The Soviet Origins of Russian Information Warfare

Manifestations of Reflexive Control in Ukraine

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Abstract

The recent resurgence of Russia as an assertive global power and its determination to contest the geopolitical status quo have prompted a wave of intellectual appreciations of the military and political methods it employs in furtherance of national interests. The proliferation of novel labels that attempt to capture and qualify the essential character of contemporary Russian foreign and security policy suggests that Russian expressions of modern (political) warfare, and information warfare in particular, require a new conceptual framework to be rightly understood. Another strand of literature, however, refers to the congruence between recent Russian expressions of information warfare and Soviet-era military concepts. 'Reflexive Control' is one such Soviet theory that receives occasional mention as concept that can elucidate modern Russian behavior. Reflexive Control, in its basic form, takes place when a controlling party purposefully conveys reasons and motives that cause a subject to independently make a decision that favors a predetermined hidden agenda of the controlling party. This study represents the first comprehensive attempt to apply the concept of Reflexive Control to modern-day expressions of Russian information warfare in Ukraine, by investigating the Russian use of techniques of Reflexive Control in Crimea and the Donbass since February 2014. On the basis of indicators distilled from established literature on Reflexive Control, the empirical analysis suggests that the main qualities underpinning Reflexive Control as a theory function as core tenets of the Russian security policy in Ukraine, and can thus account for modern-day expressions of information warfare. It concludes on that basis that the conceptual framework brought forward in this study provides for a very relevant tool with which to interpret Russian actions in Ukraine. It furthermore echoes other works that suggest the conceptual novelty that is attributed to contemporary manifestations of Russian information warfare is overstated, since the methods with which such war is waged find clear resonance in the literature on Reflexive Control.

Keywords: Reflexive Control; Information Warfare; Russia; Ukraine; Maskirovka; Active Measures; Dezinformatsiya.

Foreword

The idea for this thesis sprung from a personal fascination with the supposedly very successful Russian effort at reasserting itself on the global stage and effectively contesting the unipolar Western international and security order. This pro-active (or hostile) approach to the surprise of many has arguably exposed the West as at times insecure, disunited, reactive and on the back foot. This against all odds, one may claim, and on the basis of impressive Russian asymmetrical use of resources.

The Russian assertiveness gains many different expressions, but even the casual observer can distinguish an overarching theme in the Russian approach. It is the ability to manipulate the perceptions of different audiences worldwide that signifies the most potent weapon in the Russian arsenal and forms a common thread in the Russian grand strategy of the 21st century. The research into expressions of this dynamic in the Ukraine crisis introduced me to a somewhat dated Soviet theory on comprehensive cognitive manipulation, which upon further investigation provided a hopeful theoretical baseline for understanding better the successful Russian resurgence that occupies the minds of so many in the West.

I would like to thank first and foremost my supervisor Dr. M. de Haas, whose guidance and feedback was invaluable to this research project. I am furthermore grateful for the conversations I have had with a number of experts on Russian security policy, which have shaped the direction that this study has taken.

Ruben Treurniet

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

CIA	Counter Intelligence Agency
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
EU	European Union
FSB	*Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti*, Russian Federal Security Service
GRU	*Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye*, Russian Military Intelligence Service
ICAS	International Center for Defence Studies
JIT	Joint Investigation Team
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, Soviet Security Service
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
RC	Reflexive Control
RT	Russia Today
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
START	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
SVR	*Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki,* Russian Foreign Intelligence Service
TASS	*Telegrafnoe Agentstvo Sovetskovo Soyuza,* Russian News Agency
US(A)	United States (of America)
USASOC	United States Army Special Operations Command

1 Introduction

1.1 Manipulation of information as means of modern warfare

Russia's involvement in the Ukraine conflict has been labelled in a variety of ways. Observers have named it, amongst others, 'Hybrid Warfare' (Thornton, 2015), 'Full-Spectrum Conflict' (Johnsson & Seely, 2015), 'Non-Linear Warfare' (Pomerantsev, 2014a) and 'New Generation Warfare' (Bērzinš, 2014). Although the terminology varies according to the exact appraisal of Russian actions and intentions, a core tenet of each interpretation is the centrality of informational capabilities as prime determinant of military and political conflict in Russian strategic thinking. The importance of influencing information flows forms a central premise of Russian geopolitics more generally, which capitalizes on the notion that an ongoing 'cognitive' or 'information war' is a defining dimension of contemporary international confrontations (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014 p.13, 17; Samadashvili, 2015, p.22; Smith, 2016, p.21). As such, Russia has proven itself particularly responsive to the post-modern information landscape, by recalibrating its communication strategy to fit the age of 'information geopolitics' (Thomas, 2015a, p.11). This (perceived) state of affairs translates into a conception of information as possible tool to "undermine political, economic, and social systems; carry out mass psychological campaigns against the population of a State in order to destabilize society and the government; and force a State to make decisions in the interests of their opponents" (Thomas, 2015a, p.12).

The perceived vast potential of information as weapon to define the course of both military and non-military conflicts has led Russia to assign an increasingly large role to informational capabilities in pursuit of military and political objectives (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). This has been put on clear display during the Ukraine conflict (Sazonov, Saumets & Mölder, 2016). In response to the supposed attempts to manipulate perceptions of Russian involvement in Ukraine, General Philip Breedlove of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) claimed that Russia had showcased "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare" (quoted in: Vandiver, 2014). The Ukraine conflict is therefore seen by many as a revealing case-study of developments in Russian security policy and the role that information warfare plays in it.

However, multiple reflections in policy-papers argue that the novelty of Russia's contemporary approach to information warfare should not be overstated (Ven Bruusgaard, 2014; Darczweska, 2015; Snegovaya, 2015; Gilles, 2016; White, 2016). As Darczweska (2015, p7) claims, "doctrinal assumptions about information warfare demonstrate not so much a change in the theory of its conduct … but a clinging to old methods (sabotage, diversionary tactics, disinformation, state terror, manipulation, aggressive propaganda, exploiting the potential for protest among the local population)". The reference to pre-existing techniques begs the question to what extent Russian expressions of information warfare in Ukraine indeed require a new conceptual framework to be rightly understood and appreciated – something the proliferation of novel labels suggests. It is clear in any case that the use of information operations to influence perceptions and behaviors of adversaries is far from new. Manipulating information flows was an important element in the Soviet repertoire during the Cold War, and served the purpose of battling over the way in which affairs were perceived by particular audiences. It suggests the possibility that the current Russian conception of information war and its methods can be seen as an updated version of original Soviet techniques. Are modern Russian information operations indeed old wine in new bottles? And if so, which original conceptual framework can provide a useful template for modern day expressions of the Russian manipulation of information?

Such issues have led some to argue current Russian information operations in the Ukraine-context to be a renewed expression of the theory of 'Reflexive Control' (RC) that formed part of Soviet military strategic thought developed from the late 50s onward (e.g. Kasapoglu, 2015; Snegovaya, 2015; Rasmussen, 2015; Selhorst, 2016). RC, in its most basic form, entails the attempt of a controlling agent to influence the decision-making of a subject through manipulation of its cognitive processes (Thomas, 2004, p.237). By manipulating the input that defines a subject's judgement, the controlling agent herewith aims to inform the decisions of the subject to the degree that it comes to correspond to the interests of the controlling party. As Kasapoglu (2015, p.6) rightly notes in a research paper by the NATO Defense College, "Ukraine has been serving as a 'laboratory' that can be observed to determine the characteristics of the Russian 'reflexive control' concepts". But while such accounts are useful and thought-provoking, the existing references of RC in the Ukraine context are scant, mostly non-academic and all lack an elaborate framework for proper analysis of the degree to which RC can be seen as relevant conceptual template for modern Russian information warfare. In order to assess whether or not RC can provide a satisfying

theoretical lens, this research therefore aims to fill this academic void by translating RC into relevant indicators and applying these to the Ukraine conflict.

In doing so, the thesis will zoom in specifically on the Russian techniques of information warfare during the annexation of Crimea in February and March 2014, and the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine (or 'the Donbass') since March 2014. The most important reason for these choices is the geopolitical weight that both cases carried as phases of a wider conflict over Ukraine that struck at the core of Russian perceptions of national security, and the likelihood that a study of Russian actions could therefore be particularly revealing of the main methods employed. Although many analyses on Russian information warfare in Ukraine have been brought forward (mostly in policy-papers, see, e.g. Darczweska, 2015; Snegovaya, 2015; Giles, 2015; Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016), references to RC as relevant theoretical construct are very sparse and limitedly substantiated, justifying scrutiny on the conceptual basis brought forward in this study. The above considerations lead to the research question and sub research questions outlined in the following sections.

1.2 Research question

How can the Soviet concept of Reflexive Control account for expressions of Russian information warfare in the context of the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbass?

1.3 Sub research questions

1. What is the Soviet concept of Reflexive Control?
2. How can Reflexive Control be translated into relevant indicators for the Ukraine-context?
3. What role does information warfare play in contemporary Russian security policy?
4. Which expressions of Reflexive Control can be identified in the case of Crimea?
5. Which expressions of Reflexive Control can be identified in the case of Donbass?

1.4 Societal and academic relevance

The resurgence of Russia as an assertive global power in itself demands academic and societal recognition and warrants further research into and debate over the nature of this development and possible responses to it. The information domain is particularly relevant in this regard. The revolution in communication technology of the past decades has fundamentally reshaped the ways in which information is (re)produced, shared and consumed, driving the need to foster an understanding of the way in which malevolent information manipulation can work to the detriment of (inter)national security and stability. Only slowly, and belatedly, do Western policy-making circles acknowledge the severity of the threat that the Russian information warfare can pose to the stability of the West (Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016, p.1; Applebaum & Lucas, 2016). Mark Galeotti, a renowned expert on Russian security policy, even goes as far as to argue "the West is at war" with Russia as it is (Galeotti, 2016), while the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the need to counteract "Russian information warfare" as recent as November 23rd, 2016 (European Parliament, 2016). To research the relevance of RC as theoretical template for modern-day expressions of Russian information warfare can contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon and thus serves a clear societal purpose. Moreover, the partial annexation of a sovereign country by Russia, the fact that fighting in the Donbass has already claimed more than 10.000 lives, and the fact that the situation in the East is still considered to be a 'frozen conflict', all warrant a proper analysis of expressions of information warfare in the context of Ukraine. Because of the widely established use of information warfare by Russia in the Ukraine conflict, this research will principally focus on Russian actions when considering the Crimea and the Donbass. This does not mean, however, that there are no other actors that may have conducted (similar) information operations, covert or overt, in an attempt to manipulate perceptions on the conflict, which has undoubtedly been the case. It does mean that Russia is simply seen as the most relevant actor in this context, and that its methods on information warfare invite further investigation.

The connection with Crisis and Security Management follows from the fact that the praxis of information warfare touches upon the core of (inter)national security interests. As will be elaborated on later, contemporary Russian perceptions of national security center on the ability to successfully wage information warfare against actors that are seen to do the same against Russia on a continuous basis (Franke, 2015). It follows naturally that possible expressions of such warfare are part of the security management domain. Due to the heightened tensions between Russia and the West and the increasing conflict-potential of information tools, information warfare is bound to become an increasingly relevant dimension of the security agenda of the West - specifically that of the European Union (EU) and NATO – and further drives the need to dissect Russian methods and identify the relevant conceptual framework from which these methods are expressions.

The academic relevance of this thesis in part follows from the societal urgency that the heightening of tensions between Russia and the West and the intensification of information warfare represent. An important purpose of academia is to provide insight into societally relevant phenomena so that they can be adequately understood and dealt with. In the case of the topic under consideration here, academic reflections still leave much to be desired. It nonetheless is true that research into the Ukraine conflict and expressions of Russian security policy and information warfare is in high demand. But the qualifying aspect of this thesis – the application of RC on the case-study of information warfare waged in Crimea and the Donbass – is severely underexposed in academic works. To the extent that RC is applied to the Ukraine context it is done in a very limitedly substantiated manner, without any proper exposition and operationalization of the concept. As such, the academic novelty of this thesis lies in its effort to apply a (limitedly documented) Russian security theory on hitherto unexplored expressions of Russian information warfare during the conflict in Crimea and the Donbass.

1.5 Initial remarks on Reflexive Control

In order to provide the reader with adequate insight into the way in which this thesis is built up, it is useful to shortly touch upon the existing body of knowledge on RC in Western literature, and the demarcation of the RC-relevant concepts of *controlling agents* and *subjects*.

1.5.1 Body of knowledge

Unfortunately, the Western literature on RC is rather limited. This demands a relative freedom to infer from several accounts the main principles that define RC as a concept, and to translate these into indicators relevant for the case under consideration here. There are, nonetheless, several works in Western literature that are well received and form the backbone of other works that build on, or refer to, RC as concept relevant for contemporary Russian strategic thought. Diane Chotikul (1986) has written a long and well-substantiated account on RC towards the end of the Cold War. It reveals the breadth of the possible applications of RC, and herewith establishes clearly that interpretations of RC should not be limited to a narrow, military concept. Nonetheless, RC was originally developed for its military applications, and it is the military domain that Reid (1987) and Thomas (2004) explore in their works. Timothy Thomas (2004) in particular has written a groundbreaking article in which he expounds his knowledge on RC as based on a number of influential Russian sources. The reader would find that nearly every subsequent Western account on RC is based in good part on Thomas' work (see, e.g. Shemayev, 2007; Ginos, 2010; Kasapoglu, 2015; Snegovaya, 2015; Kalinina, 2016; Selhorst, 2016). Arguably, the works of Chotikul (1986), Reid (1987) and Thomas (2004), and the literature to which they refer, provides for a solid enough body of knowledge from which to infer what can be understood by RC, and which concrete methods it can translate into. In terms of the latter, the development of the theoretical framework will serve as the source from which to distill the indicators (or techniques) that will be applied to the Crimea and Donbass cases for empirical analysis. Some of the indicators used will represent established military RC methods, while other indicators will be products of the exposition of general features of the concept of RC as found in the literature mentioned above.

1.5.2 Demarcation of controlling agents and subject

The concept of RC defines actors in relevant circumstances as those who (attempt to) manipulate, and those who are (attempted to be) manipulated. In other words, the controlling agents are those that attempt to manipulate the cognitive process of the subject, in order to define, or control, the latter's decision-making algorithm. Because of the hypothetically limitless applications of a concept defined in such broad terms, it is necessary to specify which actors define the controlling agents and subject(s) in this research. As will be further substantiated in chapter 3, the controlling agents relevant for this study are defined as those actors that can be seen to either directly or

indirectly function as representatives of a Kremlin-mandated narrative or directive relating to Crimea and the conflict in the Donbass. Stemming from considerations on which Russian actors are, or can be instrumentalized to, actively manipulate the information environment in the context of these cases, these agents can range from public officials, to state-owned media outlets such as Russia Today (RT), to state-owned weapons producers such as Almaz Antey. The 'subject' under consideration for this thesis constitutes the audience that the Russian information warfare around Crimea and Donbass would have wanted to target in an attempt to steer its views in a direction favorable to Russian interests. The obvious subjects in this regard are the political leaderships of Western countries (the United States (U.S.) in particular) and Ukraine as direct contestants over influence (or control) over the situation in (parts of) Ukraine. But since 'the whole world was watching' during the Ukraine conflict, the international public (opinion) can also be identified as subjected to Russian attempts at information manipulation, more so because the decisions of foreign leaders in important part are guided by public opinion in the first place. It is indicative of the fact that attempts at RC in practice may be targeted at multiple audiences at the same time. Of course, many other actors can be argued to be relevant subjects in the context of the Ukraine conflict that will not be considered in this research, such as the Russian domestic public (opinion), ethnic Russians in Crimea and the Donbass, or specific foreign officials/commanders as part of micro-level RC-engagement.

1.6 Structure of this thesis

This thesis is built up as follows. After this introductory chapter, the second part will comprise the theoretical framework on RC. It seeks to outline the main principles that define RC and explore ways in which RC can take shape in practice. The third chapter then goes into the research design of the thesis by describing its methods, delineating the units of analysis and observation, and operationalizing the concept of RC by developing concrete empirical indicators. The research will entail a qualitative multiple case study that uses empirical data on the Russian dissemination of information surrounding Crimea and the Donbass, in order to test the validity of RC as explanatory theoretical base for Russian expressions of information warfare. The fourth chapter concerns a contextual overview that will provide the reader with insights into the Russian understanding of

information warfare and the role it plays in modern-day Russian strategic thinking. After this, chapter 5 is devoted to the empirical analysis of the Crimea case-study. Chapter 6, in turn, looks at the Donbass case-study. In Chapter 7, the findings of the empirical research are laid out and reflected upon. Chapter 8, lastly, gives a conclusion of the thesis, outlines some relevant limitations to this study, and suggests further avenues for academic research.

2 Theoretical framework

This section will produce the theoretical architecture that will provide the foundation of the study, and strives to answer the first sub-research question: *"What is the Soviet concept of Reflexive Control?"*.

2.1 Reflexive control as (non-) military concept

"In its most simple form", Clifford Reid (1987, p.294) states, "*reflexive control* is that branch of the theory of control related to influencing the decisions of others". Another Western scholar on RC, Timothy Thomas, in an often-referenced study defines RC as "a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action" (Thomas, 2004, p.237). RC was originally conceived by Soviet military strategists in the late 1950s. Vladimir Lefebvre, one of the founding intellectuals of the concept of RC, defined it as "a process by which one enemy transmits the reasons or bases for making decisions to another" (quoted in Thomas, 2004, p.238). RC attempted to conceptualize one of the core objectives in military confrontations: that of influencing the decision-making process of the adversary to one's own benefit. To achieve this, Lefebvre suggested "we can influence [the adversary's] channels of information and send messages which shift the flow of information in a way favorable to us" (quoted in: Reid, 1987, p.293). Importantly, even though the basics of RC were developed long ago, it remains a relevant concept in the post-Soviet world that undergoes continuous refinement and is further developed in a number of non-military fields. Indicative in this regard is the publication since 2001 of a Russian journal titled "Reflexive Processes and Control" (Thomas, 2004, p.237).

RC takes place when a controlling party purposefully conveys reasons and motives that cause a subject to independently make a decision that favors a predetermined hidden agenda of the controlling party. In order to succeed, the controlling party must imitate the subject's reasoning or possible behavior so as to understand what may trigger the desired reflex. Developing such an understanding is, theoretically, based on assessments of an endless stream of variables that are relevant in defining the behavior of an adversary, such as psychology, personal traits of relevant subjects, history and the roots of a particular confrontation. Russian military theorist Leonenko illustrates the use of RC on the battlefield: "In fact, the enemy comes up with a decision based on

the idea of the situation which he has formed, to include the disposition of our troops and installations and the command element's intentions known to him. Such an idea is shaped above all by intelligence and other factors, which rest on a stable set of concepts, knowledge, ideas and, finally, experience. This set usually is called the "filter," which helps a commander separate necessary from useless information, true data from false and so on" (quoted in: Thomas. 2004, p.241). To manipulate the 'filter' of the subject so as to influence its perception serves as the prime purpose of RC.

Clifford Reid (1987) expounds the manifold military variants that the application of RC may take. According to Reid, the Soviet theory of RC holds that the decision process of an opponent consists of four elements that can all be the subject of reflexive interaction, whether separate or in conjunction. These elements are "the opponent's (1) perception of the situation, (2) goals, (3) solution algorithm, and (4) decision" (p.295). Influencing or shaping any of these elements can work towards the ultimate aim of defining an opponent's decision in a way favorable to Soviet interests, but the elements are ranked on the basis of the likelihood that attempts at RC will be successful. As such, the "most common form of reflexive control is accomplished by providing the opponent with an erroneous or incomplete image of the situation" (p.296), and thus represents the shaping of its perception. In a military context, this can translate into attempts to, for example, manipulate the adversary's perception on "the size and characteristics of one's own forces" and the "current evolution of events" (p.295). Methods to achieve this, according to Reid, are "normally associated, in the West, with the terms *camouflage, concealment,* and *disinformation*" (p.295). In addition to manipulation of the perception of a situation, influencing the way in which the opponent sees and formulates its goals is also an important objective of RC. In shaping the cognitive process of the adversary, the controlling agent can attempt to do so in a way that presents a certain goal as a logical objective towards which actions are then formulated in a fashion that corresponds to preconceived interests of the party employing RC methods (Reid, 1987, pp. 298-305). By transferring particular images of the situation or one's own supposed perceptions or goals, the controlling agent may steer the subject towards preferred (in)action.

