MEDIA CLASHES IN THE EX-SOVIET GEOPOLITICAL SPACE OF THE BLACK SEA BASIN

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Abstract

The collapse of the Soviet Empire and the dizzying development of new communication technologies led to the geopolitical reconfiguration of the world and paved the way for the former Soviet republics to become democratic and collaborate with European countries. As NATO and the EU advance towards its borders, Russia uses both military and ideological propaganda to keep former territories under its influence. Russia also leads a fierce battle in order to strengthen its position in the Black Sea region, where geographically Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia are located. The article highlights the strategies, tactics and techniques applied by the Russian media in order to achieve various geopolitical goals.

Keywords: *media, geopolitical interests, ideological strategies and tactics, media techniques, Black Sea basin, "frozen conflicts"*

1. INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War led not only to the geopolitical reconfiguration of the world. Due to the contemporary technologies, substantial changes also took place in the field of mass media, as a basic took (of information/ misinformation or of propaganda/manipulation) in the hands of the geopolitical actors (states, regional and international organisations) regarding the promotion of their strategic interests in one or another part of the world.

After obtaining their independence, the former soviet republics followed the path of democracy development and of the multilateral collaboration relationships with European countries. In context, Russia mobilized its entire ideological-propagandistic arsenal, which also included the media, in order to try to preserve its geopolitical influence in the countries of the former soviet space. As the EU and NATO got closer to its borders, and the former methods, including the CSI project, were not producing the desired result, Russia used another scenario

– the creation of armed conflict areas at the borders of some post-soviet states and this also represented a method of to attemper the EU and NATO expansion process.

Despite the promises of the 1992 Istanbul summit, Russia has not, even today, withdrawn its "military occupation troops" from the territory of the Republic of Moldova, supporting, in the summer of the same year, separatism in the eastern districts of the country (Transnistria), and a few years later, with the help of the same methods and purposes it started a war on the border with Georgia. Immediately after the 2014 Sochi Olympics, Crimea was taken from Ukraine and a few months later, again with the encouragement of separatism, in the eastern territories of Ukraine, a new war broke out, which led to the creation of two phantom republics: Donetsk and Luhansk.

Over the course of these conflicts, none of the solved so far, the Russian media, in its clash with the local information mediums from the above-mentioned countries, improved and diversified its informational-propagandistic tactics, shifting from actions of *manipulation* and *misinformation* to an *informational war*, followed by a *hybrid war*.

Therefore, it is necessary to highlight the fact that in the classical view, *manipulation* represents an action with the purpose of determining a social actor (person, community) to think and act in a compatible manner with the interests of the initiator. *Misinformation* is the technique which refers to offering false information to third parties, making them commit collective acts or to broadcast the judgements desired by the misinformers.

The informational war represents a specific form of war, which tries to replace realities and facts by constructing an alternative reality and by

projecting it onto the target population, in order to reach military goals, to demobilize the population or to inflict a feeling of doubt in relation to the objectives of national interest. The informational war is also called *the mediatic war* – the actions of the media directed towards the enemy's information or information systems.

The hybrid or the *non-linear war* is, according to Mark Galeotti, a postmodern war, never officially declared, which takes place using military and non-military means, from undercover operations to cybernetic attacks or even massive lobby operations, which represent pervert 21st century war forms (CER SI PAMANT ROMANESC, 2014). The new complex political, military and ideologic strategies, regarded by the specialized literature as "hybrid war," were used by the Russian Federation in the spring of 2014, during the annexation of Crimea. The NATO strategists were taken aback by the occupation of Crimea in just a few days. This was one of the first manifestations of the hybrid war, a strategic invention, through which Russia tries – and so far, succeeded – to project its power outside its own borders and to compensate the deficit of military endowment in comparison to the West (CÂMPEANU, 2015).

Today, in the struggle to regain the role it once had on the European continent and in the world, the Russian Federation permanently uses both the information war tools, as a distinct form, and those of the hybrid war, of which it is part. The new forms of war are used by Russia to argument and justify all their actions and behaviours in relationship to the *close neighbouring countries.* Therefore, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, together with their media, entered a *Bermuda triangle,* in the Black Sea basin, motivated by the geopolitical/geostrategic interests that Russia has/follows in this region.

2. THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE GEOPOLITICAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE BLACK SEA BASIN

The Black Sea basin concentrates some important issues belonging to this region. According to the European Commission, the Black Sea region represents a distinct area, which

reunites 10 states: 6 abutter states – Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, The Russian Federation, Georgia and Turkey and 4 states whose history, proximity and the tight connections with the Black Sea basin – Armenia, Azerbaijan, The Republic of Moldova and Greece – give them the status of relevant actors within the area. Therefore, the European definition of the Black Sea region largely overlaps with the concept of the Wider Black Sea Region, previously promoted by NATO in its relations its allies and partners within the area (CHIFU & NANTOI, 2016).

If prior to 1991, the geopolitical architecture of the Black Sea basin was determined by SSSR, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, which dominated the coastal areas around the Black Sea, today some new countries can be added, such as Ukraine, The Republic of Moldova and Georgia. Therefore, the old "cooperation framework of the countries belonging to the socialist block" was replaced by "a frozen security system," whose main characteristics are the lack of trust and cooperation, the suspicions, the fierce competition among fields, the perception of the neighbouring countries as potential enemies, and that of Russia's ambition to create the status of a regional power for itself (VOCILĂ, 2010).

