

CLASSIFYING RUSSIAN PSYOPS AND COUNTERMEASURES: IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY

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Abstract: *This research examines the role of psychological operations (PSYOPS) in the Russian-Ukrainian war, analyzing their integration into Russia's broader military strategy and assessing their alignment with NATO's doctrinal criteria for PSYOPS. The research follows a qualitative methodology, combining content analysis of NATO doctrines, open-source intelligence (OSINT), and case studies of Russian PSYOPS operations. The study first establishes the conceptual and doctrinal framework of PSYOPS, considering its function in a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) environment, which shapes the unpredictability and adaptability of psychological warfare. Subsequently, the research explores how Russia's PSYOPS align with NATO doctrine, identifying key deviations and their strategic implications. The study also evaluates the effectiveness of Ukrainian countermeasures in mitigating the operational impact of Russian PSYOPS, focusing on resilience and military adaptation. A critical approach for data analysis is applied, cross-referencing multiple sources to mitigate information bias and ensure accuracy. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the operational effectiveness of PSYOPS in hybrid warfare and the challenges associated with counteracting such strategies in modern conflicts.*

Keywords: *PSYOPS; hybrid warfare; OSINT; military strategies; NATO doctrine*

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary security environment has undergone profound transformations, driven by technological advancements, geopolitical shifts, and the increasing prominence of non-kinetic strategies in conflict. Traditional warfare, centered on territorial control and military dominance, has gradually given way to hybrid approaches that integrate conventional operations with psychological, informational, and cyber dimensions. These developments have reshaped how states engage in strategic competition, making perception management and cognitive influence central to modern security frameworks.

Psychological operations (PSYOPS) have been employed in military strategy for decades, evolving alongside changes in warfare. While their historical roots can be traced to propaganda efforts and psychological influence in earlier conflicts, the systematic application of PSYOPS gained prominence in the 20th century, particularly during the Cold War. The development of mass media, and later digital communication platforms, has expanded the reach and effectiveness of such operations, allowing state and non-state actors to engage in large-scale influence

campaigns that transcend traditional military engagements.

In recent years, the resurgence of geopolitical competition has been accompanied by an increased reliance on PSYOPS as an instrument of power projection. The war in Ukraine has underscored this trend, highlighting the role of psychological operations not only in direct military engagements but also in shaping public perception, influencing political decision-making, and destabilizing adversaries. Russia's use of PSYOPS in this conflict represents a continuation of its broader hybrid warfare strategy, raising concerns about the implications for regional security and the effectiveness of existing countermeasures.

In this context, the study examines the categorization of Russian PSYOPS and the strategies developed to counteract them. By assessing their role within the broader security landscape, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of contemporary conflicts, where the battle for influence is as crucial as traditional military capabilities.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the role of PSYOPS within Russia's military strategy by examining how these operations have been integrated into broader efforts to manipulate perceptions and destabilize Ukraine's internal resilience, while also assessing the extent to which they align with or diverge from NATO's established criteria for psychological operations. This analysis will identify key deviations and their strategic implications, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of Ukraine's countermeasures in mitigating the operational impact of Russian PSYOPS.

Beyond this central objective, two secondary objectives guide the research. The first is to identify and analyze the key psychological techniques and information manipulation tactics used by Russia and verify the degree to which they adhere to NATO's PSYOPS doctrine. Where deviations exist, the research will explore how and why Russian methods differ from NATO's approach. The second objective is to assess Ukraine's response, focusing on the measures adopted to counteract these operations and determining their effectiveness in mitigating the intended psychological and military effects.

To address these objectives, the research explores two primary questions: (1) First, to what extent do Russia's PSYOPS campaigns in Ukraine align with NATO's doctrinal definition of psychological operations, and where do they diverge? and (2) Second, how effective have Ukraine's countermeasures been in neutralizing or minimizing the operational impact of Russian PSYOPS?

The study follows a qualitative methodological approach, integrating multiple research methods. Content analysis serves as the primary method, applied to official documents, military doctrines, and open-source intelligence (OSINT) sources. This facilitates an assessment of Russian PSYOPS by cross-referencing their implementation with NATO's doctrinal criteria. Additionally, qualitative OSINT research provides insights from digital platforms, media sources, and governmental statements, allowing for a contextual understanding of the evolving landscape of psychological operations.

