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## **THE 2014 OCCUPATION OF CRIMEA: PERSPECTIVES ON THE MECHANISMS OF MILITARY-POLITICAL AND INFORMATION AGGRESSION**

*The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the preparation, mechanisms of implementation, and information-political support of the occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014. The study examines the process of forming the prerequisites for the implementation of the Russian scenario of hybrid aggression, which effectively began with the proclamation of Ukraine's independence and became systemic after the "Crimean crisis" of 1992–1994. Particular attention is paid to the long-term activities of Russian state institutions, special services, cultural and public organizations aimed at creating a favorable informational and political environment on the peninsula for the implementation of the project of the "return of Crimea".*

*The article analyzes the role of a network of pro-Russian political parties, public organizations, media outlets, and cultural initiatives that shaped the narrative in public consciousness portraying Crimea as a "historically Russian territory". Considerable attention is devoted to the use of so-called "soft power" instruments, including the activities of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, the Foundation for the Support of Compatriots Abroad, as well as Russian diplomatic and consular institutions that carried out information and propaganda influence under the guise of cultural and humanitarian cooperation.*

*The military component of the operation is also examined, particularly the use of the infrastructure of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the activities of reconnaissance and sabotage groups, the formation of paramilitary structures such as the so-called "Crimean self-defense forces", and their interaction with regular units of the Russian armed forces. The key stages of the occupation are analyzed, from the organization of pro-Russian rallies and the destabilization of the socio-political situation to the seizure of administrative buildings, the blockade of Ukrainian military units, and the organization of the pseudo-referendum on March 16, 2014.*

*Special attention is paid to information and psychological operations aimed at constructing the image of a "Ukrainian threat", mobilizing pro-Russian elements of the population, and creating the illusion of mass support for the annexation. It is demonstrated that the information component of the operation was an integral part of the military aggression and played a crucial role in demoralizing Ukrainian forces and legitimizing the actions of the Russian Federation.*

*The study concludes that the occupation of Crimea was the result of long-term and comprehensive preparation that combined military, informational, political, and social instruments of influence. The experience of this operation demonstrates the characteristic features of modern hybrid warfare, in which information and psychological operations, manipulation of public opinion, the use of networks of agents of influence, and local collaborationist structures become key instruments.*

**Key words:** *occupation of Crimea, information and psychological operations, information and psychological influence, Russian aggression, Russian Black Sea Fleet, propaganda, information warfare, disinformation, agents of influence, destabilization.*

The annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea by the Russian Federation (RF) in 2014 became one of the most illustrative examples of the implementation of a hybrid warfare strategy in contemporary international politics. It combined the use of regular military units, special operations, information and psychological influence, the activities of agents of influence, and local paramilitary formations operating under the guise of a "popular protest".

The events of February – March 2014 demonstrated that the occupation of the peninsula was not a spontaneous reaction to the political crisis in Ukraine but rather the result of long-term preparation. This preparation included systematic information and propaganda activities, the creation of networks of pro-Russian organizations, the formation of a loyal information environment, and the use of the military presence of the Russian Black Sea Fleet (RBSF).

In this context, particular relevance is attached to the study of the mechanisms behind the preparation and implementation of the hybrid occupation of Crimea, especially the role of information and psychological operations, the activities of agents of influence, the use of local collaborationist structures, and the application of information technologies in creating favorable conditions for the military seizure of territory.

The analysis of these processes is important not only for understanding the events of 2014 but also for developing effective mechanisms to counter modern forms of hybrid aggression.

The issue of the RF hybrid aggression against Ukraine, particularly the occupation of Crimea, has been the subject of research by numerous Ukrainian and foreign scholars. A significant contribution to the study of the preconditions, mechanisms, and consequences of the annexation of the peninsula has been made by V. Horbulin (Горбулін В. П., 2017) and M. Turanskyi (Туранський М. О., 2020).

Certain aspects of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine have also been examined by V. Holovchenko & M. Doroshenko (Головченко В., 2016), Y. Dykyi (Дикий Е., 2016), Y. Fedorov (Федоров Ю., 2016), Y. Tverdokhlib (Твердохліб Ю., 2019), and other researchers who have paid considerable attention to information and propaganda mechanisms of influence, the role of media, and the activities of agents of influence in shaping pro-Russian sentiments on the peninsula.

At the same time, a significant portion of the existing research focuses either on the military-political aspects of the annexation or on the informational component of hybrid warfare. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the interaction of these elements in the process of preparing and implementing the operation to occupy Crimea requires further scholarly examination.

