

Psychological and Propaganda Operations as a Form of Hybrid Warfare

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Abstract: Psychological and propaganda operations are inseparable part of hybrid warfare. The rapid complication of overall relations in the international community, especially since the beginning of 2022, has led to tectonic upheavals in the world order, which have caused numerous changes in front of our eyes. The world is changing today, perhaps faster than ever. In such complex political and security, economic and social circumstances, models of hybrid warfare gained additional importance and in a certain way, conditionally speaking, became an inseparable part of the foreign policy of the leading powers. In addition, hybrid actions of a psychological and propaganda nature have become an inseparable part of international relations. This paper first analyses the conceptual definition of the terms hybrid war, psychological and propaganda operations, and then explains the cause-and-effect relationships and examines their consequences on the offensive and defensive actors of international relations. Among the conclusions is the assertion that defensive actors may be completely unaware that a hybrid war is actually being waged against them by undertaking psychological and propaganda operations.

Keywords: psychological operations, propaganda operations, hybrid war, conventional war.

Graphical abstract



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INTRODUCTION

Psychological and propaganda operations have always been an integral part of all wars, and as wars have changed and evolved over time, these integral elements have also adapted to those changes. Nowadays, it is impossible to conduct a hybrid war without using psychological and propaganda operations.

Although a lot is said and written about hybrid wars, the concept itself is still partly controversial, since there is no single definition. Vuković (2018: 12) warns that “due to the existence of several terms that are close to the phrase *hybrid war* in terms of their content, such as *low-intensity conflict*, *fourth-generation war*, *complex war*, *asymmetric war* and *special war*, detecting and marking these specific characteristics is the main challenge when defining *hybrid war*. Several authors who wrote about hybrid war, encouraged by the existing pluralism of concepts concerning the so-called small wars, asked themselves whether it was a fundamentally new phenomenon or an already seen phenomenon that just acquired a different, more attractive name”.

Therefore, the same author tries to provide a closer definition through the following explanations: the hub of the hybrid war is the armed struggle; “the boundaries between the basic categories of war skills such as front/background, combatant/non-combatant, war/peace are blurred and these concepts themselves are mutually convertible in relatively short periods”; “hybrid war is conducted by amalgamated actors – states and non-state actors (subnational, transnational), often, but not always, with the aim of concealing their actions and circumventing international legal norms and customs of war”; the actors “extremely take into account the political, psychological and propaganda aspects of their actions, so in this type of war the share of the moral and mental dimension increases at the expense of the physical dimension of warfare” (Vuković, 2018: 25). Hoffman (2003), who is one of the founders of this term, states that it is a type of military strategy that combines conventional means of warfare with various non-traditional means such as paramilitary, economic measures, sanctions, then spreading propaganda and fake news that affect the morale of the enemy side. Stowell (2019) emphasizes that it is a method of “non-linear warfare”, involving psychological, economic, political and cyber-attacks. For McCuen (2008), these are *full spectrum wars*, the execution of which requires the support of the wider international community, the public of the country whose army intervenes, but also the population on whose territory war operations are carried out (or even against whose country war operations are carried out).

In an interesting collection of papers edited by Williamson and Mansoor (2012), a range of authors examines historical cases of hybrid warfare that extend from the control of Germania by the Romans (thesis argued by James Lacey), through the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 (Marcus Jones), to the Japanese occupation of North China 1937–1945 (Noboru Yamaguchi) and the Vietnam War 1950–1975 (Karl Lowe). Mansoor (2012: 7) associates hybrid warfare with “strategic patience” underscoring that time works in favour of the side using hybrid warfare methods.

Despite the controversies and ambiguities, we can still talk about several common and implied things that determine hybrid war and distinguish it from other determinants. One of the main ones is that it implies the application of psychological and propaganda activities. Those operations represent methods and procedures by which a certain influence is



exerted in the sphere of psychological activities, as well as propaganda activity that has a directed effect in order to achieve the desired goals (Parezanović & Željki, 2019). The goal of psychological operations is to “influence changes in the attitudes and behaviour of adversaries, friends and neutral public in a way that corresponds to the achievement of the national, political and military goals of the organizers of the operations” (Miljković, 2008: 8). In short, it is not possible to prepare and execute a hybrid war without applying psychological and propaganda operations. In this paper, in addition to the analysis of the nature of these operations, the question of their timing will be considered as an important element in the preparation and execution of hybrid war.

