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Putin´s great asset: The social construction of reality



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Abstract:

Following the third anniversary of the unfortunate act of aggression against a sovereign state, the Russian Federation remains steadfast in its determination to achieve its political objectives. At this point presently in the conflict, no one could have imagined that this absurdity would have lasted for more than three years. The question, which is always difficult to predict when considering the behaviour of the Russian people in support of the war, seems to have been resolved. The Russian people is unwavering in its support for the military campaign. It does so thanks to the masterful governance of the trinity designed by Clausewitz: violence, passion, and reason. The social construction of reality allows for the generation of influences in the interaction of the three pillars that have in turn produced a very effective long-term strategy. The design of the military campaign in Ukraine requires study in order for us to confront it, as it will undoubtedly be copiously used in the future.

Keywords:

Social psychology, social construction, reality, perception, cognitive.

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Introduction

It is evident that the shape of conflicts has transformed significantly. Initially, this statement may not seem novel, but it contrasts with the reality that the nature of war has hardly changed and remains intrinsically linked to the terms established by Clausewitz in his famous book *On War*[1]. In this foundational text, Clausewitz indicated that war was the continuation of politics by other means, a statement commonly known when approaching the study of the art of war. Furthermore, Clausewitz pointed to the Trinity of War made up of: violence and hatred, uncertainty, and politics. This trinity combines violence, chance and reason, asserting that war is a mix of uncontrolled emotion, uncertainty, and rational strategic planning.

Interestingly, one of the novelties of current conflicts is the emergence of new domains of confrontation (particularly cyberspace and the cognitive domain), along with the diversity and proliferation of risks and threats. Some of these challenges, especially those linked to the cognitive domain, have expanded the confrontation space, primarily due to revisionist countries that have been able to observe the difficulties of the West in defending itself against aggression in these domains. Moreover, they have taken advantage of the reduction of the significant conventional military advantage held by Western countries. These techniques are not new and appeared in the Soviet Union with the use of Reflexive Control which is defined as "…a means of transmitting to an ally or opponent specially prepared information to incline them to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action…"[2].

The conflict in Ukraine is part of an advanced strategy directed by the Kremlin, influencing the three pillars of Clausewitz. This strategy is not limited to Ukraine, as it also unfolds in other scenarios, such as destabilization processes (for instance Moldova or Georgia) or Russia's penetration into North Africa. The strategy is able to adapt to any scenario, including in degrading the cohesion of organizations or countries (European Union with Brexit or the United States with the 2016 elections). Essentially, it instrumentalizes interactions between the three pillars by supplying biased information and controlling

[1] Von Clausewitz, Carl. On War. United Kingdom: Penguim 2003.
[2] Thomas, Timothy. Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 17, nº 2 (2004), pp. 237-256.

decision-making.

The social construction of this reality is part of that strategy, if not its fundamental element. This social construction of reality allows the Kremlin to garner unwavering support from its population, enabling it to proceed decisively in the face of the aberration of conquering Ukraine. The aspect that is of concern is the influence that, through cognitive domain, it manages over Western societies through hybrid strategies based on disinformation.

Essentially, the strategy aims to influence the three pillars of Clausewitz's Trinity: the government, the Armed Forces, and the population. When referring to Ukraine, one technique is to raise the levels of disaffection among the population so that, ultimately, under exhaustion, they withdraw their support for a people who have suffered an invasion.

Clausewitz's Trinity

The concept of a Trinity developed by Clausewitz encompasses all aspects involved in war. Through a comprehensive and intuitive model, it presents the complexity of war based on three pillars: *Violence, Uncertainty*, and *Reason*.

Violence (and thus emotion) is the primary aspect of war, which is guaranteed by the people, who must fervently support and endure the war as they provide the necessary material to conduct it: the soldiers. This aspect is key to understanding the sustained effort of the war in Ukraine by the Russian people during the special military operation[3]. The lack of motivation among the people to wage war can trigger movements that call for its end. The Vietnam conflict is a clear example of this. This logic, propagated by some leaders of the European Union, suggesting a Russian uprising against the Kremlin as a result of Western sanctions, has proven entirely ineffective.