The beginning of the 21st century offered this territory, in the context of the new Euro-Atlantic geopolitical and geostrategic realities, the characteristics of a NATO and EU proximity space. The accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the European Union represented a moment of reference in the expansion of the West-European democracy at the borders of the Black Sea basin, the meeting point of three security spaces: West-European, Euro-Asian and Islamic. Following the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the North-Atlantic Alliance, "the length of the Euro-Atlantic space seacoast increased by 14%" (LAUREAN & NICOLĂESCU, 2004).

The NATO and EU expansion up "to the borders of the Black Sear" determined the Black Sea to come out the shadow cone of the periphery of Europe and the assertion of a new geopolitical reality in the region. Nowadays, according to researchers, the extended Black Sea basin possesses an important position in Russia's national security agenda. That is why, the Black Sea region is extremely rich in conflicts and it is

the only one which hosts all six conflicts, "frozen" on the European continent: The Republic of Moldova (Transnistria), the west and north of Georgia and the South-east of Ukraine (Crimea, Donetsk and Lugansk).

The placement of some American military bases closer to the conflict area and to Russia's borders, which should increase the role of the Black Sea region as a strategic security and safety space makes Russia's fight for the supremacy of the influence with its neighbouring countries, including Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, and for regaining control over the ex-soviet space even more serious and fierce.

3. THE INFORMATIONAL – PROPAGANDISTIC COMPONENT OF THE GEOPOLITICAL CLASHES

Throughout centuries, the Black Sea region represented not only a space of cooperation and commerce, but also an area of military and political clashes. At present, the Black Sea represents a border area between the European Union and NATO, on the one side and that of *the close vicinity*, instituted and preserved by the Russian Federation, on the one side, due to two major geopolitical reasons: a buffer zone and a virtual space of the Soviet inheritance, with all its classical attributes of political, ideological, economic, cultural and military attributes, characterized by the existence of some "frozen" conflicts, prolonged by propaganda, misinformation and massive manipulation of the national public opinion by the Russian media, in the space of the three countries which are part of the triangle of geopolitical confrontations of the Russia Federation's "national interests."

In the struggle to dominate the informational space of the Black Sea basin, Russia uses a wide range of soft-power tools, including propaganda and mass-media influencing, a number of techniques which include focusing on sensational subjects and not fact; the binary black and white representation of Russia in positive terms and of the West in negative terms; sarcasm; historical parallels and generalizations without any fundament; the ostentatious quotations of the Russian officials and news agencies. The kind of

Sputnik media basically disseminates Kremlin's story, while others offer a more adapted content to the national public and to its consumption behaviour, such is the case of Georgia, where 18% of the population get their news from Russian sources. Similarly, the Republic of Moldova has a large number of Russian-speaking channels, many of them being rebroadcasted from Moscow. Ukraine is also anchored in the orbit of the Russian media because it has inherited extensive links with it, even though it has banned the retransmission of Russian TV channels in its space.

In our opinion, the common key points of the three countries from the geopolitical triangle of the Black Sea, Ukraine, The Republic of Moldova and Georgia, subjected to the ideological-propagandistic treatment of the Russian media are the following:

- the informational harassment of the national media and of the public by launching so-called news regarding the dangers that the EU, NATO and the USA bring to the countries belonging to The Commonwealth of Independent States (CSI), and especially to Russia, as its leader, who has difficulties regarding its intentions to restore its influence and control over borders and in its close vicinity;
- the militarization of the mass-media information in the reflection process regarding the events/incidents which take place in the areas of frozen conflict: Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Donetsk and Luhansk, and also in the Black Sea, together with the military expansion and the consolidation of the Russian influence in the region;
- the launching of media and direct propagandistic attacks towards the EU and NATO with the purpose of limiting Western influences and of integrating the states from the Black Sea geopolitical triangle into the EU and in the Euro-Atlantic community, using the geographical dislocation of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as buffer areas for Russia's borders;
- the conducting of intelligence / manipulation-disinformation operations (depending on the purpose pursued) during election campaigns to promote or maintain in parliament or in key positions parties or people loyal / enslaved

to the metropolis, ready at any time to promote its policy in the Black Sea region;

- the use of a wide range of soft-power instruments, including propaganda and the influencing of the media, in order to undermine the territorial unity of the target countries and to ensure the informational security of separatist regions.

The Russian information sources exploit in Ukraine and in the Republic of Moldova the conservatory feelings of some society segments, while in Georgia the Moscow TV channels develop messages which promote politics beneficial to the Russian interests.

In the case of the three states from the geopolitical triangle respectively, the discouragement and the self-censorship which resulted from the media rhetoric of the Russian officials are also perceived as risks by a number of researchers. As a result of the Russian propaganda, the politicians from the three states oftentimes restrain themselves from taking measures to promote national interests, so as not to provoke Russia.