TEORETHICAL AND METODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In war, the truth is the first one to suffer! It is an old proverb that exists in many languages. The subject of research is the way truth suffers in war. The authors prove the hypothesis that the truth is “purposefully killed”, that is, that psychological and propaganda operations create a new security environment within which the public opinion of the enemy is no longer capable of distinguishing truth from falsehood. A special curiosity is the increasingly frequent use of the term post-truth, which was explained as a new term by the famous Oxford dictionary in 2016. Post-truth means a circumstance when the attitude of public opinion is shaped more by emotions and some personal beliefs than by objective facts. In short, thanks to post-truth, an individual or even entire social groups create their own image of reality based on belief in unverified information that causes them an emotional reaction and confirms some subjective convictions. Instead of being the opposite way where personal convictions are created based on rational reasoning and objective facts, people’s behaviour is determined by other things.

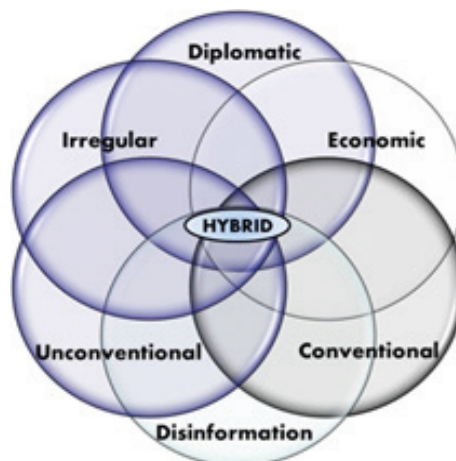


Figure 1. *The Concept of Hybrid War in NATO Strategies*
(NATO, 2016)

In this context, this paper proves that psychological operations precede propaganda operations, and that together psychological and propaganda operations precede other unconventional forms of war and the use of conventional weapons. One of the characteristics of hybrid war is that all operations are carried out simultaneously (Proroković, 2021). This

can be seen in the description of hybrid war by NATO (Figure 1), Indian state institutions (Figure 2) or certain Russian authors (Figure 3).



Figure 2. *The Concept of Hybrid Warfare in India's Strategies* (Indian Foreign Affairs, 2021)



Figure 3. *The Concept of Hybrid War in Russia's Strategies* (Kurban, 2019)

However, as can already be seen on the Graphical abstract, the authors of this paper insist on the phased development of hostility and preparation for the start of a hybrid war. Undoubtedly, when a conflict escalates, all available means and measures are used simultaneously, but in order for a conflict to escalate, it is necessary to carry out preparatory actions beforehand.

These actions are carried out by designing and implementing psychological and propaganda operations. The function of propaganda operations is to influence changes in the security environment, and the function of the latter psychological operations is to initiate psychological (or psychological-cognitive) warfare. Proving this thesis and its cause-and-effect relationships is the goal of the research. In order to present the evidence, the theoretical frameworks of realism are used to analyse international relations and contemporary normative political concepts to examine internal political processes in states. The combination of these two approaches makes it easier to understand and better present the goals and scope of hybrid wars, that is, to find an answer to the question: why do states resort to psychological-propaganda operations?

Therefore, with this approach, it is easier to explain the place and role of propaganda and psychological operations during the preparation and execution of a hybrid war. The

methodological framework is based on the methods of content analysis, discourse analysis, synthesis, induction and deduction, as well as specific case studies that will be cited in order to confirm the conclusions presented.

