of the disaster and loss such an irresponsible policy can bring about.'[10] In explaining Gazprom's tough stance vis-à-vis Ukraine, for example, Putin has argued that there was no other choice but to take a hard line against Kyiv,[11] again placing Russia as a bystander, not an active party.

Putin has consistently delegitimised Poroshenko's government:

> *'There can only be one assessment: this was an anti-constitutional takeover, an armed seizure of power [that] significantly destabilised the east and south-east of Ukraine […] we see the rampage of reactionary forces, nationalist and anti-Semitic forces going on in certain parts of Ukraine, including Kyiv […] Are the current authorities legitimate? The Parliament is partially, but all the others are not. The current Acting President is definitely not legitimate […] one set of thieves [is] being replaced by another. […] We will not fight with the Ukrainian people [but] I do not have a partner at the top level there'.*[12]

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Throughout the Ukraine crisis which began in 2014, Vladimir Putin has not once used the word 'cyber'. This does not signify a lack of interest in the subject, or that Russia has not engaged in computer network operations, but it does demonstrate a preference not to discuss the issue, which in turn likely means that cyber warfare as a distinct form of attack, from

8 Andrei P. Tsygankov. *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 181.

9 *Ibid*.

10 'Meeting with Presidents of Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan' Website of the President of Russia, 8 May 2014), http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20980.

11 'Message to the leaders of European countries regarding the supply and transit of Russian gas across the territory of Ukraine' Website of the President of Russia, 15 May 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/82.

12 'Vladimir Putin answered journalists' questions on the situation in Ukraine' Website of the President of Russia 3 April 2014), http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366.

Russia's perspective, has not played a major role in the Ukraine conflict. There have been some commercial reports alleging specific Russian cyber attacks, such as that by the security firm FireEye,[13] but these are typically dismissed as Western propaganda. According to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, 'We know that blaming Russia for everything has turned into a sport'.[14]

Putin did refer to the stories about phone hacking and surveillance of top politicians, which were prominent in the news in 2014:

> *'As for the facts of cyber espionage that you mentioned, it not only amounts to overt hypocrisy in relationships between allies and partners, but also a direct violation of the state's sovereignty, an infringement on human rights and an invasion of privacy. We are looking forward to jointly developing an international information security system*'.[15]

This quote may indicate an underlying assumption of Russian doctrine: today, everyone is spying on everyone, there are currently no acceptable international laws to govern such activities in cyberspace, and Russia must be a part of any credible effort to develop such norms.

Although Russia claims not to be directly involved in the Ukraine conflict, Moscow still wants to direct its peace-making efforts. Putin has championed a consideration of Ukraine's eastern regions[16] has produced a diplomatic solution called the Putin Plan[17] and 'gave the instruction to hold consultations with foreign partners, including the IMF and the G8 countries, on organising financial assistance for Ukraine'.[18]

4 Ukraine

Many of these quotes came from the President of Russia's website, and are directly attributable to Vladimir Putin. However, most of the conflict-related quotes in this section – from the President of Ukraine's website – are from news articles and press releases that quote Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. Unlike on the Russian site, full-length Ukrainian speeches are a smaller proportion of the presidential communications. That said, Ukraine has been much clearer than Russia in identify-

13 'APT28 – A Window Into Russia's Cyber Espionage Operations?' *FireEye*, https://www2.fireeye.com/apt28.html.

14 Owen Matthews. 'Russia leading the way in the cyber arms race,' *Irish Examiner,* 13 June 2015, http://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/features/big-read-russia-leading-the-way-in-the-cyber-arms-race-336675.html.

15 'Interview to Prensa Latina and ITAR-TASS' Website of the President of Russia, 11 July 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46190.

16 'On the start of contacts with Ukraine's Choice public movement in Donetsk and Lugansk' Website of the President of Russia, 22 June 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news.

17 'The 'Putin Plan' for settling the conflict in Ukraine' Website of the President of Russia, 3 September 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46554.

18 'Instructions regarding the situation in Ukraine' Website of the President of Russia, 27 February 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20347.

ing cyberspace as a separate and active domain of conflict. Various terms have been used, such as 'cyber security',[19] 'informational cyber-security system of Ukraine',[20] and 'cyber and information security'.[21] These terms may refer to slightly different things at different times, but in general, there was more cyber warfare-related content to analyse.

Ukraine has been much clearer than Russia in identifying cyberspace as a separate and active domain of conflict.

