The art of deception revisited (part 2): the unexpected annexation of Crimea in 2014

Colonel Han Bouwmeester, PhD*

'Of course, the Russian servicemen did back the Crimean self-defence forces. They acted in a civil but a decisive and professional manner'.

- Russian President Vladimir Putin, April 17, 2014[1]

This second part of the diptych on the art of deception revisited is about Russian deception and the way it was applied during the annexation of Crimea in 2014. During the annexation, armed soldiers dressed in dark green uniforms without insignias turned up and took control of the Ukrainian peninsula. There was no armed confrontation between these unidentified men and Ukrainian military and security forces. Only a few skirmishes took place in which predominantly armed civilians and paramilitary groups were involved. Who were these 'green' men? Where did they come from? And what were their intentions? Many questions arose, and initially Ukraine and the West struggled to come up with answers. Even now, more than seven years on, it is still highly relevant to reconstruct the annexation to gain a better understanding of Russia's actions, which prompts the following question and focus of this article: How were the Ukrainian authorities deceived during the annexation of Crimea in 2014?

This article begins with an explanation of Russian deception, also known as maskirovka. Obviously, the effects of surprise and manipulated perception play a major role. The article continues with the run-up to the annexation, including the violent demonstrations that took place on Maidan Square in Kiev, followed by a descriptive account of the annexation itself. A display of the deception techniques the Russian authorities used to take over Crimea as non-violently as possible concludes the article.

Maskirovka

The origin of the term maskirovka is disputed. Russian scholars go back to the Battle of Kulikovo, which took place on 8 September 1380.[2] The battlefield, some 120 miles south of Moscow, was the venue where Prince Dmitry Ivanovich Donskoy of Moscow divided his mounted fighters into two groups and thus

---

* Colonel Han Bouwmeester, PhD is an Associate Professor of military strategy and land operations at the Netherlands Defence Academy

1 President of the Russian Federation, 'Direct Line with Vladimir Putin', Kremlin Website, 17 April 2014. See: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796.

2 Charles Smith, 'Soviet Maskirovka', in: *Air Power Journal* 2 (1988) (1)29.

A military base at Perevalne during the 2014 Crimean crisis. This article looks into Russian deception and the way it was applied during the annexation of Crimea in 2014

fooled the Mongol Golden.[3] Others believe that maskirovka was merely a military idea dating back to the Czar's Imperial Army in the nineteenth century.[4] Till World War II maskirovka was considered a typical military tool, but that changed during the Cold War when Soviet authorities started employing it as one of many Soviet government activities. In 1966, Russian strategist Major General Vasilii Reznichenko acknowledged that maskirovka was more than simply a military tactic for deception. He defined maskirovka as a 'set of measures that consists of such actions as concealing true targets and installing simulated ones to deceive and confuse the enemy […], and the use of disinformation.'[5] It reflects the mechanisms of hiding and showing as mentioned in part 1 of this diptych.

Evgeni Messner: Creating manageable chaos
After the Cold War the work on subversive warfare written by Russian refugee Evgeni Messner became better known in the Russian Federation. In the early 1920s Messner fled to Yugoslavia after the White Army, in which he served, was defeated by the Bolsheviks. After World War II he emigrated to Argentina, where he established himself as publicist. Messner initially shaped his views during the Russian Civil War, experiencing first-hand combat

against an opponent that used irregular methods, terror and propaganda. Later, during World War II, he witnessed guerrilla tactics used by the *Chetniks* in the Balkans whose partisan operations he studied intensively. Messner compiled his experiences in the concept of *myatezh voina*, or subversive warfare, therein expressing his belief that future conflicts would no longer be fought on front lines. Psychological operations were an important element of warfare.[6] Messner emphasized the use of maskirovka in order to destabilize command structures and to create 'fog of war'.[7] The main purpose was to create a manageable form of chaos.[8] While Messner's publications had been officially banned in the Soviet Union because of his anti-Communistic views, it came as no surprise that his writings enjoyed a considerable revival during the Putin era. In 2005, the library of the Russian Military Academy issued a Russian publication, based on the legacy of Messner with the title 'If you want peace, defeat the rebellion!'[9] Today Messner's ideas are taught in Russian officers' training courses.

The long-standing form of maskirovka turned out to be an umbrella concept that encompasses many English terms such as camouflage, concealment, deception, imitation, disinformation, secrecy, stratagem, feints, diversion, and simulation. In order to understand the concept of maskirovka it is vital to grasp the entire concept rather than just its components.[10] The modern version of maskirovka is often applied in the information environment, being part of deceitful strategic communications.[11] The main components of present-day maskirovka are concealment, disguising own activities, and deceit, openly showing off to impress the opponent. The overall aim of maskirovka is to surprise a possible opponent or to create manipulated perceptions. Once maskirovka is applied the challenge is to maintain the opponent's status of surprise.[12] Maskirovka is therefore very similar to deception in general, as was concluded in part 1 of this diptych.