The second pillar is *Uncertainty* or the "Fog of war". Here we must consider the complex shape of current conflicts that are governed by chaos theory and even the contradictions and complexities of the post-normal world. An example of these contradictions was the rebellion carried out by the Wagner Group and its march toward the Kremlin. This event, far from weakening the Kremlin, strengthened it and introduced a new dynamic into the conflict. The withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan and the lack of

[3] This is the euphemism the Kremlin is utilizing, instead of war. It is one of the multiple mechanisms in the range of disinformation in place in the Russian information environment.

combativeness from the Afghan Armed Forces is another example of the importance of having a real support from the Armed Forces to take the fight.

Finally *Reason,* which materializes in politics and government. During the three years of the conflict in Ukraine despite setbacks, the Kremlin has maintained a seamless cohesion that contrasts with the hesitancy of certain countries in the EU in the common effort against the absurdity of the war. Externally, the figure of the leader, Putin, has barely been diminished.

In all three pillars, cognitive aspects intervene influencing decision-making, which determine the resilience of the whole. Emotional aspects decisively influence the perception of the conflict, the willingness to fight until sacrificing one's own life, support for mobilizations for war and generally the decisions of each of the elements that make up these three pillars. The Trinity applies to both contenders; thus, if we can obtain a good rate of influence over the three pillars, we can strengthen or weaken the adversary in their strategy.

From Durkheim's perspective, every society tends to produce the type of individuals it needs for the maintenance and perpetuation of its structure of dominance[4]. The Russian case has been developing since Putin's arrival in the Kremlin back in 2000, when a new Russian identity and a new strategy for achieving a position of advantage in the international order began to sprout. For this purpose, the Kremlin required the steadfast support of the people as a source of soldiers and a placebo for potential internal disturbances. The invasion of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine are part of a superior strategy, where the cognitive conditioning of society and, consequently, of the Armed Forces plays a crucial role in understanding the unfolding of the conflict.

The Social Construction of Reality

Each individual perceives a different reality; we can assert without fear of being mistaken that there are countless realities, as many as individuals. These different realities are shaped by the stimuli received during the childhood and are confirmed or changed during the maturation stage. A person engages with reality through their senses and shapes this

[4] Lorenc Valcarce, Federico. *Émile Durkheim y la teoría sociológica de la acción*. Madrid: Andamios, 2014.

reality through the different information they receive. "The subject is therefore a receiver of ideas and values that, from a constructivist perspective, help them set up their model of reality". [5] This shaping of reality is the product of socialization which is understood (according to Giddens), as the process by which "*…individuals learn and internalize the norms, values, behaviours and cultural characteristics of their society*"[6].

From the lens of Berger and Luckmann, this socialization allows us to carry out the social construction of reality "…*through two processes of socialization. The first is primary socialization that the individual undergoes during childhood and the second is a subsequent process that induces the already socialized individual to new worlds*"[7]. This socialization is built upon human interactions that share meanings, initially from parents and subsequently from other groups. In the case of Ukraine war, a widely shared meaning in Russian society is that Russia is the guardian of Christian values, while Europe represents an endless example of degeneration and depravity. This has led Putin to assert that Russia is not only a military power but also a moral one,[8] as an essential part of his geopolitical strategy to change the world order[9].

An individual's composition of reality is a lengthy process that begins in childhood and evolves continuously throughout their life. These processes generate a specific culture that teaches them to interpret the world through the lens imposed by the collective. Coherence in the messages that stem from the two forms of socialization is key to maintaining a robust identity for the individual. The three primary pillars in the transmission of ideas and values are: family, schools, and the media (social networks and outlets).