Before engaging in the core analytical process, the research considers how PSYOPS operate within a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) environment. This conceptual framework is particularly relevant to understanding the adaptability and unpredictability

of modern warfare. The uncertainty surrounding the effectiveness of information operations, the complexity of multi-layered disinformation campaigns, and the ambiguity regarding public and military reception of PSYOPS messages all contribute to the broader context in which these operations unfold.

The methodological implementation begins with content analysis to establish the doctrinal and strategic foundations of PSYOPS. This will be followed by an in-depth examination of specific operational cases, supported by OSINT findings that capture the real-time evolution and effectiveness of these campaigns. The research will employ case studies to illustrate key PSYOPS initiatives, including Russia's recruitment campaign, the large-scale mobilization effort through the Moscow rally and the use of loudspeaker-equipped TIGR armored vehicles and ZS-88 BTR-80 platforms to transmit fear-inducing messages to Ukrainian forces. These cases will provide empirical examples of how PSYOPS have been structured, disseminated, and adapted over time, allowing for a deeper understanding of their function within the broader hybrid warfare strategy. Additionally, they will be analyzed through NATO's doctrinal lens to assess their alignment with established PSYOPS principles or their divergence toward alternative psychological warfare tactics.

A critical approach is applied throughout the study, recognizing the challenges posed by information bias and the operational objectives underlying various sources. Since both Russian and Ukrainian PSYOPS aim to shape perceptions and influence actions, systematic cross-checking is employed to verify the accuracy of data and minimize bias. This approach enables a balanced assessment of both offensive and defensive dimensions of psychological operations.

Data collection is based on publicly available materials, including official government documents, military publications, media archives, and OSINT.

3. THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN OPERATIONS IN UKRAINE

Since 2013, Russia has progressively transitioned from conventional military engagements to a hybrid warfare model that integrates PSYOPS, cyber warfare, economic coercion, and political subversion. This shift became particularly evident in Ukraine, where a sequence of hybrid operations was employed to

weaken state institutions, erode public trust, and prevent the country's integration into Western security structures. The strategic recalibration of Russia's foreign policy during this period (Tsygankov, 2013: 207-210) marked a departure from direct territorial conquest toward a model of influence projection that relied on information dominance and destabilization efforts.

The first large-scale implementation of hybrid tactics in Ukraine began in late 2013, coinciding with the Euromaidan protests (DeBenedictis, 2021: 78). As demonstrations intensified following the suspension of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (European Commission, 2013), Russian-controlled media platforms launched extensive psychological campaigns aimed at discrediting the movement. State-funded outlets such as RT and Sputnik disseminated narratives portraying the protests as a Western-engineered coup (EUvsDISINFO, 2021), reinforcing divisions between pro-European and pro-Russian segments of Ukrainian society. These psychological operations were complemented by economic pressure (Wierzbowska-Miazga and Sarna, 2014), including the suspension of trade agreements and energy supply disruptions, which sought to increase internal instability and force the Ukrainian government to realign with Moscow.

Following the fall of President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, Russia escalated its hybrid operations, leading to the annexation of Crimea. Unlike previous territorial acquisitions, this operation relied heavily on psychological manipulation and information warfare to shape public perception. Russian forces operating without official insignia, occupied key infrastructure while state-controlled media framed the intervention as a humanitarian mission to protect Russian-speaking populations (Ashby, 2022). Parallel to military actions, local pro-Russian political figures organized a controlled referendum under coercive conditions, leading to the annexation of Crimea in 18 March 2014 (Putin, 2014). The psychological impact of these operations was significant, creating a rapid shift in public sentiment that facilitated the Kremlin's territorial objectives while minimizing immediate military confrontation.