TASKS AND GOALS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PROPAGANDA OPERATIONS

Propaganda is a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perception and manipulate behaviour in order to provoke a reaction that is in the interest of the propagator (Ellul, 2006). Citing a whole series of examples from the World War II, Fox (2015) explains how propaganda wars can also be waged. However, waging a propaganda war does not necessarily mean that it is done with the aim of waging a hybrid war. Propaganda wars can be short-term oriented, in order, for example, to influence the international environment at the moment of important negotiations and thus ensure a better negotiating position of one side. Also, propaganda wars can be directed “inwards” with the aim of motivating one’s own public in an international dispute or conflict. At the same time, that conflict can be political, it does not have to include a military dimension. A classic example of this is the use of propaganda tools by supporters of Great Britain’s exit from the EU during the Brexit campaign. Propaganda warfare becomes part of hybrid warfare only when it is carried out together with psychological operations that are carried out in parallel or start a little later. Then they are directed towards the other, hostile side.

Vuletić (2018: 275) emphasizes that “psychological warfare is carried out by one or more states against the population or armed forces of another state in order to influence consciousness, attitudes, morals, and behaviour. It is carried out continuously and has different intensity, both in peace and in war. Psychological operations aim to convey certain information to foreign listeners and viewers in order to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, attitudes, and for the sake of achieving their own interests and goals”. Therefore, this author, summarizing the views of a whole series of other researchers, comes to the conclusion that psychological operations are undertaken for the purpose of waging a psychological war. The explanation that psychological warfare is conducted continuously both in peace and in war should be understood conditionally. That is to say, that psychological warfare is waged both during conventional war and beyond conventional war. Conventional war, in accordance with what was previously written, can also be viewed as the last phase of hybrid war. Whether the start of a hybrid war will end with a conventional war depends on a whole series of factors.

It should also be noted that the expansion of information technologies, along with the growing influence of social networks, has made it easier to carry out propaganda and psychological operations. That is why today this concerns the national security of a country and the security culture of its citizens (Milanović & Radovanović, 2015). “With IT support, the application of psychological operations, the real picture of the causes and consequences of the event is distorted, and non-existent, perceptually very convincing images are produced with a powerful effect on the global, domestic and opposing public. For the realization of the set goals, it can be resorted to photo montages, computer editing of real events, making news about non-existent massacres and crimes, about the capitulation of



opposing units, heroism and successes of one's own units, and the like. In such situation, the consequences for the opponent can be very great, from the condemnation of world public opinion, the approval of the use of force by the big powers, the introduction of sanctions, the formation of international criminal courts, to the creation of doubt in the ranks of the opponent in their own capabilities and actions" (Vuletić, 2018: 275).

The tasks and goals of modern psychological warfare in periods of complex political and security situations can be diverse and they are primarily conditioned by the given situation, but they mainly boil down to: weakening the morale of the enemy's armed forces and civilian population; causing the rival party to refuse participation in hostilities; creation of prerequisites for achieving the planned military and political goals with minimal human losses and material costs (Chenikov & Bogdanov, 2013).

In addition, it is important to emphasize that psychological operations are the main elements of psychological warfare. Their planning and implementation are carried out considering perceived weaknesses in the moral and psychological state of the population and the composition of enemy troops, as well as based on the specifics of the military and political and operational situation (Clow, 2009). Operations of a different character are carried out according to a single plan, which is mutually coordinated, with the synchronization of actions with combat troops. All the forces and means of psychological operations must be used massively, comprehensively and diversely (Volkogonov, 1984).

For the above reasons, the accelerated development and increasing use of information and communication technologies has significantly changed the modern world and the conduct of conflicts. Contemporary conflicts are emphatically characterized as a struggle in the sphere of information (Kiselev & Kostenko, 2015). "Modern hybrid warfare is characterized, as a consequence of technological development, by new ways of action of the opposing parties. Technological progress, especially in the field of communications, has led to increasing psychological effects both in peace and during armed conflicts. Analysis of the application of psychological warfare in modern conflicts allows to draw the following conclusions: modern conflicts are accompanied by very intense psychological action; various methods and means of psychological warfare represent a relatively cheap means of strong influence that helps achieve informational superiority; psychological warfare is conducted with the help of special dedicated units, but very often the services of certain specialized companies, media houses and the like are also used; psychological warfare can have significant effects as a result; new simulation technologies make it possible to stage fake events that are perceived by a large part of the population as real; the goal is to deliver certain information and indicators to the conflicting party or a selected audience, in order to influence their feelings, motivation, objective reasoning, and thus their behaviour" (Vuletić, 2018: 281).

