

Shades of Gray in the War in Eastern Ukraine: 'Neither War nor Peace' Existence Zones, 'Neither Truth nor Lie' Silence Zones

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Abstract: *The concepts of 'gray zone conflict', as one of the new phenomena in the theory of international relations, are given considerable attention in modern strategic researches of analysts, in particular American ones (Hel Brands, Adam Elkus, etc.). The definition of 'gray zone conflict' by American political scientists coincides with the definitions of domestic scholars in outlining the hybrid war in general, and Russian Federation's war against Ukraine in particular. At the same time, qualifying the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and the war in Eastern Ukraine as the sole concept of 'gray zone' shall be considered not to be entirely correct, since the scales tend to favor the definition of civil war, which is so advantageous to Vladimir Putin. On the other hand, the war in Eastern Ukraine has many shades of gray, which gives grounds to the use of the concept of 'gray zone conflict' on specific examples of the existence of real and imaginary gray zones (realities of existence and zones of silence) and to investigate their quantitative and qualitative characteristics, to determine the degree of the viral use of the gray zone of conflict by the state (as an object of aggression), which complicates its establishment. The possibilities/unacceptability of solving gray zone conflicts by "gray" methods are being outlined as well.*

Keywords: *Donbas, gray zone conflict, gray zones of the war, hybrid war, Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, the war in Eastern Ukraine*

1. Introduction

For the sixth year in a row, Ukraine has been in a state of undeclared war with the Russian Federation and remains attacked in all directions from year to year. The Euro-Atlantic community is also attacked in all directions. Having lost its “muscles” over the long times of a peaceful and well-fed life, the Western world, including the European one, was not ready for the brazen destruction of the collective security system, kept from the very end of World War II and Russia’s revisionist attempts to extend its control far beyond the post-Soviet countries.

The popularity of the ‘end of history’ concept of Francis Fukuyama and the disappearance of what seemed to be an ideological alternative to liberal democracy led the West to cease worrying about values and to enter a comfort zone, which famous Ukrainian writer Oksana Zabuzhko figuratively called “irresponsibility of the fed ones” (Zabuzhko, 2019). But the ostensibility of such comfort was well recognized by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, having a neighbor close by, in the “uncomfortable embraces” of which they have been “lucky” to be after World War II. That is why they were so eager to appear under the Euro-Atlantic umbrella. Like no other, these countries are aware of the danger of being involved in one of the so-called ‘gray zone conflicts’ created by Russia that are considered a new phenomenon in the practice and theory of international relations (Matisek, 2017; Mazarr, 2015; Brands, 2016; Elkus, 2015). That is why the countries of Central Europe are the most active lobbyists of the national interests of Ukraine, which holds the line on the borders of the gray zone conflict proliferation.

Fighting the war with hybrid means allowed the Russian leadership not only to seize part of the sovereign territory of another state, to occupy one of its most strategic regions, but also to create a silence gray zone, area of information manipulations concerning Ukraine that apply not only to the population of the aggressor state, but also to the international community in whole. It took almost two years of expressing “deep anxiety” and the presence of political will in specific European governments until it became clear that the aggressor’s impunity made him even more brazen, and the obsessive painful state of the Kremlin leaders turned them into “global shakhids” (Balabanov *et al.*, 2018).

The methodological principles (interdisciplinary, synergistic, and civilizational approaches) followed by the authors of the paper give a reason to assert a civilizational fracture in the East of Ukraine, the frontier between the imperial

ideology of Russia, which proclaimed itself the successor of the USSR, and modern values of the free democratic world, and then between the rise of history back or forward. It is the war for the values in which the territory and human resources are an instrument that has many shades of “gray”—real and conditional ones, having great viral potential both from the side of the subject and from the side of the object (or potential objects) of aggression. Based on certain provisions of the concept of gray zone conflict, exploring its essential characteristics, the authors of the paper suggest using extrapolation with the method of direct and included observation, analysis of events, phenomena and processes taking place in a real gray zone of war in the east of Ukraine to consider the gray zone conflict as an instrument of the hybrid war of the Russian Federation, is being “tested” in Ukraine.

The first part of the article is devoted to clarifying the feasibility of studying the war in the east of Ukraine in the concepts of the gray zone conflict phenomenon, and to describing the adequate application of approaches, terms and definitions thereof.

In the second part, the state of existence of the so-called real gray zone—‘neither war nor peace’ existence, the living conditions of the population have been described, as well as the real and conditional boundaries of these have been outlined and substantiated. Considering the gray zone in the context of object-and-subject dichotomy (the assumption of providing it with a separate “will” and “action algorithm”), an extrapolation of threats of “proliferation” of specifically defined boundaries of the gray zone created by military events was applied to real and conditional regional scales that will have significant geopolitical consequences.

The third part is devoted to the problem of “virality” of the silence zone concerning the war in the east of Ukraine, the peculiarities of its creation by the aggressor state and the state under aggression.