Primary Socialization

This occurs during the individual's early stages, when they are only socializing with their parents and siblings. During primary socialization, the child acquires the values and

[5] González, Jose Luis. *La construcción social del sujeto*. Francia: Amazon, 2016.
[6] Giddens, A., Duneier, M., Appelbaum, R. P., & Carr, D. *Introduction to Sociology* . New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.
[7] Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996.
[8] Deborah Welch Larson, Alexei Shevchenko, Russia says no: Power, status, and emotions in foreign policy, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Volume 47, Issues 3–4 (2014), pp 269-279.
[9] Henne, Peter (2019, 06 de junio). "The Geopolitics of Faith: Religious Soft Power in Russian and U.S. Foreign Policy". *Berkeley Center for Religión, Peace & World Affairs*

beliefs of their parents, a process that is heavily emotionally charged, where the child can hardly confront that glossary of beliefs. The strong emotional weight of this process allows (linked to core issues) the child to absorb the main lines that govern society through their parents' actions during their upbringing. An applicable example is that children consider it an absolute truth that Russia is the guardian of Christian values and must counter Western stances on gender or issues related to sexual diversity.

"*Primary socialization tends to be the most important for the individual; the basic structure of all primary socialization should resemble the primary*"[10]. It is during this stage that the process of integrating the child into society begins. In this acceptance process, it is vital that the child and later adult remain identified with the objective reality imposed by their parents, which understandably, is aligned with society and determined by the Kremlin.

Notably, projects like "*Conversations about Important Things*" deserve to be studied. [11] This program was approved by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation. It consists of a catalogue of mandatory activities from ages 6 to 17. Every Monday, it is compulsory in all schools to show a video (available on the web) from the program *Conversations about Important Things.* One example of the theme of one of



Figure num. 1 Some examples of traditional values

the videos relates to that traditional vision the Kremlin seeks to impose, as can be observed in Figure number 1 above.

[10] Ibid.

[11] The Project is described here: https://razgovor.edsoo.ru/

The child is born into a cognitive bubble; both familial and educational interactions are coherent and aligned with the ideas and beliefs shared by that society. This homogeneity of thought reduces societal stress levels and, therefore, potential conflicts or outbreaks of violence. The notion that Russia is the guardian of Christian values in the world has established itself as an indisputable reality, as has the fight for the survival of that model. Humans easily understand binary models: one country is good and the other is bad—something simple yet effective.

Secondary Socialization

During secondary socialization, higher education cycles and the media take on a more prominent role. However, this process starts with a clear disadvantage since a self has already formed within the person, with a catalogue of values and norms internalized by the individual. This catalogue comes from the prior stage of primary socialization.

As the individual approaches these two pillars of influence (media and higher education cycles) a process of refinement and contrast of the values and ideas from the initial stage begins. "*Secondary socialization is the internalization of sub-worlds based on institutions*"[12]. During this stage, it is worth developing further two aspects that help understand the Kremlin's control over these pillars of influence: the Kremlin's censorship policy and media control.

The Kremlin's censorship policy is multidisciplinary, with an astonishing variety of parallel lines of action[13]. It would be impossible to detail the depth and complexity of this strategy in this article but it is worth highlighting some aspects. For example, the modifications to the Penal Code made following the invasion of Ukraine have a clear purpose of controlling adverse discourse regarding both the actions of the Government and the Armed Forces, State Security Forces, and even paramilitary forces.

The law, in its Article 280.3, indicates that any criticism or information deemed defamatory can be penalized with up to 15 years in prison. This range of possibilities includes aspects such as disinformation or difficult-to-interpret issues such as degrading the honour and dignity of the Armed Forces. These aspects allow for a broad interpretation of the law.

[12] Ibid.

[13] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/15/technology/russia-internet-censors-vladimir-putin.html

These policies run parallel to graphicly depicted publicity about the sentences for those who defame. Images present a nightmarish landscape with journalists locked in cages, subjected to trials, and sentenced to a dozen years in prison for purportedly disinforming the Russian public. In Figure number 2, the trial of the independent newspaper *Meduza* journalist Ivan Golunov can be observed.



Figure num. 2 Ivan Golunov journalist during the trial.

With this reality, it is complex for debates to occur within the framework of secondary socialization covering the performance of the Armed Forces or the Kremlin. Generally, conversations will focus on aspects that show a firm adherence to Kremlin policies. However, it is possible that individuals may have the courage to confront this situation, provided they have enough information to rebut the institutionalized viewpoints in society. Unfortunately, this does not occur in Russia, thanks to the social media control policy. The official page of Reporters Without Borders states that "…*almost all independent media have been banned, blocked, and/or labeled as 'foreign agents' or 'undesirable organizations.' All others are subjected to military censorship."*[14]. Although the data varies significantly, there is no doubt that censorship of websites exceeds 10,000. At the start of the invasion, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Reddit, among many others, were banned.