A large part of maskirovka consists of active measures, which was a Soviet term for active intelligence operations with the purpose to

3   Mark Thompson, 'The 600 Years of History Behind Those Ukrainian Masks', TIME Online, 18 April 2014, http://time.com/67419/the-600-years-of-history-behind-those-ukrainian-masks/.
4   Timothy Thomas, *Recasting The Red Star: Russia Forges Tradition and Technology Through Toughness* (Fort Leavenworth, KS (USA), Foreign Military Studies Office, 2011) 107.
5   Vasilii Reznichenko, *Taktika* (Moscow (USSR), Military Publishing Office of Ministry of Defence, 1966) 148.
6   Ofer Fridman, *Russian Hybrid Warfare: Resurgence and Politicisation* (London (UK), C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, 2018) 49-74.
7   Mirosław Banasik, 'Russia's Hybrid Warfare in Theory and Practice, in: *Journal on Baltic Security* 2 (2016) (1) 165-168.
8   Fridman, *Russian Hybrid Warfare*, 49-74.
9   Evgeny Messner and Igor Marchenkov, *Хочешь мира, победи мятежевойну! Творческое наследие Е. Э. Месснера: Русский путь* (*Khochesh' mira, pobedi myatezhevoynu! Tvorcheskoye naslediye Ye. E. Messnera: Russkiy put'* ('If you want peace, defeat the rebellion! The creative heritage of E. E. Messner: the Russian way') (Moscow (RF), Russian Military Academy Library, 2005).
10   Smith, 'Soviet Maskirovka', 28-39.
11   Joergen Oestroem Moeller, 'Maskirovka: Russia's Masterful Use of Deception in Ukraine', *HUFFPOST Website*, 23 April 2014. See: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joergen-oerstroem-moeller/maskirovka-russias-master_b_5199545.html.
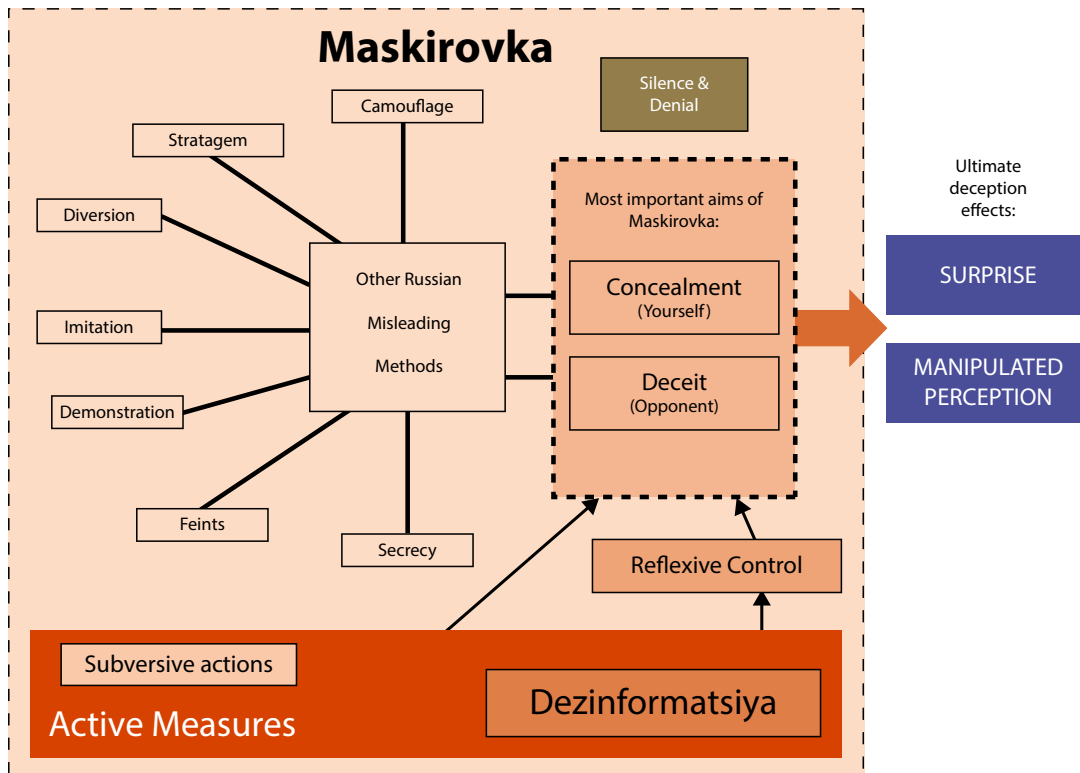
Figure 1 Overview of maskirovka, reflexive control and dezinformatsiya

influence humans or world events in order to reach one's own geopolitical aim. It includes propaganda, subversive actions, counterfeiting official documents, the deployment of agents of influence and exerting different forms of religious suppression.[13] One of the mechanisms used for active measures is reflexive control, particularly used in the information environment to control the decision-making process of an opponent.[14] Reflexive control contains four main elements: (1) putting on power pressure, (2) *dezinformatsiya*, (3) affecting an opponent's decision-making algorithm, and (4) creating time pressure.[15] Reflexive control is not a stand-alone mechanism; the Russian Federation will always harmonize its use with other governmental influence activities. It constantly uses reflexive control, and it does not stop applying reflexive control when operations are over.[16]

One of the means belonging to active measures to exercise reflexive control is dezinformatsiya,

the Russian version of disinformation. Dezinformatsiya is the intentional spread of inaccurate or manipulated information by Russian authorities and media with the purpose to deceive other persons. The Soviets already found out that effective dezinformatsiya also needs to contain some credible information, otherwise nobody will trust it.[17]

12 Andrei Grechko and Nikolai Ogarkov, *The Soviet Military Encyclopedia* (1976), English Language Edition, Vol. 1 (Boulder, CO (USA), Westview Press, 1993) 345-346.
13 Aristedes Mahairas and Mikhail Dvilyanski, 'Disinformation - Дезинформация (Dezinformatsiya)', in: *The Cyber Defense Review* 3 (2018) (3) 21.
14 Christian Kamphuis, 'Reflexive Control: The Relevance of a 50-year-old Theory Regarding Perception Control', in: *Militaire Spectator* 187 (2018) (6) 326.
15 Mikhail Ionov, 'On Reflexive Control on the Enemy in Combat', in: *Voyennaya Mysl* (Military Thought), 1 (1995) 46-48.
16 Daniel Bagge, *Unmasking Maskirovka: Russia's Cyber Influence* (New York, NY (USA), Defense Press, 2019) 50.
17 Ladislav Bittman, *The Deception Game: Czechoslovak Intelligence in Soviet Political Warfare*, Syracuse University Research Corporation (New York, NY (USA), Ballantine Books/Random House, 1972) 20.