As already written, the new moment represents the greater importance of social networks, which makes it easier to carry out propaganda and psychological operations. In this context, Vučinić (2017: 326) warns: "Psychological techniques are used in order to achieve numerous general goals of hybrid warfare, which are primarily aimed at avoiding the appearance or minimizing the duration of the regular (militarized) way of waging war. The field of social media has become a platform for various psychological activities and processes of coercive, deceptive, alienating and defensive character. In addition to already known techniques of propaganda and persuasion, social media provided the possibility



of developing a new approach to manipulation known as social engineering. Social engineering, although primarily designed for war between organizations, acquires a special place and role in the conduct of hybrid warfare. In the end, it can be concluded that in the concept of hybrid warfare, psychological warfare has a central role, and the reasons for the stated claim should be sought in the set goals and certain characteristics of the new concept of warfare, but also in the nature of social media.”

Therefore, the accelerated development of information and communication technology and its application in numerous spheres of society caused the appearance of new threats to individuals and society as a whole. The IT revolution has led to the emergence of a new dimension in which modern conflicts take place (Jones, 2017). Realization of interests is not done only by the use of armed force, but by other means and methods of action.

In other words, it could also be said that the use of military power must be prepared with propaganda and psychological operations.

TIME FRAMES AND DIRECTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PROPAGANDA ACTIONS IN THE SPHERE OF HYBRID WARFARE: POSITIONS OF OFFENSIVE AND DEFENSIVE ACTORS

The time frames in which psychological-propaganda activities are carried out during hybrid warfare are conditioned by several factors that determine a number of other mutually conditioned features depending on, for example, plans, the development of the situation, new changes and the like, which is understandable. However, when it comes to classification regarding the term of execution of psychological and propaganda operations in the sphere of hybrid warfare, it can be: strategic, i.e. long-term period, operational, i.e. medium term, tactical or short-term. Strategic psychological operations are of a global character and are carried out over a long period of time (lasting several years). They have a pronounced political character and represent information and propaganda campaigns. Operational psychological operations are carried out in a period of three to five years and are aimed at the realization of precisely defined and specific goals that can be of a wide social range. Tactical psychological operations are carried out in support of one-time directed hybrid actions, usually for a period of up to a year.

Psychological and propaganda operations can also be classified by direction. They can be directed against the civilian population, against enemy troops and against enemy leadership. Psychological operations of this type are carried out with the aim of disorienting the leadership of the enemy, among other things, by persuading the enemy side of the inevitability of defeat, violating their self-control, with the aim of encouraging actions that cause damage to their forces. Also, they can be aimed at helping opposition forces and dissident movements. Psychological operations aimed at helping opposition forces and dissident movements are carried out in order to create favourable conditions for providing moral and other support to opposition forces and dissident elements located in enemy territory (Parezanović, 2013). Here we can talk about different forms of political upheavals, among which colour revolutions are gaining more and more importance.

Hybrid threats are a kind of technologies of controlled chaos (Bartosh, 2018). The ultimate goal is to undermine the combined power of the state, the position and influence of the



authorities within the country and in the international arena (Bartosh, 2017). Thus, unlike other types of threats, the complex of hybrid threats focuses strictly on the chosen object of influence (a specific target country), have a clearly defined format and a predetermined end goal, and are in the core of the strategic plan of the operation. The successful implementation of the threat complex depends on the availability of sources capable of providing the necessary forces and assets, as well as the ability to access them. This synergistic effect of the use of hybrid threats determines their special danger for the entire national security system of the country. The goals of such actions can be the complete or partial disintegration of the state, a qualitative change in its internal or foreign policy, the replacement of the state leadership with loyal regimes, the establishment of external control over the state, its criminalization and submission to the dictates of other states or transnational corporations (Panarin, 2019).