The purpose of this article is to conduct a comprehensive study of the preconditions, mechanisms, and stages of the hybrid operation carried out by the Russian Federation to occupy the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in 2014, as well as to analyze the role of information and psychological operations, pro-Russian political and public structures, networks of agents of influence, and paramilitary formations in creating conditions for the seizure of the peninsula.

Special attention is focused on identifying the instruments of information influence, the use of the military infrastructure of the RBSF, the mechanisms of political destabilization in the region, and the technologies used to legitimize the occupation through the organization of a pseudo-referendum. The research is also aimed at generalizing the experience of Russian hybrid aggression as a component of modern forms of information and psychological warfare.

The preparation of the scenario for the hybrid occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC) effectively began with the proclamation of Ukraine's independence. The first attempt occurred during the period of the "Crimean crisis" (1992–1994). Subsequently, using the developments and experience gained during the first attempt to occupy the peninsula, Russia began systematically creating a favorable environment for the implementation of the project of the "return of Crimea". Through a network of pro-Russian political parties, public organizations, media outlets, cultural initiatives, and educational programs, the image of Crimea as a "historically Russian land" that allegedly required "protection" from "Ukrainian nationalists" was firmly established on the peninsula. A special role in this process was played by such structures as the Russkiy Mir Foundation, the Foundation for the Support of Compatriots Abroad, as well as Russian consular institutions that conducted information and propaganda activities under the guise of cultural diplomacy.

In the military dimension, the RF consistently increased the potential of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) on the territory of the ARC, modernized infrastructure, conducted reconnaissance of strategic facilities, and prepared logistical routes for the rapid deployment of troops. By 2014, numerous Russian military facilities were already operating on the territory of the Crimean Peninsula, formally

regulated by agreements on the basing of the RBSF<sup>1</sup>, which in practice were used to prepare the operation. In February 2014, using the events of the "Revolution of Dignity" as a pretext, Russian special services artificially created an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear, masking their actions under the pretext of «protecting the Russian-speaking population» and the alleged "threat from the new Kyiv authorities", thereby initiating the active phase of the invasion. February 20 is considered the official date of the beginning of the occupation, as recorded by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. However, the first violations of Ukraine's state border by the armed forces of the Russian Federation were recorded a day earlier, on February 19, 2014<sup>2</sup>.

Even before the open phase of the occupation of Crimea began, the Russian Federation carried out a series of coordinated military and intelligence actions that created favorable conditions for the rapid establishment of control over key facilities on the peninsula. In particular, long before February 19, 2014, reconnaissance and sabotage groups of Russian security structures and special services were operating on the territory of the ARC. They infiltrated the peninsula disguised as "tourists", "security personnel", "volunteers", and "clergy", and also arrived as part of regular units of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. In remote mountainous areas of the peninsula, training camps for sabotage groups were established, composed mainly of local residents whose activities were aimed at destabilizing and undermining the socio-political situation in the region<sup>3</sup>.

Among the most active units were specialists from the 45th Separate Special Purpose Regiment of the Russian Airborne Forces, an elite formation specializing in deep penetration operations, the seizure of strategic facilities, the neutralization of command centers, and the creation of "controlled chaos" in the enemy's rear<sup>4</sup>. The task of these groups was to create conditions for the unhindered entry of the main forces and to ensure control over administrative centers without the official declaration of war, which fully corresponded to Moscow's hybrid strategy. They were engaged in preparing bridgeheads, conducting reconnaissance of key targets, monitoring security systems, and ensuring logistical capabilities for the rapid occupation of the peninsula.

Beginning on February 20, 2014, the open illegal movement of Russian troops onto the territory of the ARC commenced, using civilian vessels as well as transport belonging to the BSF. Under the pretext of the rotation of BSF units, additional forces began arriving in Crimea, including marine infantry, special forces units, engineering troops, communications specialists, and others<sup>5</sup>.

On February 23 the command system of the Southern Military District of the Armed Forces of the RF placed the grouping of troops in Crimea on full combat readiness. The formal justification for this decision was the events unfolding in Kyiv (the flight of V. Yanukovich, the formation of a new government, the intensification of protest movements, etc.). In the Kremlin, these developments were interpreted as a "coup d'état and a state overthrow", allegedly creating a threat to the Russian-speaking population. Under this pretext, the active phase of the military operation was launched (Горбулін В. П., 2016).