The annexation of Crimea was followed by the destabilization of eastern Ukraine, where hybrid tactics were employed to fuel separatist movements in Donetsk and Luhansk. Psychological operations played a central role in legitimizing Russian-backed paramilitary groups, with extensive media campaigns portraying the

Ukrainian government as hostile toward Russian-speaking populations (Moser, 2014: 146). During this period, disinformation campaigns intensified, spreading claims of alleged atrocities committed by Ukrainian forces. These narratives, widely disseminated through Russian and local media channels, contributed to the erosion of Ukrainian state authority in the region and fueled the armed conflict in Donbas. The psychological impact extended beyond Ukraine's borders, as Russian influence operations targeted European audiences to generate skepticism regarding Western support for Kyiv, reinforcing narratives of internal corruption and political instability.

By 2015, Russia had further refined its hybrid approach, integrating cyber warfare with psychological operations to undermine Ukrainian state institutions. In December 2015, a cyberattack attributed to Russian-backed groups targeted Ukraine's power grid (Grumaz, 2017), causing widespread outages in Kyiv and western regions. The psychological dimension of this attack was evident in its timing and execution, aiming to instill fear and uncertainty regarding Ukraine's ability to protect its essential services. Similar cyber-enabled psychological operations continued in subsequent years, including coordinated disinformation campaigns during the 2019 Ukrainian presidential elections (Ukraine Election Task Force, 2019), where Russian actors sought to amplify political divisions and undermine public confidence in democratic processes.

From 2016 to 2021, hybrid operations were increasingly focused on economic pressure and the amplification of domestic unrest. Russia employed trade restrictions, energy supply manipulation, and economic coercion to weaken Ukraine's financial stability. Simultaneously, information campaigns sought to exploit societal divisions by amplifying dissatisfaction with government policies and economic hardships. These efforts were aimed at undermining public trust in state institutions and fostering internal instability, making Ukraine more vulnerable to external influence. One of the most significant coercive strategic maneuvers occurred in November 2018, when Russian naval forces seized Ukrainian vessels in the Kerch Strait, presenting the event as a provocation by Kyiv (IISS, 2021: 11). This operation combined kinetic action with psychological influence, aiming to present Ukraine as the aggressor while reinforcing Russia's strategic control over the Black Sea region.

By 2022, Russia had escalated from hybrid operations to a full-scale invasion (Putin, 2022), but psychological and hybrid tactics remained

central to its military strategy. In the early phases of the conflict, Russian PSYOPS aimed to create a rapid collapse of Ukrainian resistance, spreading disinformation that Kyiv had already surrendered and that key officials had fled the country. Digital influence campaigns attempted to manipulate social media platforms, generating panic and misinformation regarding military engagements. On the battlefield, psychological pressure was exerted through targeted strikes on civilian infrastructure, aiming to weaken public morale and create internal pressure on Ukrainian leadership to negotiate.

Despite the scale of these hybrid and psychological operations, their effectiveness diminished as Ukrainian resilience increased. The population, having experienced nearly a decade of Russian hybrid tactics, demonstrated a higher resistance to disinformation, and Ukrainian countermeasures became increasingly sophisticated. Government-led Strategic Communication (STRATCOM) efforts, international support in cybersecurity, and the decentralization of media narratives contributed to countering Russian influence. Additionally, Ukraine's military employed its own psychological operations to sustain morale, counter disinformation, and diminish the impact of Russian efforts to instill fear and division.

The evolution of Russia's psychological and hybrid operations in Ukraine since 2013 illustrates a strategic transition from direct military intervention to an influence-based model that leverages information warfare, cyber operations, and psychological pressure as primary mechanisms of control. The long-term consequences of this shift have extended beyond Ukraine, influencing

European security policies and reinforcing NATO's focus on resilience against hybrid threats. While these operations have demonstrated initial effectiveness in destabilizing adversaries, their diminishing returns in Ukraine suggest that psychological resilience and strategic countermeasures can significantly reduce their impact over time.

4. A DOCTRINAL APPROACH TO PSYOPS

PSYOPS represents a critical instrument in contemporary military and STRATCOM frameworks. They function as a force multiplier by shaping perceptions, influencing behaviors, and supporting broader political and military objectives. While PSYOPS share certain characteristics with other influence operations, particularly disinformation campaigns, they are distinct in their purpose, execution, and integration within military doctrines. Establishing clear differentiations between these concepts is essential for analyzing their application in hybrid warfare and, specifically, for assessing the alignment of Russian PSYOPS with NATO standards.