Moreover, the market offers numerous tools that allow for the controlling of the information environment, making a news story in the digital realm easily traceable and censorable. These programs automatically track, with specific parameters and in real-time, any news unfavourable to the Kremlin. Once the news is located, it can be easily nullified within a few hours, with corresponding repercussions for the medium that published that news. In

[14] https://rsf.org/es/pais/rusia.

other words, the impact of the news has significant limitations, as it barely remains alive for a few minutes in the Russian digital information environment. Thus, generating influence, which usually comes hand in hand with viral dissemination, becomes very complex in such a closed information society.

This censorship produces a cognitive bubble effect that prevents Western ideas from penetrating Russian information environment. The level of control is so sophisticated that even experts are surprised. The result is that these socialization processes (e.g. the influence of free media or social networks) can hardly diverge from those established in primary socialization, as there is insufficient baseline information that differs from the central message launched by the Kremlin. This, in turn, is as simple to understand as saying that in Russia unified thought is fully implemented.

Ways to Instrumentalize Socialization

If there are no leaks between the two forms of socialization, an identity will form that is impossible to break. Individuals will have a quasi-permanent glossary of ideas, and importantly, the more those ideas settle, the more they will defend them. At this point, we reach the objectification of reality, allowing individuals to consider a specific aspect as an immutable reality. For example, the Ukrainian army is fuelled by Nazis who are supported by the West. This message, when socially accepted, is devastating, especially when considering the Russian sentiment against Nazis which remains alive in Russian society.

Moreover, "…*the subject, when acquiring information about the environment, does not register it as it is; they are not mere receptors but rather elaborate it based on the contents they already possess*"[15]. In other words, by shaping the appropriate information environment in schools, family, and media, we maintain control over the reality perceived by individuals. If we also enrich this with real but distorted events, we obtain an explosive cocktail that motivates individuals. We have prepared a soldier willing to fight for that reality formed with substrata of disinformation and with a cognitive strategy based on the social construction of reality.

An example, used as a cognitive projectile weapon, is the voting at the UN General

[15] Garzón, Adela. Seoane, Julio. La memoria desde el procesamiento de información. *Psicología cognitiva y procesamiento de la información.* Madrid:, Pirámide, 1982

Assembly. For instance, we can use the example of when Russia annually submits a draft resolution to combat the glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that exacerbate contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance. In Figure number 3 below, it can be seen that a broad majority of countries approve the resolution, voted on in December 2023. Those opposing the resolution are mostly the countries that comprise the liberal international order and, notably, are the ones that impose sanctions on the Russian Federation.



Figure num. 3 Voting panel in UN General Assembly

It is not surprising that days later, during a visit to Belarus, the Russian Foreign Minister declared, "*Despite the fierce resistance from Western countries, we have received a broad majority of votes in favour of the resolution. Western countries have revealed their true nature in their voting on this resolution*"[16].

This simple image of the vote, within the disinformation framework, transforms into a compelling news item indicating support from Western countries for the Nazi cause. Furthermore, one could say that "…*the relevant issue is that when, through various*

[16] Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's opening remarks at a joint board meeting of foreign ministries of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, Brest, November 22, 2024 - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Disponible en https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1983331/

procedures, an idea has finally embedded itself in the souls of the masses, it acquires irresistible power and develops a whole series of consequences"[17]. This means that the shaping of ideas allows individuals to forge a specific identity that enables them to act in any way, even if it seems implausible for them to do so. The child first and the adult later are well-prepared to fight against Western Nazis in prevention of a new world war that their grandparents and parents dealt with, where the USSR almost exclusively won the battle against Hitler. A parallel world that in other countries would be treated as ridiculous. But in Russia it is a reality.

In the entire information society of the Russian Federation, a suggestion effect is generated, understood as "…*the attempt to induce in others the acceptance of a specific belief without providing any evidence or logical basis for its acceptance*"[18]. Thus, the ideas that the West supports Nazism, that the West is depraved, that the international order exclusively supports Western countries and many other fallacies, are deeply rooted and settled forming a parallel reality that is prevailing and indisputable.