Even if the conflicts from the three countries started a few years apart, they were all based on reasons which bring them closer together: the conflict in Transnistria started in the same day when the young state of the Republic of Moldova was accepted into the United Nations; the war in South Ossetia began in 2008, just a few months after the Bucharest summit in which it became clear that Georgia and Ukraine were on the verge of joining the North Atlantic Alliance. The occupation of Crimea followed the Sochi Olympics and the war in Donbas started shortly after the Ukrainian president V. Ianucovici was forced out of the country by protesters for his refusal to sign the EU Association Agreement. It goes without saying that all three wars have one architect, interested in preserving them in a "frozen" state for a long period of time. The conflicts from the extended Black Sea region represent "frozen" conflicts, administered today by pseudo-separatist, mafia-terrorist powers, intended to serve as buffer zones for Russia in the fight against EU and NATO enlargement to its borders, but also to thwart the achievement of these countries' plans to integrate into the European democratic structures. As reward,

Russia ensures these separatist enclaves security and economic support which amounts to 70-80 % of their annual requirement.

Of course, the differences regarding the intensity of the Russian mass-media informational attacks in the three states are determined by the national specificity which characterizes those particular people, and also by the development level of the media system, especially of the national media, and also by the professional skillfulness and the journalists' ability to equidistantly inform the citizens about the essence of the facts and events which take place in the national and international context. One must not forget the fact that the media/informational systems from Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, and also those of the other post-soviet republics served, for years in a row, as sub-systems of the central Soviet ideological and propagandistic apparatus.

There are enough reasons to state that after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, from the point of view of the military and informational strategy, Russia chose the Republic of Moldova as its favourite target. Here is where Russia's 14th Army was dislocated, which now possesses through the power of a part of its remaining military effective, the largest weapon depots in Europe since World War II. This is why, with the help of its entire propagandistic and media system, Russia tried to create a separatist enclave in the eastern area of Dniester River which was subsequently called *The Dniester Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic,* later on *The Dniester Moldovan Republic*. It is in these territories that the Russian military is deployed and here is the weapons depot, which Russia has not repatriated to this day, contrary to several promises made and agreements signed with the Moldovan side.

In the clashes to defend "the cause" of the rebels from Transnistria in front of the constitutional organs in Chisinau, and to preserve in the Eastern part of the Republic of Moldova of the military bridgehead at the Black Sea and the mouth of the Danube, and also in the direction of the Balkans, Russia used not only its propagandistic arsenal, but also its military effective, which in 1992 was involved a bloody conflict, nowadays known as "the Dniester war" or "the war from Moldova" (BÂRSAN, 1993). At that time, the

Romanian analyst S. Brucan noted: "When it comes to Russia, it represented an imperial power prior to the Soviet era and it remained the same after it. The separatists wouldn't have started this adventure if they hadn't had the approval of Kremlin and of the 14th Army from Transnistria. How could the Russian-speaking guards get the most modern tanks, armoured and missiles, that the Cossack wives could not bring on horseback?" (BRUCAN, 1993).

On July 21, 1992, M. Snegur and B. Yeltsin signed in Moscow "The Convention regarding the regulation principles of the armed conflict from the Dniester area of the Republic of Moldvova", a document which marked the official ending of the of the war in Transnistria. Up to the present, the political analysts rhetorically ask themselves: if the Convention was signed by the presidents of the two states, the supreme commanders of their armed forces, then who did, in 1992, the Republic of Moldova go to war against?! In the same context and in full consent with Moscow's official line, the former commander of the Russian 14th Army, A. Lebedi, drafted, three days following the signing of the Convention, three possible ways of self-determining Transnistria: "a) if the people in Transnistria want a union with Russia, the example of the Kaliningrad region has to be followed; b) things will clear up, Ukraine will once again unite with Russia and therefore Transnistria will join this new state formation and c) the creation of an independent state, having long-lasting economic connections with Russia and Ukraine," the last option representing "the most realistic path".

Experts noticed that: "the preconceived nature of the reports and correspondence published in the foreign press at that time and signed by those who did not penetrate, intentionally or unintentionally, the essence of the events that occurred on the Moldovan land, reduced the degree of analytical examination and adequate reflection of the situation. from the area" (MORARU & VOICU, 2003). Under these circumstances, Russia continued to insist with the informational army, applying different techniques which mostly helped it achieve the desired strategy within the region. One can highlight some of them:

- *the foot in the door*, a technique used in regulating the "explosive" situation in the Republic of Moldova, completely opposed to *slamming the door in the face,* but one that has a similar effect – the adversary, by mediating the situation, to obtain larger concessions. In this context, one can interpret that Russia proposed, basically not without the contribution of the media, an authentic trade to Chisinau: the signing of the Treaty on the Union, in exchange for taking the decision to dissolve the unconstitutional state formations;

- *the slam the door in someone's face technique,* was used by the Russian media in relation to the Republic of Moldova, regarding "the legislation on the formation of a union of three states, united on the basis of a federal link in the territory of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic;

- *the opponent's bait technique* is based on "luring" the opponent and obtaining his decision (argument). In this context, Moscow offered Chisinau the well-known *Kozak Plan* (also federalisation!) which, under the pressure of opposing political parties and of the public opinion, was reused by the authorities in Moldova;

- t*he technique of throwing the ball at low altitude* was based on another scenario invented by Moscow – the so-called Belkovski Plan, which provided for the "annexation" of the territory of Bessarabia to Romania, stating that the Transnistrian part of the Republic of Moldova was to be ceded to Ukraine. It is to be remembered that the plan was discussed during various meetings between politicians, journalists and experts, which took place in Bucharest and Odessa, being largely promoted and having various both "for" and "against" interpretations in various fields of information from Russia, Romania, Ukraine and The Republic of Moldova;

- *the technique of taking the embers with the hands of another* was exploited by the Russia, separatist and Ukrainian media, during the *Iuşcenko Plan*, a faithful copy of the *Kozak Plan.*

At the same time, the architects of the separatist republic, with the help of various "decisions" and "decrees" forbade the Latin graphic in the territory, starting "a war against the Romanian language," seriously accusing the *Moldpres* agency, the *Teleradio-Moldova* company and the *Sfatul Ţării and Moldova Suveran*ă newspapers,

asking for the journalists to be punished "for the content of their articles" (BÂRSAN, 1993).