From the beginning of the conflict, Ukraine has suffered a variety of network attacks. In February 2014, the Ukrainian telecommunications firm Ukrtelecom reported that 'unknown people'[22] had damaged a fibre backbone cable that resulted in the loss of communication between Crimea and the rest of Ukraine. Not long after, Ukrainian security chief Valentyn Nalivaichenko announced, 'I confirm that an ... attack is under way on mobile phones of members of the Ukrainian parliament for the second day in a row'.[23] The most sophisticated attack came against the Ukrainian Central Election Commission (CEC) during Ukraine's Presidential elections.[24] However, there was no official attribution for any of these attacks provided by the government in Kyiv.

There were at least two cases of cyber attack attribution, both to Russia. The Security Service of Ukraine linked the disruption of mobile communications and the defacement of websites to pro-Russian hackers and to pro-Russian forces in Crimea. There was no direct link made to Moscow, perhaps in part because the 'IP-telephonic' attack was aimed at top Ukrainian politicians irrespective of their political allegiance.[25] On another occasion, when the hacktivist group CyberBerkut claimed responsibility for an attack on German government websites, Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk placed the blame on Russian intelligence: 'I strongly recommend that the Russian secret services stop spending taxpayer money for cyberattacks against the Bundestag and Chancellor Merkel's office'.[26]

In the case of downed Malaysian airliner MH17, which Poroshenko called terrorism,[27] the President stated that 'The State Security Service of Ukraine has inter-

19 'President met with U.S. Congress delegation,' Office of the President of Ukraine, 6 August 2014 http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-zustrivsya-z-delegaciyeyu-kongresu-ssha-35766.

20 'NSDC decision: Ukraine asks the UN, NATO, EU, OSCE and strategic partners for help,' Office of the President of Ukraine, 28 August 2014, http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-zvertayetsya-za-dopomogoyu-do-oon-nato-yes-obsye-de-33573.

21 'Presidents of Ukraine and Lithuania have held the Seventh session of the Council of Presidents' Office of the President of Ukraine, 24 November 2014. http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezidenti-ukrayini-i-litvi-proveli-some-zasidannya-radi-pre-34105.

22 Ukrtelecom. 'Ukrtelecom's Crimean sub-branches officially report that unknown people have seized several telecommunications nodes in the Crimea,' 28 February 2014, http://en.ukrtelecom.ua/about/news?id=120467.

23 Dave Lee. 'Russia and Ukraine in cyber 'stand-off'," *BBC News*, 5 March 2014 http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-26447200.

24 SRK/NN/SS, 'Hackers attack Ukraine election website,' *PressTV*, 25 October 2014, http://www.presstv.com/detail/2014/10/25/383623/ukraines-election-website-hacked.

25 Max Smolaks. 'Security Service Of Ukraine Claims Politicians' Phones Are Under Attack,' *TechWeek Europe*, 4 March 2014, http://www.techweekeurope.co.uk/workspace/security-service-ukraine-claims-politicians-phones-attack-140643.

26 Erik Kirscbaum. 'Ukraine says Russia behind cyber attack on German government,' *Reuters*, 8 January 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/08/us-germany-cyberattack-idUSKBN0KH0IY20150108.

27 'Address of the President on the occasion of the crash of Malaysia Airlines aircraft,' Office of the President of Ukraine, 18 July 2014, http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-z-privodu-tragediyi-z-litakom-aviakomp-33262.

cepted a conversation in which one of the leaders of the mercenaries boasted about bringing down the plane in his reporting to his Russian supervisor, a colonel of the General Intelligence Unit of Russia's Armed Forces'[28] and 'terrorists have already declared their desire to hide the evidence and transport the aircraft's black boxes to Moscow'.[29]

In eastern Ukraine, Poroshenko contends that the separatist movement is 'fully controlled' by Russian leadership[30] and even in government-controlled territory, he announced that '[t]he Security Service of Ukraine unmasked and neutralised the terrorist group coordinated by special forces of the Russian Federation'.[31]

To international audiences, Poroshenko has focused primarily on the broader topic of hybrid warfare, taking care to fit within the narratives and terminology of the West. At the 2015 Munich Security Conference, he said that '[f]or over a year Ukraine has been facing dramatic consequences of an undeclared hybrid warfare. It is very important that the states in the region devote more attention to hybrid threats. […] Today, a former strategic partner is waging a hybrid war against a sovereign state, a co-founder of the United Nations. Mounds of lies and propaganda have been heaped into a wall of hatred, erected between two once friendly nations'.[32] While analysts have yet to agree on a common definition of hybrid warfare, it certainly encompasses Internet-based propaganda, information operations, and computer hacking.