A prelude to the annexation

After discussing maskirovka in some detail, what comes next is a survey of the events in Crimea and how deception was practised there by the Russian authorities. The series of events started in Ukraine. Years before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian authorities had set their sights on Crimea because of the many ethnic Russians living in the peninsula and tasked the GRU,[18] Russia's military security service, to deploy a number of its operators in Ukraine and Crimea, using fake Ukrainian-owned companies to gain long-term residency in the Ukraine. Known as the GRU 'fire-starters', these operators were tasked with destabilising the situation in Ukraine by spreading disinformation, creating chaos and confusion, and sometimes provoking incidents.[19] The GRU's influence in Ukraine progressively increased.

Meanwhile Russian unit 26165, known as GRU 85 Main Special Service Centre, home to the Russian military's best mathematical minds and believed to be responsible for hacking campaigns in the investigations into the downing of Malaysian airline MH17 and the 2016 US elections,[20] also employed cyber espionage operations targeting different segments of Ukrainian society. Operation Armageddon began in mid-2013 to target Ukrainian governmental institutions, law enforcement units, military leaders and journalists. This operation occurred just when Ukraine and the EU had started

negotiations for economic support. A few months later, in November 2013, an advanced malware named *Snake* infected the Ukrainian Prime Minister's office and several Ukrainian embassies abroad. The operations were constructed in such a manner to avoid discovery and attribution. These advanced espionage techniques provided the Russian authorities with insights into Ukraine's strategic thinking. Furthermore, the Russian authorities used targeted journalists to get a better under-standing of public opinion, to identify dissidents and to create channels to disseminate disinfor-mation and pro-Russian messaging.[21]

At the same time Ukrainian President Yanukovych refused to sign a Ukraine-European Union agreement, opting for a Russian bail-out loan and closer ties with the Russian Federation. Russian authorities had offered the Ukrainian President a $15 billion package to buttress the dire Ukrainian economy and a basic debt-remission agreement regarding Russian natural gas deliveries that could have come close to an additional $2 billion.[22] Yanukovych favoured the Russian deal since his constituency in Ukraine comprised an extensive ethnic-Russian element. His decision sparked a series of protests and civil unrest in Ukraine, because most Ukrainians favoured a deal with the EU.[23] During the night of 21 November 2013, Mustafa Nayyem, a Ukrainian journalist of Afghan descent, set up a Facebook account urging people to gather in protest in *Maidan Nezalezhnosti*, the Independence Square in Kyiv. Consequently, at first a few Ukrainians responded to his call, but their numbers rapidly increased in the following days. Most of the demonstrators refused to leave and wanted their government to listen to them.[24] The protests, later called 'Euromaidan', were soon followed by calls for the resignation of the president and his entire government. During the actions the protesters became more and more convinced of widespread government corruption and violations of human rights in Ukraine.[25]

During Euromaidan, protests gradually became violent confrontations in which protesters clashed with the police and the *Berkut*, Ukraine's special police. Meanwhile, the Euromaidan rally

18   GRU stands for *Galvnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravelenie* (Main Intelligence Office), the Russian Military Intelligence Service.

19   Jack Laurenson, 'Russian Spies in Ukraine Stoke Kremlin's War, *Kyiv Post Website*, 28 November 2018. See: https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/russian-spies-in-ukraine-stoke-kremlins-war.html?cn-reloaded=1.

20   Roland Oliphant, 'What is Unit 26165, Russia's Elite Military Hacking Centre?', *The Telegraph Website*, 4 October 2018. See: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/10/04/unit26165-russias-elite-military-hacking-centre/.

21   Azhar Unwala and Shaheen Ghori, 'Brandishing the Cybered Bear: Information War and the Russia-Ukraine Conflict', in: *Military Cyber Affairs: The Journal of the Military Cyber Professionals Association* 1 (2015) (1) 4-5.

22   Matthew Crosston, *Russia Reconsidered: Putin, Power, and Pragmatism* (Dallas, TX (USA), Brown Books Publishing Group, 2018) 70-72.

23   Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park, 'Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity: The Dynamics of Euromaidan', in: *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7 (2016) 85-89.

24   David Patrikarakos, *War in 140 Characters: How Social Media Is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY (USA), Basic Books, 2017) 97-101.

25   Shveda and Park, 'Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity', 90-91.

Ukrainian protesters in Maidan Square, Kyiv, 2014

erupted after the Ukrainian Parliament approved anti-demonstration laws, with the occupation of government buildings across Ukraine as a result. Mid-February 2014 Euromaidan escalated when riot police advanced towards Maidan, using live and rubber ammunition and when Berkut-snipers opened fire at the dissenters. A total of 111 protesters were killed, later often framed by Ukrainian sources as the 'Heavenly Hundred', while 18 police officers were also killed during the confrontation. As a result, Yanukovych, together with the leaders of the parliamentary opposition, signed the 'Agreement on the Settlement of Political Crisis in Ukraine', which came about through mediation of the EU and the Russian Federation. Shortly after signing the agreement Yanukovych fled the country, while the protesters occupied his personal estate and government buildings. Subsequently, the Ukrainian Parliament installed Oleksandr Turchynov, a former secret service chief, until

Petro Poroshenko was sworn in as the new Ukrainian President on 7 June 2014.[26] Almost simultaneously, Russian politicians and state media launched an unprecedented propaganda campaign claiming that the United States was behind the protests, without providing any evidence.[27]

During the protests that led to the fall of the Ukrainian President hints of heavy FSB[28] involvement emerged. Ukrainian activists, protesting against Yanukovych, claimed that the FSB, Russia's internal security service, supported

---

26 Leonid Peisakhin, 'Euromaidan Revisited: Causes of Regime Change in Ukraine One Year On' (Washington, D.C. (USA), The Woodrow Wilson Center/The Kennan Institute, 2015) 4-6; Ivan Katchananovski, 'The "Snipers" Massacre on the Maidan in Ukraine', *Elsevier Website*, August 2015. See: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2658245.