In the fight with the media from the right side of Dniester the a few publications got seriously involved, such as the newspaper *Bastuiuscii Tiraspoli (Grevistul tiraspolean)*, freely distributed, the pro-transnitrean *Tiraspoliskaia pravda (The Tiraspol Truth)* and *Zarea Pridnestrovia (The dawns of Transnistria)*, as well as the media artillery from the Russian Federation, both written and visual, which had a large audience on behalf of the population from both banks of the Dniester (LESCU, 2008). There is only one example in this regard: the Moscow newspaper *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, which interviewed the transnistrean leader Smirnov and announced no less than the beginning of the "unification process between Moldova and Romania" (BÂRSAN, 1993).

Both the Russian media and that of the rebels in the region abundantly broadcasted, during that time, fake news and bias presentations from "the whirlpool of events," based on "worthy to be trusted" sources, discovering on the banks of the Dniester River "armament of Romanian production" and "zinc caskets" of Romanian soldiers and the photo-reporters of the press agencies displayed in various halls in Kremlin truncated photos about "the crimes of the Moldovan nationalists" in Transnistria. In time, the Russian media diversified its forms of propagandistic influence and of manipulation in the Republic of Moldova, dominating, for years in a row, its informational space.

In order to restrain, as much as possible, the intentions of the Republic of Moldova for European integration and to keep it in its sphere of influence, the following elements were used:
- the active promotion in the media of Russia's image as a state of peace and democracy, mainly with the help of propaganda and lobby;
- the glorification of the greatness of the Russian state by broadcasting on TV and in newspaper of materials with invented and false insinuations, called to emphasize the Russia's invincibility, including at the Black Sea;
- the publishing in the media of some news aimed at creating fear, panic and hatred towards the closeness with the EU and NATO by the Black Sea and by the sates belonging to the former Soviet space;

- the promotion on TV and radio, the publishing in various newspaper and on social networks of the pseudo-narrations with a high degree of plausibility, built artificially, on so-called facts, in order to ensure the social optimism of separatists;
- the existence of media campaigns in order to discredit the EU, NATO and the USA, perceived as enemies of democracy, of an open society and of the rights of the individual;
- media approaches based on the fear of NATO and of the USA and an urge for collective actions in order to "defend" the separatist region and the Republic of Moldova, so as to reduce the socio-political pressures in the conflict zone;
- the creation, with the help of misinformation and media manipulation of the public opinion, of manoeuvring and support groups of the Russian politics in the conflict region and in the Black Sea basin;
- the forming, with the help of the media of a category of obedient people in the region, always ready to embrace any summon or theme, without thinking of the consequences.

In the same context there are some data belonging to an investigation which indicate the fact that media in the Republic of Moldova refer, in the fake news bulletins, to the Russian news agencies, with a proportion of 41% (Ukraine – 33%, and Georgia – 19%).

In the period we are referring to, the Russian propaganda used the cable television channels in the Transnistria area in a smart manner, as well as the energy of "the trolls" in order to control and guide the social network debates on political topics and of public interest. The new technological elements led to the consolidation and improvement of the Russian informational and propagandistic war, one which had already mastered the Moldo-Ukrainian informational space of the Black Sea.

With the purpose of promoting "the unity of centuries of Moldo-Russian relationships," various socio-political groups of Moldovan citizens working in Russia were used. Their protest actions against the Moldovan authorities "who are not devoted to their free liberators," were and still are largely commentated by the Russian media and by that from the left of Dniester.

Therefore, through its propagandistic and mediatic actions Russia managed to divide the people of a republic, taking, with the help of propaganda, the feeling of patriotism from it. It transformed it in "a population" which it threw from one side of the barricade to the next, therefore subsequently gaining "experience" on falsifying and about the tendentious interpretation of the events in Georgia and Ukraine, where, in time, certain new political and media clashes developed in the Black Sea region.

In fact, starting with 1991, Russia began some open confrontations of an informational and armed threat type with the two neighbors at the Black Sea – Georgia and Ukraine, having now accumulated sufficient "skills" for escalating such actions in the Republic of Moldova, where it had secured a reservation of the Soviet empire – Transnistria.

According to various authors, it is to be noted that the history of the informational clashes between Russia and Georgia can be divided into three states: the first one is comprised of the years 1991-2005, in which the media conflicts between the two countries had just started, the period of Georgia's declaration of independence, of Z. Gamzahurdia's presidency, of the revolution of roses and of M. Saakaşvili's coming to power. The first stage is characterised by the ideological and media battle regarding Russia's division of the military fleet of URSS at the Black Sea with Ukraine and Georgia, the latter one because of its insistence was subjected to discreditation by the Russian media: "It is quite possible that Georgia, gaining its own fleet and joining a military bloc, or, following a hammer blow to the anvil, will be left without its ships, which will sink immediately". Anyway, during that period, there were still not enough grounds to talk about significant informational confrontations, because the attitude towards the field of information between the two countries was different.