Importantly, due to this aim of shaping perceptions, RC is also considered to be a means of information warfare. As Major General Turko, an instructor at the Russian Federation's General Staff Academy, has noted in discussing RC: "The most dangerous manifestation in the tendency

to rely on military power relates more to the possible impact of the use of reflexive control by the opposing side through developments in the theory and practice of information war rather than to the direct use of the means of armed combat." (quoted in: Thomas, 2004, p.240). Herewith Turko establishes a direct link between RC and information warfare and assesses information operations to play a more decisive role in modern military confrontations than does conventional power. Since RC consists of leveraging information to influence the process of decision-making, there exists a natural conceptual overlap between RC and information warfare. Turko also goes beyond the original conception of RC as combat-theory to claim that it has geopolitical significance, rather than being a mere guide to action on the military battlefield (Thomas, 2004, p.240). In the same vein, Ginos states that "the most complex and dangerous application of reflexive control remains its employment to affect a state's decision-making process by use of carefully tailored information or disinformation", suggesting potential impact at the highest levels of political decision-making (Ginos, 2010, p.10).

Kostin of the Moscow Military University brings forward a similar line of thought when he argues that the 'logic of the military-political conflicts' towards the end of the 20th century was such that victory increasingly depended on "informational technologies and mass media" (quoted in: Lepsky, 2002, pp.42-43). Under such circumstances, the use of 'directed information' becomes increasingly important for the purpose of RC, which Kostin defines as "trustworthy facts together with elements of misinformation", and serves to have an audience act in a certain way. Depending on the circumstances, such directed information may target military and political subjects, but increasingly also the populations of other states (ibid.). It seems, however, that Kostin incorrectly uses the term 'misinformation' in this context, since misinformation entails a situation where an audience is presented with false or misleading information without the need for the transmitter to have the *intent* to do so (Thomas, 2004, p.255; Fallis, 2014, p.621; Pynnöniemi, 2016). Since intent is clearly an integral part of directed information, it appears that Kostin means disinformation, or the *purposeful* dissemination of incorrect or misleading information - coupled with trustworthy facts so as to enhance credibility of a packaged message. To the extent that Russian information forms the basis for decision-making of the adversary, according to Kostin it "has to be based on reflexive management" to achieve a desired outcome (quoted in: Lepsky, 2002, p.43).

Adamsky (2015, p.27), in discussing RC based on Russian sources, similarly touches upon the non-military potential of "moral-psychological suppression and manipulation of social consciousness" in pursuit of "desired strategic behavior" by an adversary. As Adamsky notes, RC operations are designed to "manipulate the adversary's picture of reality, misinform it, and eventually interfere with the decision-making process of individuals, organizations, governments, and societies" (p.27). In targeting the population of another state, Adamsky argues, the attacker seeks to "make the population cease resisting …, even supporting the attacker, due to the disillusionment and discontent with the government and disorganization of the state and military command and control and management functions" (p.27). It once again reveals that RC can also be operationalized to serve purposes that go beyond narrow military concerns.

The extensive possible applications of RC were also brought forward by Diane Chotikul, who in 1986 significantly contributed to Western understanding of the RC when she wrote an explorative account on the origins and nature of the doctrine (Chotikul, 1986). She argues the emphasis on controlling subjects' perception in Soviet military theory to be the result of the then prevalent Marxist conception of consciousness. Cognition, in the Marxist-Leninist paradigm, results from the way in which the material world conditions the processes in the human mind, therewith determining 'social consciousness'. Sensory awareness of the empirical world thus defines the dimensions and content of the cognitive processes of an individual. By extension, then, to control the actions of the individual requires the manipulation of one's consciousness, which would ultimately depend on the ability to purposefully influence the external stimuli that define consciousness and thus decision-making.

According to Chotikul, the targets of RC can be threefold. Firstly, it can target a decision process or system of decision-making; secondly it can target individuals responsible for decision making; and thirdly it can target the cultural complex within which decisions are embedded (Chotikul, 1986, p.48). RC can herewith target both allies (such as the domestic population or friendly leaders) and adversaries, and works at the tactical, operational and strategic level. Chotikul's account reveals that our understanding of RC should not be limited to that of (military) combat operations in the narrow sense, even though this field has received the most attention in relation to the concept. RC can thus be applied in a wide range of spheres serving the control of behavior of different subjects in pursuit of different objectives (Thomas, 2004, pp.247-248). It all

comes down to the way in which a subject's 'filters', or information processing mechanisms, are conditioned so as to control (the way in) which (the) information is processed, and ultimately, acted upon. It begs the question how the ambitions of RC are translated into concrete techniques.

2.2 Expressions of RC: Dezinformatsiya, Maskirovka and Finlandization

To explain how RC can work in practice, Chotikul draws upon the related concepts of *Dezinformatsiya, Maskirovka* and *Finlandization* (1986, p.69). Thomas (2004, p.239) and Reid (1987, pp.295-297) similarly refer to disinformation and Maskirovka, with their work focusing primarily on the military application of these concepts. The following serves as a short exploration of these concepts in order to illustrate the methods through which RC can take shape, also outside of the military realm. It is important to realize that these methods have much conceptual overlap, and the exact demarcation of each term remains somewhat ambiguous. All concepts, however, are related to RC in the way that the latter represents the overarching purpose within which these concepts can be embedded as instrument. Dezinformatsiya, Maskirovka and Finlandization, thus, can be employed towards the larger objective of consciously trying to control a subject's behavior as expression of RC.

2.2.1 Dezinformatsiya and active measures

The official definition of Dezinformatsiya in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia was "the dissemination (in the press, radio, etc.) of false information with the intention to deceive public opinion" (in: Bittman, 1985, p.49). But Ladislav Bittman, a defecting former intelligence officer in Czechoslovakia, claimed that this definition does not capture the whole meaning of the term, since "public opinion is only one of the potential targets (…) [and] many disinformation games are designed only to manipulate the decision-making elite, and receive no publicity" (pp.49-50). Bittman instead defines Dezinformatsiya as "a carefully constructed, false message that is secretly introduced into the opponent's communication system to deceive either his decision-making elite or public opinion" (ibid.). This description of the term is revealing of the multi-dimensional nature

of Dezinformatsiya since its use as a tool for manipulating thought- and decision-making processes can range from military officers to political leaderships to public opinion. As Thomas (2004, pp.254-255) explains, Dezinformatsiya attempts to "influence the consciousness and minds of people", which may entail the targeting of "an entire population".

One of the most productive descriptions of Dezinformatsiya is given by John Barron (1974, pp.420-423), who states that "It entails the distribution of forged or fabricated documents, letters, manuscripts, and photographs; the propagation of misleading or malicious rumours and erroneous intelligence by agents; the duping of visitors to the Soviet Union; and physical acts committed for psychological effect." Barron continues by claiming that "these techniques are used variously to influence policies of foreign governments, disrupt relations among other nations, undermine the confidence of foreign populations in their leaders and institutions, discredit individuals and groups opposed to Soviet policies, deceive foreigners about Soviet intentions and conditions within the Soviet Union, and, at times, simply to obscure depredations and blunders of the KGB itself." It is, once again, indicative of the broad applicability of Dezinformatsiya, and its exact expression in relation to RC would depend on the particularities of the circumstances, the subject and the controlling agents.

The concept of Dezinformatisya is often linked to that of so-called 'active measures', which, according to Schoen and Lamb (2012, p.8) is a "catchall expression used by the KGB for a variety of influence activities … to influence the views and behaviors of the general public and key decisionmakers" [1,2]. Methods included, amongst others, "setting up and funding front groups, media manipulation, disinformation and forgeries". The ambiguity on the exact conceptual interaction between Dezinformatisya and 'active measures' is put on particularly clear display in the paper of Schoen and Lamb. The authors describe active measures as going beyond perception management to include "incitement, assassination, and even terrorism" (Schoen & Lamb, 2012, p.8) while on the same page quoting Colonel Rolf Wagenbreth of the East German foreign

[1] The KGB (*'Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti')*, was the main security agency of the Soviet Union from 1954 until its break-up in 1991.

[2] For a detailed exposition of active measures and the relevant elements of the Soviet institutional security architecture, see Heuer, 1987, pp.23-42.

intelligence as stating "Our friends in Moscow call it 'dezinformatsiya' [while] our enemies in America call it 'active measures'". In doing so, Schoen and Lamb suggest on the same page that active measures are both more than and the same as Dezinformatsiya. After all, the authors claim that active measures include physical violence (which Dezinformatisya does not), while they also refer to Colonel Wagenbreth who suggests that Dezinformatisya and active measures are synonymous. Echoing the interpretation of Schoen and Lamb, it seems fair to say that instances of Dezinformatsiya can be defined as active measures, while not all instances of active measures are necessarily expressions of Dezinformatsiya. When active measures include incitement and assassination, the scope of active measures comes to capture physical expressions of political violence (in contrast to principally psychological ones), and can in certain contexts be interpreted as a political modality of military Maskirovka, which is discussed in the following paragraph.

2.2.2 Maskirovka

Maskirovka literally translates into 'masking', and signifies a Russian military technique developed in the early 20th century that centers on camouflage, concealment, and deception. The original purpose of Maskirovka was to contaminate an adversary's perception of a combat situation. There are several distinct ways in which Maskirovka can be used to deceive the enemy by "creating a false image on your strengths and weaknesses" (Anuta, 2016, p.46; see also Cimbala, 1997, p26). Charles Smith (1988 pp.28-39), after analyzing the doctrine in Soviet times, considered it to be "a set of processes designed to mislead, confuse, and interfere with accurate data collection regarding all areas of Soviet plans, objectives, and strengths or weaknesses" and offers a categorization of forms that Maskirovka can take. Both Smith (1988) and Heuer (1987, pp.42-43) argue concealment, imitation, simulation, demonstrative actions *and* Dezinformatsiya to be part of the methods of Maskirovka that can be used to deceive an opponent on the battlefield. Again, this suggests a complex interplay of concepts, since Dezinformatsiya is presented here as an element of Maskirovka, while other definitions have it cover a much wider range of situations than Maskirovka would have. Literature (in the West) is unable to give final disclosure on the meaning of these terms, perhaps precisely because Russian military authors have at times used them interchangeably. This is what Timothy Thomas (2011, p.117) suggests when he states that in describing 'deception', military authors "have preferred, over the years, the terms *maskirovka*

(concealmeant), *obman* (deception), *dezinformatsiya* (disinformation), and *vvedenie v zabluzdenie* (camouflage)". It is beyond the scope of this study to further elaborate on the subtleties of these terms, but it is indicative of the ambiguities that exist in the Russian lexicon that relates to RC.

2.2.3 Finlandization, Strategic Maskirovska

Chotikul (1986, p.72) argues 'Finlandization' to be the "political counterpart to maskirovka", which constitutes the attempt to influence the domestic and foreign policy behavior of adversaries. The Merriam Webster (n.d.) dictionary definition of Finlandization is "(the conversion to) a foreign policy of neutrality under the influence of the Soviet Union". The term itself was derived from the fact that Finland was seen as having been particularly susceptible to these Soviet methods. As Shapiro (quoted in Chotikul, 1986, p.72) claims in this context: "No Soviet leader… has failed to attach supreme importance to the battle for the minds of his opponents. It is toward this end that the whole machinery of state propaganda is directed … to neutralize or cast doubt on information about Soviet life or policy unfavorable to the Soviet Union." To steer (public) opinion abroad on Soviet (political) actions thus becomes an expression of RC, as it attempts to condition the way in which decision-making that affects the Soviet Union takes place, which makes that Finlandization can also be viewed as particular instance of Dezinformatsiya.

As with RC, the original focus of Maskirovska lay in the military realm, where it applied primarily to actively shaping enemy perceptions of Soviet objectives and positions on the combat battlefield. Over the course of the Cold War, however, Maskirovka came to span non-military dimensions as well. Others, therefore, have simply expanded their understanding of Maskirovka to include strategic, non-military domains, utilizing "strategic Maskirovka" as a term that also encompasses the essence of 'Finlandization' as method to influence the wider (geo)political realm and foreign and international public opinion. As Anuta (2016, p.45) claims, there are indications that the Soviet Union was conceptualizing Maskirovska increasingly towards its use in non-military and strategic domains. As the 1978 Soviet Military Encyclopedia stated, Maskirovka was then seen as being "carried out at national and theater levels to mislead the enemy as to political and military capabilities, intensions and timing of actions. In these spheres, as war is but an extension of politics, it includes political, economic and diplomatic measures as well as military"

(quoted in Anuta, 2016, p.45). This conception of the multi-dimensional applicability of Maskirovka justifies a broader understanding of the term and sheds interesting light on the recent (renewed) emphasis on the non-military potential in modern confrontations. Similary, Julian Lindley-French (2015, p.1) argues that strategic Maskirovka represents a "new level of ambition" in applying a doctrine that originated as the use of military deception. The author defines strategic Maskirovka as a "war short of war, a purposeful strategy of deception that combines use of force with disinformation and destabilization", and can thus be applied for non-military purposes (p.4), clearly echoing certain definitional interpretations of Dezinformatsiya and active measures.

It should become clear from the description of Dezinformatsiya, active measures, Finlandization and (strategic) Maskirovka that these concepts are not unambiguous and have significant conceptual overlap. All are, however, directly related to RC as they represent ways in which the cognitive process of a subject can be manipulated to further a preconceived hidden agenda. The real-life expressions of RC can thus take manifold shapes that depend on the relevant controlling agent(s), the subject, its filter, and the way in which it is seen to be best manipulated. With the theoretical baseline of RC in place, the stage is set to expound how RC principles translate into concrete parameters that can be applied to the case-studies. Due to the complex interplay of these concepts, however, the translation into indicators will not be an entirely straightforward endeavor, and demands a degree of demarcation so as to distinguish and classify different expressions of RC. The following chapter will first elaborate on the (justification for the) research methods, before demarcating the actors seen relevant for RC interactions under consideration and operationalizing RC to produce indicators for empirical analysis.

3 Methodology and operationalization

3.1 Research methods

3.1.1 Two-case-study design

As has become clear, this thesis will entail a holistic two-case-study design (see Yin, 2003, p.40) in which the theoretical concept of RC will be applied to Russian attempts at manipulating the information environment in the context of Crimea and the Donbass. Although definitions of the term 'case-study' vary according to exact interpretation, Yin (2003, p.13) gives a useful yet generic description of the term when he calls it "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". It reflects that the thoroughness of case study research allows for a unique level of scrutiny into the complex nature and expressions of the phenomenon under consideration. The choice for these particular case studies was made on the basis of the fact that both the annexation of Crimea and the fighting in the Donbass are exponents of what can be defined as the most salient military and political conflict in recent Russian history. Given the fact that both cases had particularly severe geopolitical ramifications, it seems warranted to research which methods Russia employed to influence perceptions on these events.

Babbie (2013, pp.17-18) divides case-studies into the three categories of explorative, descriptive and explanatory research. This study carries a clear explanatory quality, since it seeks to explain a known phenomenon (Russian expressions of information warfare) on the basis of particular theoretical construct (RC). The three categories, however, do not have to be mutually exclusive, and are not in this case. It could, namely, also be argued that an aim of this study is explorative to the extent that it seeks to assess whether or not a dated and limitedly documented theoretical construct is applicable to a modern-day situation. Similarly, the lack of (academic) overview of expressions of information warfare also makes that this thesis holds significant descriptive value. Nevertheless, the 'how' and 'why' questions are guiding in this research, and the use of an in-depth case study suits such an explanatory approach particularly well.

3.1.2 External and internal validity

A problem with the use of case-studies is that they can have limited external validity, meaning that it is difficult to generalize to other contexts on the basis of the research (Yin, 2003, p.37). The choice for scrutiny of two separate but related cases was made to enhance such validity when compared against a single case-study. Nonetheless, this still constitutes a clear limitation to this study. Because this research entails a relatively novel theoretical approach, however, no final conclusions or generalizations are to be expected in any case. Instead, the use of in-depth research into two cases can provide insights into the viability of RC as theoretical construct for explaining Russian actions, which then may or may not be applied to yet other contexts.

Internal validity is similarly important with research designs that attempt to make causal (or explanatory) inferences (Yin, 2003, p.36). It revolves around the need to ensure that what is being 'measured' or documented in the study actually accurately reflects the real-life phenomenon under consideration. Towards this aim, this study will consider a combination of academic literature, policy-papers, official Russian documents and (international) journalistic (or media) accounts, as well as introduce so-called 'boundedness' that demarcates which data is considered to be relevant for this study. A half-dozen background conversations with experts on Russian information warfare that have been conducted as part of the initial research effort served to guide and consolidate the research process, but will not be alluded to as official sources for this study.

3.1.3 Boundedness

Literature on case-study design emphasizes the importance of boundedness, in which the unit of analysis is both spatially and temporally demarcated. Gerring (2004, p.342) describes this notion as the need for a case study to be "an intensive study of a single unit … a spatially bounded phenomenon – e.g. a nation-state, revolution, political party, election, or person – observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time".

With regard to the temporal dimension, this study will assess possible expressions of RC from the moment that the events under consideration took place until the present. In the case of Crimea this counts as 27th of February 2014, when pro-Russian gunmen seized buildings in Simferopol, the Crimean capital, which would soon escalate to actual annexation by Russia. With

regard to the Donbass, this study will consider relevant expressions since an armed conflict flared up in March 2014.

With regard to the 'spatial dimension', however, it must first and foremost be established how the controlling agent and subject are defined. Because the main principle of RC covers a hypothetically endless stream of controlling agents, subjects and potential methods for influencing its filters, it is imperative to bring some focus into the application of RC to the specifics of the case-study of this thesis. Or, in other words, to introduce 'boundedness'.

3.1.4 The controlling agents

Firstly, to examine to what extent RC can be considered applicable to modern-day Russian behavior, it is necessary to establish which actors are to be seen as the 'controlling agents'. In other words, which institutions or actors in the Russian political and security landscape can be identified as official carriers of a centrally conceived message or guide to action? Whose messages and actions should we look at as possible expressions of a formalized RC theory? Naturally, the most obvious actors in this regard are government officials that carry the formal mandate to represent the Kremlin's views. In this regard, Russian president Vladimir Putin forms the clearest example of a political actor whose dealings can shed light on possible manipulative methods, but other state officials such as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and official spokespersons can also be labeled relevant.

As we will see in chapter 4, Russian security policy has increasingly centered on a determination to change the domestic and international informational landscape in its favor. In this regard, the Kremlin has invested heavily in both internally and externally focused traditional media that purport to give an 'alternative' to Western views on current affairs, but in reality should be seen as a direct extension of the Kremlin (Altman, 2014; Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014; Pekel, 2015; Brandt Corstius, 2015; Gotev, 2016; Gilles, 2016a). Russia Today (RT) is the best-known example of this dynamic and has gained remarkable traction with audiences abroad in a relatively short period of time, with anti-Western, pro-Russia broadcasts and an extensive online presence. Its motto 'question more' is an interesting reflection of the broader Russian denial of objective truth, in a world where everything is subjective and political, and therefore should be questioned. RT's

editor in chief Margarita Simonyan has famously been quoted as saying: "there is no objectivity – only approximations of the truth by as many different voices as possible" (quoted in: The Guardian, 2016). Press agency Sputnik is another communication channel that the Kremlin instrumentalizes as a mouthpiece to get particular messages across (Bershidsky, 2016; Vilson, 2016, p.120). The close ties between the Kremlin and these channels are well established. As Gatov (2015) claims, the Kremlin exerts direct influence through a "media hotline" that was created in the mid-2000s and facilitated a "system of direct communication between Kremlin "handlers" and chief editors at state controlled media". In the same vein, Sergei Zverev, former Deputy Chief of the Presidential Administration, has acknowledged that there are "political meetings where we discussed the agenda of the coming week and developed proposals on how to cover those topics in the media, primarily television" (in: Gatov, 2015). Information that is disseminated via such Kremlin-controlled platforms, then, is deemed relevant material for this study's purpose of examining methods of RC.

Furthermore, due to the firm grip that Putin's administration has established over political, economic, social and cultural segments of Russian society after an extensive process of centralization (see: Tsygankov, 2010, p.131; Cannady & Kubicek, 2014; Tsygankov, 2014; Persson & Pallin, 2014, pp.27-29), there are many other actors (such as in the industrial or military realm) whose messaging can be argued to be direct expressions of the Kremlin line. In the empirical research, the messaging of individuals and institutions will be judged relevant to the degree that these can be argued to have close ties to the Kremlin. Together, these controlling agents make up what will be referred to as the Russian politico-security complex, which represents the multitude of actors that play key roles in executing Russian security policy, as seen first and foremost by the Russians themselves. If the direct link between actor and Kremlin cannot be clearly established (for example, in the case of patriotic individuals or (potentially fake) pro-Russian social media accounts) such actors will not form part of the analysis. In the same vein, hypothetical suspicions on covert attempts by Russian security services to manipulate information flows will not be examined in the empirical research, given their speculative character. Only to the extent that covert operations have been convincingly uncovered or may seep through to the overt sphere and gain the form of official communication or news coverage do such attempts carry any relevance for this study.