27 Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* (New York, NY (USA), Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020) 386.

28 FSB stands for *Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopastnosti* (Federal Counter-Intelligence Service).

the Berkut as they violently crushed the protests. During the weeks following the Maidan protests, the number of accusations of GRU involvement in the unstable situation in Ukraine grew fast, which would signify a shift in power because Ukraine had long been considered the FSB's territory for gathering intelligence. The media were the first to signal that the GRU got the upper hand over the FSB in Ukraine and Crimea.[29] Russian companies owned property rights in most of the Ukrainian and Crimean telecommunications infrastructure, making it fairly easy for the GRU, and to a lesser extent the FSB, to access and understand telephone calls. This assumption is supported by a text message received by many participants of an anti-Russian demonstration, reading: 'Dear subscriber, you are registered as a participant in a mass disturbance.'[30] This can be interpreted as a form of micro-targeting, not used for political purposes but just to scare the demonstrators.

The unrest in Ukraine ignited a political crisis in Crimea with demonstrations against the new interim government in Ukraine. A number of Crimean inhabitants were afraid that Russia's influence would disappear from Ukraine. The situation rapidly deteriorated. The Crimean parliament was divided; some members of

parliament (MPs) wished to join the Russian Federation while others, including the supporters of President Yanukovych, respected the agreement between the Ukrainian president and the Euromaidan protesters.[31] President Putin became highly concerned about the situation in Crimea. On 22 February 2014, Putin organized an all-night meeting with his Chief of Staff, the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, the Minister of Defence, and the chiefs of the Russian intelligence services and in the early hours, at 7 a.m., the decision about the annexation of Crimea was made.[32]

That same day, Sunday 23 February 2014, was not only the final day of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, but also a day that saw several demonstrations, pro-Euromaidan as well as anti-Ukrainian, taking place in Crimea. The notorious Russian motor gang 'The Night Wolves', overtly supported the pro-Russian activists with whom they formed civilian defence squads.[33] The following days pro-Russian protesters blocked the Crimean Parliament, demanding the non-recognition of the Ukrainian government, while at the same time the Regional State Administration in Simferopol was blockaded by hundreds of activists urging for a referendum on secession. On 26 February 2014 clashes took place near the Supreme Council of Crimea in Simferopol between, on the one hand, Crimean Tatars and supporters of Euromaidan and, on the other, pro-Russian demonstrators.[34]

On 27 February 2014 Russian KSO forces,[35] Russian special forces referred to earlier in this article as unidentified men and also known in the Western world as 'little green men', seized government buildings in Simferopol and raised the Russian flag. Russian troops erected barricades, cut off all communication with the buildings and confiscated the telephones of Crimean MPs. Late February 2014, KSO troops took control of the main roads to Sevastopol, and a military checkpoint was established on the highway between Sevastopol and Simferopol.[36] Within a few hours, KSO troops assisted by Berkut isolated Crimea from Ukraine.[37] *ChVK*[38] *Wagner,* a Russian Private Military Company, also appeared in Crimea and acted

29 Stratfor, *Reviving Kremlinology* (Austin, TX (USA), Stratfor Enterprises LLC, 2015) 15.

30 Unwala and Ghori, 'Brandishing the Cybered Bear', 4.

31 Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (New Haven, CT (USA), Yale University Press, 2014) 99-117.

32 Крым Путь на Родину (*'Krym Put na Rodinu'* or *'Crimea: Homeward Bound'*), the Russian Documentary on Crimea by *Rossiya-1*, Director: Sergey Kraus, *YouTube Website*, 18 March 2015. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68CwJVO8U1k.

33 Howard Amos, 'Ukraine Crisis Fuels Secession Calls in pro-Russian South', *The Guardian Website*, 23 February 2013. See: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/23/ukraine-crisis-secession-russian-crimea.

34 Interfax Ukraine, 'Ukraine Asking UN to Monitor Security Situation in Crimea Round the Clock, Says Security Service Chief', *Interfax Website*, 26 February 2014. See: https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/193029.html.

35 KSO stand for *Komandovanie sil Spetsial'nalnykh Operatsiy* (Russian Special Operation Forces Command). The KSO are considered Tier 1 Special Operational Forces.

36 Mark MacKinnon, 'Globe in Ukraine: Russian-backed Fighters Restrict Access to Crimean City', *The Globe and Mail Website*, 26 February 2014, Updated 12 May 2018. See: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/tension-in-crimea-as-pro-russia-and-pro-ukraine-groups-stage-competing-rallies/article17110382/#dashboard/follows/.