The Surprising Result of Instrumentalization

One of the most blatant examples of the effectiveness of the institutionalization of certain ideas can be found in the conflict in Ukraine, where currently, over 85% of the Russian people support Putin's actions, according to the independent Levada Institute[19]. Even acknowledging the manipulation of the figures, the trend is clear and it is an irrefutable reality that the Russian President enjoys popular consensus, despite the aberrations he is committing.

[17] Le Bon, Gustave. *Psicología de las masas*. Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2018.

[18] Brown, S.A.C. *Técnicas de persuasión*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1984.

[19] https://www.levada.ru/en/

PUTIN'S APPROVAL RATING



Do you approve the activities of V. Putin as the President (Prime Minister) of Russia?

	06.2024	07.2024	08.2024	09.2024	10.2024	11.2024
Approve	87	87	85	84	87	87
Disapprove	11	11	12	13	10	11
No answer	2	2	4	3	3	2

Figure num. 4 Putin´s approval rating

We are talking about how, through the State's concentration via coherence driven by messages, it can impose legitimate knowledge. As Professor González indicates, "…*in contemporary societies, institutionalized knowledge and the professional practice that derives from it constitutes one of the most powerful and effective mechanisms of legislation, and therefore of dominance*"[20].

Throughout history, humans have sacrificed their lives for aspects of noble nature, such as principles or values, which, with current means, can be governed from three elements of the two socializations: the school, the family, and the media. Via these three axes, we govern Clausewitz's trinity and strengthen the military instrument, for example, from deterrence, a key aspect in current conflicts.

Returning to the trinity of the Prussian genius, by controlling the three pillars of socialization—the family, the school, and the media—we ensure that the people and the Armed Forces maintain a singular vision of a reality constructed socially. In Russia, there is no war in Ukraine. Instead, there is a special military operation and the West is a depraved entity due to its gender policies and has strong ties to Nazism. This is the reality perceived by Russians.

As a consequence "*We are witnessing the triumph of a hyper-democracy where the masses act directly without law, through materials of pressure, imposing their aspirations and tastes*" [21]. Putin will win the elections as long as he can maintain this cognitive bubble that besieges Russians. It is a reality that masterfully governs the people, the Army, and the government in pursuit of fulfilling the political objectives set long before we could imagine.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ortega y Gasset, José. *La rebelión de las masas*. Barcelona: Planeta, 2011.

Conclusión

The nature of war has hardly changed from the perspective of the Prussian General Clausewitz and his famous Trinity. The social construction of reality allows for the influencing of the three pillars of the Trinity (the people, the army, and the government), which guarantees a sustained effort in the infamy of the war against Ukraine. Three years in and with a landscape that seems to indicate that this approach has proven successful, there exists a significant danger for the West as this approach serves as an effective weapon for revisionist countries.

It is an irrefutable fact that our messages and our reality do not penetrate Russian society, so their social construction of reality remains hardly threatened. Moreover, each passing day sees improvements in strategy, rapidly spurred by the success of their lines of action. It is perceived that autocracies can have more strategic agility than democracies because decision-making is much quicker. If war is the continuation of politics by other means in order to achieve the objectives set by the government, then agility in decision-making is a fundamental element when the interactions of the trinity are constantly evolving, just as the morphology of the conflict is.

However, we must not cease in using the tools of the Rule of Law and those legal instruments generated within a multilateral framework. In the long run, they will be successful, of that I have no doubt.

The trend in controlling the three elements that govern the social construction of reality (family, educational institutions and media) allows for achieving, without repression, the objective of autocracies which is to perpetuate themselves in power. A power encouraged by a citizenry that remains in a state of permanent cognitive control, turning them into true cognitive zombies, ready for war over what they perceive as existential values.

We must learn diligently from these aspects of war because they demand a multidisciplinary action from all the instruments of state power, with a coherence that is very difficult to achieve with ministries featuring strong autarkic structures. Together, we can be stronger but united we will be invincible against this scourge presented by the Ukrainian conflict, where the social construction of reality materializes the saying: "*when perception becomes reality*".

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