On the same day, a column of the 810th Separate Marine Brigade of the RBSF illegally departed from Kozacha Bay in Sevastopol and began taking positions around strategic facilities, including airports, communication hubs, and administrative buildings.

Already on February 24 the so-called "Olympic squadron" – a group of Russian warships – set course for the Crimean coast. Under the guise of returning from security duties during the Winter Olympic

<sup>1</sup> Угода між Україною і Російською Федерацією про статус та умови перебування Чорноморського флоту Російської Федерації на території України. (28. 05. 1997). URL: [https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643\\_076#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_076#Text) (30.12.2025).

<sup>2</sup> Закон України «Про засади державної політики національної пам'яті Українського народу (№ 4579-IX)» URL: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/4579-20#Text> (30. 12. 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Особистий архів автора. Інтерв'ю з капітаном першого рангу Буграмістренко А. І.

<sup>4</sup> Особистий архів автора. Інтерв'ю з капітаном другого рангу Рожковим І. П.

<sup>5</sup> *Report on Preliminary Examination Activities* (2016). URL: [https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/iccdocs/otp/161114-otp-rep-PE\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/iccdocs/otp/161114-otp-rep-PE_ENG.pdf) (30. 12. 2025)..

Games in Sochi, these ships delivered additional special forces units and equipment to the peninsula. Among them were units of the 45th Separate Special Purpose Regiment of the Russian Airborne Forces, GRU personnel, and specialists in electronic warfare. These actions proved critically important for establishing operational control over Crimea during the first days of the invasion, creating the conditions for the rapid seizure of administrative buildings and communication centers across the peninsula (Березовець Т., 2015).

The culmination of this operation occurred on the night of 26–27 February 2014, when reconnaissance and sabotage groups, acting jointly with units of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), GRU, and the BSF marines, seized the buildings of the Supreme Council of the Crimea and the Council of Ministers of the ARC in Simferopol. Armed soldiers without insignia – commonly referred to as the "little green men" – swiftly entered the buildings, neutralized the guards, blocked the entrances, and established full control over the premises<sup>6</sup>.

Simultaneously with the seizure of administrative buildings, Ukrainian military units, airports, communication hubs, and other strategic facilities were blockaded. The actions of the attacking forces were professional, carefully planned, and well coordinated. The attackers possessed modern equipment, secure communication systems, night-vision devices, and their tactics clearly indicated their affiliation with regular Russian military units.

In particular, Ukrainian military units in Perevalne, Bakhchisarai, Simferopol, Sevastopol, Kerch, and Feodosia were blockaded. Russian troops, acting jointly with so-called "self-defense" formations, surrounded barracks, blocked access roads, cut off electricity supplies, and exerted psychological pressure on Ukrainian personnel. The Simferopol and Belbek airports were brought under control, allowing the Russian Federation to secure logistical routes and deploy additional forces.

Special attention was paid by Russian forces to communication nodes, including telecommunications centers, mobile network towers, and internet providers. This allowed them to partially isolate the peninsula from Kyiv's information influence while ensuring their own operational coordination. The seizure of strategic facilities – such as ammunition depots, fuel bases, and command posts – was carried out without combat, largely due to the element of surprise and the disorientation of Ukrainian forces.

Despite this, Moscow officially denied its involvement at the time, presenting the events as an "internal protest movement of the population". In reality, these forces became the main striking instrument during the initial phase of the occupation, ensuring Russia's control over the administrative center of the peninsula even before the deployment of the main military contingents (Чмихало Г. Г., (2026), с. 86).

By mid-March, the number of Russian military personnel on the territory of Crimea had exceeded 40,000 troops. This significantly exceeded the permitted limit under the bilateral agreements between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, particularly the Agreement on the Status and Conditions of the Presence of the BSF of the RF on the Territory of Ukraine (1997), which set the maximum number of personnel at 25,000 troops, with strict restrictions on their movement and deployment. In reality, however, the Russian Federation not only exceeded these limits but also used the fleet as a bridgehead for the invasion, thereby violating all conditions of the basing agreement.

Simultaneously with the military operation, the RF carried out a large-scale information and psychological campaign. Through television channels, social media, agents of influence, and local pro-Russian media outlets, disinformation was spread about "fascists/Banderites in Kyiv", a "coup d'état", and an alleged "threat to Crimea". Messages about the "protection of compatriots", "historical justice", and the "necessity of returning Crimea" were actively promoted. These narratives targeted both the internal audience on the peninsula and the international community in order to create the illusion of a "popular initiative" and the "independent choice" of Crimean residents. Russian television channels broadcasting in the ARC, as well as internet resources that massively disseminated disinformation, played a particularly significant role in this process (Чмихало Г., 2025).