3.1.5 The subject

Secondly, in order to carve out the relevant methods of RC, the 'subject' that the Russian leadership would want to control during the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbass needs to be identified. Both events carried massive geopolitical significance, and are still the subject of intense political confrontations. With regard to Crimea, it is fair to say that the (Western) world was shocked to learn that Russian troops had occupied the peninsula, therewith effectively annexing part of a sovereign European country. In the words of David Cameron, then prime-minister of the U.K., the annexation "sent a chilling message across the continent of Europe" (Withnall, 2014). Under such tense circumstances there are many potential actors that the Kremlin would have wanted to manipulate through RC methods. The Russian(speaking) population in both Russia and Ukraine are examples of targets that may have been subjected to RC in an attempt to legitimize Russian actions. This thesis, however, will focus on ways in which actors linked to the Kremlin may have attempted to manipulate the actions of rival governments and international public opinion by means of RC methods. As discussed in the theoretical framework, the public opinion formation can well serve as a target for RC operations since it in important measure defines the way in which political leaders act.

3.1.6 Unit of analysis/observation

Having established the boundaries within which this research will take place now allows for a concrete definition of the unit of analysis and the unit of observation. As based on the justification for the controlling agents under consideration, the relevant unit of analysis constitutes what can be named the expressions of RC by the Russian 'politico-security complex', capturing the breadth of institutional actors that can be seen as exponents of a centrally conceived guide to action by the Kremlin. The unit of observation, then, comprises expressions by these (in)direct state representatives that (attempt to) manipulate or steer the international information environment relating to the annexation of Crimea and subsequent armed conflict in Donbass since they occurred.

FIGURE 1, UNIT OF ANALYSIS

3.2 Indicators

Having outlined the subject and controlling actors under consideration here, this section aims to answer the second sub-research question, namely: "*How can Reflexive Control be translated into relevant indicators for the Ukraine-context?"*.

The articulation of the subject means that the conception of RC relevant here transcends the original military, tactical significance of the theory, since the manipulative methods to control cognitive processes instead target a global audience. Similarly, the above identification of controlling actors has implications for which methods of RC identified in the literature can be seen as relevant for the analysis of Russian behavior relating to Crimea and the Donbass. As has become clear from an overview of the somewhat limited Western literature on RC, there is no off-the-shelf list of RC-indicators that can be applied to non-military situations. There are, nonetheless, common

threads that can be distilled from the concepts discussed above that can be adjusted to the particularities of this research. In addition, there are several examples of concrete indicators to be found in the literature that are relevant for the military application of RC, which can also be translated to suit the non-military dimensions of this framework. What follows is a list of indicators based on the literature and inference from the concepts discussed above.

3.2.1 Maskirovka and Active Measures

As discussed in the theoretical framework, Maskirovka constitutes the military application of RC in which camouflage, concealment and deception are used as ways to disguise the true extent and intent of military operations. Active measures, then, in this study are defined covert special operations normally executed by secret services as part of the political warfare dimension of a conflict. This can gain expression in the form of establishment and support of proxy groups, incitement and the special operations involving various degrees of violence. Even though, as discussed in paragraph 2.2.1., Dezinformatsiya can be seen as a form of active measures, this study will assess instances of Dezinformatsiya as a separate indicator so as to distinguish between physical warfare (Maskirovka and active measures, although these also have clear psychological and RC intent) and psychological warfare *per se* (Dezinformatsiya). Subsequently, given the ambivalence in terms of where exactly Maskirovka stops and active measures start (or vice-versa) in a context of hybrid warfare, the two will be considered in conjunction as the various physical political and military expressions of RC that carry a clear intent to conceal the exact nature of these expressions so as to cloud the judgement of the adversary and herewith exert a certain control over its behavior. In this vein, Thomas (2004, pp.244-245) refers to the writings of Major General (ret.) and RC theorist Ionov as example of RC's application in the military domain. The latter identifies "measures to present false information about the situation" as core method of the "transfer of information to the enemy to promote control over him".

3.2.2 Dezinformatsiya

Again, given the turbidity that surrounds the precise defining of the overlapping concepts under consideration here, a minimal degree of somewhat artificial categorization is necessary. Whether seen through the lens of Masirovka, Dezinformatsiya or other, the core of RC methods revolves

around purposefully presenting subjects with incorrect information so as to steer their decision-making process. To translate this to the non-military realm would entail the introduction and propagation of rumors and falsehoods by relevant channels of communication to convince or confuse the subject. This is the narrow Western definition of disinformation that forms part of all concepts discussed above. Although the Soviet signification of Dezinformatsiya itself also included relatively complex covert operations rather than the 'simple' dissemination of untruths, the ultimate aim was to introduce rumors and falsehoods into a foreign or international information sphere that would take on a life of their own and leave their mark on perception-formation of a situation (Holland, 2012).

Arguably, in the contemporary high-speed and borderless information environment there are more opportunities to by-pass or update such labor-intensive traditional methods by utilizing networks with a global reach that feign neutral and balanced reporting. Indeed, L. V. Matveeva in discussing RC argued the "quick development of informational and computer technologies" to have a great impact on how people perceive reality, as "important and non-important information get mixed" and mediators of information, such as anchors, commentators and "politicians-TV stars" increasingly leave a mark on information provision (quoted in: Lepsky, 2002, p.56). Similarly, as Gilles (2015, p.7) argues, "when leveraging the power of the internet", the "planting and disseminating [of] a lie is exceptionally easy". The fog that extreme interconnectedness and the proliferation of communication channels create can thus facilitate the successful planting and spread of falsehoods via the overt 'channels of control' under consideration here. Barron's definition of Dezinformatisya as "the propagation of misleading or malicious rumors and erroneous intelligence by agents" can be considered very relevant for the Crimea and Donbass context if 'agents' come to include overt mediators of information linked to the Kremlin. When such disinformation becomes part of a framework for foreign decision-making, Gilles (2016, p.39) argues, it constitutes a successful tool of RC.

In addition to spreading blatant untruths, in the battle over the way in which reality is perceived by the global audience, discrediting inconvenient information is the other side of the same coin. It entails reactive attempts to undermine opposing views rather than pro-active efforts to introduce a particular line of thought. The aim of both, however, is to condition the cognitive process of a subject in a way that leads it to interpret a situation in a way that favors the controlling

agent. Indeed, as Barron noted, Dezinformatsiya in part served to "discredit individuals and groups" that opposed Russian interests.

3.2.3 Embedding information in a misleading narrative

Closely related to Dezinformatsiya as outlined above is the use of particular narratives to condition the way in which information is processed and reality is perceived by a subject. Russian military specialist V. L. Makhnin in this regard stated that using so-called 'simulacrums' (an 'image or representation of reality') and analogies to create false comparisons are methods that can be introduced into the process of RC (in: Thomas, 2015b, p.456). In discussing Makhnin's work, Thomas notes that "Putin often uses analogies against the international community", in which he makes questionable historical references and comparisons so as to suit a certain narrative. For this study, it thus seems relevant to research whether similar misleading narratives were employed in embedding the information on Crimea and the Donbass. A well-known Soviet tactic that can be shared under this category is so-called 'Whataboutism' (the Economist, 2008). It covers a Soviet propaganda technique that was given its name by Western observers, in which any criticism of the Soviet Union was met with a "what about ..."? In this way, it attempted to deflect allegations by shifting attention to other actors, and pointing out the apparent hypocrisy in their criticism on the Soviet Union. Applied to this study, it is worthwhile to analyze whether any such rhetorical technique was employed in response to critique over Russian involvement in Crimea and the Donbass.

Another tactic for RC, according to Thomas (2015, p.457), is to accuse opponents of actions that Russia in reality itself performs. Blaming others can shift attention away from one's own questionable behavior and influence a subject's perception. A good example of such 'projection' discussed earlier would be the constant accusations against the West of attempting to dominate the informational sphere as a means of fighting hybrid wars as products from imperialist ambitions. Such projection can shift attention away from Russian actions and color the way in which a situation is framed in Russia's favor.

3.2.4 Power Pressure

Lastly, and as brought forward as a military technique by Major General Ionov, exerting power pressure over a subject can work to influence its perception of the situation and make it reassess its behavior (in Thomas, 2004, pp.244-245). This includes threatening with sanctions or risks so as to manipulate the way in which a subject appreciates the stakes of a particular situation, or to contaminate the adversary's analysis of the way in which the (actual) controlling agent perceives the situation. Translated to the analysis of the case studies, this could take the form of assessing whether threats were issued by Russia with the likely aim to manipulate the decision-making calculus of the political leaderships in Ukraine or the West.

Note, lastly, that the tactics outlined in this section can be used simultaneously. Discrediting inconvenient messages can be achieved by misrepresenting the messenger through false labelling or analogy, for example, while successful Maskirovka efforts will naturally often be accompanied by Dezinformatisya in the form of the spread of lies or discrediting of actors that (attempt to) reveal such Russian military operations. Figure 2 on the next page gives an overview of the operationalization of RC.

3.3 Operationalization of Reflexive Control

Concept	Indicators	Operational definitions
Reflexive Control	Maskirovka & active measures	(Attempts at obscuring) military and special forces operations with military or political warfare intent.
	Dezinformatsiya	Purposeful spread of lies, unsubstantiated rumors, denial of accusations, discrediting of unwelcome sources.
	Misleading narrative	Embedding of information in misleading narratives, diverting attention to moral or legal scruples of adversaries, 'projection'.
	Power Pressure	Threatening with sanctions or risks as a means of exerting pressure on adversaries.

FIGURE 2, OPERATIONALIZATION OF R

4 Contextual overview: Information warfare

With the demarcation of controlling agents, the subject and the RC indicators, the stage is set to move towards the empirical parts of this study. However, in order to be able to properly comprehend Russian actions in the Ukraine, it is imperative to understand how Russia understands the concept of 'information warfare' before moving to the case-studies. The following chapter is meant to embed the empirical analysis of Crimea and the Donbass into a contextual overview that sheds light on the notion of information warfare in contemporary Russian military thought, by answering the third sub-research question: *"What role does information warfare play in contemporary Russian security policy?"*

4.1 Non-military and asymmetric means in modern conflict

Russian involvement in Ukraine has been characterized by a novel approach to modern conflict situations, as it has proven adept at using a variety of military and non-military means to further its political agenda. Many observers have labeled the Ukraine conflict the scene of a 'hybrid war', capitalizing on the convergence of different means employed in the pursuit of strategic objectives (Kofman & Rojansky, 2015; Rácz, 2015; Snegovaya, 2015; Samadashvili, 2015; Pakhomenko & Tryma, 2016; Iancu et al, 2016; Smith, 2016, p.21). Although the conceptual details of 'hybrid warfare' vary according to particular scholarly interpretations, consensus exists on a broad definition in which warfare is no longer exclusively conducted on the basis of a confrontation between conventional forces, but encompasses many elements and actors that transcend the traditional military realm. In this respect, Glenn (2009, p.2) defines hybrid warfare as the simultaneous and adaptive use "of a combination of (1) political, military, economic, social, and information means, and (2), conventional, irregular, catastrophic, terrorism and disruptive/criminal warfare methods", which "may include a combination of state and non-state actors". Perl (2016, p.1) would even go as far as to have hybrid warfare mean "unrestricted warfare", using "all possible means to accomplish political and military goals", where there are no rules: "no chivalry, no ethics and no Geneva convention". What is clear is that the scope and depth of warfare

operations herewith greatly expand, making military decision-making one relevant dimension among many others. McCuen (2008, p. 108) adds to this notion by claiming that hybrid wars are fought on the basis of "both physical and conceptual dimensions: the former a struggle against an armed enemy and the latter, a wide struggle for control and support of the combat zone's indigenous population, the support of the home fronts of the intervening nations, and the support of the international community". The ability to physically subdue an opponent as such becomes part of a larger hybrid effort that includes a confrontation over a grand battle of perceptions that can prove vital for reaching a certain objective. A key component of hybrid warfare is its asymmetric tendency, in which one side to the conflict is able to leverage unconventional means to a degree that is wholly out of proportion to its conventional capabilities, expanding its capacity to do damage to its adversary (Perl, 2016, p.1).

An often-cited publication of the chief of the Russian General staff Valery Gerasimov (2013), nicknamed the 'Gerasimov doctrine', gives a valuable insight into prevalent views in Russian security circles on the nature of contemporary and future warfare, which in many ways corresponds to the defining conceptual qualities of hybrid warfare. Although some scholars such as McDermott (2016) question the 'hasty rush' among Western observers to label contemporary Russian military practice as expressions of 'hybrid warfare' (a concept in itself alien to Russian military thought), this does not mean that the Gerasimov's outlook on modern warfare has not adopted principles that correspond closely to core elements of hybrid warfare. McDermott claims that Gerasimov does not acknowledge the relevance of an overarching doctrine because the latter asserts that "each war represents an isolated case, requiring an understanding of its own particular logic, its own unique character" (in McDermott, 2016, p.100). Arguably, however, hybrid warfare foresees in the variability of conflicts and the ability to adjust the means and modus operandi of a multi-dimensional operation to make it suit varying conditions and needs. Indeed, Gerasimov (2013, p.24) does talk about a change in "the rules of war", in which the role of non-military means in achieving strategic goals has expanded to the extent that it often exceeds "the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness". Moreover, Gerasimov asserts that in the current political-military landscape, "wars are no longer declared", suggesting a 'hybrid' state between peace and war as defining of modern day conflict (ibid.). He also directly alludes to asymmetry as a core element in contemporary confrontations, and furthermore claims that "no matter what forces the enemy has, no matter how well-developed his forces and means of armed conflict may be, forms and methods

for overcoming them can be found" (Gerasimov, 2013, p.29). According to Galeotti (2014), this statement is a veiled acknowledgement of the discrepancy between Russian and Western capabilities in the conventional sphere, which simply implies that conflicts should be fought on terms that best correspond to Russian strengths. Thomas (2015, p.454), although hesitant to use the hybrid label, similarly stresses the importance of asymmetric operations in Russian current strategy, referring to a statement by Putin in 2010 when he stated: "our responses are to be based on intellectual superiority. They will be asymmetrical, and less costly". Even though, as Bartles (2016, p.34) claims, Russian commentaries see hybrid warfare as a Western concept that articulates the relevant dimensions for warfare in narrower terms than Gerasimov himself suggests (for example the view that even NGO's constitute an indirect and asymmetric method of war), this does little to refute the notion that there is extensive conceptual overlap. Most importantly, both hybrid warfare theory and Gerasimov suggest a multi-dimensional, asymmetric and fluid understanding of modern warfare.

4.2 Information warfare as concept in Russian foreign and security policy

With regard to the advent of novel tools of warfare Gerasimov pays particular attention to the potency of "actions of informational conflict". In the view of Gerasimov (2013, p.27), the information arena offers manifold asymmetrical possibilities for the pursuit of strategic goals, which "makes it necessary to perfect activities in the information space". Figure 3 graphically represents 'the main phases in the evolution of conflict' as conceptualized by Gerasimov. Note the prominent role that conducting 'information warfare' plays throughout the operation, before, during and after the escalation of conflict. It begs the question what precisely is meant by information warfare, and to what extent the publication of Gerasimov represents a more broadly shared vision in the Russian security-apparatus on the nature of modern warfare, and the role of information operations in it.

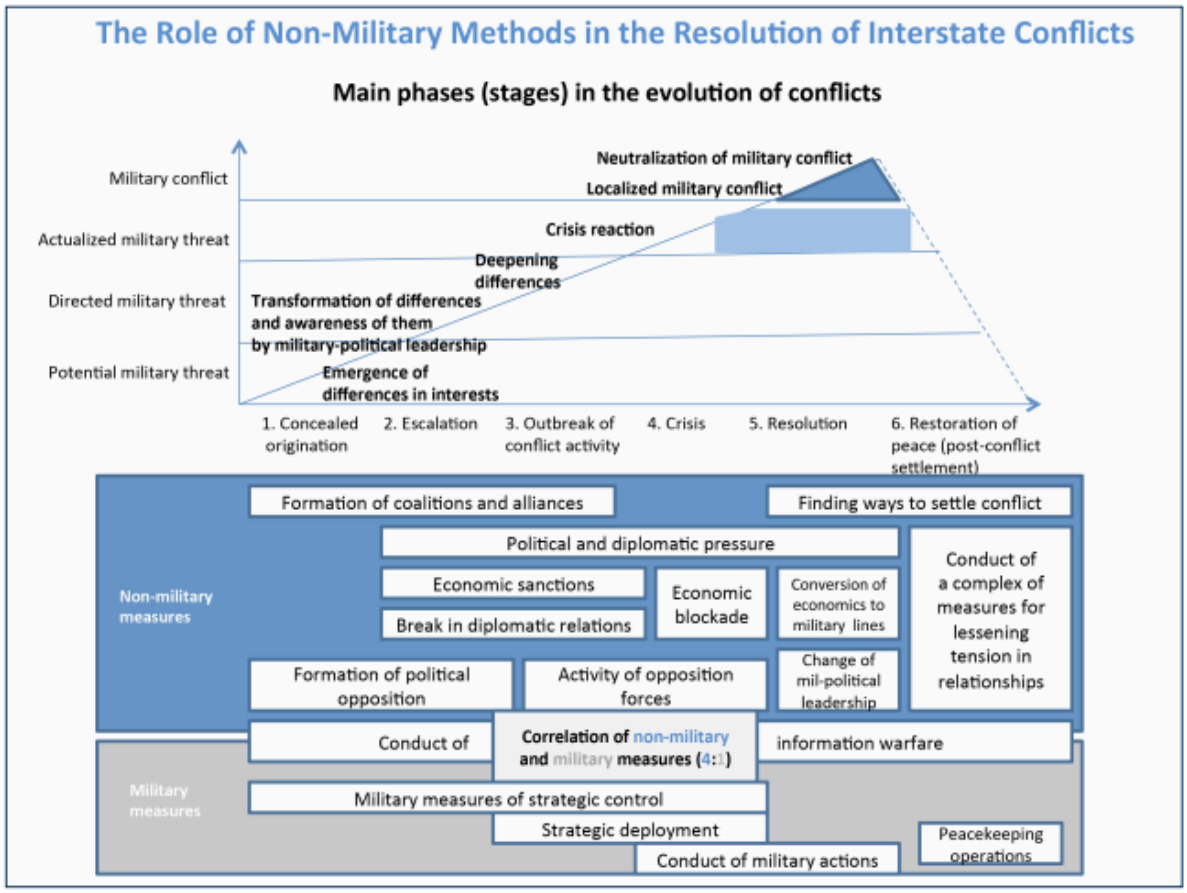


FIGURE 3, THE ROLE OF NON-MILITARY METHODS IN THE RESOLUTION OF INTERSTATE CONFLICTS. IN: SELHORST (2016), P.150

In order to develop a clearer view of the Russian understanding of information warfare, it is useful to draw on official policy documents. In 2011, Russia signed 'The Convention on International Information Security' (Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011) that acknowledged the threats connected to uses of modern information and communication technologies and sought to act against the use of such technology to "violate international peace and security". Importantly, the document gives a useful description of "information warfare", which is defined as:

"[a] conflict between two or more States in the information space with the goal of inflicting damage to information systems, processes, and resources, as well as to critically important structures and other structures; undermining political, economic, and social systems; carrying out mass psychological campaigns against the population of a State in order to

destabilize society and the government; as well as forcing a State to make decisions in the interests of their opponents".

This broad description seems to correspond to the multi-dimensional character that Gerasimov attaches to the notion of information warfare, and is explicitly brought forward by Franke as representative of Russian military thought (2015, p.15). With reference to the entry in the Russian military encyclopedia, Elfving (2016) indicates that information warfare by Russians is conceived as both a matter of information/cyber technology, as well as of psychology (i.e. of "winning hearts and minds"). Gilles (2015, p.2) adds that the Russian conception of information warfare as "all-encompassing and not limited to wartime" is indeed much broader and fundamentally different from Western versions that emphasize the temporary, limited and tactical character of information operations carried out during hostilities. The modern Russian understanding of warfare thus assigns a central role to information operations, stemming from the conviction that winning the information war can indeed completely destabilize an adversary without any need for extensive conventional confrontation.

Russian official documents reflect that information space is increasingly seen as central battleground of modern conflict[3]. The Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 (Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013) emphasizes the need to "develop its own effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad [and] strengthen the role of Russian mass media in the international information environment". It is indicative of the importance that Russian foreign policy has come to attach to influencing international perceptions of Russian behavior through information strategies. The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept also reflects that the Russian view of information warfare does not simply center on technical or military threats, a notion that was also elaborated on in the 2009 National Security Strategy (Russian Federation National Security Strategy, 2009). The document identifies Russian culture and history as matters of national security and emphasizes the need for "creating a system of spiritual and patriotic education of Russian citizens … by developing a common humanitarian and information and

[3] See De Haas (2004, pp7-9) for an overview of the Russian conceptual security framework as translated into official policy documents. The National Security Strategy counts as primary and overarching conceptual framework for Russian security policy, with the Military Doctrine and Foreign Policy Concept as subordinate but also very influential documents.

telecommunications environment in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and its neighboring regions." Russian conceptions of national security are fundamentally intertwined with the ability to bind to it 'compatriots abroad', 'brother nations' and more generally peoples seen to have a cultural, historical and religious bond.