37 United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), *"Little Green Men": A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014* (Fort Bragg, NC (USA), 2015) 29-31.

alongside the KSO troops. ChVK Wagner, believed to be registered in Argentina, was formed from the remnants of the 'Slavonic Corps', a mercenary unit with a disgraceful reputation in Syria in 2013.[39] The main training camp of ChVK Wagner located at the Molkino base in the region of Krasnador is also the home base of the 10 *Spetsnaz* Brigade of the GRU.[40] When the annexation began it emerged that GRU unit 74455, also known as Advanced Persistent Threat 28 or Fancy Bear, had created several fake accounts and put a number of posts on Facebook and the Russian version, Vkontakte, named as 'Eastern Front' and 'For Crimean Independence'. The aim of these online activities was to stir up negative feelings towards the government in Kyiv and to alienate the Crimean population from pro-Western parties.[41]

On 28 February 2014 the State *Duma* adopted a bill to change the Russian procedure for adding territory to ensure a smooth transition of Crimea from Ukraine to the Russian Federation.[42] Meanwhile in Crimea, KSO troops placed the airport and state television under pro-Russian supervision. Likewise, they surrounded and blockaded Ukrainian military bases. Ukraine also saw its docked fleet blockaded by Russian naval vessels. Ukrainian headquarters and air defence locations were seized by Russian troops to ensure the security of additional Russian forces arriving by air. Concurrently, Russian authorities ordered so-called 'snap' exercises[43] involving large numbers of Russian conventional army troops on Russian territory along the border with Ukraine and close to the Crimean Peninsula.[44] On 1 March 2014 newly-appointed Prime Minister Aksyonov requested President Putin's assistance in safeguarding peace and public order in Crimea. In response, Putin, authorised by the Federation Council of the Russian Federation, sent in more troops.[45]

The KSO troops in Crimea turned out to be members of 22 Spetsnaz Brigade of the GRU together with elements from 810th Naval Infantry Brigade from Russia's Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol. These troops were supplemented with well-organised pro-Russian civilians and

Effective dezinformatsiya needs to contain some credible information, otherwise nobody will trust it

proxy groups, like ChVk Wagner and the Night Wolves. Russian units that linked up later in Crimea originated from *Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska* (VDV), the Russian airborne forces, and a reconnaissance regiment.[46] On the Russian mainland, Battalion Tactical Groups in the Southwestern Military District were tasked to conduct the snap exercises along the borders with Ukraine.[47] Overall, such a comprehensive operation requires detailed coordination and

38 *ChVK* stands for *Chastnyye Voyennyye Kompanii* (*частные военные компании*), which means Private Military Company.

39 Pierre Vaux, 'Fontanka Investigates Russian Mercenaries Dying for Putin Syria and Ukraine', *The Interpreter Website*, 29 March 2016. See: http://www.interpretermag.com/fontanka-investigates-russian-mercenaries-dying-for-putin-in-syria-and-ukraine/.

40 Sarah Fainberg, *Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict* (Paris (FRA), *Institut Français des Relations Internationales*, 2017) 18.

41 Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (London (UK), Profile Books, 2020) 353.

42 Venice Commission, *Draft Federal Constitutional Law "Amending the Federal Constitutional Law on the Procedure of Admission to Russian Federation and Creation of a New Subject of the Russian Federation in Its Composition" of the Russian Federation*, 10 March 2014, (Strasbourg (FRA), Council of Europe, 2014).

43 A 'snap' exercise is an exercise in which Russian units suddenly start moving troops and equipment, often at night, as if they were about to attack their neighbouring countries.

44 Roger McDermott, *Brothers Disunited: Russia's Use of Military Power in Ukraine*, Monograph (Fort Leavenworth, KS (USA), United States Army, Foreign Military Studies Office, 2015) 11-12.

45 USASOC, *Little Green Men*, 29-31.

46 Mark Galeotti, *Spetsnaz: Russia's Special Forces* (Oxford (UK), Osprey Publishing, 2015) 48-51.

47 USASOC, *"Little Green Men*, 42-52.

central command and control of all the units involved to prevent them from disrupting each other's sub-operations or, worse, from committing fratricide.

On 4 March, President Putin ordered to stop Russian exercises at the borders, while the following day the Russian Navy blockaded the Ukrainian Navy at Novoozerne. In the following two weeks KSO troops together with pro-Russian

civilians seized additional sites in Crimea and consolidated their positions.[48] On 16 March 2014, the Crimean Parliament held a highly disputed status referendum on joining the Russian Federation. A large majority of the population of Crimea voted in favour of a connection with the Russian Federation. Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, still denied any Russian involvement, but two days later it was officially announced that Crimea had become part of the Russian Federation.[49] That same day Russian and Crimean representatives officially signed the Treaty on Accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation.[50]

A week after the signing, Ukraine's 22,000 troops in Crimea finally laid down their weapons, exhausted by the annexation, abandoned by their government, and suffering from a severe loyalty crisis. The Ukrainian armed forces collapsed like a house of cards, while Ukrainian security forces stationed in Crimea kept very calm.[51] Reportedly, in total four people died

48   Ibidem, 42-52.

49   Marvin Kalb, *Imperial Gamble: Putin, Ukraine, and the New Cold War* (Washington, D.C. (USA), Brookings Institution Press, 2015) 161-163.

50   President of the Russian Federation, '*Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Крым о принятии в Российскую Федерацию Республики Крым и образовании в составе Российской Федерации новых субъектов*' (The Agreement Between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Crimea on the Admission to the Russian Federation of the Republic of Crimea and the Formation of New Entities in the Russian Federation), *Kremlin Website*, 18 March 2014. See: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20605.