According to MC 402 (NATO, 2003: 2) and AJP-3.10.1(A) (NATO, 2007:1-1), PSYOPS are defined as

planned psychological activities using methods of communications and other means directed to approved audiences in order to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives.

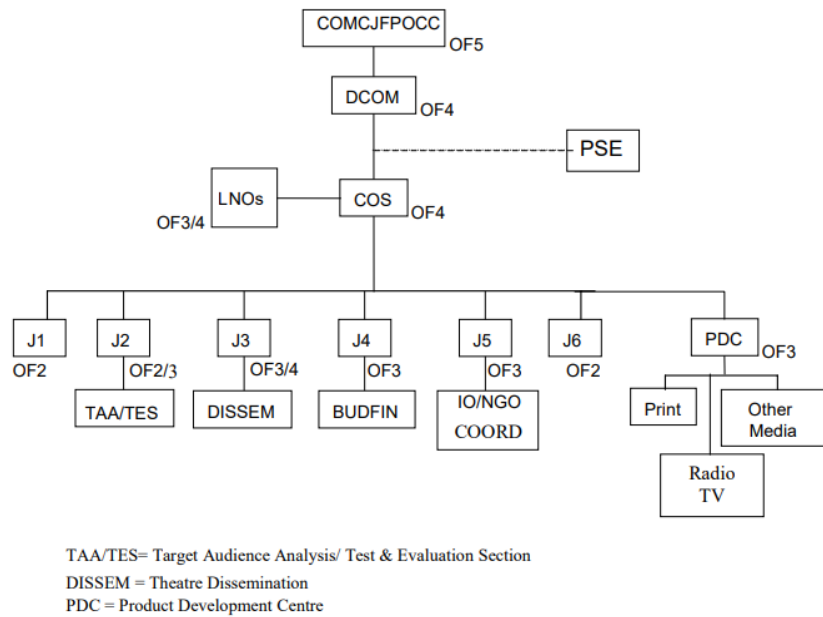


Fig.1. CJFPOCC structure (NATO, 2007: 3 - 3)

Unlike disinformation campaigns, PSYOPS are structured, systematically implemented, and require approval at a strategic level. Their primary function is to support military operations by directing psychological influence toward specific target audiences, ensuring coherence within the broader framework of STRATCOM. Additionally, PSYOPS can involve kinetic actions, as military force is often used to reinforce psychological measures, creating a tangible impact on the adversary's perception and decision-making processes.

The Combined Joint Psychological Operations Task Force (CJFPOCC) is a key component of NATO's doctrinal approach to PSYOPS (see Figure 1), ensuring their integration into military campaigns (NATO, 2007:3-3). It is responsible for planning, coordinating, and executing PSYOPS at multiple command levels, maintaining consistency and strategic alignment with operational objectives.

The HQ Staff oversees operational guidance, target audience analysis, and the development of PSYOPS materials, while also coordinating with civilian agencies to align efforts with STRATCOM goals. The Product Development Centre (PDC) produces print, audio, and audiovisual content, ensuring adaptability to mission requirements. The Dissemination Section guarantees product delivery under all operational conditions. Liaison elements play a crucial role in embedding PSYOPS into broader joint operations, ensuring 24-hour situational awareness and coordination across military components.

A fundamental characteristic of PSYOPS, as defined by NATO (NATO, 2007), is the

requirement for attribution. Disseminated materials, whether in the form of print, audiovisual, or digital content, must be officially attributed to an approved source. This ensures accountability, strategic coherence, and alignment with broader military and political objectives. PSYOPS require clear attribution to maintain credibility and to reinforce the intended psychological effect on the target audience.