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Looking toward the future, Poroshenko has positioned himself as a 'President of Peace'[33] 'on the forefront of the global fight for democracy'.[34] Russia is the clear antagonist: 'all military threats and challenges are related to Russia,'[35] and Moscow's war 'has brought Ukraine to the brink of its survival'.[36] Poroshenko argues that not just Ukraine, but the whole world needs a resolution to this conflict,[37] and that 'democracies must support each other'.[38] Ultimately, Ukraine's national security goal is 'full

28 *Ibid*.
29 *Ibid*.
30 'President's statement on ceasefire from February 15,' Office of the President of Ukraine, 15 February 2015, http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zayava-prezidenta-pro-pripinennya-vognyu-z-0000-15-lyutogo-34723.
31 'Head of the Security Service of Ukraine reports to the President: Terrorist group coordinated by Russian special forces was neutralized,' Office of the President of Ukraine, 16 August 2014, http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zneshkodzheno-teroristichnu-grupu-yaku-koordinuvali-specsluz-33478.
32 'Speech by President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko at the Munich Security conference,' Office of the President of Ukraine, 7 February 2015, http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-petra-poroshenka-na-myunhenskij-k-34663.
33 Petro Poroshenko. Speech by President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko at the Munich Security Conference 2015.
34 Petro Poroshenko. 'Address by the President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko to the Joint Session of the United States Congress,' 18 September 2014, http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-petra-poroshenka-na-spilnij-sesiy-33718.
35 'President: New Military Doctrine is based on the duration of threat from Russia and demands full compatibility of the Armed Forces with NATO standards,' Office of the President of Ukraine, 2 September 2015, http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/nova-voyenna-doktrina-vihodit-z-trivalosti-zagrozi-z-boku-ro-35907.
36 *Ibid*.
37 Petro Poroshenko. President's statement on ceasefire from February 15 2015.
38 Petro Poroshenko. Address by the President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko to the Joint Session of the United States Congress 2014.

NATO membership'.[39] The President asserted that 'Ukraine is not a NATO member now. Unfortunately, we are not allies de jure. Yet, de facto we are more than just partners … Ukraine is the eastern outpost of Euro-Atlantic civilisation, which is now defending not only sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of our country.'[40]

5 The Role of Non-state Actors

In the cyber domain, non-state, sometimes anonymous actors can play a significant role in any conflict. During the Ukraine crisis, numerous groups such as Cyber-Berkut have positioned themselves as independent, Internet-based guerrillas, and to some degree they have influenced the course of events. In general, there is too little public information available for analysts to determine if any of these non-state actors has a direct or indirect government connection.

In Ukraine, one of the most prominent non-state cyber leaders is Eugene Dokunin, who describes himself as a 'lone wolf waging a furious battle against the thousands of paid hackers and trolls in Russia'.[41] Whereas governments may not boast about their achievements, rogue actors do. Dokunin's group claims to have blocked more than 170 PayPal and other online accounts belonging to separatists, and frozen almost $3 million of their cash. In one attack, they compromised networked printers in separatist regions, forcing them to spew out documents glorifying Ukraine, as well as the popular chant 'Putin is a dick', which is sung in football stadiums across Ukraine'.[42] Dokunin reserves some of his ire for the sitting government in Kyiv: 'The Ukrainian Government hasn't invested a cent in cyber warfare, even though this is also an information war'.

6 Conclusion

Communication analysis reveals that both Putin and Poroshenko have adopted similar rhetorical strategies – 'good vs. evil' and 'us vs. them' – in an effort to rally citizens around the flag. They emphasise the righteous nature of their cause, their leadership in working toward a solution, and other countries' approval of their political stances. This is an exercise in national identity building, while portraying the adversary as illegitimate, dangerous, and even terrorist in nature. To resolve the

39 'Speech by President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko at the session of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine with participation of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg,' Office of the President of Ukraine, 22 September 2015, http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-poporoshenka-na-zasidanni-radi-na-36007.

40 Petro Poroshenko. Speech by President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko at the session of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine with participation of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, 2015.

41 Vijai Maheshwari. 'Ukraine's Lonely Cyberwarrior vs. Russia,' *The Daily Beast,* 18 February 2015, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/18/ukraine-s-lonely-cyber-warrior.html.

42 *Ibid.*

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situation, Russia has offered its services as an indispensable negotiator. By contrast, Ukraine has oriented its national strategy to the West and to NATO. Russia has focussed on national interests, while Ukraine has appealed to the international community for understanding and support.

Even while Russia and Ukraine have been engaged in a modern, 'hot' military conflict, its leaders have shed very little light on cyber warfare. Russia has referred to it only in high-level, diplomatic terms. Ukraine, despite the fact that it has suffered numerous cyber attacks, primarily frames the issue within the larger concept of hybrid warfare. Neither country denies that cyberspace is now a theatre of warfare, or that it is part of the Ukrainian conflict, but neither has argued that cyberspace is an integral aspect of it. And for the most part, this echoes the sentiments of other authors and chapters in this volume.