51   Anton Lavrov, 'Russia Again: The Military Operation for Crimea', in: Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov (eds.), *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine,* (Minneapolis, MN (USA), East View Press, 2015) 178.

during the annexation of Crimea, two pro-Russians, one pro-Ukrainian demonstrator, and a local Crimean warrior.[52] Furthermore, a Ukrainian soldier was shot by a Russian sniper a few hours after the official signing of the treaty, while another Ukrainian soldier was wounded.[53]

The success of the operation can be measured by the fact that in just a few weeks' time, without firing a single shot, the morale of the Ukrainian troops plummeted and all of their 190 bases on the Crimean Peninsula were surrendered. Instead of relying on a mass deployment of armoured units supported by air power, the Russian authorities deployed fewer than 10,000 troops, mostly naval infantry that were already stationed in Crimea and supplemented with KSO-troops and some airborne units, poised against more than 22,000 Ukrainian troops.[54]

During the annexation of Crimea, Russian authorities were extremely successful in creating a surprise effect as well as maintaining manipulated perception. Ukrainian leaders, and indeed the rest of the world, were aghast when insignificant numbers of unidentifiable soldiers gradually took over control of the peninsula. It certainly took a few weeks to discover who these soldiers and their origin really were. This worked to the advantage of Russian authorities. Meanwhile the Crimean population had decided in a referendum that the peninsula would become part of the Russian Federation. This gave credence to the assertion of Russian authorities that the takeover of Crimea was the will of the local population and that the decision had been taken democratically. A regulated flow of information, speed and secrecy encouraged a surprise effect at the time of the annexation of Crimea which had a crippling effect on the response of the Ukrainian leadership. Its ability to respond quickly and adequately was seriously hampered.

The Russian flag flies in Crimea. During the annexation of Crimea, Russian authorities were extremely successful in creating a surprise effect as well as maintaining manipulated perception

PHOTO NICK S

The media only reported fragments and incomplete images of Russia's operations, while an overview of the situation was missing. The Ukrainian leaders, followed by many Western leaders, wanted a quick explanation for the events. So, an artificial narrative came into being, constructed from information particles and observations, some of which even without further explanation, while large chunks of information were absent. In using allusions to Nazism, Russian media, publicists and various authorities tried to put Ukrainian leadership in a bad daylight.[55] It was an attempt to link the past to the present, focusing on the distortion of history and trying to manipulate people's perception. Maintaining those perceptions was also well taken into account in these Russian actions. It was only six weeks later that President Putin admitted that the Russian Federation was behind the annexation of Crimea.[56]

Applied Russian deception methods

The previous paragraphs have given a comprehensive picture of the Russian takeover of Crimea. The next sections take a closer look at the methods of deception used by the Russian authorities. Many researchers in recent years have focused on partial aspects of Russian deception, but in order to enhance under-standing of the Russian deception used, all Russian activities must be considered holistically.

52 J.C. Finley, 'Unrest in Crimea Leaves 2 Dead; Government Buildings Seized', *United Press International Website*, 27 February 2014. See: https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2014/02/27/Unrest-in-Crimea-leaves-2-dead-government-buildings-seized/6371393516263/.

53 Gavin Williams, 'Introduction: Sound Unmade', in: Gavin Williams (ed.), *Hearing the Crimean War: Wartime Sound and the Unmaking of Sense* (New York, NY (USA), Oxford University Press, 2019) vx.

54 Jānis Bērziņš, *Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy* (Riga (LTV), National Defence Academy of Latvia, Center for Security and Strategic Research, 2014) 4.

55 NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom CoE), *Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign Against Ukraine: Examining Non-military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine from a Strategic Communications Perspective* (Riga (LTV), 2015) 16.

56 President of the Russian Federation, 'Direct Line with Vladimir Putin'.

1. Creating uncertainty

An important condition for creating deception is uncertainty, as discussed in part 1 of this diptych. Both before and during the annexation of Crimea, Russian authorities were able to create periods of great confusion and chaos, resulting in a high level of unpredictability and uncertainty among the Ukrainian population and authorities. During the annexation of Crimea, there were two aspects that caused a great deal of uncertainty.

First, since 2008, Russian authorities had issued passports to ethnic-Russians in Crimea, which caused immense uncertainty.[57] After the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, more than 25 million ethnic-Russians became 'compatriots' in new post-Soviet republics.[58] Ukraine harboured almost 8.3 million ethnic-Russians, which was 17 per cent of its total population. Nearly 1.5 million ethnic-Russians lived in Crimea, which was 67 per cent of the total Crimean population.[59] Dual citizenship was forbidden by law in Ukraine, because a second nationality was seen as a threat to the nation.[60] The issue of Russian passports, which also took place prior to the Russo-Georgian armed conflict in 2008,[61] meant that the Ukrainian authorities no longer had a clear picture of their citizens'

nationality and what this meant for their loyalty, and they could not oversee the consequences of the random issue. In many cases it could lead to the change of a person's nationality without the officials knowing. The handing out of passports also provided an excuse to the Russian Federation to intervene as soon as ethnic-Russian citizens, the compatriots, were threatened by powers considered to be unfriendly by the Russian government.[62]

Second, the annexation of Crimea took place during the Olympic Games 2014. Here, too, a comparison with the Russian-Georgian armed conflict is evident, as the 2008 Beijing Olympics took place just before the outbreak of this conflict. The Olympic Games in fact provided an ideal cover. All eyes were on the Games while the Russian Federation used the opportunity to start a conflict in a very veiled manner. On 7 February 2014, President Putin opened the 2014 Winter Olympics in the Russian summer resort Sochi with a sparkling show and featured again in the equally impressive closing ceremony on Sunday 23 February 2014.[63] That same day Putin gave his final approval for the annexation, which had without any doubt already been prepared in advance. The Russian annexation of Crimea was a huge wake-up call for the world at large, leading to general surprise and disbelief as the world was initially groping in the dark about Russia's real intentions. It might be pure coincidence, but the Games were of course a perfect distraction for carrying out activities that had to remain hidden for as long as possible.