In contrast, disinformation campaigns involve the deliberate spread of false or misleading information through various channels, with the objective of manipulating perceptions, influencing opinions, and shaping decision-making processes (Chiluwa & Samoilenko, 2019:282). These efforts often rely on deceptive narratives, manipulated visuals, and digital platforms to amplify their reach, creating a distorted reality that has long-term political and societal implications. While disinformation campaigns can be employed as a component of PSYOPS, they do not encompass the full range of psychological influence tactics that fall under PSYOPS domain.

Additionally, disinformation campaigns can function independently (Chiluwa & Samoilenko, 2019:282), whereas PSYOPS operate as an essential element of STRATCOM, requiring higher levels of approval and integration within state-directed military frameworks. Disinformation campaigns may be deployed across political, economic, and social domains (Wright, 2025:71), while PSYOPS are applied in a military context and are considered fundamental to strategic deterrence. A critical distinction is that PSYOPS can integrate kinetic actions, reinforcing

psychological effects through military means, while disinformation campaigns remain within the domain of information manipulation alone.

Given these differences, PSYOPS enable NATO to amplify the effects of its military capabilities by directly influencing target groups. This contributes to soft power projection,

particularly in regions where traditional military engagement may not be viable.

For a systematic comparison, the core characteristics of PSYOPS and disinformation campaigns have been extracted to an analytical table (see Table 1), which will serve as a reference point for assessing Russian operations in Ukraine post-2022.

Table 1. Doctrinal and operational distinctions between PSYOPS and disinformation campaigns

Criteria	PSYOPS	Disinformation campaigns
Objective	Influence perceptions and behavior to achieve military and political goals	Manipulate information to distort reality and influence decision-making
Target audience	Specific, defined audience within operational parameters	Often broad and undefined, targeting general populations
Integration	Part of STRATCOM	Can be employed ad hoc without direct military coordination
Use of false information	Can use selective information but does not rely solely on deception	Relies primarily on the spread of false or misleading narratives
Application context	Military and security-related environments	Can function independently across various domains
Use of kinetic actions	Can include kinetic operations to reinforce psychological effects	No direct use of kinetic force, relies solely on information manipulation
Attribution	Must be attributed to an official source	Often anonymous or falsely attributed to unaffiliated sources

5. CASE STUDIES

One of the earliest large-scale Russian PSYOPS campaigns in 2022 focused on military recruitment, initiated in March. This operation targeted a young demographic, using media and digital communication channels to promote military service under favorable conditions. Disinformation tactics reinforced narratives of NATO aggression, positioning military enlistment as both a duty and an opportunity (Dylan *et al.*, 2022:144). Official Russian government statements aligned with these recruitment efforts, underscoring national security threats and the necessity of military mobilization. Promotional materials, such as the Military Mortgage Brochure issued by the Russian Ministry of Defense (Gielewska *et al.*, 2022), highlighted financial incentives, reinforcing the psychological appeal of military service. The internal dissemination of these materials had an external destabilizing effect, suggesting a prolonged military engagement and shaping Russia's mobilization strategy.

Beyond recruitment efforts, Russia employed additional psychological influence strategies to shape public perception and sustain support for its military actions. One significant example was the March 18, 2022, rally in Moscow, where Putin sought to display national unity in support of the

invasion (AP, 2022). The event commemorated the annexation of Crimea and reinforced the justification for military operations in Ukraine. Positioned before a banner stating “for a world without Nazism” (Lynch, 2022) Putin's speech framed the war as a necessary intervention against external threats. This event was a classic example of mass psychological mobilization, utilizing nationalist sentiment to sustain public support for the ongoing conflict.

Another PSYOPS initiative involved the deployment of loudspeaker-equipped TIGR armored vehicles and ZS-88 BTR-80 platforms to transmit messages to Ukrainian forces on December 27, 2023 (ISW, 2023). Delivered in Russian and Ukrainian, the broadcasts warned of continuous airstrikes, artillery barrages, and drone attacks, presenting surrender as the sole chance of survival. These transmissions took place along the Dnipro River, in the Donbas region, intensifying psychological pressure on Ukrainian troops.