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<sup>6</sup> Кондрашов А. *Крым Путь на Родину*. 2015. Документальный фильм URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyGvMvILuhM> (30.12.2025).

On 26 February, two rallies took place in Simferopol – a pro-Ukrainian rally (up to 10,000 Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians) and a pro-Russian rally (up to 2,000 participants, some of whom had been brought from the RF). As a result of the crowd crush, one participant in the pro-Russian rally was killed. The organizers included representatives of the party "Russian Unity" (leader – Sergey Aksyonov) (Баранец В., (2019), pro-Russian public organizations, Cossack formations, and coordinators from the FSB. These rallies were used as a tool to legitimize further actions – creating the illusion of "popular resistance", "local self-defense", and a "demand for a referendum".

The information and psychological campaign of the RF regarding Crimea effectively began with the proclamation of Ukraine's independence and had a systematic and multi-level character. Its active phase started after the Orange Revolution of 2004–2005, when the Kremlin became convinced that Ukraine was moving toward Euro-Atlantic integration, which contradicted Russia's strategic interests. From that point on, Russian special services, diplomatic missions, foundations, and media outlets began implementing a comprehensive program aimed at influencing the information environment of Crimea.

The RF systematically created and supported pro-Russian political forces, among which the key roles were played by the parties "Russian Unity", "Rodina", and "Russian Bloc". These structures received funding from the Russian state budget as well as through indirect channels such as foundations, business structures, and cultural organizations. Their activities were aimed at promoting the ideology of the "Russian world" (Russkiy mir), discrediting Ukrainian statehood, and forming the image of Kyiv as a "hostile center" allegedly threatening the population of Crimea.

A particularly important role in shaping the pro-Russian information environment was played by the mass media. Television channels such as "TRK Krym" and "NTS", as well as newspapers including "Krymskaya Pravda" and "Sevastopolskaya Gazeta", were actively operating on the territory of Crimea. In total, since the early 2000s, more than 2,000 various Russian publications had been active in the region (Яблонська Н. В., 2006, с. 247), systematically broadcasting Russian narratives. Their content included historical myths, manipulative interpretations of events, anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, and direct disinformation – for example, claims about the alleged "ban on the Russian language" or "persecution of Orthodoxy". Through educational programs, historical reconstructions, and the activities of various foundations, the image of Crimea was constructed as a "historically Russian land" that had supposedly been "unfairly transferred to Ukraine" in 1954.

Cultural events – festivals, exhibitions, commemorative dates – were used as instruments of "soft power". In schools and universities, materials with a pro-Russian interpretation of history were widely disseminated, meetings with «veterans of the RBSF» were organized, and trips to Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Novorossiysk, and other Russian cities were arranged within the framework of so-called "cultural exchange" programs. Through these channels, an entire generation of young people was formed with deep distrust toward Ukrainian state institutions and raised in the spirit of loyalty to Russian identity (Чмихало Г. Г., 2026, с. 100–101).

The next step was the active phase of military penetration, accompanied by a large-scale information campaign and deliberate political destabilization.

Thus, by the end of February, the Russian Federation had already established full control over key administrative, military, and infrastructural facilities in Crimea, creating conditions for the further political legitimization of the occupation through the appointment of a loyal administration and the organization of a pseudo-referendum.

The military phase of the operation was implemented with a high level of coordination, the use of special forces, information cover, and the involvement of local collaborators (Cossacks, criminal groups, and various marginal elements). Alongside the military component, the Russian Federation intensified the political and social dimensions of the operation, in particular the organization of mass rallies designed to create the illusion of "popular support" and to serve as a tool for legitimizing the actions of the occupation authorities.

The first mass pro-Russian rally, which became a symbolic element of the Russian Federation's hybrid operation, took place on February, 23 2014 in Sevastopol. Russian media and pro-Russian

activists actively disseminated narratives about a "coup d'état" and an alleged "threat to the Russian-speaking population", thereby creating an emotional background for mobilizing the population of the peninsula (Дикий Е., 2016).