The above indicates that the ability to influence (popular and political) perceptions through information operations lies at the heart of Russian worries over perceived Western informational capabilities, reflected also in the 2014 Russian Military Doctrine (Russian Federation Military Doctrine, 2014), which stressed that (enemy) political objectives can be achieved "by the extensive use of the protest potential of the population and special forces" (quoted in Franke, 2015, p.13). Similarly, the 2015 National Security Strategy (Russian Federation National Security Strategy, 2015) observes an "intensifying confrontation in the global information arena" caused by the aspirations of "some countries" to use informational capabilities towards geopolitical goals, i.a. by "manipulating public awareness and falsifying history". The Russian official documents overall bring forward a negative and cynical view of the world, suggesting that an information warfare against Russia is waged on a continual basis.

4.3 Information operations as coercive tool modelled on the West

Considering the centrality in Russian contemporary strategy of asymmetric and relatively cheap methods of modern warfare, information operations are seen as a critical soft power tool. Putin explicitly referred to the use of information as 'soft power' for the first time in 2012, when he explained soft power as "a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence" (quoted in: Russia Today, 2012). He continued saying that "regrettably, these methods are being used all too frequently to develop and provoke extremist, separatist and nationalistic attitudes, to manipulate the public and to conduct direct interference in the domestic policy of foreign countries", which constitutes a clear reference to perceived encroachment upon national sovereignty by the West.

Importantly, soft power in the Russian playbook has come to represent a set of tools for manipulation to further political ends, rather than the Western interpretation of soft power as a tool

to foster attractiveness and understanding (Monaghan, 2013, pp.6-7; Pomerantsev & Weis, 2014, p.12). Instead, according to Lutsevych (2016), contemporary Russian non-conventional power tools are better described as 'soft coercion', which constitutes the ability to attain objectives or exercise influence by non-military means. Another important distinction between the Western and Russian conceptions of soft power is the fact that in Russia the ability to exercise such power exclusively belongs to and is directed by the state, rather than coming from society as a whole (Smith, 2016, p.24).

Interestingly, this appreciation of the possible potency of information as soft power tool appears to result from the Russian valuation of Western abuse of this same tool. With an implicit reference to the Western world, the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept warns of the risk for the "destructive and unlawful" use of soft power (amongst which information methods) to destabilize countries and manipulate their public opinion under the pretext of supporting cultural or human rights projects (Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). Similarly, Gerasimov (2013, p.24) refers to the Arab Spring in general and the Western involvement in Libya in particular as preeminent examples of the way in which modern conflicts are fought, hinting at (perceived) Western imperialist tendencies as central element in the Russian conception of national security. It is overall well established that the Russian view on Western-oriented regime change often entails the conviction (and accusation) of Western meddling in the internal affairs of sovereign countries to further an imperialist foreign agenda. This was the case with the so-called 'color revolutions' in several former Soviet Republics (among which Ukraine) in 2003-2005, the Arab Spring as well as the more recent Maidan revolution in Ukraine (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014 p.13, 17; Samadashvili, 2015, p.22; Smith, 2016, p.21). According to Russian scholar Igor Panarin, Western superiority in information warfare (i.e. the ability to steer perceptions) guaranteed victories of liberal insurgents supported by the West in recent decades (in: Darczewska, 2014, pp.14-17; Samadashvili, 2015, p.22). It helps explain why, according to Nissen (2016 p.1), "Russia accuses the 'West' of conducting hybrid warfare and information attacks against Russia, not the other way around". The Russian adoption of information warfare herewith is legitimized as but a response to counteract "informational aggression from the Atlantic civilization led by the USA" (Darczewska, 2014, p. 5).

4.4 A grand battle of perceptions

The portrayal of Russia as an embattled actor whose interests are merely to defend itself from foreign encroachment and hostility (which is a commonplace assertion not just in official documents but throughout Russian society) can in itself be seen as an expression of the way in which information can be instrumentalized to influence perceptions of Russia and its intent. With the all-encompassing Russian conception of information warfare in mind, it can easily be argued that the use of such a narrative constitutes what Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) call the 'weaponization of information' that represents a core element of the Russian repertoire of soft coercion. The narrative legitimates Russian confrontational politics, defines it as reactive, and translates outright Russian hostility into vital defense of its national interests.

In the Russian mindset control over information constitutes one of the most powerful weapons in modern confrontations exactly because it allows to define perception. As such, it can be employed to steer public opinion formation at home and abroad and influence political decision-making by adversaries (Darczewska, 2014, p.12). As Jānis Bērziņš (2014ab) of the National Defence Academy of Latvia argues, a key assumption of the Russian strategy is that "war is essentially staged in the minds of the participants" (Bērziņš, 2014a), so that the ultimate objective of asymmetric, non-conventional warfare is to create a sociopolitical environment that is conducive to undermining and destabilizing the economic and political foundations of the adversary. In this hybrid landscape, "information operations have a great role to play" (Bērziņš, 2014a).

As such, Russian strategic thought reflects the importance of *perceived* reality rather than reality itself as defining of the course of modern warfare (Sillanpaa & Simons, 2016, p.10). The notion that perception trumps reality holds important implications for the role that objective truth has to play in contemporary hybrid confrontations. A central premise of the Russian approach to information war even seems to be that objective truth does not exist in the first place. The only thing that matters is the way in which something is perceived, and through manipulation of information this perception can be steered so as to control a narrative. Truth in this way becomes entirely subservient to political expediency.

5 Crimea case-study

As the first of two case-studies, this chapter will apply the RC-framework developed above to the Crimean crisis, by answering the fourth sub-research question: *"Which expressions of RC can be identified in the case of Crimea?"*.

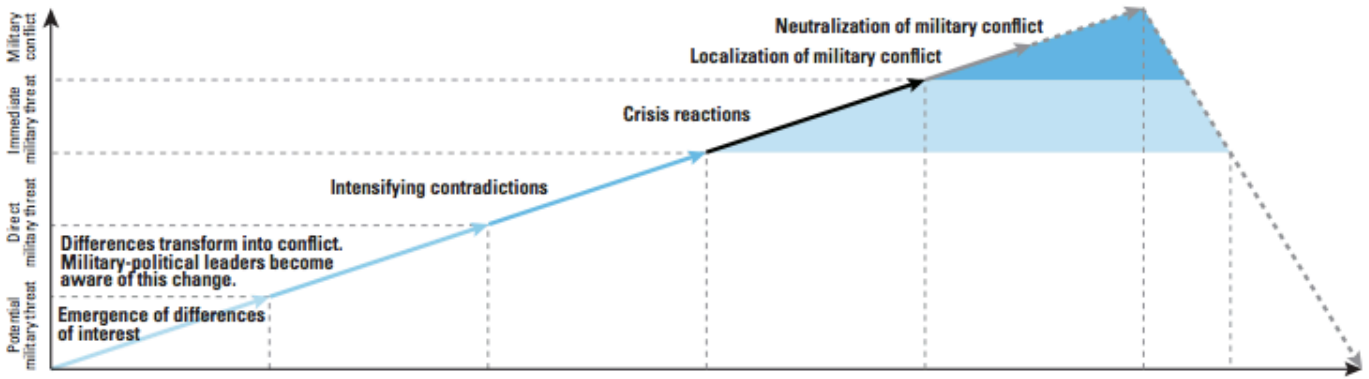
5.1 Timeline

The Euromaidan protests in late 2013 that led to the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovych heralded a pro-European orientation in Kiev, and a decided break with the Russia-friendly approach that characterized its foreign policy in the preceding years (Yuhas, 2014b). The peninsula Crimea, with a largely ethnically Russian demographic make-up, became the focal point of international attention when pro-Russian demonstrators took to the streets on 22 February 2014 and expressed calls for secession (Yuhas & Jalabi, 2014). After several days of increasing tensions between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian groups, unmarked members of the Russian military (which, due to its lease of the Sevastopol military base were already present in great numbers) on February 27th in conjunction with local separatist groups took possession of critical infrastructure and buildings of the Crimean state government. Under (pro-)Russian occupation, the Crimean parliament voted to replace Prime Minister Anatolli Mohyliov with Sergey Aksyonov, the leader of the political party 'Russian Unity'. In addition, the parliament declared to consider Crimea part of Russia, and decided to organize a referendum that would give supposed popular legitimacy to that decision (Yuhas & Jalabi, 2014). The referendum, initially planned for May 25th, was moved forward and held on March 16th. The official results indicated that 96% of voters were in favor of annexation by Russia. Despite harsh international criticism the Supreme Council of Crimea declared independence from Ukraine and requested to be admitted as state under rule of the Russian Federation, a step that was soon formalized. A study by the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) shows a timeline depicted in Figure 4 that is particularly useful, since it has modelled its depiction on the Gerasimov doctrine discussed in chapter 4 (USASOC, 2015). The following paragraphs are devoted to the empirical analysis of the use of RC-methods in the context of the Crimean crisis, as based on the RC-indicators developed in paragraph 3.2.

Main phases (stages) of conflict development in Crimea

Gerasimov's Model in Crimea

- The **covert origins** stage featured a long period of political infighting in Kyiv, culminating in an unforeseen crisis for Putin.
- During the **escalations stage** Putin took actions calculated to de-escalate the situation, but they had the opposite effect.
- The **start of conflict** activities was relatively sudden and brief, quickly transitioning to the next stage. This suggests intensive and deliberate planning designed to preempt any embryonic resistance forming against Putin's designs.
- The **crisis stage** featured nearly flawless execution of Russia's new information-based warfare, culminating in a staged referendum and political decision.
- During the **resolutions stage**, Putin's autocratic government rapidly sealed the annexation with a legal form. With Russian troops firmly in control of Crimea, he was able to present the world with a fait accompli.
- The **restoration of peace** stage was facilitated in part by the upswing of conflict in eastern Ukraine, so as to divert attention away from Crimea.



1. Covert origins

Dec. 1991
Ukraine declares independence. Pro-Western and pro-Russian factions form.

2004–2005
Orange Revolution brings pro-Western President Yushchenko to power.

2010–2013
Pro-Russian President Yanukovych elected. Under Russian pressure, he abandons deal with EU in late 2013, sparking Maidan protests.

Dec. 2013
Putin responds with trade and financial deals intended to calm protests and bring Ukraine into EEU.

2. Escalations

Feb. 18, 2014
Protests in Kyiv against President Victor Yanukovych become violent.

Feb. 21, 2014
Yanukovych flees Kyiv. Putin condemns interim pro-Western government.

Feb. 23, 2014
Pro-Russian protests in Sevastopol, supported by Russian elements.

Feb. 23, 2014
Russian naval infantry recon in Kherson isthmus.

3. Start of conflict activities

Feb. 27, 2014
Ukrainian naval bases in Sevastopol blockaded; pro-Russian gunmen seize government buildings in Simferopol.

4. Crisis

Feb. 28, 2014
Russian troops seize Crimean border crossings. IL-76 aircraft begin flying Russian troops into region.

Mar. 1, 2014
Russia formally authorizes use of Russian troops in Crimea. Kirovske air base seized.

Mar. 5, 2014
Russian navy blockades Ukrainian navy at Novoozerne. OSCE inspectors turned away at border crossing.

Mar. 8–22, 2014
Russian troops seize additional sites and consolidate positions.

5. Resolution

Mar. 11–18, 2014
Referendum and subsequent treaty leads to Russian annexation of Crimea into Russian Federation.

Mar. 21, 2014
Russia formally annexes Crimea.

Mar. 24, 2014
Ukraine orders troops to withdraw from Crimea.

6. Restoration of peace

Late Mar. 2014–Present
United States and EU impose sanctions, but annexation remains in effect; popular approval in Crimea and Russia boosts Putin's political fortunes. Focus of conflict moves to eastern Ukraine.

Nonmilitary measures
Military measures

FIGURE 4 MAIN PHASES (STAGES) OF CONFLICT DEVELOPMENT IN CRIMEA. IN: USASOC, 2015, P.51

5.2 Maskirovka and active measures:

As outlined, Maskirovka constitutes the military component that can form part of an attempt to control the decision-making of a subject through manipulation of its information intake. It aims to deceive or confuse an audience of military actions and intentions so as to hinder an effective response by the adversary. Active measures are seen as covert special operations geared towards political warfare involving varies degrees of violence that have the aim to destabilize a situation, for example through incitement.

The Russian military involvement in Crimea is widely acknowledged among experts as a sophisticated, unexpected and ultimately highly effective campaign centered on surprise and deception. A BBC article named it "the smoothest invasion of modern times", stating that "it was over before the outside world realized it had even started" (Simpson, 2014). The overall presence of Russian troops in Crimea in late February and early March is well established, not in the last place because of Putin's admission to this during a Q&A with Russian public on April 17th, 2014, which will be discussed further below. A host of sources and reports elaborates on Russian military action in this period, some written while the operation was still underway (see, e.g. Balouziyeh, 2014; Bowen, 2014; Eppinger, 2014ab; ICDS, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Walker, Salem & MacAskill, 2014; Amnesty, 2015, pp.382-389; McDermott, 2015). In a detailed report, the International Center for Defence Studies (ICDS, 2014) scrutinizes the involvement of Russian military elements in the Crimean uprising and subsequent secession. Echoing the purpose of Maskirovka and active measures, the report indicates that the campaign had "been designed not like a traditional coercive military operation, but instead quite like a special forces/intelligence operation – with elements of deniability, multiple paths of development, and maximum flexibility" (p.1). Throughout the uprising in Crimea, the Kremlin denied any military involvement and claimed that any active armed elements were "local self-defense units", referring to the heavily armed individuals that were soon dubbed "little green men" in Western media and "polite people" in Russian reports (Shevchenko, 2014). These elements wore professional Russian military attire and weaponry, but were masked and lacked insignia. Based on video and photo evidence, the report finds that in

reality it was in large part Russian special forces that from February 27th onwards occupied government buildings, barracks of the Ukrainian military and strategic infrastructure (ICDS, 2014, pp.3-9; see also: Bērzinš, 2014; Carbonnell & Prentice, 2014; Ignatius, 2014). Likewise, while most (army) vehicles had their license plates removed, the few that hadn't revealed their Russian origin and even the military units to which they belonged (ICDS, 2014, p.6). The analysis of the United States Army Special Operations Command goes further and indicates that Russian subversive action was undertaken prior to any outright military action by using special forces to stoke up sentiments for popular uprising while bribing ethnic Russians to do the same: a classical 'active measure' (USASOC, 2015). In the same vein, McDermott (2015, p.14) claims that the Russian special forces of the "FSB, SVR and GRU [were] involved in stirring up local protests, hiding among the population and conducting reconnaissance and subversive operations"[4].

Russian special operations, however, did not stop with physical action, as Margarita Jaitner (2015) outlines. Extensive cyberattacks and hacks took place during the Crimean uprising that targeted Ukrainian officials, websites and institutions, which "likely made it more difficult for Kyiv to gain a clear picture of what was happening in Crimea", and subsequently "presumably hampered its decision-making process" (Jaitner, 2015, p.91). The report by the United States Army Special Operations Command further states that "Crimea's landline, Internet and mobile services were nearly eliminated" (USASOC, 2015, p. 46; see Paganini, 2014 for an elaborate overview of Russian cyberattacks against Ukraine during the Crimea crisis). Gilles (2016, p.64) similarly claims that the Simferopol internet exchange point was taken over by special operations forces, while cable connections to mainland Ukraine were selectively disrupted. It seems clear how such actions can be embedded in a larger attempt at reflexively controlling the opponent. Indeed, Jaitner notes that the "entire course of events" in Crimea "was enveloped in a sophisticated effort to control the flow of information" (2015, p.91). Control over information can translate into control over a subject's cognitive reflexes as product of RC, and one way to achieve this is by such hampering of the subject's access to ('undesirable') information.

[4] The FSB ('*Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti'),* the SVR *('Sluzhba Vneshnev Razvedki'*) and the GRU *('Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye'*) represent the Russian Federal Security Service, the Foreign Intelligence Service and the Military Intelligence Service, respectively.

5.3 Dezinformatisya

5.3.1 Denial in official communications

In order to give credence to the notion that the Russian military was not actively involved in the Crimea uprisings, official communications from the Kremlin consistently denied any such involvement as the operations were unfolding. On February 27th, when Russian special forces poured into Crimea to seize strategic (political) objectives, Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov maintained that the presence of the anchored Russian Black Sea Fleet posed no danger to Ukraine, claiming that "currently all units are engaged in their daily routines (…) [and] do not represent a threat" (Sputnik, 2014a). On March 4th, when (pro-)Russian troops were well in control of the entire peninsula and its political and military proceedings, Putin gave a press conference to international journalists elaborating on his views of the situation (Putin, 2014a). When asked whether the troops that blocked Ukrainian Army units and that wore Russian attire were in fact Russian, Putin insisted that these "were local self-defense units" adding that there was "no need for the deployment of troops". His remarks that "there are many uniforms that are similar [to those worn by 'unidentified troops'] in post-Soviet states" and that "You can go to a store and buy any kind of uniform" is perhaps the clearest instance of Dezinformatsiya of the Crimean campaign. Note that this untruthful suggestion of military non-involvement came on the heels of a request to the Russian parliament for authorization of military action in Crimea that had already been granted (Sputnik, 2014b). "If I do decide to use the Armed Forces", Putin (2014a) continued, "this will be a legitimate decision in full compliance with (…) international law". On March 5th, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu similarly denied any deployment of Russian armed forces in Ukraine (Brennan, 2014). He qualified video footage that showed Russian license plates on military vehicles as "complete nonsense", and as "a provocation", adding that he did not know how the supposed local militias came to possess these vehicles. Earlier that same day, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov had also denied any Russian military involvement in Crimea, arguing that he could not call the "so-called self-defense forces" back to base because they were not Russian, adding that Russian Naval personnel stationed in Crimea were at their normal positions (ibid.). When Putin (2014b) addressed the Russian parliament on March 18th to convince

lawmakers to ratify a treaty that would have Russia annex Crimea, he still exclusively referred to the "Crimean local self-defense units" as those that had been able to maintain order and a virtually bloodless transition, suggesting they were products of "the will of the people", fighting against which is "practically impossible". Somewhat cynically Putin goes on to say that "'They' keep talking of some Russian intervention in Crimea", even though Putin was unable to recall "a single case in history of an intervention without a single shot being fired". Moreover, Putin claimed that although the parliament had given him the hypothetical authority for military intervention in Crimea, "nobody has acted on this permission yet", since "Russia's Armed Forces never entered Crimea".

5.3.2 Reporting by the Kremlin's international media outlets

RT, the internationally oriented state broadcaster, closely followed the Kremlin narrative of denial in the face of quickly growing counter-evidence. On February 27th, 2014, when Russian military operations began when (unidentified) Russian special forces occupied Crimea's parliament and oversaw a hasty parliamentary session that voted for the holding of the secession referendum, RT reported that "local ethnic Russian 'self-defense squads'" were responsible for the occupation (RT, 2014a). Similarly, on February 28th, when heavily armed men without insignia occupied Simferopol International Airport, RT reported that these actions did not represent any 'take-over' but merely consisted of "self-defense squad [with] the intention to prevent possible turmoil" that were patrolling the airport surroundings. On March 2nd, RT published a photo report headlined "Tea, sandwiches, music, photos with self-defense forces mark peaceful Sunday in Simferopol", emphasizing the peaceful spirit of what were still referred to as local armed militias (RT, 2014c). On March 3rd, RT reported a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry that still held that its Black Sea Fleet units based in Crimea "aren't interfering in the internal politics of Ukraine", while the article further held that the final say on sending troops lay with Putin, "who hasn't yet made such a decision" (RT, 2014d).

In a very revealing piece of denialist Russian Dezinformatsiya, however, broadcasted as late as March 13th, 2014, RT correspondents in Crimea claimed that there were no Russian troops (out of their bases) whatsoever (RT, 2014f). The anchor refers to the mainstream media's

insistence on “the growing Russian military contingents and even Russian tanks roaming Crimea”, before switching to RT’s “international reporters on the ground, that are seriously struggling to find the evidence”. One of the correspondents relays how he had expected to find “the mighty Russian military storming into Ukraine”, and then is forced to “confess” that he has indeed discovered one Russian battle machine: a World War Two memorial of a tank “that has been here since the 1940s”. He goes on to claim the armed men he spoke with were indeed local militias rather than soldiers, concluding that the armed presence in Crimea came down to “concerned residents and the rusty relic of a tank”. Another colleague, reporting from Sevastopol, similarly claims that no Russian troops have left their bases and states that “the only thing that has changed is the emergence of these self-defense forces and that Ukrainian [defecting] troops have decided that protection of the Crimean region is more of a priority” (ibid.).