2. A rapid and stealthy intervention

After the annexation of Crimea, the Western world struggled to find an explanation for the quick take-over of the peninsula. A new element was the intervention of phantom troops, unidentifiable, unassailable, and therefore frightening. The KSO troops and naval infantry wore the new Russian *Ratnik* equipment, thus enhancing the deception effect.[64] At an earlier stage, the pro-Russian civilians had been recruited, organised, equipped and trained by the GRU, which ran a fire starter programme. The Russian authorities denied any involvement, initially at least. The speed of the operation also

57 Anya Tsukanova, 'Cheney urges divided Ukraine to unite against Russia threat', *The Sydney Morning Herald Website*, 6 September 2008. See: https://www.smh.com.au/world/cheney-urges-divided-ukraine-to-unite-against-russia-threat-20080906-4auh.html.

58 Jeff Diamant, 'Ethnic Russians in Some Former Soviet Republics Feel a Close Connection to Russia', *Pew Research Center Website*, 24 July 2017. See: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/24/ethnic-russians-in-some-former-soviet-republics-feel-a-close-connection-to-russia/.

59 Zvi Gitelman, 'Nationality and Ethnicity in Russia and the Post-Soviet Republics', in: Stephen White, Alex Pravda and Zvi Gitelman (eds.), *Developments in Russian and Post-Soviet Politics* (London (UK), The MacMillan Press, Ltd, 1994) 238-246.

60 *Verkhovna Rada* (Ukrainian Parliament), *The Law of Ukraine on Citizenship*, Chapter 1, Article 2 (2008).

61 Alexi Gugushvili, *Country Report: Georgia* (Florence (ITA), European University Institute, 2012) 3-13.

62 Scott Littlefield, 'Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy: The Contradictions and Consequences of Russia's Passport Distribution in the Separatist Regions of Georgia', in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 61 (2009) (8) 1478.

63 Oleg Golubchikov, 'From a Sports Mega-event to a Regional Mega-project: the Sochi Winter Olympics and the Return of Geography in State Development Priorities', in: *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 9 (2017) (2) DOI: 10.1080/19406940.2016.1272620.

64 Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 56-57.

played a role in the surprise effect. It was a stealth operation; nobody knew what was happening or could officially attribute any action to the Russian Federation. Private Military Companies (PMCs), paramilitary organizations and pro-Russian civilians supported unknown troops and that also made it very difficult to attribute the annexation activities and responsibility to Russian authorities. In 2012 Putin had attempted to legalise PMCs and indicated that PMCs 'constitute an instrument for achieving national [Russian] interests without the direct participation of the authorities'.[65]

3. The use of Nazi symbols and terminology

After Ukrainian President Yanukovych had left office, Russian media tried to frame the new Ukrainian government as the Nazi regime. Evidently in Russian media World War II was still continuing in 2014. Russia's unfinished narrative was based on the notion that 'fascism had not been extinguished', and the general public is called upon to 'defeat the fascists'.[66] Blaming the opponent of Nazi sympathies had to induce an appeal to Russian emotions and to spark certain action. However, the Russian authorities were not very successful in manipulating the Ukrainian citizens. Russians in their homeland and ethnic Russians in Ukraine were sensitive to this defamation, but the Ukrainian leaders were not. Remarkably, Russian media continued their propaganda, although Russian authorities soon deduced that the war rhetoric of the Russian media did not impress non-Russians. They were the perfect audience to influence and to convince of the 'good' Russian intentions, but the excessive use of Nazi symbolism had the opposite effect. Russian media caused disgust amongst the Ukrainian non-Russian population. Making the Ukrainian government suspect of fascist sympathies can be seen as an attempt to create a manipulated perception. However, it did not have the intended effect and can therefore be considered a failed attempt to mislead the Ukrainian population and public opinion.

4. The use of conspiracy narratives

The Putin Presidency, which started (again) in 2012, marked a strong increase in the application of conspiracy theories in the communication of the Russian policy.[67] The annexation of Crimea and later the Ukrainian conflict in the Donbas region were an exceptional stage in the development of the creation and usage of conspiracy theories.[68] The increased production and consumption of anti-Western conspiracy theories became the norm in everyday Russian life. These theories were aimed at creating a sharp dichotomy, like the 'righteous Russians' versus the 'cunning Americans and Westerners supporting the bloody Ukrainian fascists'. The Russian media and public figures, all loyal to the Russian authorities, interpreted Euromaidan as the outcome of subversive Western actions aimed at brainwashing Ukrainian citizens, while intervention in Crimea had been justified by the pretence of protecting compatriots abroad from Ukrainian fascists backed by the West.[69] The conspiracy theories were meant to strengthen the exalted Russian identity in the Russian Federation, but also to instil fear in Crimea and to scare Ukrainian and Crimean leaders, especially those who favoured Western support. Conspiracy theories can be regarded as an essential part of Russia's dezinformatsiya activities to deceive and manipulate decision-makers as well as the general public.

The dissemination of conspiracy theories is not exclusive to present-day Russian authorities. Yet the idea of a possible alternative to the official discourse and the accusation of conspiracy against powerful groups or individuals had always been present below the surface in Russian and Soviet history.[70] A most suitable example of this is the notorious anti-Semitic pamphlet of 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion', a conspiracy narrative, which was Russian

65   Emmanuel Dreyfus, *Private Military Companies in Russia: Not So Quiet on the Eastern Front?* (Paris (FRA), *Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'Ecole Militaire*, 2018) 9.

66   NATO StratCom CoE, *Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign Against Ukraine,* 16.

67   Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World* (Cambridge (UK), Polity Press, 2018) 183-187.

68   Konstantin von Eggert, 'All Politics are Local: Crimea Explained', in: *World Affairs* 177 (2014) (3) 51-52.

69   Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*, 183-187.