The rally in Sevastopol gathered approximately 10,000 participants, including both local residents and individuals brought in from the Russian Federation. According to Ukrainian intelligence services, organized groups arrived from Krasnodar Krai, Rostov Oblast, and Belgorod. They were transported by buses, railways, and also by sea through the ports of the RBSF. Some of them were accommodated in sanatoriums, dormitories, recreation centers, churches, and monasteries subordinate to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (ROC), as well as on the territory of BSF military bases, indicating pre-arranged logistical support<sup>7</sup>.

During this rally, the candidacy of Alexei Chaly was "nominated" as the "people's mayor" of Sevastopol, a decision supported by representatives of pro-Russian organizations, including the "Russian Bloc" and "Sevastopol – Crimea – Russia". Chaly, a Russian businessman and owner of the company "Tavrida Electric", which specialized in the production of electrical equipment, maintained close ties with Russian political and business circles and was known for his active participation in pro-Russian initiatives.

The organizers of the rally and pro-Russian media portrayed him as a «man of action" capable of "defending the city from the Kyiv junta". The election of Chaly had no legal basis – it was purely symbolic, intended to demonstrate the alleged "will of the people" and to create an alternative center of power. This step became the first stage in delegitimizing Ukrainian administrative authorities at the local level and preparing the ground for the subsequent seizure of administrative structures, effectively laying the political foundation for the further implementation of the Russian occupation scenario in Sevastopol.

Three days later, on 26 February, two large-scale rallies took place in Simferopol near the building of the Supreme Council of the ARC. On one side was a pro-Ukrainian rally, organized by the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, which gathered up to 10,000 participants, including Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, and representatives of civil society organizations. They advocated for the territorial integrity of Ukraine and opposed the interference of the Russian Federation in the internal affairs of the state<sup>8</sup>.

On the other side was a pro-Russian rally of up to 2,000 participants, some of whom had also been brought from the territory of the Russian Federation. The organizers included representatives of the party "Russian Unity", pro-Russian public organizations, Crimean Cossack groups, as well as coordinators from the FSB, who provided logistics, security, and information support. The rally was aggressive, with calls for the separation of Crimea, its accession to Russia, and "protection from fascists". During the confrontation between the two camps, a stampede occurred, resulting in the death of one participant in the pro-Russian rally. This incident was later used by Russian propaganda as "evidence of an alleged threat" to pro-Russian activists and as a tool to legitimize further actions—namely the creation of "popular resistance", "self-defense units", and demands for a "referendum"<sup>9</sup>.

These rallies had strategic significance: they created the illusion of mass support for pro-Russian actions, legitimized subsequent steps toward the seizure of power, and served as informational cover for the military operation already unfolding on the peninsula. The organized transportation of participants, coordination of actions, and media support all indicate a high level of organization that went far beyond spontaneous civic protest. They formed part of a unified scenario in which rallies served as instruments of political manipulation and psychological pressure.

Beginning on 24 February 2014, the formation of the so-called "Crimean self-defense units" began on the territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. These units became one of the key elements of the Russian hybrid operation aimed at occupying the peninsula. Despite official claims of a "spontane-

<sup>7</sup> Хронологія окупації Криму (2023) URL : [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2mh\\_1SfNo4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2mh_1SfNo4) (30. 12. 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Відступ агресора під тиском громадськості: мітинг 26 лютого 2014 року (2024). URL :<https://rusaggression.gov.ua/ua/vidstup-ahresora-pid-tyskom-hromadskosti-a26b7c4b1758f3a977ad816f66ccffe8.html> (30. 12. 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Хроніка окупації Криму (2022). URL : <https://ark.gp.gov.ua/ua/chronology.html> (30. 12. 2025).

ous popular movement", this process was carefully planned, organized, and coordinated by Russian special services, including the GRU, the FSB, and structures of the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation. Its primary objective was to create the illusion of internal resistance, a "popular protest", and the "self-defense" of Crimean residents against alleged "threats from the Kyiv junta", thereby allowing Moscow to carry out aggression without formally declaring war (Чмихало Г. Г., 2026, с. 60–62).

These units consisted of various categories of individuals. The core was formed by local pro-Russian activists, members of organizations such as "Russian Unity", "Sevastopol – Crimea – Russia", and the "Russian Community of Crimea". A significant portion of the formations consisted of representatives of criminal groups and veterans of the RBSF, who possessed military training and were familiar with local infrastructure. Cossack formations also actively participated, having previous experience in pro-Russian actions and in opposing Ukrainian patriotic events. In addition to local residents, the "self-defense" units included citizens of the Russian Federation brought in specifically for this purpose, which further strengthened the organization and discipline of these groups.