Liz Wahl, a former anchor of the American R.T. news broadcast, decided to quit on air in response to the network’s coverage of the ongoing Crimea crisis. Wahl told viewers on March 6th, 2014, that she was resigning because she could not “be part of a network funded by the Russian government that whitewashes the actions of Putin” (Carroll, 2014). In a revealing documentary named “the world according to RT” (Pekel, 2015), Wahl has reflected on this period saying that “Ukraine was the first time that questions were fed to me. Verbatim. Word for word. Like … ‘we want you to ask about the neo-Nazi’s in the opposition’, ‘we want you to point out the hypocrisy of the West and the U.S. in invading other countries in the past’, ‘we don’t want you to use the word invasion because we don’t want this to look like an invasion’”. RT issued a statement in response to Wahl’s stepping down, stating that “when someone makes a big public show of a personal decision, it is nothing more than a self-promotional stunt”, therewith discrediting her actions as not more than the product of personal ambition rather than of legitimate grievances (RT, 2014e). Wahl’s resignation came shortly after Abby Martin, another RT host, had announced on March 4th that she needed to respond to “Russia’s military occupation of Crimea”, continuing to say that “what Russia did is wrong” and that she “will not apologize for or defend military aggression” (Austin, 2014). Although Martin defended both her own statement and the editorial stance of RT in her next appearance, it is telling that an RT host went against the editorial line by referring to Russian active involvement in Crimea, and even naming it a military occupation, when RT as exponent of the wider Russian politico-security complex was pushing a completely contrasting reading of events.

5.3.3 Admitting the obvious

Despite the fact that the occupation of Crimea by Russian armed forces was quickly reported and denounced by Western news outlets and governments, the Russian government continued to deny its military involvement until after the Crimean referendum and subsequent Russian annexation had taken place. From late March 2014 onwards, however, Putin gradually came to admit to the presence of the Russian military. On March 28th, Putin praised the Russian military's professionalism in keeping its composure and helping to establish "peaceful conditions" for holding the referendum in Crimea, indirectly implying an unspecified degree of involvement (Sputnik, 2014c). On April 10th, Putin still denied that Russia covertly prepared for the annexation of Crimea in late February and early March, but did argue that the Russian military became involved "after I learned about the mood of the people", i.e. when polling data suggested a large majority in favor of Crimea "rejoining Russia" (Sputnik, 2014d).

On April 17th, Putin made what was truly a surprise move when he admitted that the "little green men" the world had been obsessing over were in fact Russian special forces that had been active in Crimea before the referendum, adding that "of course the Russian servicemen did back the Crimean self-defence forces" (Putin, 2014c). Nevertheless, Putin once again denied any preconceived scenario, stating that "this had not been pre-planned or prepared", and that "it was done on the spot, and we had to play it by ear" (ibid.). Nearly a year later, however, in a Russian TV documentary produced for the occasion of the first anniversary of the Crimean annexation (named "The Path To The Motherland"), Putin once again contradicted earlier statements when he recalled that on February 23rd, 2014, he told the leaders of the Russian special forces and Defense Ministry that Moscow was "forced to begin the work to bring Crimea back into Russia" (BBC, 2014b). This clearly exposes earlier claims of non-preparation and non-involvement as dishonest. With regard to the occupation of Crimean parliament on February 27th, 2014, Putin recalls that "it took 30 minutes for special troops to conduct this operation", giving "[Crimean] lawmakers the possibility to do their work" (Kondrashov, 2015). And yet, even this account on the events might not tell the whole story, given that the Russian military after the annexation awarded some servicemen the "Crimean Medal of Honor", which dates Crimea's 'liberation' as having taken place from February 20th until March 18th, thereby implying preparations at a time when former

President Yanukovych formally still held office in Kiev (Cathcart, 2014; Casapoglu, 2015, p.3). Regardless of the signification of this thought-provoking medal inscription, however, the overarching conclusion that can be distilled from the official Russian communication is its obvious dishonest character.

The fact that Putin's statements on Crimea often stood in such stark contradiction to reality (and often to his other statements) put the Russian media-establishment in a somewhat awkward position. As Putin came out and admitted to the Russian military operations in Crimea, Russian news agencies were forced to report on the facts they had until then swept under the rug or denied. But even in the face of such a momentous distortion of reality, Dmitry Kiselyov, head of media conglomerate Rossiya Segodnya and widely considered a principal Kremlin mouthpiece, continued to insist that the Russian military had not left its Crimea bases and never intervened in the conflict – after Putin had already admitted to the Russian involvement (Shuster, 2015). Similarly, RT editor in chief Margarita Simonyan kept arguing that Putin "did not admit that earlier statements were untrue" (ibid.), going beyond the obvious instances of doublespeak of the Russian president. In the words of Peter Pomerantsev, "RT, at the end of the day, only has one viewer: Putin. They have to convince them that the model they have chosen is right" (in: Pekel, 2015). It is therefore an interesting observation that on May 5th, 2014, the Kremlin in a somewhat covert fashion issued awards and medals to more than 300 media workers, including Margarita Simonyan, for their "objective coverage of events in Crimea" (Bigg, 2014). It is no stretch to claim that this reflects the Kremlin's valuation of the work of its media-mouthpieces as a job well-done, precisely because of their dishonest, confusing, denialist reporting that closely followed the Kremlin-line.

5.4 Misleading narrative

In addition to spreading falsehoods over the course of events, another RC tactic is to brand developments in a certain way by embedding them in a preconceived narrative that influences how a subject interprets relevant affairs. The multiple ways in which the Kremlin attempted to frame the Crimean crisis, and its involvement in it, give plenty of material to discuss as expression of RC.

5.4.1 Neo-nazi's, fascists and the ultra-nationalist right

One recurring theme in the Russian framing of the Ukraine crisis in general, and the (need for a) referendum in Crimea in particular, is the supposed fascist character of the political Maidan revolution in early 2014. The first important point to make in this regard is the fact that "the presence and instrumental role" of at times violent extreme-right elements in Euromaidan indeed is "undeniable" (Saluschev, 2014, p.43), and represents a reality that Western media often choose not to dissect or even touch upon. Conversely, however, representatives of the Kremlin politico-security complex have shown themselves eager to exploit the questionable character of some of those involved in the Maidan protests and political takeover, falsely portraying the transition government that replaced Yanukovitsch as espousing fascists views (ibid.; Pakhomenko & Tryma, 2016, p.47). As Ben Nimmo (2016, p.5) claims, "the period from 20 February to 18 March [2014] can best be characterized as the month in which Russian officials of all levels and through all channels attempted to portray the Ukrainian government as neo-Nazi, anti-Semitic, racist and anti-Russian". Keir Gilles (2016, p.64) notes that by injecting this reading into the quickly established pro-Russian information sphere in Crimea, the Kremlin was able to convince large parts of the population that "bandits and fascists were coming from Kiev to kill them". This seems no stretch if we consider the words of Putin himself during a press conference on March 4th, when he stated that Russia's biggest concern was "the rampage of reactionary forces, nationalist and anti-Semitic forces going on in certain parts of Ukraine, including Kiev" (Putin, 2014a). Earlier, the Russian Foreign Ministry had stated that the West had "effectively allied itself with neo-Nazis" by supporting the government that replaced Yanukovych (RT, 2014g).

The documentary by Pekel (2015) gives a revealing insight into the way in which this framing was translated to Russian news reporting. In an RT broadcast on March 15th, 2014, an anchor claimed that Ukraine's Jewish community feels it "can no longer entrust their safety to the police" due to the spread of "ultranationalist" elements, before showing an RT interview with Misha Kapustin, a Rabbi in Crimean Simferopol who emotionally claims: "I don't want to leave. I am pushed to leave. Because I want my children to feel safe" (in: Pekel, 2015). In a phone conversation that is part of the documentary, however, the Rabbi says that "[RT] made it look like I was escaping Ukrainian nationalists. In fact, I was escaping from the Russian forces". Peter Pomerantsev, in response, branded this particular instance of framing as "crass" and "beyond any

journalistic boundary" (Pekel, 2015). The headline of an RT op-ed on March 2nd is similarly revealing of the narrative the Kremlin was pushing: "Existential threat: 'Russians cannot allow Ukraine to be ruled by neo-fascists" (RT, 2014g), while Pekel's (2015) documentary shows multiple RT-segments that grossly exaggerate the neo-Nazi threat.

5.4.2 Protecting Civilians

A related framing tactic for Russian involvement in Crimea was the Russian concern for the supposed threat that ethnic Russians faced as a result of said nationalist sentiments. The labeling of Russian behavior in terms of the need to protect ethnic Russians is a direct extension of the 'fascists labeling' discussed above. A driving force for the exploitation of this supposed threat was the intension of the Ukrainian parliament after Yanukovych departure to strip Russian of its status as a regional language (Saluschev, 2014, pp.42-43). Despite the fact that interim-president Oleksandr Turchynov vetoed the law soon after the parliament had adopted it, the "damage had been done" as the initial intension became the source of fear and resentment among the ethnically Russian population (Saluschev, 2014, p.42). The notion that ethnic Russians lived under grave threat was strongly exaggerated, yet actively propagated by the Kremlin.

After the Russian parliament had granted Putin formal authority to militarily intervene in Crimea (at a time when special operations had been underway for days), Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov told the UN Council on Human Rights that military intervention would be "about protecting our citizens and compatriots, about protecting the most fundamental human right – the right to live and nothing more" (Sputnik, 2014e). In his address to parliament after the Crimean referendum had taken place, Putin claimed that "the first in line" that were "threatened with repression" were those who opposed the coup in "Russian-speaking Crimea" (Putin, 2014b). According to Putin these people "turned to Russia for help in defending their rights and lives", and Russia "could not leave this plea unheeded; (…) could not abandon Crimea and its residents in distress".

Again, RT closely followed this reading of events. In a broadcast on March 4th, an RT-correspondent points at the two roads that connect the Crimean Peninsula to the mainland, and reports: "[these are] two roads that locals say could become two gateways for undesirable forces

from the North. They fear that Ukrainian fascists pose a major threat. The country's ultranationalist Right Sector group has helped topple President Yanukovych. Now many Crimeans are worried that such radicals want to come and open Pandora's box" (in: Pekel, 2015). Former RT correspondent Sarah Firth reflects on the propagation of 'anti-fascist' sentiments when she said that at no point in the coverage of supposed 'fascist elements' did RT provide any context or figures on the degree to which this is the case (in: Pekel, 2015). In this way, Firth argues, RT zooms in "on this tiny bit, and the story becomes something completely different".

The Crimean narrative of the neo-Nazi threat and the need to protect ethnic Russians is problematic as it lacks factual substantiation. Russia has never presented any convincing evidence that ethnic Russians in Crimea were systematically targeted by Ukrainian extremists (Balouziyeh, 2014). If there indeed was such a threat one would have expected Russia to accept, or even promote, a monitoring mission from the Organization for Security and Co-operation for Europe (OSCE) to assess the security situation in Crimea. Instead, unarmed OSCE monitors trying to reach the peninsula were turned back three days in a row in early March (even though their observations of the roadblocks "produced significant evidence of equipment consistent with the presence of Russian Federation military personnel" (Dahl, 2014). Also in March, two U.N. representatives were similarly withheld from visiting Crimea to assess the human rights situation when (pro-)Russian forces were in control (Charbonneau, 2014).

5.4.3 Respecting the will of the people

Another narrative that was brought forward to legitimize intervention in Crimea was the need to respect the supposed will of the Crimean people in deciding their own future. On March 4th, 2014, Putin claimed that Moscow did not consider the possibility of Crimea joining Russia, but right after stated that "only residents of a given country who have the freedom of will and are in complete safety can and should determine their future" (Putin, 2014a). Herewith Putin combines the narrative on the need to protect Crimeans and subsequently have them express their right to self-determination. In his speech to the Russian parliament on March 18th, after the Crimean referendum had taken place, Putin asserted that "we had to help create conditions so that the

residents of Crimea for the first time in history were able to peacefully express their free will regarding their own future" (Putin, 2014b).

According to the Kremlin, the results of the referendum on March 16th spoke for themselves. The official figures indicated that 96.77 percent of the voters chose to rejoin Russia, with a turnout of 83.1 percent (Morello, Constable & Faiola, 2014). The U.S. and other Western governments had already indicated that they would not recognize the results of the referendum due to the presence of Russian troops and the crisis conditions under which the vote was held (ibid.). These conditions cast doubt on the validity of the results as presented by the Kremlin. In addition to the fact that the Crimean information sphere was entirely dominated by pro-Russian propaganda, the presence of Russian troops is likely to have had an intimidating effect on voters, while Crimean Tatar leaders and ethnic Ukrainians called on their community to boycott the referendum (ibid.; Constable, 2014; Anderson, 2014). A report from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on April 15th indeed indicates that the referendum was held under conditions of intimidation, harassment, torture and other human rights abuses (United Nations, 2014). A Sputnik opinion piece the same day discredits the report as "propaganda created by Washington … arranged to serve the US agenda" (Sputnik, 2014f). A few weeks earlier, on March 27th, the U.N. General Assembly had adopted a non-binding resolution (by a vote of 100 in favor, 58 abstentions and 11 against) stating that Russia's annexation of Crimea "has no validity" and calling upon all States, international organizations and specialized agencies not to recognize the results of the referendum (Charbonneau & Donath, 2014). These reports of course do not prove, or even suggest, that accession by Russia did not carry the support of a majority of Crimeans. They do, however, undermine the moral and legal case that the Russian narrative of 'self-determination' was built on. And even if a (large) majority of Crimeans would indeed be in favor, the legality of secession is convincingly disputed by numerous accounts (Balouziyeh, 2014; Marxen, 2014; Somin, 2014), in spite of Putin's insistence that Russia acted in full compliance with international law.

5.4.4 Demonization of the West

The final dominant narrative under consideration here propagates Western malfeasance and hypocrisy in the context of the Crimea annexation. The Kremlin, formally or through media-channels, frequently portrayed the Maidan revolution in general and the supposed threat to Crimea in particular as Western plots led by the U.S. so as to undermine Russia. As reported by RT, Putin himself claimed that "the Ukrainian armed coup was organized from Washington", stating that "the Ukrainian opposition was supported mostly by the Europeans. But we knew for sure that the real masterminds were our American friends" (RT, 2014i). As Nimmo (2016) outlines, Russian communications increasingly backdated the blame for the Ukraine crisis on NATO. Putin, in his speech to parliament on March 18th, 2014, hypothesized over Ukraine "soon joining NATO", meaning that "NATO's navy would be right there in this city of Russia's military glory, and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia" (Putin, 2014b).

In an interesting instance of 'projection', it was RT that accused Western media of "warmongering" in their coverage of the surprise military exercises that Putin ordered in the run up to the Russian operations in Crimea, stating that Western outlets "are speculating that Russia is on the brink of getting involved in Crimea" and denouncing their coverage as "False Alarm" (RT, 2014j). However, the Western criticism of the military exercises also invited RT to engage in 'whataboutism' by turning the tables and publishing an article titled: "10 NATO war games that almost started armed conflicts" (RT, 2014k). Yet in portraying NATO exercises as dangerous potential triggers for war, RT actually indirectly suggests that there *is* reason to be alarmed over Russian military drills. The purpose of the RT article, however, simply seemed to outline NATO hypocrisy over the supposedly unnecessary controversy the West created over Russian military drills.

Similarly, when U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry called out the Russian operations in Crimea by stating that "You just don't invade another country on phony pretext in order to assert your interests", the obvious hypocrisy of Washington was not lost on RT, which was quick to point to the American invasion of Iraq (RT, 2014l). Putin himself referred to interventions in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya as instances in which the U.S. and its Western partners violated or ignored the views of the U.N. Security Council, which was indicative of the fact that their conduct

is "guided by the rule of the gun" (Putin, 2014b). Calling out an adversary by resorting to 'whataboutism' in itself can well be justified as a means of ensuring that (the actions of) all parties are held to the same account. But exposing hypocrisy does nothing to legitimize one's own questionable behavior. After all, the Kremlin *did* use a 'phony pretext' in order to assert its interests, while the U.N. Security Council also *did not* legitimize the Russian military occupation of Crimea, and the General Assembly, although not univocally, actually denounced the annexation in late March.

Another interesting case of 'whataboutism' is the often-made Russian reference to the 2008 independence of Kosovo, as both another example of Western hypocrisy and as a means to legitimize Russian actions in Crimea. On March 18th, 2014, Putin said that Kosovo's unilateral separation from Serbia in 2008 was "exactly what Crimea is doing now", which the West and the International Court of Justice recognized as legitimate (Putin, 2014b). On March 14th, Foreign Minister Lavrov had already argued that "if Kosovo is a special case, then Crimea is also" (RT Ruptly, 2014). According to Putin it's "not even double standards; this is amazing primitive, blunt cynicism (…) calling the same thing white today and black tomorrow" (Putin, 2014b). However, equating Kosovo and Crimea as if they were exactly the same is a gross oversimplification of the actual cases. There are certainly obvious similarities, but the differences are just as relevant here. For example, Kosovo's formal independence was achieved years after the original conflict, which gave citizens ample time to freely and fairly debate and decide on their future – something that clearly lacked in the case of Crimea (Burke-White, 2014, pp.71-72). Furthermore, the clear and compelling evidence of systematic oppression of (parts of) the population in Kosovo was absent in Crimea, and where Kosovo simply declared independence, Crimea was annexed by the state that shaped the conditions for the referendum in the first place. These aspects make that the equation between the two cases falls short. Putin's black/white analogy as means to call out the West on its supposed fluid understanding of the concept of truth, then, makes for another somewhat ironic instance of projection.

5.5 Power pressure

The last RC method under consideration here is the use of 'power pressure' so as to influence a subject's reading of a situation and its decision-making process. There are several instances that can be marked as clear attempts by Russia to pressure its adversaries into certain behavior. Of course, it should be emphasized that there are sufficient examples of Western nations using threats (such as through economic sanctions) to pressure Russia into compliance, but this never got the escalatory character that qualifies the Russian posturing as military brinkmanship. The most obvious occasion of the latter was a huge surprise military drill that Putin ordered close to the Ukrainian border on February 26th, 2014 in which 150.000 Russian troops took part (RT, 2014m). It came a day before Russian special forces began occupying strategic buildings in Crimea, and lasted a week. Of course, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu insisted that "the drills are not connected with events in Ukraine at all" (ibid.). Similarly, as Putin remarked in the anniversary-documentary on Crimea, part of the Russian operation involved the deployment of K-300P Bastion coastal defense missiles "in a way that made them seen clearly from space", according to RT so as to "demonstrate Russia's willingness to protect the peninsula from military attack" (RT, 2014i). On March 8th, 2014, Russia threatened to end U.S. inspections of Russian nuclear arsenals that were agreed to under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) in response to the American decision to halt U.S.-Russia military cooperation because of the invasion of Crimea (Keck, 2014; USASOC, 2014, p.57). The intent of this move, according to the report of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC, 2014, p.57), was to "demonstrate to the West that while the matter of Ukraine may have some weight within NATO's strategic formulation, it was no less than a vital interest to Russia". Gazprom, the state-owned energy-giant, arguably did part of the Kremlin's bidding when it threatened on March 7th to shut off gas deliveries to Ukraine due to an outstanding debt, even though Gazprom's CEO insisted that it didn't want a "gas crisis" and hoped Ukraine would be able to make the payment (RT, 2014n).

After having discussed the use of Maskirovka and active measures, Dezinformatsiya, misleading narratives and power pressure as expressions of RC-techniques in the Crimea context, figure 5 summarizes the findings of this case-study.

Concept	Indicators	Findings
Reflexive Control	Maskirovka & Active Measures	• Widespread presence of camouflaged troops and armed vehicles • Special operations aimed at capturing key buildings and setting up roadblocks • Evidence of stirring up local protests • Cyber operations aimed to control information flow
	Dezinformatsiya	• Consistent initial denial of Russian military involvement by Russian officials • Multiple contradictory retrospective accounts on Crimean course of events and Russian involvement by Putin. • Consistent initial denial of Russian military involvement by Russian state-sponsored media-outlets
	Misleading narrative	• Greatly exaggerated 'neo-Nazi threat from Kiev' as narrative to foster fear for the Ukrainian government and delegitimize it • 'Protecting Russian citizens' as frame to legitimize Russian actions, but no proof for systematic threat to ethnic Russians, with Russian obstruction to independent investigation • 'Respecting the will of the people' as narrative to legitimize annexation, even though the referendum was held under conditions of harassment, torture and intimidation • Demonization of the West and use of 'whataboutism' to point out hypocrisy and delegitimize Western actions • 'Projection' in which Russia blames the West for things it is guilty of itself (e.g. 'warmongering', 'disregarding the truth')
	Power Pressure	• Massive surprise military drill on Ukrainian border in lead-up to and during Crimean crisis • Russian threat to stop nuclear arms inspections (START) • Gazprom threat to cut off energy supply over outstanding debt

FIGURE 5, OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS IN CRIMEA CASE-STUDY

6 Donbass case study

As second half of the empirical analysis, this chapter will address the fifth and final sub-research question: "*Which expressions of RC can be identified in the case of the Donbass?"*.