70   Marlène Laruelle, 'Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success?', in: *The Russian Review* 71 (2012) (4) 565-567.

in origin. These protocols sketch the image of a number of powerful Jews discussing world domination and were considered to be a reaction to the first Zionist World Congress in Basel in 1897.[71] In the 1920s, Russian *émigrés* spread the protocols to Western Europe and the United States, and thus the protocols found their way in history. New discoveries about the protocols are still hot news in Russian media.[72] This example indicates how long such theories continue to have an effect on history and on people.

5. Large-scale exercises

The large-scale exercises along the border with Ukraine in 2014, in retrospect, contributed to the overwhelming stealth effects of the Russian offensive operations. These exercises were meant to look threatening, foreboding a large-scale Russian attack on Crimea and Ukraine. The Russian exercise in 2014 had all the trappings of a military show of force. These demonstrations are a way of frightening and impressing others in order to evoke an alternative perception and belong to the concept of maskirovka. During the annexation Ukrainian and Crimean authorities no longer knew what to expect from the Russian Federation. What were its intentions?

It was not the first time that Russian authorities used large-scale exercises as a disguise for their operations. Prior to the Soviet invasion at the time of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 by the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union held major exercises to deter the local authorities. In addition, just before the Yom Kippur War in 1973 in the Middle East, the Egyptian armed forces, assisted by the Soviet GRU-Spetsnaz and regular Soviet personnel, held large-scale

exercises to deceive the Israeli authorities.[73] The Russian Federation has since built a reputation for large scale exercises held prior to, or during, military operations it was actively or passively involved in.

6. Increasing activities in cyber space

Over the last two decades the use and abuse of cyber space has increased exponentially. During the annexation of Crimea, the application possibilities of the Internet had increased considerably, and social media platforms were also actively used. The Russian authorities again managed to use vague shadow organizations with criminal reputations, such as CyberBerkut. Now, the methods before and during the annexation were a sophisticated form of micro-targeting, by which demonstrators were personally contacted on their mobile phones during Euromaidan and later during the protest actions in Crimea. Vague on-line criminal organisations using social media make it difficult to link these cyber activities with the Russian authorities, which adds to uncertainty and deception.

7. Maintaining the manipulated perception

In March 2015, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander (SACEUR), General Philip Breedlove, explained to a wide NATO audience that Russia's occupation of Crimea was a massive concern to NATO. Breedlove considered the 'informationally' aspect, which refers to the content as well as the dissemination of information, as the most impressive part of Russia's approach. He emphasized that the Russians were able to exploit a conflict situation and create manipulated perceptions of this situation. In Breedlove's opinion, all they did was to apply the mechanisms of information manipulation: create a false narrative, get this false narrative out quickly and support that false narrative with all the tools that were there.[74] The Russian authorities were able to constantly confront the rest of the world with unexpected activities and to provide only pieces of information. People try to make sense of the world from one moment to the next. Every situation is overloaded with all kinds of information and to make sense of it, the human brain quickly figures out how chunks of

71   Michael Hagemeister, 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: Between History and Fiction', in: *New German Critique*, 35 (2008) (1) 83-95; Richard Evans, *The Hitler Conspiracies* (Oxford (UK), Oxford University Press, 2020) 13-20.

72   Hagemeister, 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion', 83-90.

73   Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *The Soviet-Israel War 1967-1973: The USSR's Military Intervention in the Egyptian-Israel Conflict* (London (UK), C. Hurst & Company Ltd., 2017) 327-346.

74   United States Department of Defense, 'NATO Commander Breedlove Discusses Implications of Hybrid War', *DoD News Website*, 23 March 2015. See: https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/604334/nato-commander-breedlove-discusses-implications-of-hybrid-war/.

US General Philip Breedlove in Ukraine in 2015. He was NATO's SACEUR at that time and described Russia's annexation of Crimea as a major concern to NATO. Especially the information aspect was impressive, according to Breedlove

information are connected.[75] Particularly in the security environment, narratives are deliberately created with the purpose of activating a certain feeling, emotion or opinion.[76] This was what Russian authorities did over time, providing the rest of the world with chunks of information, and the Western world was very keen to attach its own perception to that information. Therefore, the Russian authorities managed to sustain the deception effects during and after the annexation of Crimea for at least another month and a half before Russian President Putin himself gave a confirmative answer.

Concluding remarks

The purpose of this article was to provide answers to the question: How were Ukrainian policymakers misled during the 2014 annexation of Crimea? In a nutshell, Ukrainian authorities were confronted with six elements of modern Russian deception warfare, which were instrumental in the quick and smooth takeover of Crimea. These six elements, which must be considered in conjunction with each other, include: (1) creating uncertainty through issuing random Russian citizenship and using a world event as distractor for an intervention, (2) using conspiracy narratives, (3) intervening rapidly and stealthily, (4) staging large-scale exercises, (5) increasing activities in cyber space, and (6) maintaining manipulated perception. Furthermore, the Russian authorities also tried to manipulate the Ukrainians' perception by accusing their leaders of Nazi sympathies, but this attempt ultimately failed. All in all, it can be concluded that with these activities in the Crimean Peninsula, the Russian authorities surprised not only Ukrainian policy makers but also the rest of the world. Moreover, with their holistic approach, the Russian authorities have managed to add a new chapter to the phenomenon of deception in conflicts. ∎

75   Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories* (New York, NY (USA), Bloomsbury Sigma, 2016) 161-173.
76   Beatrice de Graaf, George Dimitriu and Jens Ringmose, *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War* (Abingdon (UK), Routlegde, 2015) 7-8.