By mid-March 2014, the number of "self-defense" members had exceeded 5,000 people. These formations had a clear structure, command system, functional division, and established communication channels. Their activities were coordinated through headquarters located at Black Sea Fleet military bases, as well as directly through FSB officers, who exercised operational command. Many participants received financial compensation, equipment, food, and instructions, indicating centralized funding and logistical support from Russia.

Functionally, the "Crimean self-defense" units performed a range of tasks that complemented the actions of regular Russian troops. Their members blocked Ukrainian military units, sealed off access roads, surrounded barracks, erected barricades, and exerted psychological pressure on Ukrainian personnel. They also assumed responsibility for guarding administrative buildings – local councils, courts, and government offices – effectively ensuring the occupiers' control over governing institutions. Additionally, these units served as crowds at rallies, creating the image of "popular support", and acted as provocateurs, fueling tensions.

Another important aspect of their activities involved provocations and acts of violence, including attacks on journalists, the blocking of Ukrainian activists, obstruction of Ukrainian media operations, and participation in the seizure of strategic infrastructure facilities. Many operations were conducted jointly with Russian soldiers without insignia – the so-called "little green men". In this context, the "self-defense" units functioned as a cover, creating the appearance of a grassroots civic initiative, while actual command and control were exercised from Moscow (Чмихало Г. Г., 2026, с. 31–34).

Thus, the formation of the "Crimean self-defense units" was not a reaction to the political crisis but a pre-planned element of Russia's hybrid aggression. Their activities ensured control over territory, institutions, and the information space without an official declaration of war and without large-scale combat operations. These paramilitary formations played a key role in implementing the scenario of the peninsula's "soft occupation", creating the appearance of the "legitimacy" of events and facilitating the subsequent organization of a pseudo-referendum, which Moscow later used to legitimize the illegal annexation of Crimea.

At the same time, as the military actions unfolded, the Russian Federation intensified the information component of the operation, which played a critical role in shaping public opinion, justifying the occupation, and ensuring support among part of the population. Within the framework of the hybrid operation to seize Crimea, the Russian Federation actively used information resources to construct the image of a "Ukrainian threat" to the Russian-speaking population.

Within the hybrid operation aimed at the seizure of Crimea, the Russian Federation actively used information resources to construct an image of an "enemy/threat" to the Russian-speaking population. This element was crucial in creating psychological pressure, mobilizing loyal segments of the population, and legitimizing the subsequent actions of the occupation authorities. The information and psy-

chological campaign conducted by the Russian Federation had a multichannel character, encompassing virtually all available means of communication – from television (radio and print media) to the internet (social networks, various websites and platforms) and rumors. An equally important role was played by agents of influence, operating both in Crimea and beyond its borders (Чмихало Г., 2025, с. 96–98).

Through Russian television channels broadcast on the peninsula, including "Rossiya 24", "Channel One", "NTV", and "Zvezda", disinformation was disseminated about "fascists/Banderites" in Kyiv, a "coup d'état", a "threat to Orthodoxy", and the alleged "physical destruction of Russian-speaking people". These messages were emotionally charged and accompanied by video footage of violence, fragments of the Maidan protests taken out of context, and interviews with radical figures presented as "typical representatives of the new government". The term «Kyiv junta» was used particularly actively in order to delegitimize the Ukrainian government and create the impression of its illegitimacy.

On social media platforms – VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, as well as through Telegram channels and online forums—disinformation materials were spread, including calls for resistance, instructions for organizing rallies, and fabricated news reports about "attacks on Russian speakers", the alleged "ban on the Russian language", and the "disbandment of police and army structures", among others. A significant role was played by bots and trolls, which mass-commented on publications, created the illusion of widespread support for pro-Russian actions, and attacked Ukrainian users. Some of these resources were administered from the territory of the Russian Federation (Померанцев П., 2020, с. 42–42; 97), particularly from Saint Petersburg, Moscow, and Rostov-on-Don, where specialized centers for information operations operated.

Agents of influence – local journalists, bloggers, public figures, and clergy – promoted narratives about "historical justice", the "necessity of returning Crimea", and the «protection of compatriots". They participated in talk shows, public events, spoke at rallies, and published articles in local newspapers. Their activities were coordinated through Russian consular institutions, representative offices of the "Russkiy Mir" Foundation, as well as directly through FSB coordinators. In schools and universities, so-called "patriotic lessons" were organized, lectures about a "shared history" were delivered, and films with imperial narratives were screened.

