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Psychological Operations in Hybrid Warfare: Assessing Their Impact on National Security in Georgia

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Abstract

The nature of warfare has undergone a profound transformation in the twenty-first century, extending beyond conventional military engagements to encompass informational, cyber, and psychological dimensions. Among these developments, Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) have emerged as a critical instrument of influence, aimed at shaping perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours among target audiences. This article examines the role and impact of psychological operations on contemporary warfare through the case of Georgia. Drawing upon theories of communication, propaganda, and hybrid warfare, the study analyses how psychological and informational influence has evolved into a strategic component of modern conflicts. Particular attention is devoted to the 2008 Russo - Georgian War, the growing role of social media and disinformation campaigns, and the information environment surrounding Georgia's occupied territories.

The research demonstrates that psychological operations increasingly function as a force multiplier within hybrid warfare, influencing public opinion, institutional legitimacy, and international political support. The findings further suggest that Georgia's geopolitical position, coupled with domestic vulnerabilities such as political polarisation and limited media literacy, increases susceptibility to external influence operations. The article concludes by proposing policy recommendations focused on strengthening strategic communications, enhancing media literacy, improving cybersecurity capabilities, and fostering societal resilience. These measures are essential for addressing the challenges posed by psychological and informational threats in contemporary security environments.

Keywords: Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), Hybrid Warfare; Information Warfare, Strategic Communications, Disinformation, Georgia, National Security.

Introduction

The character of warfare has evolved significantly in the contemporary international security environment. Traditional military conflicts, historically defined by kinetic force and territorial control, have increasingly incorporated non-kinetic dimensions, including cyber operations, information campaigns, and psychological influence activities. As a result, modern conflicts are fought not only on physical battlefields but also within cognitive and informational domains. Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) have become a central component of this transformation. These operations are designed to influence the perceptions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals, groups, and societies in support of strategic objectives. In contemporary conflicts, success is often determined not solely by military superiority but also by the ability to shape narratives, influence public opinion, and undermine an adversary's decision-making processes [1].

Georgia presents a particularly relevant case study for examining the impact of psychological operations on modern warfare. Situated in a geopolitically sensitive region and exposed to ongoing hybrid threats, Georgia has experienced extensive informational

and psychological influence activities, particularly following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. These developments provide valuable insights into the changing nature of warfare and the growing importance of cognitive and informational domains [2]. This article analyses the influence of psychological operations on the transformation of modern warfare and examines their implications for Georgia's national security environment.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Psychological Operations and Strategic Influence

Psychological operations are generally defined as planned activities designed to influence the emotions, motives, reasoning, and behaviour of foreign audiences in support of political and military objectives. Contemporary PSYOPS have expanded beyond traditional military contexts and now encompass digital platforms, social media, and broader information ecosystems [3].

Lasswell's Communication Model

Harold Lasswell's communication model provides an important analytical framework for understanding psychological operations. His well-known formula - "Who says what, through which channel, to whom, and with what effect?" - highlights the strategic nature of communication and its influence on audiences. In modern information conflicts, this framework helps explain how competing actors construct narratives and shape public perceptions through targeted messaging [4- 6].

The Propaganda Model

The Propaganda Model developed by Herman and Chomsky argues that media institutions play a significant role in filtering and framing information. Rather than acting as neutral intermediaries, media systems often shape public understanding through selective representation and agenda-setting processes. This perspective is particularly relevant to contemporary information warfare, where media narratives frequently become contested spaces for political influence [7-9].

Hybrid Warfare Theory

Hybrid warfare combines conventional military operations with irregular tactics, cyber activities, economic pressure, diplomatic initiatives, and information operations. Hoffman argues that modern conflicts increasingly integrate these diverse instruments into a unified strategic approach.

Within this framework, psychological operations function as a key mechanism for influencing perceptions and undermining adversaries without necessarily resorting to direct military confrontation. As we know, „The theories of intrinsic motivation focus on the values that existed before military life, such as ideology, nationalism, warrior spirit, and rational service". Despite the existence of intrinsic motivation, it should be noted that external factors(such as psychological operations), can undermine and weaken the intrinsic motivation of a soldier [10-12].

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case-study methodology focusing on Georgia as a representative example of a state exposed to hybrid threats and psychological influence operations.