The second stage, referring to the years 2005-2012, can already be regarded as one of an informational confrontation, which goes beyond an informational war. The superior limit of this period was marked by a shift in the mutual accusations between officials of the two states - publicly and through the media - in connection with several failures and political, military and economic problems, with Georgia having the first the lead, and Russia taking it after the war. Russia's military action was a reaction to NATO's intentions to invite Ukraine and Georgia to the Alliance, which was held in the spring of the same year at the Bucharest summit. Specialists consider that war between Russia and Georgia was the first war on the European continent in the 21st century. The armed clash between Russia and Georgia ended in the same summer of 2008, but the informational war continued. In the second half of 2008, the clash gains the character of an authentic informational war, which advances more and more towards a new form – a hybrid war. This transition state towards a hybrid war existed until 2012, when the party led by M. Saakaşvili lost the parliamentary elections, and the president began to lose his own popularity.

The third stage, which started in 2012, presents some states of confusion. Trying, around the Olympics in Sochi, to create "a belt of good-neighbourhood in the perimeter of the Russian borders", the Russian media made a lot of fuss, warning the audience "not to forget that Abkhazia is situated near Sochi – the capital of the 2014 Olympic Games," and Ossetia "is also not very far." Therefore, "the stabilization of the situation in the region represents the purpose of Russia's politics." The problem is just the price that Russia is ready to pay, and it has to pay".

A sudden enrolling of the Russian media in the actions which make the object of the hybrid war is highlighted, after 2014, in Georgia and in the Republic of Moldova, when the Russian Federation occupies Crimea and unleashed an armed war in the eastern side of Ukraine.

Russia's informational-propagandistic and military actions in the separatist regions of Georgia were activated following "the frozen" of the conflict in Transnistria. Initially, in 1992-1993, the Russia media made use of all the resources included in its informational-psychological influencing arsenal in order to inflame the separatist dispositions among the Abkhazia's inhabitants, as well as those from the Tskhinvali region, which in Russia is known as Southern Ossetia. Massively supported by the Russian media, especially by the audiovisual media, the rebel enclaves, through the regimentation of the

local media, constantly organized provocative and disobedient actions to the legal authorities of Georgia, aiming to make these "liberation fighting" events find wide echo in the international press as well. Certainly, the media actions contributed to the desired result: 20% of Georgia's territory ended up under the administration of the separatist forces from Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia.

Georgia and Ukraine are the post-Soviet states which showed the greatest resistance to the Russian influence. Anyway "Kremlin uses a variety of tools in order to indirectly influence the media from the Black Sea region." This conclusion was expressed in Kiev during a round table entitled "Diagnosing and combating the Russian influence and its capture in the media of the countries from the Black Sea." (CSD, 2018).

The propaganda and the media misinformation became Kremlin's preferred weapon in Caucaz, as here one can find a fertile soil for a number of techniques, such as:

- the technique of *finger pointing*, similar to that of personifying the case (for example: the root of the evil in starting the war was no one else but the Georgian pro-American president, Mihail Saakaşvili);

- the technique of *discovering the useful enemy*: NATO and the USA "pushed the Georgians from behind and it "sent them to war";

- *the conspiracy* technique, which assumes the cultivation of some subversive statements and of betraying some common interest, through public destruction, with the help of the opponent's media through "information" and "compromising evidence," with "the discovery of the foreign secret service agencies at the Russian-Georgian border," with "the endowment of the Georgian army with foreign military technique"; with "the discovery" of some "documents, understandings and guaranties" of the heads of the country "to open NATO bases" in Georgia;

- the purely Russian *constraint to peace* technique – announced by president V. Medvedev, excessively mediated in order to motivate armed actions;

- the technique of *mimicking discussions*: the contradictory debates in the Russian and Georgian media of a large number of questions, without focusing on the essential ones – war, separatism and occupied territories;

- the technique of *militarizing information*, which started together with the informational war, as a component part of the hybrid war, when military terms are abusively infiltrated into news and reporting in conflict zones in order to raise awareness, impress and frighten the population;

- the technique of *dramatizing the dramatic events*, such as the 8th and 9th of August 2008, when the Russian-Georgian war was taking place and the Russian journalists were broadcasting on the Russian channels video materials with state people who proudly and threateningly declared: "We shall not tolerate to not punish those who are to blame for the deaths of our compatriots" and that the Russian army launched a peace constraint/imposture operation" (V. Medvedev);

- the technique of the *double standard* presentation of events: each time similar conflicts take place (having a separatist character) on the territory of the Russian Federation, they are treated with the active help of the media as some "riots or terrorist actions."

Obviously, during the military actions in Georgia, and also after them, the forms, methods and techniques that Russia used in order to disturb things, as well as the minds of the people, caught in this game, became even more diversified, including:

- attacks on important mass-media sources, especially on the electronic ones from Georgia (the *Rustavi-2* TV company, *Georgia on-line* or the *Imedi* radio station, who have actively participated in the multifaceted presentation of the events from the battlefield);

- actions with an informational and psychological character regarding the development of the separatist manifestations and of the people's lack of subordination in front of the legitimate authorities of the central and local power;

- the spreading of falsified materials and of "desperate" media calls by the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States in order to hold Georgia accountable for "the humanitarian crisis in Southern Ossetia," which made "thousands of Russian citizens to leave their homes";

- the promotion in every way possible of the idea that the more controversies appear due to

the roots of the conflicts, the higher the political success of Kremlin grows;

- the founding and financing of some pro-Russian local newspaper and audiovisual channels in the separatist areas;

- the publishing of the audiovisual materials which present "the cultivation of the prestige and the formation of Russia's image, by promoting its interests and by defending the Russian citizens and of the compatriots, meaning the inhabitants of the Soviet Union. These categories do not exist in real life, but they represent tools of the post-imperial syndrome," as the political analysts I. Chifu și O. Nantoi state (CHIFU & NANTOI, 2016).