A particularly important role in documenting and analyzing the processes of the occupation of Crimea was played by the 72nd Center for Information and Psychological Operations (CIPSO), which before 2014 had been stationed in Sevastopol. Officers of the center conducted continuous monitoring of the information environment, identified sources of disinformation, documented acts of aggression, and prepared analytical reports for the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC), as well as international partners. In its work, CIPSO produced counter-propaganda materials – leaflets, infographics, videos, and publications – and cooperated with Ukrainian media and civil society organizations, providing data on information attacks and preparing analytical materials for diplomatic and legal initiatives<sup>10</sup>.

After the seizure of Sevastopol, a significant part of the Center's archives was destroyed, and the unit itself was evacuated to mainland Ukraine. Under the new conditions, the CIPSO continued its activities, particularly at a base in Brovary, where new infrastructure was deployed. The Center adapted to new challenges, expanded its analytical work, and strengthened cooperation with the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the NSDC, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), as well as with international institutions, including NATO, StratCom, and EUvsDisinfo<sup>11</sup>. The results of the activities of the 72nd CIPSO became the basis for international appeals, legal proceedings, and information campaigns aimed at exposing and documenting Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Thus, the information and psychological operation of the RF was not merely a background element of the military occupation but a full-fledged front that ensured the demoralization of Ukrainian forces,

<sup>10</sup> Особистий архів автора. Інтерв'ю з капітаном другого рангу Рожковим І. П.

<sup>11</sup> EUvsDisinfo. Russian disinformation in Crimea: narratives and amplification. (2022). URL : <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/russian-disinformation-in-crimea-narratives-and-amplification/> (30. 12. 2025).

the mobilization of pro-Russian elements, the creation of the illusion of "popular support", and the legitimization of the annexation in the eyes of part of the population. Its success was conditioned by many years of preparation, the systematic work of media outlets, agents of influence, and intelligence services, as well as the insufficient readiness of Ukrainian institutions to counter such types of threats.

The final stage of this multi-component operation was the political legitimization of the occupation, implemented through the organization of a pseudo-referendum, which was intended to consolidate control over the peninsula in a legal dimension.

On 16 March 2014, the occupation authorities of the Russian Federation conducted the so-called «referendum» on the accession of the peninsula to the Russian Federation in the territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. This event was organized within an extremely short period – less than three weeks after the seizure of administrative buildings in Simferopol and the beginning of the military operation. The formal justification for holding it was the alleged "will of the people", supposedly expressed by participants of pro-Russian rallies; however, in reality, it was a political technology aimed at legitimizing the annexation in the eyes of both domestic and international audiences.

The voting process took place under the full control of armed formations – Russian military personnel, members of the "Crimean self-defense" units, and special forces without insignia. Armed individuals in military uniforms were present at polling stations, exerting psychological pressure on voters, controlling access, and supervising the voting process. Many polling stations were deployed on the territory of military units, educational institutions, and administrative buildings, which violated the principles of secrecy and voluntary choice. International observers were not allowed to participate—no authoritative organization, including the OSCE, recognized the referendum as legitimate.

According to the official data announced by the occupation authorities, 89.5% of the referendum participants voted in favor of joining Russia. However, independent sources, including Ukrainian intelligence services, human rights organizations, and journalistic investigations, indicate that the actual voter turnout did not exceed 30%, and the results were falsified. Ballots were printed without proper control, voter lists were incomplete or deliberately altered, and the voting process itself was non-transparent and manipulative. Moreover, the choice was limited: the ballot did not include an option to remain within Ukraine, which contradicted the fundamental principles of a plebiscite<sup>12</sup>.

On 18 March 2014, the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin announced the "incorporation" of Crimea into the Russian Federation. The ceremony of signing the "treaty" on accession took place in the St. George Hall of the Kremlin with the participation of representatives of the occupation authorities of Crimea – Sergey Aksyonov, Vladimir Konstantinov, and Alexei Chaly. On 21 March, the State Duma of the Russian Federation ratified the relevant documents, completing the formal procedure of occupation<sup>13</sup>. These actions were condemned by the international community: the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution No. 68/262, which confirmed the territorial integrity of Ukraine and the non-recognition of the referendum (UN General Assembly)<sup>14</sup>.