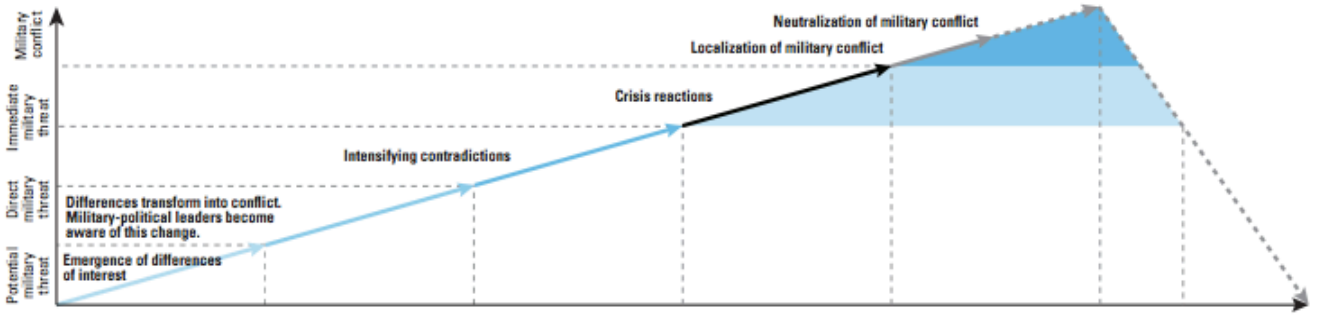
6.1 Timeline

The conflict in the Donbass can be seen as an extension of the Crimean crisis to Eastern Ukraine. Beginning in March 2014, the month when Crimea held its referendum, pro-Russian separatist groups protested against the Kiev government. These protests escalated into declarations of independence by secessionist forces, which formed the internationally unacknowledged Donetsk and Luhanks People's Republics. The Government of Ukraine in April 2014 responded with a military 'anti-terror operation', which led to an armed conflict between government and secessionist forces that has not been resolved to this day. After months of intense fighting, a ceasefire called the Minsk Protocol was signed on September 5th, 2014. After months of continuous violations of the ceasefire from both sides, the agreement completely collapsed in January 2015 when renewed heavy fighting broke out. On February 12th, a new ceasefire went into effect that was called Minsk II. Ever since, relatively minor violations of the ceasefire continue to occur on a regular basis, but the situation has been deemed a 'frozen conflict' by many since then, despite the fact that it still very much carries the potential to flare up again. Figure 6, again provided by the USASOC (2014, p.52), provides a useful and succinct overview of the most important phases and occurrences during the first year of the crisis in Eastern Ukraine.

Main phases (stages) of conflict development in eastern Ukraine

Gerasimov's Model in Eastern Ukraine

- The **covert origins** stage featured a long period of political infighting in Kyiv, culminating in an unforeseen crisis for Putin.
- During the **escalations stage** Putin took actions calculated to de-escalate the situation, but they had the opposite effect. The March 2014 annexation of Crimea led to an upswing of unrest in eastern Ukraine.
- The **start of conflict activities** was framed by Russia's deceptive diplomatic agreement at Geneva—setting the stage for Putin's sustained unconventional warfare campaign in eastern Ukraine under an umbrella of persistent denial.
- The **crisis stage** came to a head with the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, which fueled growing international condemnation of Putin's intervention in Ukraine.
- The hoped-for **resolutions stage** instead saw surprising political resilience from the Kyiv government and people of Ukraine against Russian aggression. US, EU, and NATO support, along with Russia's severe economic downturn and President Poroshenko's sustained counteroffensive, led Russia to resort to increasingly explicit invasion.
- The **restoration of peace stage** remains in doubt as the US government passes a renewed sanctions law and threatens to begin giving military aid to Kyiv.



1. Covert origins

Dec. 1991
Ukraine declares independence. Pro-Western and pro-Russian factions form.

2004–2005
Orange Revolution brings pro-Western President Yushchenko to power.

2010–2013
Pro-Russian President Yanukovych elected. Under Russian pressure, he abandons deal with EU in late 2013, sparking Maidan protests.

Dec. 2013
Putin responds with trade and financial deals intended to calm protests and bring Ukraine into EEU.

2. Escalations

Feb. 18, 2014
Protests in Kyiv against President Victor Yanukovych become violent.

Feb. 21, 2014
Yanukovych flees Kyiv. Putin condemns interim pro-Western government.

Mar. 11–21, 2014
Referendum and subsequent treaty leads to Russian annexation of Crimea into the Russian Federation. Kyiv government signs Association Agreement with EU.

Mar. 22, 2014
Protesters in Donetsk call for referendum on integration with Russia.

3. Start of conflict activities

Mar.–Apr. 2014
Russian agents organize, lead, and cooperate with protesters in major cities and port of Mariupol. Pro-Russian crowds and "little green men" seize government buildings. Russians use bribery, intimidation, and subversion to neutralize government officials, police, and some military units.

Mar. 24, 2014
Russia expelled from G8.

Apr. 17, 2014
Geneva agreement (US, Ukraine, EU, Russia) calls for de-escalation, disarming militias. Russia fails to comply.

Apr. 27, 2014
Russian agents and militias seize television station in Donetsk, replacing Ukrainian media with Russia Today.

Mar.–Apr. 2014
Cossack militias, Chechens, and others begin operations in eastern Ukraine.

4. Crisis

May 1, 2014
Ukraine resumes conscription in face of ongoing aggression in east and south.

May 2, 2014
~40 pro-Russian activists die in a fire in Odessa.

May 11, 2014
Luhansk and Donestsk referenda on independence; alleged results strongly favor separation from Kyiv and annexation by Russia.

May 25, 2014
Poroshenko elected.

Jun. 16, 2014
Russia cuts off natural gas to Ukraine.

Jun. 27, 2014
Poroshenko signs trade agreement with EU.

Jul. 17, 2014
Malaysian Flight 17 downed.

Summer 2014
As Kyiv commences counter-offensive, Russian troops, armored vehicles, weapons, and supplies enter Ukraine.

Aug. 14, 2014
NATO confirms "Russian incursion."

5. Resolution

Sep. 5, 2014
OSCE helps negotiate cease-fire.

Sep. 2014
President Poroshenko promises greater autonomy in eastern Ukraine.

Sep. 15, 2014
US-led NATO peacekeeping exercises commence in western Ukraine.

Oct. 18–31, 2014
Putin and Poroshenko negotiate natural gas deal.

Oct. 26, 2014
Ukrainians elect pro-Western–majority parliament.

Nov. 2014
Separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk hold elections condemned by Kyiv. More Russian troops enter Ukraine.

Despite cease-fire, fighting continues, at times escalating to major battles. Russian tanks enter, but Western sanctions and Russia's economic downturn chip away at Russians' support for war.

6. Restoration of peace

Conflict continues.

Nonmilitary measures
Military measures

FIGURE 6, MAIN PHASES (STAGES) OF CONFLICT DEVELOPMENT IN EASTERN UKRAINE. IN: USASOC, 2015, P.52.

6.2 Maskirovka and Active Measures

The Russian military tactics employed in Eastern Ukraine are very similar to those seen in Crimea. The wide-spread presence of the Russian military in the Donbass since March 2014 is well-reported, even though the Kremlin has always denied any military involvement and continues to do so. Just as in Crimea, the Russian military in the Donbass region was actively assisting, or in some readings even inciting and leading, pro-Russian popular revolts aimed at sharpening ethnic and political fault-lines in an effort to destabilize Ukraine and promote secessionist tendencies in the East. Reports of Russia fanning the unease in Eastern Ukraine were published as early as late February 2014 (Westerlund & Norberg, 2016, p.593). As pro-Russian movements gained momentum in the aftermath of the Crimea crisis and forcefully took control of government buildings in large cities such as Donetsk, Luhansk, Slovyansk and Kharkiv, it was feared in the West that secession and possible Russian annexation were increasingly likely scenarios for the Donbass. In response to this, the Ukrainian government launched a large-scale military effort in mid-April, named the "anti-terrorist operation", to counter separatist forces and in the words of acting Ukrainian president Turchinov "not allow Russia to repeat the Crimean scenario in the eastern regions of Ukraine" (Humphries & Grove, 2014). The situation in Eastern Ukraine herewith gained a completely new dimension when compared to Crimea, and was much harder for the Kremlin to control. This came on top of the fact that the region covers a much larger area than Crimea, there were no existing Russian military bases from which operations could be launched, and the support for Russia among the Ukrainian population was not nearly as high as in Crimea (Vaux, Miller & Fitzpatrick, 2014). The character of Russian involvement in the East therefore gained an even more covert and complex character than it had had in Crimea (ICDS, 2014, p.9).

A combination of special forces, proxy's and material and operational support appear the primary means through which Russia has attempted to destabilize the region (ICDS, 2014, pp.9-12; USASOC, 2014, pp.58-62). Vaux and colleagues (2014), as well as Mitrokhin (2015) outline the many different 'separatist' leaders and groups that have been exposed as Kremlin-operatives, either directly or via channels that indirectly lead back to Moscow. As Whewell (2014) claims,

"evidence from intelligence sources, and Russian human rights groups, suggests thousands of regular Russian troops have also been fighting there, alongside a larger number of local rebels". There are numerous examples that implicate the Kremlin as (co-)driver of conflict in the Donbass region. In May 2014, a failed attack on Donetsk airport resulted in around 50 separatist deaths, of whom more than 30 were brought back to Russia implying their status as Russian nationals (The Interpreter, 2014)[5]. In August, 2014, ten Russian soldiers were captured by the Ukrainian military some twenty kilometers from the national border, but in response the Russian Defense Ministry argued the soldiers "crossed it by accident on an unmarked section" while on patrol (BBC, 2014b). According to a briefing paper of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), the number of Russian soldiers skyrocketed in August 2014 as part of large operations, with the paper reporting the exact regiments and brigades of the Russian military that generated the Russian presence in Eastern Ukraine (Sutyagin, 2015). In May 2015, the Ukrainian army captured two Russian nationals that were recently formally discharged from the Russian military but admitted to having been part of a Russian special forces spying mission (Dolgov, 2015). Two months earlier, in March 2015, the U.S. Army Europe Commander Ben Hodges said that the U.S. military estimated there to be around 12.000 Russian soldiers supporting pro-Russia separatists in the Donbas region, with another 50.000 soldiers stationed on the Russian side of the border (Reuters, 2015). The number of Russian troops present in Ukraine at any given time, however, was hard to pinpoint with reports diverging considerably on the exact figures (McDermott, 2015, pp19-20, 32). A reason for this, according to chief of media operations for NATO central command Jay Jansen, was that it was difficult to determine the precise presence of Russian troops due to the fact that separatists controlled multiple border crossings facilitating continuous cross-border troop movements (Kanter & Fackler, 2014). The fact that thousands of Russian troops had been involved in the fighting in the Donbass since the late spring of 2014, however, is beyond doubt.

[5] A year later, in May 2015, Putin signed a degree marking the 'peace-time' deaths of Russian troops during special operations a state secret, which critics have reasoned to be a clear attempt at covering up evidence of military involvement in Ukraine. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov 'addressed' these concerns when he told the press that the decree "has nothing to do with Ukraine" and simply represents an upgrade of state privacy laws (Demirjian, 2015).

In addition to professional Russian troops there were also many Russians fighting in Eastern-Ukraine that claimed to do so on an entirely voluntary basis (Whewell, 2014). The presence of these supposed volunteers played into the Kremlin's narrative that any Russian native that fought in the Donbass did so voluntarily without any orders from Moscow. Westerlund and Norberg (2016, p.593) outline the variety of different forces that the Kremlin had under direct or indirect control in the Eastern Ukraine, ranging from enabled volunteers to 'arriving militias' that were recruited from South Ossetia to a Chechen battalion of armored vehicles (the so-called 'Vostok batallion'). In facilitating the deployment of forces that were not formally aligned with the Russian government, the Russians "used militias to carry out *actions of opposition forces*" (p.593) that were supported by Russian regular and elite troops. Westerlund and Norberg (2016, pp.594-595) interestingly note that any such support never included air or sea operations, arguably because this would undeniably expose Russia's direct military involvement, since separatists were not, and could not be, in possession of the necessary equipment and expertise.

In addition to direct combat involvement, there is plenty of evidence for large-scale weapon deliveries to the Donbass. Vaux and colleagues (2014) claimed that "there is overwhelming evidence that Russia is colluding with and encouraging the separatists with large quantities of high tech weaponry and personnel crossing the border on an almost daily basis". In January 2015, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated that "for several months we have seen … a substantial increase in Russian heavy equipment such as tanks, artillery and advanced air defense systems" (in McDermott, 2015, p.27; see pp.27-33 for an extensive list of examples of Russian weapon systems used by separatist rebels), something his predecessor Anders Fogh Rasmussen had similarly warned for in August 2014, speaking of a "major escalation in Russian military involvement" and "transfers of large quantities of advanced weapons" (Gordon, 2014). Just as in Crimea, such equipment was often anonymized through removing number plates on vehicles and relevant unit markings (Westerlund and Norberg, 2016, p. 595). McDermott (2015, pp.27-33) provides an elaborate overview of such weapon deliveries. An example was the appearance of three T-64BV tanks in the rebel-held town of Snezhnoye on June 12th, 2014, which a NATO report convincingly substantiates to be vehicles brought over from Russia (NATO, 2014). The most notorious instance in which such arms deliveries took place, however, was when a highly sophisticated BUK surface-to-air missile system crossed the Ukrainian border from Russia on July 17th, 2014 (Westerlund and Norberg, 2016, p.594). Stationed in separatist held territory, it (in all

likelihood accidentally) shot down commercial airliner Malaysia Airlines MH17 a few hours later, killing 298 civilians (Joint Investigation Team, 2016). The downing of MH17 makes for a very interesting case that reveals Russian tactics of Dezinformatsiya, to which we will come back below. However, the use of unidentified troops, special operations, proxy's and secret weaponry, in any case, are the elements that define Maskirovka and active measures as an originally Soviet covert tactics and gained clear expression in the Donbass conflict.

6.3 Dezinformatsiya

6.3.1 Troop presence in Donbass

The Kremlin repeated the straight-faced denial of involvement that worked out well in Crimea in its communication on Eastern Ukraine, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. As early as April 17th, 2014, in the question-and-answer session that led him to admit the Russian military involvement in Crimea, Putin stated that there were "no Russian units in eastern Ukraine" involved in the unrest in Eastern Ukraine, discrediting allegations of a Russian military presence as "nonsense" (Putin, 2014c). In late August, Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov claimed "it is wrong to say that Russia is supplying weapons to the self-defense forces", stating that the rebels had simply seized military warehouses with Soviet-era weaponry (Sputnik, 2014g). In November, 2014, General-Major Igor Konashenkov of the Russian Defense Ministry dismissed NATO claims of Russian weapon deliveries as "hot air" and said that "there was and is no evidence" for such accusations (Baczynska, 2014). In January 2015, over fresh Ukrainian allegations of Russian military transfers, Foreign Minister Lavrov told reporters: "I say every time: if you allege this so confidently, present the facts. But nobody can present the facts, or doesn't want to", disregarding the plethora of sources that indeed had provided facts on the Russian military presence (Baczynska, 2015). In April 2015, again during the annual question-and-answer show, Putin once more denied Russian involvement, by stating: "I can tell you outright and unequivocally that there are no Russian troops in Ukraine" (Putin, 2015). In December 2015, then, it seemed as if Putin owned up to the Donbass-presence of the Russian military when he said Russians had been present in Ukraine "involved in specific issues, including in the military sphere. But this doesn't mean that Russian regular troops are present there" (The Interpreter, 2016). His press secretary Dmitry Peskov soon

afterwards clarified that Putin was simply referring to Russian volunteer fighters, rather than anyone representing the Kremlin. In October 2016, then, Putin went down a similar avenue when he stated that "we were forced … to defend the Russian-speaking population in the Donbass", which can be explained as an indirect admission of sorts (The Interpreter, 2016). Up to this day, however, Russia continues to deny its (extensive) military presence in the Donbass.

6.3.2 MH17

6.3.2.1 Speculation on the cause of a plane crash

The downing of MH17 in July 2014, however, put the Kremlin in the awkward position of having to respond to widespread allegations of culpability in shooting down a commercial plane that crashed in separatist territory, while bent on maintaining the degree of 'plausible deniability' that had guided Russian strategic communications since the start of the Crimea crisis. The ad hoc fashion in which a response to such accusations had to come about makes for a revealing case with regard to the methods employed to influence the cognitive processes on the crash of observers worldwide. As soon as the tragedy made headlines, speculation over the cause began. In Western media, in part as a response to the fact that a separatist leader had immediately bragged on social media about shooting down what he thought was a Ukrainian army plane (which was deleted soon after), speculation quickly centered on separatist forces as being the likely culprits (Tharoor, 2014). Moreover, the separatists had already shot down numerous Ukrainian military airplanes in the preceding months, while the complete absence of any separatist' aerial capacity would make the (accidental) involvement of Ukrainian anti-air capabilities highly unlikely. The fact that sophisticated weaponry and expertise would have been required to down an airplane flying at a height of over 10 kilometers, led to suspicions of (in)direct Russian involvement – whose military presence in the region, as discussed above, was already well-established.

On the day of the crash, Dmitry Peskov, spokesman for Putin, called speculation on Russian involvement in the tragedy "stupidity", saying that the Kremlin would not make further statements on what may have happened because "no one knows" who is responsible (Walker, Salem, Luhn & Branigan, 2014). But Putin himself went against this advice by stating that "obviously, the state over whose territory it happened bears responsibility for this terrible tragedy,

[which] would not have happened if there was peace on this land, if military action in the southeast of Ukraine had not been resumed" (Stromberg, 2014).

In addition to Putin, other actors in the Russian politico-security complex were quick to appoint blame to Ukraine and express a myriad of theories on what might have happened in an effort to counter the leading Western narrative of very likely separatist culpability. Danny Sandford, BBC correspondent in Ukraine at the time, recalled that in the aftermath of the crash "it seemed to us that the Russian media were very quickly making sure that there were alternative theories for how this plane had been destroyed, other than the one that was very quickly coming out of Western capitals (…) that the plane had been shot down by a BUK missile launched and controlled by the rebels" (in: Pekel, 2015). In studying the Russian response to MH17 aimed at an international audience, this already appears to be an accurate observation. It is imperative to note, however, that while the reporting of English-language Russian media-outlets was very biased, farfetched and conspiratorial as it was, the coverage of Russian-language media went a lot further still, with conspiracy theories ranging from a U.S. Counter Intelligence Agency (CIA) plot to implicate the Russians, to MH17 being a 'death flight' filled with corpses in Amsterdam, to the plane having been reinsured just before the crash (Ioffe, 2014; Gaufman, 2015, pp. 163-164). It leads Danny Sandford to say that RT is bad enough, but "the main Russian state channels in take this a massive step further" (in: Pekel, 2015).

6.3.2.2 Fighter jets and outdated Buk missile systems

Numerous alternative theories were floated by Russian officials and media, all implicating Ukraine as likely culprit. On the day of the crash, RT aired a segment suggesting that Putin's presidential plane may have been the target of the missile that brought down MH17, because it was "flying on the exact same height as the doomed Boeing just 40 minutes later" (in: Pekel, 2015; see also RT, 2014o). Suggestively, only Ukraine could have wanted to target Putin's plane. Also on that same fateful day, RT published an article headlining: "Kiev deployed powerful anti-air systems to E. Ukraine ahead of the Malaysian plane crash" (RT, 2014p). It is based on information provided by the Russian Defense Ministry, and further more cites Yury Karash, a 'pilot and aviation expert', as saying "I can allege that it was most likely the Ukrainian armed forces" after he recalled "how a Ukrainian missile downed [a] Russian TU-154 aircraft ten years ago". A subsequent RT article

referred to the Russian Defense Ministry as claiming the supposed Ukrainian BUK-installation in the region was fully operational at the moment of the crash (RT, 2014q).