Therefore, modern warfare encompasses almost all spheres of a society or state, administrative-political, socio-economic, cultural and ideological, which gives war a universal and multifaceted character. Wars are not only an integral element of all phases of the development of human society, but have firmly and in a long-term integrated into social life and became a specific determinant of its changes and development. On the other hand, the essence and content of war, its causes, meaning and goals, as well as ways of solving military tasks, are determined by changes in social reality itself and are determined by its evolution. Military and technical means of warfare are constantly being updated. Today, in the field of understanding of war, the execution of tasks related to the occupation of the enemy's territory and its resources plays a secondary role compared to the goals of establishing strategic and comprehensive control over the minds of the population of the country that is the object of attack, thereby achieving complete control over the future of the conquered state. The arsenal of weapons for the physical defeat of the enemy is complemented by technologies for its destruction, which are aimed at the spiritual and value-motivational spheres of human activity (Ksenofontov, 2022).

Therefore, during the preparation and execution of the hybrid war, there is no improvisation. There can be no improvisation even when designing psychological and propaganda activities. Depending on the projected tasks and goals, the time frame and direction of psychological and propaganda activities are determined. Of course, it should be noted that every war has its own dynamics. The situation is changing, the dynamics are influenced by a large number (during the planning phase) of unpredictable factors. Therefore, activities of an operational nature can turn into activities of a strategic nature and vice versa. Also, if during the performance of psychological-propaganda activities against enemy troops it is observed that such an approach does not bring results (for example, the morale of the enemy army does not decrease), then the focus must be directed either towards the population (towards the production of controlled chaos) or towards the leadership (which for example can be criminalized or otherwise delegitimized). Much depends on the specific cases, environment and circumstances in which the conflict takes place.

However, the point is in the conclusion that these are activities that were previously planned, defined in advance in terms of duration and direction of action. Nothing happens by chance. Not even on social networks or in the media and information space where certain narratives are systematically spread. The bearers of these psychological and propaganda activities are mainly mass media and intelligence services, but also other bodies, institutions and individuals who are qualified and trained for such activities.



The analysis of psychological and propaganda activities can always be realized from two diametrically opposite points: from the point of view of the offensive actor – the one who attacks and from the point of view of the defensive actor – the one who is attacked. The presented point is unusually important for defensive actors who must realize in time that they are under attack. Psychological and propaganda activities of a strategic nature that last longer than five years or of an operational nature that last from three to five years and are directed against the civilian population are usually very difficult to recognize. Even when individuals (politicians, scientists, journalists) or parts of society recognize offensive psychological and propaganda activities, those people or groups are usually exposed to discredit and delegitimization. Among other things, this is done by spreading narratives about fabricated conspiracy theories, and it goes without saying that the proponents of conspiracy theories cannot be credible and legitimate interlocutors. Certainly, especially when we talk about the entire information space and social networks, it can be claimed with great confidence that there are various conspiracy theories that have absolutely no foundation. However, it must be warned that some narratives that are proclaimed as conspiracy theories are not actually conspiracy theories at all, but psychological and propaganda operations undertaken in order to conduct a hybrid war with clear tasks concerning or weakening the morale of the armed forces and the civilian population, or causing the rival party to refuse participation in hostilities or creating preconditions for achieving planned military and political goals with minimal human losses and material costs. Sometimes, spreading the narrative about conspiracy theory is just a masking of psychological and propaganda activities that hide the real goal of everything. In those situations, there are no conspiracy theories, only conspiracies!

For the actor who plans and executes offensive psychological and propaganda operations, the challenges concern the correct choices of the time frame and direction, creativity and sustainability of the marketed narrative. Errors are an integral part of the planning and execution of operations, so they can always occur. However, for the actor who has been attacked, the first and basic challenge is to recognize the situation in which he finds himself. Defensive actors are sometimes not even aware that they are under attack.

Therefore, the political stability of a country or society, and often the wider social community, depends on psychological and propaganda activities. The independence and sovereignty of a country, its national security, economic stability, and the like depend on the aforementioned phenomenon. The population of a country, through targeted hybrid strikes with a hint of psychological-propaganda action, can be completely disoriented and lead to a serious political, security and social crisis.

Accordingly, the processes of psychological-propaganda actions as part of hybrid warfare have accelerated rapidly, not only due to numerous political-security challenges, but also due to galloping technical and technological development. Modern technologies, primarily in the field of information and communication systems, have additionally contributed to the use of psychological and propaganda instruments and enriched the spectrum of weaponry for hybrid operations, which gave the topic of the subject research additional scientific and social importance.