The occupation of Crimea in 2014 became the first stage of the large-scale war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and at the same time a clear example of hybrid aggression, combining military force, information pressure, and political manipulation. The operation included the seizure of territory without an official declaration of war, the deliberate construction of narratives of "threat" and "protection" within the information space, and the use of pseudo-legal mechanisms for the formal legitimization of occupation. This scenario was first tested in Crimea and later expanded to Donbas, where in the

<sup>12</sup> OHCHR Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine (2014). URL : <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/UA/UkraineReport15May2014.pdf> (30. 12. 2025).

<sup>13</sup> Ukraine crisis: Putin signs Russia-Crimea treaty (2014). URL : <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26630062> (30. 12. 2025).

<sup>14</sup> Резолюція № 68/262 «Територіальна цілісність України» від 27. 03. 2014 URL : <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/767565> (30. 12. 2025).

spring of 2014 a new phase of aggression began with the support of separatist movements, the creation of so-called «people's republics,» and the escalation of armed conflict.

The success of the operation can be explained not only by its element of surprise and military preparation, but also by many years of information influence: systematic activities of Russian intelligence services, networks of agents of influence, media campaigns, and cultural infiltration that gradually shaped favorable public attitudes among certain groups of the population toward rejecting the pro-European course of Ukraine. This preparation, which intensified during the events of the Revolution of Dignity, coincided with the internal political crisis in Ukraine and enabled the implementation of a "rapid seizure" with minimal open resistance and effective informational cover.

Therefore, the annexation of Crimea represents not only a violation of international law but also a signal of the need to reconsider approaches to preventing and countering modern forms of aggression, which combine military, informational, political, and social instruments of influence.

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## ОКУПАЦІЯ КРИМУ 2014: ПОГЛЯДИ НА МЕХАНІЗМИ РЕАЛІЗАЦІЇ ВІЙСЬКОВО-ПОЛІТИЧНОЇ ТА ІНФОРМАЦІЙНОЇ АГРЕСІЇ

У статті здійснено комплексний аналіз підготовки, механізмів реалізації та інформаційно-політичного забезпечення окупації Автономної Республіки Крим Російською Федерацією у 2014 році. Досліджується процес формування передумов для реалізації російського сценарію гібридної агресії, що розпочався фактично з моменту проголошення незалежності України та набув системного характеру після «Кримської кризи» 1992–1994 років. Особливу увагу приділено багаторічній діяльності російських державних структур, спецслужб, культурних та громадських організацій, спрямованій на формування на півострові сприятливого інформаційного та політичного середовища для реалізації проєкту «повернення Криму».

У статті проаналізовано роль мережі проросійських політичних партій, громадських організацій, медіа та культурних ініціатив, які формували в суспільній свідомості наратив про Крим як «історично російську територію». Значну увагу приділено використанню інструментів так званої «м'якої сили», діяльності фондів «Русский мир», «Фонд поддержки соотечественников», а також російських дипломатичних і консульських структур, що здійснювали інформаційно-пропагандистський вплив під прикриттям культурної та гуманітарної співпраці.

Окремо розглянуто військову складову операції, зокрема використання інфраструктури Чорноморського флоту РФ, діяльність розвідувально-диверсійних груп, формування парамілітарних структур типу так званої «самооборони Криму» та їхню взаємодію з регулярними підрозділами російських збройних сил. Проаналізовано ключові етапи окупації – від організації проросійських мітингів і дестабілізації суспільно-політичної ситуації до захоплення адміністративних будівель, блокування українських військових частин та проведення псевдореферендуму 16 березня 2014 року.

Особливу увагу приділено інформаційно-психологічним операціям, спрямованим на формування образу «української загрози», мобілізацію проросійських елементів населення та створення ілюзії масової підтримки анексії. Показано, що інформаційний компонент операції був невід'ємною складовою військової агресії та відіграв ключову роль у деморалізації українських сил і легітимізації дій Російської Федерації.

Зроблено висновок, що окупація Криму стала результатом тривалої комплексної підготовки, яка поєднувала військові, інформаційні, політичні та соціальні інструменти впливу. Досвід цієї операції демонструє характерні риси сучасної гібридної війни, у межах якої ключовими інструментами стають інформаційно-психологічні операції, маніпуляція громадською думкою, використання мереж агентів впливу та локальних колабораційних структур.

**Ключові слова:** окупація Криму, інформаційно-психологічні операції, інформаційно-психологічний вплив, російська агресія, Чорноморський флот РФ, пропаганда, інформаційна війна, дезінформація, агентура впливу, дестабілізація.

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