The review of the above-mentioned manipulation-misinformation techniques shows that they were also used in the initial stage of the conflicts, both in the Republic of Moldova and in Georgia. Nowadays, these techniques are being only adapted to the new requirements and technologies. At the beginning of 2020, a team of journalists from Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, who investigated the way in which the Russian propaganda worked, became convinced of this. The journalists went to the separatist regions, getting to know the activity of some news agencies, newspaper and audiovisual channels from Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia (*Sputnik Abhazia, Apsni.ru, Auaaupa.Info, Informiruet Abhazia, GTRK "IR," Iujnaia Osetia, Respublica*), as well as from Transnistria - *The Olvia-pres Agency, TV "PMR," Radio "PMR," Pridnestrovie, Dnestrovskaia pravda, Trudovoi Tiraspoli.* It was noticed that in the rebel enclaves propaganda and misinformation converge and the broadcasted messages have a high degree of similarity, trying to set aside the European dream. The Republic of Moldova, as well as Georgia, finds itself in a more advantageous situation from a geographical viewpoint, as it has no border with Russia, where the main dangers of the propaganda and of the challenges from the Black Sea basin stem from. In the eastern side, over a distance of about 400 km, The Republic of Moldova borders only with Ukraine.

The present conflict between Russia and Ukraine is based on several problems: the rebuilding of Russia's sphere of influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States, the blocking of the expansion of NATO and of the EU towards its border, the future of the Black Sea Fleet, as well as of its military bases, the preservation of Russia's military support in the pontic basin. Russia plays a complex game here, on a number of strategic and tactical plans: geographic, ethnic, religious, economic, military, and last but not least, informational, bringing to the forefront its new concept of returning to the notion of individual security in the detriment of the collective one. Simply put, Moscow tried and will continue to try to diminish the role and the importance of the regional actors (Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia) to the simplest players and also to restrain the role of the foreign actors (ANCUȚ & DĂNILĂ, 2009) in order to achieve its political and military goals in the Black Sea.

The *informational war* strategy, followed by the *hybrid* one, started to be actively developed by the Russian Federation together with the adoption of the Information Security Doctrine in 2000, which emphasized the increasing informational sphere, a provision which aims at all the aspects regarding communication and the media. This provision was also developed in the Russian Military Doctrine which emphasizes the need to employ information operations, both during "times of peace and times of war." The new Information Security Doctrine, adopted in 2016, noticed that abroad the Russia media is "subjected to flagrant discrimination" and emphasizes "the need to present a positive image of Russia at the international level." Kremlin prioritizes a multifaceted strategy for information: "as a promotion manner of the political, social and cultural objectives, as a formation fundament of the society" based "on national/internal values" and the edification of the unique *neo-Eurasian* identity, through the rejection of globalism.

The *unconventional* (informational/hybrid) war is not something new. In many regards, the informational war that Russia has with Ukraine and the West represents an old strategy adapted to contemporary technologies. Therefore, Russia's aggression against Ukraine which started, both in Crimea and in its Eastern regions, not with tanks and "Grad" installations, but with a significant propagandistic attack, assisted by the media, on the minds of the people, used a number of techniques:

- *the mixture between truth and reality*. Kremlin exploits the rhetoric of human rights, the defence of the citizens from outside its borders and of "the Russian-speaking people," as a pretext for the achievement of the geopolitical objectives in the Black Sea region; favouring, both in Ukraine and in the Republic of Moldova and Georgia of the separatism which it supported both military and economically. In fact, it promotes conflict among "the three categories of population" from the separatist regions: *the ethnic Russians*, *the speakers of the Russian language* and the *pro-Russian population*," who nostalgically identify themselves only with the ex-Soviet period;

- *the inversion of facts*, by invoking the Kosovo precedent, as a reason to annex Crimea, an act which does not belong to the logic of the international law. According to various researchers, the separatist manifestation situations in Eastern Europe present several common elements, but they also have multiple differences; "taking into account the particularities of the Kosovo case, that particular model cannot represent a precedent for other separatisms, including for the one manifested by the Tiraspol regime" (MORARU, 2011). Russia, involved in all "frozen" conflicts, permanently asks the media to impose its favourite scenario on the statal actors and subsequently, following a desirable political solution for it, to shift to security problems; Moscow has put the blame on the EU and NATO for the actions in Ukraine, by promoting the idea that their interference in the Ukrainian politics and the urge to join NATO have led to a military intervention;

- *the denial of authentic facts*, for example – the issue of downing the MH17 airship, in July 2014, blaming the Ukrainian soldiers for this, although the data belonging to the international expertise proved the guilt of the Donbas separatists. The geopolitical interests of Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova stem from the free choice that these countries made, which are now being propagandistic and military attacked by Russia in order to divert them from their European path;