TASS (‘*Telegrafnoe Agentstvo Sovetskovo Soyuza’*), another state-owned Russian news agency, on July 18th claimed that “two Ukrainian fighters [were] seen following Malaysian jet minutes before crash”, doing so on the basis of the alleged statements from a Spanish air traffic controller working in Kiev airport named Carlos (TASS, 2014a). The story, however, was quickly debunked as the Spanish embassy indicated that they were unaware of a Carlos that worked in Kiev, while Ukrainian air traffic control only provides licenses for flight operations officers to Ukrainian nationals (Stopfake, 2014a; Higgins, 2015). On July 21st, the Russian Ministry of Defence gave a press conference that lent further credence to the possible involvement of Ukrainian fighter jets. RT reported military officials as saying, “a Ukraine Air Force military jet was detected gaining height, it’s distance from the Malaysian Boeing was 3 to 5 km”, adding that the SU-25 fighter jet could reach heights of up to 10 kilometers and was equipped with air-to-air missiles capable of reaching a target of up to 12 km (RT, 2014r). After forensic analysis, the relevant satellite images provided by the Russian Defence Ministry were later judged to have been doctored by Bellingcat, an international initiative in investigative journalism (Bellingcat, 2015).

The notion of the involvement of Ukrainian fighter jets would nonetheless continue to influence the Russian, and to a lesser degree international information sphere. On August 15th, 2014, the Russian Union of Engineers gave an informational briefing on their analysis of the MH17 crash, concluding that it had to have been a fighter jet that shot down the plane (Russian Union of Engineers, 2014). On November 13th, 2014, RT reported on new radar images of a private company showing two fighter jets, which “casts doubt on the version of the tragedy favored by Western nations” (RT, 2014s). A day later, TASS reported on the appearance of Ivan Andriyevsky, vice-president of the Russian Union of Engineers, at Russian news outlet ‘Channel One’, who showed satellite imagery of a fighter jet seemingly launching a missile at a commercial airliner (TASS, 2014b). The photo was soon debunked as an (amateurish) fake (Stopfake, 2014b), but by that time the Daily Mail had already picked up the story, headlining: “Is this the moment MH17 was shot down as it flew over Ukraine?” (Steward, 2014). It is indicative of the speed and scope of the contemporary information environment that can facilitate the swift spread of falsehoods, particularly in the open West. On December 23rd, 2014, a new “secret witness” was brought

forward by Russian media, who claimed to have seen a Ukrainian pilot returning from a mission soon after MH17 was shot down, saying "wrong plane" when he got out, adding that "the plane happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time" (RT, 2014t). The pilot was soon identified to be "Vladislav Voloshin", a Ukrainian Airforce serviceman. Two days later, on December 25th, the Russian Investigative Committee came out and 'confirmed' the witness account after taking a polygraph during an interview in which the witness claimed that the fighter jet was loaded with air-to-air missiles that it did not carry anymore when it returned (RT, 2014u). The SU-25 fighter jet scenario was again actively brought forward in the prelude to the one-year anniversary of the MH17 crash by both Russian media and the 'Russian Investigative Committee' tasked to investigate the event. The latter's conclusions supported the testimony of the witness that suggested a fighter jet had shot down MH17, whose name was revealed to be Evgeny Agapov, a Ukrainian Airforce engineer (RT, 2015a). On July 17th, 2015, exactly one year after the crash, RT again published a suggestive article based on a video that supposedly has a rebel commander speak of the downing of a fighter jet in the immediate aftermath of the crash, apparently justifying the headline "Was there a 2nd plane?" (RT, 2015b).

A day before that, the Russian Federal Air Transport Agency had also claimed that the scenario of a rebel-fired missile was impossible because it would have been picked up by a Russian radar station (RT, 2015c). In the mean-time, another theory had been brought forward by the Russian state-owned manufacturer of the BUK-missile system, Almaz Antey. It supported the notion brought forward by most Western analysts and agencies that a BUK surface-to-air missile had hit the plane, but on the basis of shrapnel damage analysis Almaz Antey concluded that it had to have been an old model of the missile that was no longer used by Russian military forces (RT, 2015d). According to Almaz Antey the Ukrainian Armed Forces still deployed this missile type, clearly implying Ukrainian culpability. Almaz Antey herewith directly contradicted all those Kremlin-representatives that had elevated the theory of a Ukrainian fighter jet.

6.3.2.3 Discrediting the official investigations

The conclusions of Almaz Antey would prove the prelude to an intensive Russian effort to discredit the research of the Dutch Safety Board, who presented its findings on the cause of the crash on October 13th, 2015. The Board concluded that the plane indeed was hit by a BUK missile, but on

the basis of the type of fragments found in the wreckage stated that the BUK-type had to be a relatively new model (Dutch Safety Board, 2015). The report also found evidence that the likely launch-site lay in rebel-held area at the time of the crash. Presumably to pre-empt the Board's undesirable conclusions, Almaz Antey gave a press conference on the same day presenting its own conclusions and herewith discrediting the official report before it was published (Walker & Borger, 2015). A day earlier, Kremlin-spokesman Dmitry Peskov had already cast doubt on the forthcoming report by stating that "there are facts delivered by the Russian side that for unclear reasons are being apparently ignored" (RT, 2015e). In response to the report, the Russian Federal Air Transport Agency criticized the report and supposed partiality of the Dutch Safety Board in a letter that was published by a Dutch newspaper (Stortsjevoj, 2016), and sought clarification from the Board on a number of issues. The Board responded to this letter a month later by dismissing the Russian claims and criticisms primarily with reference to the original report (Dutch Safety Board, 2016). The only conclusion of the Board that was seconded (and subsequently exploited) by Russian officials and media was that Ukraine should have closed its airspace to commercial traffic, which, as seen through Russian eyes, confirmed the original assertion by Putin that it was the Ukrainians who held ultimate responsibility for the crash.

A year later, the Russian politico-security complex repeated the same strategy of discrediting the forthcoming report of the Joint Investigative Team (JIT, made up of the Netherlands, Australia, Belgium, Ukraine and Malaysia), which on September 28, 2016 was to finally establish from where the BUK was launched and by whom (JIT, 2016). In the two-week lead-up to this publication, a newly formed Russian blogger group called 'anti-Bellingcat' (with questionable credentials, see: Atlantic Council Digital Forensics Research Lab, 2016) according to Sputnik "blew lid off Bellingcat's systematic lying" on MH17 (Sputnik, 2016), RT posted a video that summarized criticisms on the work of the JIT (RT, 2016a), while Almaz Antey announced it would hand over new radar data that had showed "no missile attack from rebel side", which had 'coincidentally' only been discovered a week before the final JIT report (but more than two years after the original crash) (RT, 2016b). As these agents of the Russian politico-security complex appear to have expected, the JIT on September 28th, 2016 irrefutably concluded that a sophisticated BUK missile system was brought in from Russia on the 17th of July 2014 before shooting down MH17 from rebel-held territory and being returned to Russia the same day (JIT, 2016). In response, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova claimed that the

investigation was “biased and politically motivated” (Osborn, Stubbs & Solovyov, 2016), which led to a subsequent rebuke of Dutch Foreign Minister Bert Koenders who claimed that “casting doubt on the integrity, professionalism and independence” of the JIT was “unacceptable” and amounted to “unfounded criticism” (Radio Free Europe, 2016).

The MH17 case reveals the immense effort that was launched by the Russian politico-security complex to muddy the waters with regard to what had brought down MH17, and to discredit any individual, organization or country that voiced the suggestion of Russian culpability. Equally revealing is the fact that the possibility of Russian involvement was not even considered a possible scenario in Russian media, with each report on MH17 being devoted to further suspicions on Ukraine and exonerate Russia or the separatist rebels. By contrast, the Russian view held that it was the *Western* media and political elite that jumped to conclusions, while the Russians aimed for a transparent and fair investigative process. Undoubtedly, ‘the Western media’ (if we can speak of such a supposedly uniform institution) and governments may have had their own bias in reporting on MH17, or on the Ukraine crisis as a whole. But what sets the response of the Russian politico-security complex apart is the structured, coordinated and unforgiving character with which it tried to define perceptions on MH17 and Ukraine. In this regard, Pekel’s (2015) documentary captures a meaningful reflection on MH17 by Alexander Nekrasov, Kremlin adviser under former Russian president Yeltsin, who states that “Russia Today must work as a counteract against some of the Western propaganda”, and continues by saying “and by the way, now they have found the pilot [of the supposed Ukrainian jet that shot down MH17], his name is Voloshin, and he even confessed”. Somewhat ironically, in accusing ‘the West’ of MH17 propaganda, Nekrasov points at the quintessential instance of Russian disinformation in the MH17 context as proof that Russia was right all along, with the West simply being out to demonize the Russians.

Discrediting Russia-critical points of authority, in combination with the dissemination of lies, forgeries and unfounded rumors so as to create confusion, sow discord and foster resentment among foreign populations and leaderships, are the key hallmarks of Soviet Dezinformatsiya, a set of techniques that can be used to manipulate the cognitive process of a selected audience so as to attempt to control its behavior as part of RC. The fact that the Russian politico-security complex produced numerous mutually exclusive theories on what had happened that did not withstand scrutiny of experts is indicative of the aim to cause confusion and doubt. Intoxicating the

information sphere on MH17 with countless contradictory and cynical accounts on what has happened, in the words of Gilles (2016, p.37) serves the purpose of "undermining trust in objective reporting, and especially in official statements by Russia's adversaries and victims". Although the case of MH17 is particularly informative, it represents methods used by Russia throughout the Ukrainian crisis, both originally in Crimea and afterwards in Eastern Ukraine.

6.4 Misleading narratives

During the crisis in Eastern Ukraine, the narratives put forward by the Kremlin so as to define the lens through which the conflict was seen naturally largely correspond to those discussed in the Crimea case. The riots and subsequent secessionist tendencies in the Donbass were presented by Russia as an extension of those that had led to the Crimean referendum and subsequent annexation. Gaufman (2015, p.151) shows that references to "fascism" in Russian mass media actually were higher in the first months of separatist fighting in Eastern Ukraine (May and June) than during the Crimean annexation. This is indicative of the fact that the supposed fascist leadership in Kiev continued to be a core element of the Russian reporting on the events. The notion that the fascist threat was ultimately driven by the U.S. and its Western partners, with Euromaidan as a US/EU satellite was similarly commonplace throughout coverage of the Ukrainian crisis (Gaufman, 2015, p.162).

A Russian narrative that gained prominence as the conflict in Eastern Ukraine endured was the notion that Russia was not, and never had been, a party to the conflict, and was therefore able to present itself as not more than an interested outside observer (Snegovaya, 2015, p.16). This line of thought followed naturally from the staunch Russian denial that it had launched any military operation in Eastern Ukraine, despite the tremendous evidence for an extensive Russian presence. From the assertion that Russia was not involved logically followed that it could not exert significant influence over the conflict. After all, in the Russian narrative the Kremlin did not in any way control, or even influence directly the fighting and posturing of the separatist rebels. It led to the peculiar situation in which Russia was the principal political actor in both Minsk accords, without being (formally) identified as party to the conflict in any legal sense.

At the same time, however, the Russian strategic communication actively attempted to legitimize the separatist cause in south-east Ukraine. In doing so, the Kremlin launched what Osipian (2015, p.114) names the "Novorossiia" propaganda myth. On an appearance after the annexation of Crimea on the 17th of April, 2014, Putin used the term Novorossia to refer to the "ancient Russian lands" that comprised key parts of south-eastern Ukraine and therefore were suggested to ultimately be part of the Russian motherland (Osipian, 2015, p.114; Pakhomenko & Tryma, 2016, pp.45-46). This particular interpretation of history went hand in hand with the supposed need to protect ethnic Russians in southeastern Ukraine, who were, "time and again", confronted with "attempts … to deprive Russians of their historical memory, even of their language and to subject them to forced assimilation" (Putin, 2014c). A natural extension of this reading of affairs was the expressed sympathy for the separatist cause, and staunch criticism of the Ukrainian "anti-terror operation", which was presented as a military clampdown at the expense of Ukraine's own population with Putin calling it "a serious crime against its own people" (Vasovic & Anishchuk, 2014).

Russia, then, portrayed itself as primarily concerned for the safety and human rights of the population in that area, which, through its 'homegrown' separatist uprising, clearly showed it did not feel represented by the Ukrainian government. Perhaps the clearest example of Russia's attempt to paint its objectives as a noble cause was its decision to send dozens of humanitarian convoys to the Donbass in the lead-up to peace talks, supposedly exclusively on the basis of humanitarian motives. By contrast, the U.S., Ukraine and other Western nations saw it as a breach of Ukrainian sovereignty and a possible "pretext for further Russian escalation of the conflict", with the U.S. National Security Council stating that "it is important to remember that Russia is purporting to alleviate a humanitarian situation which Russia itself created" (Luhn & Roberts, 2014). Similarly, NATO Secretary General Rasmussen said: "the disregard for international humanitarian principles raises further questions about whether the true purpose of the aid convoy is to support civilians or to resupply armed separatists" (ibid.). By many seen as a PR ploy, the sending of a humanitarian convoy played into the Kremlin's hand in any case: if Ukraine refused to let the military trucks (hastily painted white) in, it would be de facto responsible for the humanitarian misery among the population in the region, while the passage of the convoy could possibly represent a Trojan horse, but in any case would depict Russia as the selfless champion of the wellbeing of the local population (Luhn & Harding, 2014).

It shows that Russia in its portrayal of the Ukraine crisis and its involvement in it has drawn on a variety of narratives that legitimize Russian actions in one way or another. Whether aimed at demonizing the Ukrainian ('fascist') government and the hypocritical West (and its plot to control Ukraine), or glorifying the separatists (as fighting for self-determination and against oppression) and the Russian cause (the need to protect 'its' people), Russian narratives attempted to construct an artificial lens through which the conflict was interpreted in a way that suited Russian interests. In doing so, the use of misleading narratives manipulates the way in which particular audiences perceive the nature of the conflict, Russian intensions, and their own interests, therewith influencing their response to ongoing developments in a way that favors a preconceived Russian agenda.

6.5 Power pressure

Large-scale military exercises would prove the most forceful Russian method aimed at pressuring its adversaries into (a particular) compliance, or at least making absolutely clear the degree of Russian investment in the situation. Soon after the Ukrainian government had announced it would respond to uprisings in the Donbass by means of the anti-terror operation in April, 2014, the Kremlin mobilized some 40.000 troops along the Ukrainian border (Chivers, MacFarquhar & Higgins, 2014). Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu explained that the Russian military would hold drills that included fights along the border, as Russia "[has] to react to such developments", because it had a duty to stop the Ukrainian "military machine" (ibid.). Pierre Vaux and colleagues in a publication for *The Interpreter* report that there were several moments in the spring of 2014 when the anti-terror operation gained ground and was proceeding apace, when Ukrainian intelligence reports, local eyewitness statements and videos came in depicting the Russian military as 'racing' towards the Ukrainian border in large numbers, presumably to "intimidate Ukraine into halting its success for fear of triggering a Russian military response that would guarantee defeat" (Vaux et al., 2014). Throughout the ensuing conflict, Moscow continued to use snap military exercises close to Ukrainian territory as an overt threat that could well be "interpreted by other actors as preparations for a much larger-scale military intervention in Ukraine" (McDermott, 2015, p.23; see also: Westerlund & Norberg, 2016, pp.595-596).

In addition to conventional military muscle flexing, however, the Russian attempts at military power pressure were also replete with references to its nuclear capabilities, escalating the stakes of a direct and open military confrontation over Ukraine to extreme and unprecedented levels. A report by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, named "Nuclear Messaging in the Ukraine Crisis", outlines the variety of forms that expressing such nuclear threats took, and the many instances at which it occurred (Durkalec, 2015). In August 2014, Putin argued no country would want a large-scale conflict with Russia because it is "one of the world's biggest nuclear powers"; in September, Russian officials announced that by 2020 Russia will renew all of its strategic nuclear forces, instead of the 70% that had earlier been communicated; in October, Putin warned that attempts to "blackmail" Russia with economic sanctions could result in "a discord between large nuclear powers", with possibly dramatic consequences for international stability (Durkalec, 2015, p.7). In 2014, furthermore, NATO aircraft intercepted Russian military aircraft (often nuclear-capable bombers) more than 400 times as they violated or closely approached NATO airspace (Durkalec, 2015, p.9). Understandably, the Russians never explained such nuclear messaging as signifying anything more than routine exercises or weapon-upgrades, or harmless elaborations on the obvious Russian nuclear capabilities. When an article in *the Times* newspaper argued that Putin was using the threat of "nuclear showdown" in the Baltic States so as to intimidate NATO and coerce the alliance away from Russia's border, Kremlin spokesperson Peskov, in a clear case of 'projection', said: "This is a classic example of the continuing hysteria and the demonization of our country. They themselves are fanning the flames concerning this", adding that what was written "is not guided by any particular facts" and denying that Russia had ever threatened to use nuclear weapons in connection to events in Crimea (RT, 2015f).

After having discussed the use of Maskirovka and active measures, Dezinformatsiya, misleading narratives and power pressure as expressions of RC-techniques in the Donbass context, figure 7 summarizes the findings of this case-study.

Concept	Indicators	Findings
Reflexive Control	Maskirovka & Active Measures	• Widespread presence of camouflaged troops and weapon-systems • Use of proxy groups and militias • Widespread deliveries of sophisticated weapon systems to separatists
	Dezinformatsiya	• Consistent denial of Russian military involvement by Russian officials, up to this day • Consistent denial of downing of MH17 by both Russian officials and media • Spread of numerous (conspiracy) theories on MH17 to stir confusion by both officials and media • Continuous discrediting and delegitimizing of official investigations
	Misleading narrative	• Similar narratives used to those in Crimea, such as the 'neo-Nazi threat from Kiev' and need to protect ethnic Russians • Misleading narrative that Russia was 'no party to the conflict' but rather an interested outside observer • Use of 'Novorosiia propaganda myth' framing the separatist cause as legitimate quest to set free historical Russian lands • Framing of Russian violation of Ukrainian border as humanitarian mission to relieve the suffering of people in the Donbass
	Power Pressure	• Large-scale military exercises on Ukrainian border • Nuclear muscle flexing in rhetoric and actions

FIGURE 7, OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS IN DONBASS CASE-STUDY

7 Established RC methods in both case studies

As seen through the theoretical lens of RC, the Russian Crimean operation and its involvement in the Donbass, both in its military and non-military character, provides plenty of material to suggest that the ability to control the decision-making of the adversary (in this case defined as international public opinion and the Western and Ukrainian political leaderships) through manipulation of its cognitive process appears a fundamental premise of the Kremlin's Ukraine strategy.

7.1 Maskirovka, active measures

In both Crimea and the Donbass, the Russian military made heavy use of Maskirovka and active measures to ensure that there was at least a minimal degree of 'plausible deniability' that the Kremlin could hide behind in its denial of military intervention. As has been outlined, however, in practice this constituted to not much more than 'hiding in plain sight', since soon after the start of the separatist uprising in Crimea and the east it became clear to any informed observer that the Russian military was heavily engaged in military operations. As we know, Russia up until the moment of writing never got around to 'admitting the obvious' in Eastern Ukraine the way it did in Crimea, most likely because the latter was deemed a completed and successful operation while the Donbass counts as an ongoing 'frozen conflict' that may indeed flare up again.

With regard to Crimea, the use of covert action and subversion combined with cyber offensives as part of Maskirovka and active measures indeed infused Russian actions with "plausible deniability", although the extent to which the label 'plausible' applies can be debated (Ven Bruusgaard, 2014). In hindsight, it seems that Putin's claim that ad hoc established self-defense groups had the apparent capability to forcefully impose their will on a peninsula that hosted nearly 20.000 Ukrainian servicemen seems ludicrous, and this was the way some observers valued Putin's statements at the time. But as the Crimean crisis was unfolding, many others struggled to develop a clear understanding of the exact nature and extent of Russian involvement in real-time. The BBC as late as March 11th, 2014, still headlined the open question: ""Little green men" or "Russian invaders"?" in an article that discusses multiple interpretations on the presence of the "unidentified" soldiers in Crimea (Shevchenko, 2014; see also Yurchak, 2014). It is

indicative of the turbidity that the Kremlin was able to bring about in the international and Ukrainian perception of events, suggesting a very successful execution of Maskirovka techniques and active measures.

The case of Eastern Ukraine shows a similar picture, although spread out over a much longer period of time. This by definition makes it harder to convincingly uphold the image of non-involvement. But although not too many in the West may have doubted the Russian military presence, the exact nature and extent of this involvement was not clear either. The absence of any internationally mandated fact-finding mission in combination with the covert nature of Russian operations made it difficult to formulate in precise terms what the Russians were doing. The fact that separatists in Eastern Ukraine, after heavy initial losses during the 'anti-terror operation' of the government, were able to bounce back and keep hold of significant swaths of territory in the region after an intensification of Russian involvement is indicative of the fact that it has successfully served to destabilize this region up until today, even if it didn't succeed at separating provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk, insofar as that may ever have been a true objective.