Waging a hybrid war, which in the final phase also includes waging a conventional war, without previously planned and implemented propaganda and paired psychological ope-



rations is either not possible or not effective. The importance of psychological-propaganda operations is therefore greater than ever before in history.

The combination of these two approaches makes it easier to understand and better present the goals and scope of hybrid wars, that is, to find an answer to the question why states resort to psychological-propaganda operations.

CONCLUSIONS

In war, the truth is the first one to suffer! This proverb is probably as old as human civilization. Ever since there have been wars, there has been a need to justify the conduct of war. Most often, warring parties interpret the facts in their own way. The logical outcome of such an approach is that there is seldom only one truth about a war. Through the development of strategic studies and various scientific disciplines in general, the knowledge and skills of warfare were improved. Propaganda became an important tool in planning and execution of war operations, which was especially noticeable during the World War II. Thanks to propaganda, on the one hand, one motivates one's own forces and homogenizes one's own society, while on the other hand, (false or selected) information is targeted to demotivate the enemy forces and spread confusion in the society of the enemy state. By connecting propaganda and psychological activities (which is also a consequence of the rapid development of strategic studies and a whole series of other scientific disciplines) a cumulative and synergistic effect is achieved that results in an extreme weakening of the enemy's position. As already presented in the paper, propaganda and psychological operations have been thoroughly defined, explained and analysed by other authors. The reasons for their initiation and the expected effects are clear. Also, it is clear that in modern conditions they are planned and implemented with the aim of waging a hybrid war. Regardless of all the differences in the interpretation of this term, none of the researchers who have dealt with this phenomenon have denied that hybrid wars are being waged! Hybrid wars are the reality of the modern world. This conclusion, despite the fact that it seems banal, is important in the search for an answer to the research question and the subject of the research itself. The subject of research is the way truth suffers in war. The research question is why states resort to psychological-propaganda operations.

In hybrid warfare, the "suffering of the truth" may prove to be quite vague and invisible to the side being attacked! The victim of offensive actions may be completely unaware that a hybrid war is being waged against them. Let us recall that the last stage of hybrid war also includes conventional war. Hence the logical conclusion that the attacked party that is not aware that a hybrid war is being waged against it is ultimately either incapable of defending itself in a conventional war or its resistance to the enemy will be weak and inadequate. Failure to recognize propaganda-psychological operations as a prelude to hybrid war will cost the attacked side either capitulation or large casualties and material costs. When propaganda-psychological operations are undertaken against enemy forces or enemy leadership, which are more logically of an operational or tactical nature, then they are easier to recognize. However, when it comes to operations against the civilian population that are of a strategic or operational nature, things change dramatically. Then the attacked party can hardly recognize the intentions and ultimate consequences. Logically, propa-



ganda and psychological operations in this context represent the first steps in conducting a hybrid war, aimed at “hiding the truth”, “imposing a new truth” or “constructing a post-truth”. With the development of information technologies and the increasing influence of social networks, the planning and implementation of such operations becomes significantly easier and simpler than at any time in history.

For now, despite the fact that propaganda and psychological operations have been thoroughly defined, explained and analysed by other authors, there are no developed theoretical or methodological frameworks thanks to which it can be claimed with high probability that one side has been attacked, and that a hybrid war has been launched against it. Among other things, the importance of this work is reflected in the initiation of that question. The authors of this work neither have an answer to that question, nor can they give it. Searching for an answer to this question will depend on the further course of research by a large number of authors who deal with this topic. But it is necessary to be aware of it. Despite the fact that there are no developed theoretical or methodological frameworks, thanks to which one can claim with high probability that one side is attacked, this happens in practice. Hybrid wars are the reality of the modern world, and propaganda and psychological operations are carried out every day.

Through “narrative construction” the truth is killed and psychological (or psychological-cognitive) wars are initiated as the first phase of hybrid wars. The very understanding of this process becomes important for ensuring national security and avoiding a scenario that, in the last stage, involves conducting a conventional war in unequal conditions. Likewise, the very understanding that such processes take place in practice is a reason for continuing research on this topic and seeking answers to numerous questions that arise by themselves.

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