- *the presentation of some lies* regarding the conflicts in Ukraine, asking the international structures to be identifies as a country which can regulate conflicts, based on the argument that it is the only one which has the capacity and the interest to make use of the necessary staff to preserve peace;

- *changing the circumstances*, by exerting political and economic pressures (import-export) as a lever to put Ukraine and the other state actors in the region to respect, which allegedly "sabotage Europe's gas supply" or "export poor-quality wine production, fruit and vegetables, forcing the Russian authorities to impose an embargo on their imports," even if the same products are successful on the European market;

- *evoking the historical past*. Both Ukraine and Moldova exploit the conservative feelings of some of the society's segments, nostalgic after the "glorious soviet past," who unite their efforts "for a common cause"; in order to give a turn of goodwill and truthfulness to their distorted actions in relation to reality; the Russian media bets on the Ukrainians' feelings, citing the century-old relations between the two countries;

- *the partial presentation of facts:* Russia is in a favourable position to project its power up to Odessa, the northern part of the Danube Delta in close vicinity to the borders of Romania and Transnistria, the Republic of Moldova, without mentioning the reaction of the international community towards "the occupation of Crimea"; shows rebel enclaves as victims of the so-called "geopolitical scheme" on behalf of Ukraine and of the EU, with the purpose of "restricting people's right to self-determination";

- *informational aggression*. The discourse of the media has the purpose to permanently threaten Ukraine. In case it opposes to Kremlin's geopolitical interests in the Black Sea region, it will lose control of the territories from eastern bank of the Azov Sea, between Crimea and Mariupol;

- *the use of Russian sources without help*. The radio, TV and written press news bulletins contain many references to Russian sources and pro-Russian opinion, without constant acknowledgment of the author. Such message broadcasting techniques which form attitudes, lead to a binary representation: of Russia in positive colours and of NATO, of the EU and of the USA as "unfriendly countries" – in negative terms;

- *the use of fake news*, "troll" products in order to justify the media hatred and violence discourse as a support for the Russian military aggression in Ukraine and in other regions;

- *informational war:* the Russian media, especially the TV stations, turned into a propaganda vehicle of the regime as it was during the times of the ideological war; in the fight to reconquer the informational influence in the Black Sea basin all the media subdivisions became involved - VGTRK – the Russian media statal holding (includes channels *Rossia-1, Rossia-2, Rossia-24* and others), *Russia Today, TASS, Sputnik, Regnum*, that the Russian Defense Ministry regards as "one of the new types of modern armament";

- *breathtaking headlines,* systematically mediatized: Russia conquers Ukraine in 3-5 days; Romania attacks Transnistria;

- *news clipping*, with the purpose of cultivating some diverse conspiration theories, aimed at destroying the political actors/adversaries; in the "local" news and reporting, Russian journalists focus on presenting the events of the rebel formations, which "fight heroically" against the Ukrainian armed forces, who want at all costs to "enslave the republics that have gained their freedom / independence," at the same time "forgetting" to mention that all these units, the so-called conventional / camouflaged "people's police,", would never have survived only "due to the support of the local population";

- *falsifying the identities of political actors:* the Moscow media, in TV shows or newspaper, present all the Russian-speaking Ukrainians as people with Russian statal and political identity;

- *the arbitrary/unilateral interpretation of events.* Based on the acknowledgment of the true identity of Ukrainians, the Russia media, for example, in the talk shows "Time will tell" and "The place of meeting," broadcasted on *Pervîi kanal* and *NTV*, systematically debate and interpret the events from Donetsk and Lugansk as "an internal conflict"; the presentation of the Russian "hybrid forces" are completely left out, as well as those regarding the fighters who have contracts, mercenaries, former security guards of the oligarchs, former members of the special Ukrainian detachments during the time of V. Ianukovici;

- *the mockery and the discreditation of the adversary*. The Ukrainian troops are mainly formed of Russian-speaking people, most of them coming from the east of Ukraine, but the Russian media, in order to impress the public and to amplify the hatred against the legitimate Ukrainian authorities, labels everybody with terms such as "fascists," referring to individuals who "betrayed their country and people."

The above-mentioned multitude of manipulation-disinformation techniques does not mean that the Russian media, involved in the propagandistic activity of an informational/hybrid war, uses them separately. These techniques are applied in combination, taking into account the situation and the case. But they are all well-directed in order to reach the targeted purpose. These techniques used by Russia in Ukraine, second the traditional strategies of hindering the advancement of the EU and NATO towards its borders, so that it can then secure "peace" in these regions as it pleases. This is what Russia did in Moldova, and later on in Georgia, and know it applies the same scenario in Ukraine.

Specialised in Russia's problems, the British analyst James Sherr, in an interview for *Free Europe*, referring to Kremlin's interests, to the "frozen" conflicts and to the propaganda and the informational/hybrid war, which takes place at different levels, stated that these informational aggressions "are combined with the military operations in order to achieve a mix of strategic and tactical goals. For Russia, Ukraine represents an area of vital interest, also including the fact that for Russians, as well as for Ukrainians, Ukraine represents an issue of identity. This is why, even though Ukraine does everything right, even if the West intensifies its support, the Ukrainians will have to support the consequences for another generation. That, even if it will withstand the state of hybrid warfare with Russia" (DESCHIDE MD, n.d.).