7.2 Dezinformatisya

The flagrant falsehoods that were propagated by Kremlin officials and state-media alike in their denial of Russian military involvement further muddied the Ukrainian waters with regard to what exactly was taking place, and with which intension. In doing so, during the most crucial stages of the occupation, the Kremlin was able to inject a degree of uncertainty into the image formation on Crimea that had a paralyzing effect on decision-making of Ukrainian and Western governments. Similarly, it can be argued that the absence of any formal declaration of war during the subsequent crisis in Eastern Ukraine and constant attempts at camouflaging Russian involvement and intensions prevented the West from intervening in the conflict more forcefully, despite the fact that economic sanctions were introduced in response to Russian actions.

In its communication on its involvement in Ukraine, then, the Kremlin truly perfected the art of doublespeak. In the case of Crimea, this thesis has outlined the remarkable ways in which the Russian communications on military involvement developed, highlighting the many instances

in which in particular Putin himself contradicted his earlier statements, which, in fact, constitutes acknowledgement of previous dishonesty. Such doublespeak was revealed particularly strongly in the outline of the way in which the Russian politico-security complex has attempted to confuse, distort and discredit the information environment in response to the downing of MH17. The fact that the numerous theories that were floated by different agents of the Kremlin (whether government-officials or media mouthpieces) were more often than not mutually exclusive, gives credence to the notion that the Russian aim was to simply intoxicate the (international) public consciousness by means of Dezinformatsiya. By introducing one alternative theory after another, and embedding this in a narrative of a supposed genuine search for truth and the determination to 'question more', the Russians attempted to make the case that the 'Western' theory on MH17 was just one among many – entirely disregarding the possibility that Western conclusions resulted from evidence instead of anti-Russian bias. MH17 is also indicative of the way in which different RC-methods can interlude. The MH17 case was, first and foremost, an expression of Maskirovka, as it involved a Russian surface-to-air missile system that was secretly smuggled into Ukraine (and quite possibly operated by Russian soldiers). The response to MH17, then, was a clear instance of Dezinformatisya, while the way in which the West was demonized over its supposedly biased and anti-Russian approach to MH17 counts as an obvious (and misleading) framing narrative.

7.3 Misleading narratives

The use of particular narratives within which ongoing developments in Ukraine were embedded, in more general terms provided a framing lens through which the situation could be interpreted, and Russian actions be legitimized. Because the Russian involvement in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine was part of the same overarching conflict, it is unsurprising that the narratives used by the Kremlin during both campaigns are largely similar. An important narrative was what can be called the 'fascist frame', in which the Kiev authorities were depicted as illegitimate and dangerous because they were infiltrated by fascist and ultranationalist elements that pursued a violent and decidedly anti-Russian course. A natural extension of this baseline was the notion that ethnic Russians were under severe threat of being marginalized, or even assaulted, with a fascist government in place. Therefore, as argued by Gaufman (2015, p.143), the Russian framing of the

Ukraine crisis can be viewed as a "securitization move", i.e. an "attempt to depict a given phenomenon as an existential threat, thereby enabling the legitimization of extraordinary measures ostensibly aimed at this threat".

Going beyond the supposed immediate humanitarian concerns of the populations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, Russia introduced the argument that they had a right to self-determination and needed to be given the opportunity to speak out on whether or not they still wanted to be part of a government that they, in the Russian narrative, did not feel represented by whatsoever. In Crimea this led to the very swiftly held referendum and subsequent annexation by Russia, but the conditions in Eastern Ukraine were more complex, not in the last place because of the military resistance that the Ukrainian army put up in response to attempts at a forceful cessation by separatists. The right to self-determination, nonetheless, counted as an important narrative with which Russia could legitimate its sympathy and support for the separatist cause.

All narratives, however, went hand in hand with a demonization of the West that sought to delegitimize any potential Western response that could harm Russia. The frequent use of false analogies and 'whataboutism' to bring out the supposed hypocrisy of the West either legitimated Russian actions (Crimean annexation is justified, because the West also supported the independence of Kosovo), denounced the West, or simply served to reveal the Western double standards to which Russia is held.

7.4 Power pressure

The Crimea and Donbass case-studies show that the Russian use of power pressure, whether through suggestive messaging or sheer military force, was an often-used method of intimidation with the means of influencing the political calculus of the targeted subject. The different ways in which the Kremlin warned of the repercussions that might result from going against Russia are examples of such power pressure. This gained multifold expressions, but the most obvious instances were those in which Russia used mass mobilization and (snap) military exercises close to the Ukrainian border to get its message across. The frequent use of nuclear messaging further

contributed to establishing the perception in Ukraine and in the West that Russia was not kidding when it came to protecting its (perceived) interests in Ukraine, or the region.

7.5 Reflection

This section is devoted to coupling the findings of the empirical study to the theory of RC as developed in chapter 2. The indicators developed on the basis of this theory span a broad range of tools that can be marked as expressions of the use of RC, ranging from the use of subtly introduced disinformation to the propagation of blatant lies, and from the deployment of covert special operations to the threat of massive military force. The fact that this study has found all the RC-methods under consideration to be a core part of the Russian strategy in Ukraine is a telling indication that RC, as theoretical template for control over the behavior of the adversary, counts as promising explanatory framework for Russian actions.

Recalling Reid's (1987) writing on RC as revolving primarily around attempts to reflexively manipulate a subject's perception and goal formation, the combination of surprise, confusion and determined offensive action appear to have severely conditioned the room of maneuver of the Ukrainian and Western governments. The Russian posturing in Ukraine herewith represents a remarkable and somewhat paradoxical display of uncertainty and certainty. Whereas the Russian operations in both Crimea and Eastern Ukraine were initially characterized by covert action that allowed for a sufficient degree of plausible deniability, the character of the Russian presence soon morphed into one that left no doubt about who was in control of the military and political situation – despite the fact that the Kremlin continued to deny it. This was particularly true in the case of Crimea, which Yurchak (2014) argues to have experienced "a military occupation that is staged as a non-occupation", in which the Russian troops were tasked to achieve contradictory objectives: "to be anonymous and yet recognized by all, to be polite and yet frightening, to be identified as the Russian Army and yet, be different from the Russian Army". The combination of altering the perception of certain audiences with regard to the Crimean course of events and the subsequent presentation of (pro-)Russian control over the peninsula and development towards secession as a *fait accompli*, made that the Russian operation can be argued to have targeted international audiences so as to reflexively control the decision-making process

of adversary's both through manipulation of its perception and of its goals. Indeed, in addition to muddying the waters as to what had taken place "it was crucial early on to project the image of Crimea as a done deal militarily and politically", and convey to the Ukrainian government and the international audience that "Crimea is lost" (Norberg, Franke & Westerlund, 2014, p.43).

In other words, the portrayal of the Russian involvement in Crimea (and later Donbass) as unforgiving and whole-hearted conditioned the goal-formation of the West, which is a concrete outcome that the use of RC attempts to achieve. For Ukraine and the West, intervening decisively (i.e. possibly militarily) was barely a feasible scenario given the fact that through Maskirovka, active measures and power pressure Russia had made clear that any meaningful response to its involvement in Crimea and later Donbass was likely to trigger a spiral of escalation. At the same time, the use of Dezinformatsiya and framing narratives provided a minimal degree of plausible deniability that Russia tried to hide behind, which undermined consensus on the exact nature of Russian involvement and possibly prevented Russian involvement from gaining the salience that would push the West towards intervention. Arguably, then, the Kremlin used these methods both to manipulate the goal-formation (military action against Russia is unfeasible) and perception-formation (unclear what the Kremlin's intensions and the extent of its involvement are) of its adversary's as a way of controlling their response. Yuhas (2014a) names Putin's rhetorical performance over the Crimean crisis "a masterclass of saying everything and nothing", in that he both "placated the west ("We won't go to war")" while at the same time insisting that "he would use force "to protect Russians"". Peter Pomerantsev (2014b) furthermore convincingly dissects how the Russian incoherence around Crimea, which came in many shapes and forms, rather successfully creates a scripted reality show "designed to disorientate, provoke [and] intimidate (…) in which you can't quite really tell what's simulated and what isn't".

To put it differently, as Norberg, Westerlund and Franke (2014, p.42) do, "the speed and determination of Russia's Crimea operation took both Ukraine and the international community by surprise". This element of surprise, of course, was enhanced through Maskirovka and active measures tactics, while the Russian swiftness and steadfastness contributed to a situation in which it prevented Ukraine and the West from taking any decisive action, so that "Russia managed to get inside the decision-making loops of both the Ukrainian government and the outside world" (ibid.). The authors continue by remarking that it has led many to claim the operation represented a "new

generation of Russian warfare", but the analysis in terms of RC suggests that the theoretical template for such methods was developed a long time ago.

Paradoxically, therefore, in addition to purposeful spread of confusion and insecurity, the Russian strategy was simultaneously bent on making absolutely clear that Ukraine was of vital interest to Moscow's national security, and that the Kremlin was very much willing to raise the stakes in its bid to prevent Ukraine from 'joining the West'. Putin did not shy away from using extreme power pressure to get this point across by showing the Russian military muscle and its apparent intent to use it if need be. To do so meant influencing the decision-making algorithm of Western governments that were considering whether, and if so in what way, to intervene in the Russian take-over of Crimea. In making power pressure a central element of the Russian repertoire of means to influence the Ukraine conflict, Russia seems to employ what Thomas Schelling calls "competition in risk taking" aimed at achieving political objectives "not so much by tests of force as by tests of nerve" (quoted in Durkalec, 2015, p.16). In such competition, "issues are decided not by who can bring the most force to bear in a locality, or on particular issue, but by who is eventually willing to bring more force to bear or able to make it *appear* that more is forthcoming" (ibid., my italics). This description of the use of power pressure neatly brings out the psychological character such attempts at intimidation have. Issuing nuclear threats creates the impression of unpredictability and a general willingness to escalate tensions in pursuit of strategic aims, leading the adversary to overthink its response. The Western aversion for any competitive nuclear bidding and any direct military involvement in Ukraine can be alluded arguably as proof that Russian assertive (nuclear) power pressure has instilled in the West a certain hesitance to confront Russian provocations over fear of escalation. Clearly, this favors the supposed Russian political calculus that the benefits of the Ukraine crisis for Russia (annexation of Crimea, destabilization of Ukraine, (perceived) return to 'great-power status', surge in domestic support etc.) still outweigh the costs (operational expenses, economic sanctions, political isolation, and risk of actual escalation).

When assessed against the RC-indicators, the cases of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine have provided ample proof that Maskirvoka, Dezinformatsiya, the use of misleading narratives and power pressure all were core elements of the Russian strategy in Ukraine. These methods are all aimed at manipulating information (intake) on the conflict in one way or another. Whether it is done as a means to conceal Russian military operations or so as to frame the conflict in a way that

legitimizes Russian actions, they represent RC-techniques that ultimately carry the purpose of influencing the cognitive process of those parties that are seen as vital to the Russian cause. When viewed through the RC-lens that this study has presented, then, the conclusion is that all Russian actions can be explained as attempts to imprint a preconceived image of the situation into the consciousness of whatever audience is seen instrumental for the Kremlin in achieving its goals. The basic techniques used, as seen in the empirical analysis, have been around since Soviet times. This does not imply, of course, that the use of such methods constitutes some sort of magic bullet that allows for extensive control over the adversary's behavior. 'Control' in general might be a misleading term, since although control might be the ultimate aim, in practice the implication of RC methods comes down to attempts at steering and influencing a subject's actions without any guarantees of success. The latter is illustrated by the fact that although Russia has proven able to annex Crimea and continuously destabilize the Donbass (which, arguably, can be considered a success), its actions ultimately could not prevent large economic and political fallout, not in the last place as a result of the economic sanctions that the West imposed.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Answer to (sub)research question(s)

This paper has aimed to research the relevance of the Soviet theory of Reflexive Control in contemporary Russian information warfare. Before answering the main research question, this conclusion will shortly reflect upon all the sub-research questions by way of an explanatory narrative that guides the reader through a succinct summary of the central elements of this thesis.

The first sub-question, *"what is the Soviet concept of Reflexive Control?"*, was discussed in the theoretical framework. Recalling a comprehensive definition by Timothy Thomas, a renowned Western scholar on RC, the concept is explained as "a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator" (Thomas, 2004, p.237). RC, in short, represents ways to control the behavior of a subject through manipulation of its cognitive processes.

So as to demarcate the concrete methods that define the use of RC as military-political practice, this thesis posed as second sub-research question *"how can RC be translated into relevant indicators for the Ukraine-context?"*. On the basis of the techniques distilled from literature on RC, the indicators brought forward in paragraph 3.2 were 1) 'Maskirovka and active measures', i.e. military deception, special operations and political warfare; 2) 'Dezinformatsiya', or the purposeful spread of lies, unsubstantiated rumors, denial of accusations and the discrediting of unwelcome sources; 3) 'Misleading narrative', i.e. the embedding of information in misleading narratives and diverting attention to moral or legal scruples of adversaries; 4) and lastly 'power pressure', i.e. the threatening with sanctions or risks as a means of exerting pressure on adversaries.

Before this framework was applied to the Ukraine context, in chapter 4 the thesis continued by addressing the question *"what role does information warfare play in contemporary Russian security policy?"* so as to outline the extent to which Russian strategic thought is framed in terms of information operations. As the chapter has brought forward, control over information flows, and thus over the cognitive process of actors relevant to Russian interests, is a central theme in contemporary official Russian security documents. Russian expressions of information warfare,

furthermore, are well-documented and suggest the 'weaponization' of information as an important tool for coercion in pursuit of Russian political and military interests.

Chapter 5, subsequently, was devoted to the analysis of Russian actions in Crimea as seen through the theoretical prism on RC developed in earlier chapters. In answering the question *"which expressions of RC can be identified in the case of Crimea?*", the research revealed numerous instances of the use of each of the four categories (or indicators) of RC techniques. This was done through effective use of camouflage, concealment and incitement, representing the physical efforts in (obscuring) the Russian push for Crimean secession, while constantly denying any direct involvement, using misleading narratives and applying large military pressure.

The analysis in chapter 6 aimed to answer *"which expressions of RC can be identified in the case of the Donbass?",* and yielded results similar to those in Crimea. Particularly the MH17 case revealed how Maskirovka and Dezinformatsiya formed an integral part of the Russian involvement in the Donbass, in addition to employing known techniques of misleadingly framing the conflict and the Russian role in it, and the unmistakable use of (nuclear) power pressure.

As the overview in chapter 7 outlined, perhaps unsurprisingly there was large overlap between the Crimean and the Donbass case-study. Both cases reveal the immense and widely varied methods that Russia employed in an attempt to steer or define perceptions on the Ukraine conflict in one way or another. Interestingly, the reflection on the empirical findings brought forward the contradictory nature of the Russian attempts at cognitive manipulation in Ukraine, as these were hinged on projecting both presence and absence, producing a 'plausible deniability' that provided the thinnest veil for obscuring exact actions and motives while leaving unquestioned the Russian willingness to manifest its power in the region. These findings to the sub-research questions allow for a thoroughly substantiated response to the main research question.

Calling to mind the main research question that this study aimed to answer, "*How can the Soviet concept of Reflexive Control account for expressions of Russian information warfare in the context of the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbass?",* the analysis brought forward leads to the following conclusion. As this thesis has first of all distilled from the literature on RC the main principles and methods of the concept relevant for scrutinizing the Ukraine case, the subsequent empirical analysis of the Crimea and Donbass conflicts shows that the framework

of indicators provides for a very relevant tool with which to interpret Russian actions. The findings, namely, suggest that the main qualities underpinning RC as a theory function as core tenets of the Russian security policy in Ukraine. The concept of RC can account for modern-day expressions of information warfare, because the theory originally underlay the multitude of techniques aimed at manipulating the decision-making algorithm of the adversary that found expression in Russian actions in both Crimea and the Donbass. This thesis has therefore shown that the RC conceptual framework as introduced in this study provides a plausible and promising theoretical lens with which to understand and explain Russian actions in the Ukraine crisis. It also echoes the conclusions of several other works that the (conceptual) novelty that is attributed to modern-day expressions of Russian information warfare is overstated, since the methods with which such war is waged find clear resonance in the literature on RC.

This need not imply, however, that the original Soviet concept of RC is explicitly placed at the center of Russian strategic thinking as it is. The fact that, scant references aside, the theory of RC is seldom adduced in literature on contemporary Russian security policy makes it highly unlikely that the literal, original concept of RC ranks high in the modern-day Russian military lexicon. Indeed, as outlined in the contextual overview, modern-day Russian definitions of and views on 'information warfare', in addition to related conceptualizations such as 'hybrid warfare' and the so-named 'Gerasimov-doctrine', seem to dominate the vocabulary on Russian security thinking, at least in the West. But if this research has shown anything, it is that the RC theory nevertheless provides a useful way of trying to understand, and possibly predict, which techniques can be employed by Russia towards an overarching purpose articulated in terms of controlling the behavior of its adversary's. Because whether brought forward as element of information warfare or RC, this research leaves undisputed that Russia has actively sought to engage in mind-games over Ukraine at all levels of the confrontation with the West and the post-Maidan governments in Kiev, ostensibly designed to control the behavior of its rivals. The many different ways in which these elements can be, and were, executed closely mirror those that are reported in the writings on RC, which gives credence to the notion that the original concept still (indirectly) informs Russian security thought and can indeed be of value for attempts at explaining or conceptualizing Russian actions.

In a time when Russia is bent on forcefully reasserting itself on the global stage, not shying away from (the threat of) using every weapon in its arsenal, it is therefore no stretch to conclude that the RC-literature seems underexposed, if not severely so. To enhance the comprehension of modern-day Russian methods of warfare counts as an important societal and academic objective. This thesis has contributed to this cause by laying out the extent and way in which Soviet-developed concepts of (political) warfare carry relevance for the analysis of Russian actions in the Ukraine conflict, paving the way for possible further explorations of the modern-day applicability of RC.

8.2 Limitations and avenues for further research

There are also clear limitations to this study, which form an important footnote to the conclusions that it has produced. First of all, a very relevant limitation is the fact that this research has only studied English-language materials, which undoubtedly leaves out valuable information, specifically in Russian itself. This was an important factor in deciding to focus the empirical analysis exclusively on the Western public and governments as subjects of possible RC attempts, rather than any domestic targeting. But more so, the lack of access to Russian literature limited the sources on RC to a handful of Western accounts. Although these writings did refer quite extensively to Russian sources on RC, this study did not allow for a critical assessment of these original accounts. The body of knowledge on RC considered for this thesis can therefore be considered somewhat meagre, and the process of translating theory into measurable parameters was hampered to some extent by the conceptual ambiguity that characterized the main RC-methods found in literature on RC. Still, however, this arguably provided sufficient information for distilling from this literature testable indicators that captured the essence of different methods and the interplay between them, even though the framework of indicators can be said to have been categorized somewhat artificially due to said conceptual duplicity and vagueness.

Secondly, the research into the applicability of RC as a theory doesn't necessarily lend itself well for any final conclusions or irrefutable evidence. After all, there is never a 'smoking gun' that would reveal which exact thought-process went into Russian actions, i.e. what the true intensions of the Kremlin were at any one point in time, and based on which conceptual framework.

All evidence on the relevance of RC in the Ukraine crisis is circumstantial, as it ultimately relies on inference to connect it to a particular conclusion. As such, it is for observers to piece together such circumstantial evidence and attempt to distill wisdom from it. But this also means that the findings brought forward here cannot be considered conclusive evidence, and should therefore not be considered as such. On the basis of the findings, nonetheless, it is possible to draw tentative conclusions, as this study has done, which can then be scrutinized in subsequent research to see if these hold up in different contexts and with adapted parameters.

This brings us to another limitation, which is the fact that this research has studied two different episodes of what can ultimately be defined as a single armed conflict. It therefore makes sense that findings in Crimea largely correspond to those in Eastern Ukraine. The fact that both the annexation of Crimea as well as the crisis in the Donbass were parts of this study has arguably enhanced the capacity to distill from the findings conclusions with regard to the Russian methods used in the Ukraine conflict. It does not, however, tell us much about whether or not any of these conclusions would hold up in a different context. To attempt to come to any further substantiated statements on the relevance of RC in contemporary Russian military and political thought, therefore, would require further research into possible expressions of RC in a different setting. The most obvious case-study in this regard would probably be the Russian approach to the current ongoing crisis in Syria. If this research can be duplicated in that context, it would shed valuable new light on the conclusions of this study, which can either be consolidated or put in question.

Another interesting avenue for further research is the application of the RC framework onto the domestic messaging that the Kremlin used to manipulate perceptions of ongoing conflicts such as those in Ukraine. As the literature on RC reveals, domestic audiences can well be targeted as subjects of RC-practices so as to control the cognitive processes of the home population. A thorough proficiency in the Russian language would allow scrutiny into the relevance of RC in this regard. Similarly, scrutiny into the Russian literature on RC itself could strengthen the conceptual framework and the indicators that can be distilled from this as means of testing its relevance, so as to mitigate the constraints that the limited number of Western writings on RC poses.

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