Ukraine responded with a PSYOPS campaign designed to discredit Russian recruitment strategies. Mirroring the methods of Russian operations, Ukraine disseminated targeted content portraying the Russian military as ill-equipped and disorganized. Ukrainian media sources framed the conflict as one where Russian troops faced inevitable failure, a message encapsulated in a

widely distributed official recruitment poster stating, “There will be only one response to Russian troops – hatred and contempt. And our Armed Forces will inevitably come” (Interfax, 2022). The campaign sought to undermine Russian military morale while strengthening domestic and international support for Ukraine.

Another significant psychological operation conducted by Ukraine targeted Russian prisoners of war. On March 2, 2022, Ukraine publicly invited the mothers of captured Russian soldiers to retrieve their sons (Luxmoore, 2022), highlighting inconsistencies in Russian narratives.

On March 18, 2022, another psychological operation gained international attention when Ukrainian media reported that a demoralized Russian soldier surrendered his tank in exchange for \$10,000 and the opportunity to apply for Ukrainian citizenship (Kesslen, 2022:00:03-00:22). In this context, Ukraine’s Minister of Internal Affairs stated that “the Russians are giving up” (BBC, 2022:00:01-00:34). This operation leveraged both psychological and material incentives, exposing Russian military dysfunction and providing an alternative to enemy troops.

Deception operations also played a role in battlefield tactics, with Ukrainian forces employing kinetic measures to mislead Russian troops. Images from Kharkiv revealed the deployment of decoy mannequins dressed in military uniforms, equipped with fake weapons to deceive Russian forces into misallocating resources (India Today, 2022:00:26-00:34). These tactics, coupled with targeted disinformation campaigns, sought to induce strategic miscalculations.

Ukraine’s countermeasures to Russian PSYOPS extended beyond individual campaigns. Since 2016, Ukraine had invested in specialized military structures for psychological operations, culminating in the establishment of the Special Operations Forces (SOF). Within this framework, the 72nd Center for Information and Psychological Operations played a key role in formulating counter-narratives and disrupting Russian influence efforts. In 2017, Ukraine formalized the Doctrine of Information Security (President of Ukraine, 2017), integrating PSYOPS within national defense planning. However, the effectiveness of these efforts was challenged in February 2022, when the Russian military targeted and destroyed the 72nd Center’s headquarters, emphasizing the importance on controlling the psychological battlespace.

The reviewed case studies illustrate the extensive role of psychological operations within

the Russia-Ukraine war. Russian PSYOPS efforts prioritized recruitment, intimidation, and mass mobilization. In contrast, Ukraine’s PSYOPS sought to undermine Russian military cohesion, disrupt enemy morale, and amplify domestic resistance.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The analysis of Russian PSYOPS in Ukraine reveals four key deviations from NATO’s doctrinal framework: attribution, target audience specificity, integration with kinetic actions, and reliance on disinformation.

Unlike NATO, which requires official attribution for PSYOPS materials, Russian operations rely on unofficially state-controlled media, proxy organizations and dispersed digital sources to obscure their origins while shaping narratives. In terms of audience, Russian influence campaigns target broad and diverse groups, aiming to influence political attitudes and disrupt societal stability. Regarding kinetic military actions, Russia employs strikes and intimidation tactics to influence adversary perceptions; however, these actions are not systematically coordinated with psychological campaigns, resulting in a fragmented approach. In terms of the nature of information used, Russia primarily relies on false and distorted narratives, particularly in recruitment campaigns and portrayals of Ukrainian military weaknesses.

These findings highlight that Russian PSYOPS do not align with NATO’s doctrinal principles. Instead, they operate within a broader hybrid warfare framework, blurring the lines between military strategy, political influence, and psychological manipulation.

In contrast, Ukraine’s PSYOPS fully align with NATO doctrines, demonstrating a commitment to attribution, integration with kinetic actions, and adherence to strategic messaging discipline. The research shows that Ukraine has effectively countered Russian psychological operations through rapid narrative control, audience-specific campaigns, and psychological resilience within its broader military strategy.

The ability to disrupt, counteract, and replace adversarial narratives has been essential in neutralizing the impact of Russian operations. However, the Russian targeting of Ukraine’s 72nd Center for Information and Psychological Operations highlights the importance of securing and decentralizing strategic communication capabilities in hybrid warfare.

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