At the moment, the situation regarding the resistance of the former soviet countries towards Russia's informational-propagandistic aggression became even more complicated. Together with technologies, both the methodologies and the manipulation-disinformation techniques applied by Russia to dominate the informational space of the Black Sea basin changed. In recent years Russia has constantly increased its information potential by organising the broadcast of its channels in other

countries. Moscow perceives the media as a new-type of modern weapon and it does not spare money to support it. For example, in 2020, in order to support a single channel such as *Russia Today*, broadcasted in 100 countries, 325 million dollars were allocated. On the whole, Russia spent 1.3 billion euro in 2020 in order to support the media. And this represents only the amount of money which came from official sources (FILIPENCO, 2019).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All three states, Ukraine, The Republic of Moldova and Georgia, who are now seeing their future in the European Union, have both a common troubled past and a similar present:

- they obtained their independence after the fall of the Soviet Empire;
- were/are part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CSI);
- signed Association Agreements with the EU;
- are members of the Extended Black Sea Region;
- are members of the Economic Cooperation Organization of the Black Sea;
- are GUAM members;
- are part of the Eastern Partnership, initiated by the EU;
- serve buffer-zones for Russia in its clash against the EU and NATO;
- are members of the Crimea Platform – a mechanism, recently initiated by Ukraine, in order to free the peninsula and return it to the internationally well-known borders.

The separatist-terrorist conflicts that we refer to also have some common elements:

- they follow some political interests, being inspired/supported and directed from the outside;
- they are based on the doctrine of defending the Russian compatriots and the Russian-speaking people from these areas;
- both during the active period and during the "frozen" period of the conflicts, the rebel regions, which subsequently called themselves "republics," received humanitarian aid and military support, and they are currently economically supported from the outside;
- keeping conflicts in a "frozen" state makes the three countries confront themselves with serious problems in the process of joining the European and international structures.

Taking into account the geopolitical interests which connect the three states from the Black Sea basin as well as those of European integration, and the multitude of similarities between the conflicts from their territories, the only "frozen" conflicts in Europe, it is important to highlight the fact that the public opinion propagandistic and manipulative strategies and techniques which Russia uses in order to confuse the people caught in this Bermuda Triangle, are very much similar.

Therefore, in the fight to achieve its geopolitical goals in the Black Sea Russia uses:

- the written Moscow press and the clone newspaper of the well-known Russian periodicals, with branches in the tree states;
- the pro-Russian written press, edited in these countries;
- Russia's central radio stations and their local branches which nowadays can no longer be restrained;
- the satellite transmission and reception, often free of charge, of Russian TV stations in the separatist territories of the three countries;
- the pro-Russian newspaper and audiovisual channels from the separatist area, financed from the outside.

The current media may become one of the main weapons of separatism and terrorism, being used both for presenting the vulnerability of the attacked political system and for propagating terror and fear among citizens, making them not trust politicians and the security that the state should offer them (ȘEVCENCO, 2017). That is precisely why there is a need for the three states part of the information aggression Bermuda Triangle to join forces, creating a common front in the clash against the expansion of the Russian propaganda, which, in recent years, evolved alongside the informational and military technologies, reaching a perfect form of aggression – a hybrid war which "modifies the conscience of the people and has an aggressive role on the formation of their identities and on the manner of adopting political decisions". Therefore, in our

opinion, Ukraine, The Republic of Moldova and Georgia should take the following steps:

- on the short term, it is necessary to reassess the regional architecture of the Russian informational system used in propaganda, with the development of some strategies and techniques to counteract to fake news, as well as the internationalisation of the events from the epicentre of the conflicts;

- the current problems of the extended Black Sea region is to be constantly present on the media agenda of the three states from the perspective of at least three types of specific issues in this space: the political and military developments of the states from the region, the intersection in the area of the interests of the great powers and of the regional ones and the political instability doubled by the economic stagnation of the area (BALOG, 2009).

- the 2014 TV station in English, *Ukraine Today*, has to be restarted. Its purpose was to offer a Ukrainian perspective on the war and on the political situation in the Eastern area and it stopped broadcasting because of the lack of funding. A cooperation in this regard between the tree member states of the Organisation for democracy and economic cooperation, GUAM, might lead to the transformation of this television in a regional one within the Black Sea basin;

- with the support of a substantially resuscitated GUAM Organisation, other European projects to counteract the Russian propaganda in the Black Sea might be developed;

- in developing strategies to fight against the propaganda one should take into account the fact that the Russia televisions go beyond the content of the local national channels and that many inhabitants from Moldova and Ukraine get their information regarding the international events from the Russian televisions;

- in the debate on the Transnistrian conflict, the media in the Republic of Moldova must be guided by the 2005 Law on the Status of the Eastern Territory of the Republic of Moldova (Transnistria), which clearly states that the resolution of the conflict must follow three steps: demilitarization (withdrawal of troops), decriminalization (punishing the guilty) and democratization (discussions about a possible status of autonomy, etc).

- in the activity to counteract the Russian propaganda from the separatist regions, the media has to take into account that the expression "the Russian world" is not based on ethnicity, but on the soviet inheritance and on "the Russian-speaking people," having a clear expansionist character, used to instigate to new conflicts;

- in the fight against the Russia propaganda, the media has to take into account the fact that the situation in the Republic of Moldova is a specific one: the entire foreign political agenda from the television space is dominated by a foreign state;

- the media in the three countries has to convinced that Russia's system of managed democracy will weaken aggressively if besieged from all sides by unmanaged democracies.

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