The research is based on:

- Analysis of academic literature on psychological operations and hybrid warfare;
- Examination of official reports and strategic documents produced by NATO, RAND Corporation, Freedom House, and other international organisations;
- Review of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War as a case study;
- Analysis of contemporary information and disinformation campaigns affecting Georgia.

The qualitative approach enables a comprehensive assessment of how psychological operations influence both conflict dynamics and national security environments.

Psychological Operations in Contemporary Warfare

Transformation of Modern Warfare

The emergence of digital technologies has fundamentally altered the conduct of warfare. Contemporary conflicts increasingly involve competition for influence within informational and cognitive spaces. Consequently, military success is no longer determined solely by battlefield outcomes but also by the ability to shape perceptions and narratives.

Psychological operations have become a strategic tool for influencing public opinion, weakening societal cohesion, and undermining institutional legitimacy [13].

Social Media and the Information Environment

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has significantly increased the effectiveness of psychological operations. Digital platforms enable the rapid dissemination of information while simultaneously facilitating the spread of disinformation and manipulation. Algorithm-driven information ecosystems amplify emotionally charged content, making societies more vulnerable to influence campaigns and coordinated disinformation efforts [14].

The Georgian Case Study

The 2008 Russo–Georgian War

The 2008 Russo–Georgian War demonstrated the close relationship between military operations and information warfare. Alongside conventional military activities, competing actors sought to influence international audiences and establish dominant narratives concerning the conflict.

The principal objectives of psychological operations included:

- Influencing international public opinion;
- Demoralising opponents;
- Increasing uncertainty among civilian populations;
- Strengthening political legitimacy.

The conflict illustrated how informational influence can shape international interpretations of military events.

Russian Information and Influence Operations

Research suggests that Russian influence operations frequently rely on multiple and sometimes contradictory narratives designed to create confusion and weaken trust in objective sources of information. Within Georgia, these efforts often focus on:

- Undermining support for Euro-Atlantic integration;
- Reducing trust in democratic institutions;
- Deepening political and social polarisation.

Such campaigns are conducted through social media platforms, online networks, and local intermediaries, making attribution and response more challenging.

Information Policy in the Occupied Territories

Information policy plays a significant role in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region (South Ossetia), where competing narratives concerning history, identity, and political legitimacy remain central to ongoing geopolitical disputes.

Psychological Influence Activities within These Regions Seek To:

- Control historical narratives;
- Shape collective identities;
- Reinforce political legitimacy;
- Influence international perceptions.

Discussion

The findings indicate that psychological operations have become a fundamental component of modern warfare. Unlike conventional military force, psychological operations seek long-term influence by altering perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour.

The Georgian Case Demonstrates that Psychological Influence Campaigns Affect Three Key Areas:

- Public opinion formation
- Institutional legitimacy
- International political support.

The increasing sophistication of digital technologies has further expanded the reach and effectiveness of these operations, making them a central element of contemporary hybrid warfare.

Policy Recommendations

To enhance resilience against psychological and informational threats, Georgia should pursue the following policy priorities:

Strategic Communications Enhancement

- Establish a unified national strategic communications framework.
- Improve crisis communication mechanisms.
- Develop coherent and consistent national narratives.

Media Literacy Development

- Integrate media literacy into educational curricula.
- Promote critical thinking skills.
- Support public awareness campaigns targeting disinformation.

Cybersecurity Strengthening

- Expand national cybersecurity capabilities.
- Protect critical information infrastructure.
- Develop advanced monitoring and analytical systems.

Multi-Stakeholder Cooperation

- Strengthen collaboration between government institutions, academia, civil society, media organisations, and technology companies.
- Facilitate information sharing and coordinated responses to influence operations.

International Cooperation

- Deepen cooperation with NATO, the European Union, and other strategic partners.
- Exchange best practices and expertise in countering disinformation and hybrid threats.

Conclusion

Psychological operations have emerged as one of the defining features of contemporary warfare. As conflicts increasingly extend into informational and cognitive domains, the ability to shape perceptions and influence public attitudes has become a strategic asset comparable to conventional military capabilities. The Georgian experience demonstrates that psychological and informational influence can significantly affect political stability, public trust, and national security. Consequently, effective responses require a comprehensive approach that integrates strategic communications, media literacy, cybersecurity, and societal resilience. In the evolving security environment of the twenty-first century, national security depends not only on military strength but also on the capacity of societies to resist manipulation, maintain trust in institutions, and protect the integrity of the information space.

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