It should be noted that the study was carried out nearly in real time in accordance with the rapid changes in the political situation and in general objective reality, which sometimes was not even imagined. Facts are accumulated on such an exponent that being recorded and interpreted just yesterday, today they appear in a completely different context in the light of new events. Therefore, the authors of the article, in addition to achieving their goals and objectives, raise new questions and problems that can become new specific knowledge.

2. Theoretical and terminological shades of gray of the war in Eastern Ukraine

Traditional wars that were fought in the era of Karl von Clausewitz, with the declaration of war before the war itself, with the specific sides of the conflict, the clear battle line and traditional weapons, can be figuratively viewed in contrasting black-and-white colors, defined and understood. But, as noted by the authors of the article devoted to non-traditional wars of modernity, the conditions of 2014 differ significantly from the events of World War II. The tools of modern unconventional war are different as well. According to many modern analysts, in particular, American, today we should move away from the traditional vision of war, because we should adapt to the world of

urgent messages and data transmission, non-violent resistance, cybernetic and economic wars and manipulation of international law to undermine the national sovereignty. In our era, an unconventional war is likely to take the form of a movement of civil resistance, which may be manipulated by a foreign state that seeks to provoke a violent response of the government in order to destroy the legitimacy of this government in the eyes of the international community. (Votel et al., 2016)

Such an unconventional war has received many names in research and expert assessments: 'proxy war', 'hybrid war', 'gray zone conflict', and others. Gray color is the color of uncertainty, the human eye sees much worse in the gray twilight than even in darkness; reality dissolves in gray with loss of meaning. Therefore, in our opinion, one of the most accurate definitions that characterizes the war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine is the 'gray war'. The studies use the term 'gray zone conflict', which covers more or less aggressive strategies of actions of the so-called revisionist states, in particular China, Russia, Iran (Mazarr, 2015, p. 2). The gray zone conflict is qualified as a form of conflict, an activity that is forced and aggressive, but deliberately remains below the threshold of a conventional military conflict and open interstate war (Mazarr, 2015, p. 55; Brands, 2016). Hal Brands notes that some analysts define the gray zone conflict as a new phenomenon that will characterize the future international system and create challenges to its security, while others argue that this concept is extremely exaggerated (Brands, 2016). Thus, Adam Elkus believes that the concept of gray wars is devoid of strategic meaning, because the wars of the gray zone are a mix of two well-known ideas in military strategy and politics: limited wars and constraint (Elkus, 2015). But, in our opinion, we should agree

with the opinion of Dr. Michael Mazarr: despite the fact that many tools and methods of the gray zone conflict have already been used, they have renewed their relevance in new dimensions, including Russia's aggressive actions in Eastern Europe (Mazarr, 2015, p. 2). Dr. Phillip F. Karber also believes that hardly anybody in the West paid attention to the doctrinal turn of Russia towards the 'war of a new generation' before its manifestation in Ukraine, mistakenly underestimating it, confusing with its own constructs of 'the fourth-generation war', 'non-linear war' or 'hybrid war' (Karber, 2015, p 3).

In this context, it is worth mentioning the so-called 'Gerasimov doctrine', which caused controversy in foreign and domestic expert literature. It is believed that the 'first strategy of Gerasimov' laid the foundations for a hybrid war, determined Russia's strategically aggressive behavior toward its near and far neighbors—hybrid interventions, information campaigns, media viruses, interference with elections and attempts to create focal points of chaos where stable institutions have recently existed (Trehubov, 2019; Mazarr, 2015, pp. 90–91). Specifically for *Foreign Policy*, political analyst Mark Galeotti expressed his own expert opinion on the Gerasimov doctrine, because at one time it was he who proposed this term, not imagining that it should be "dragged out for cliché": "There is one little problem. Gerasimov doctrine does not exist. And the more we assure ourselves that it exists and works, the longer we misunderstand another, but the real problem that threatens us from Russia." (Galeotti, 2018)

According to Mark Galeotti, the real problem is the absence of a unified Russian doctrine, and that is why the Kremlin's activities are dangerous because they have no clear program. There is a large-scale political goal to divert, distribute and demoralize, but as for the rest the actions of the Russian Federation do not fit into a single concept, and sometimes even contradict each other. At the same time, Galeotti warns the West against assessing the actions of the Kremlin in traditional military terms. According to him, the hybrid war is divided into two parts in the meaning of its leaders. The first one is a subversive activity, that is, everything that happens in Donbas: erosion of credibility for the local administrative apparatus, stirring up a local uprising and blocking strategic communications, etc., which Western experts mistakenly consider as the active phase of the war, but Galeotti himself estimates as only a prelude. But Russia is unlikely to pretend for the second part—the phase of open war. Galeotti believes that this option is unbelievable, because Moscow is trying to use NATO's democratic institutions against the Alliance itself, projecting the shortcomings of Western democracy. (Galeotti, 2018) Almost completely agreeing with the political scientist, the authors of the article note that both Galeotti and Western experts are not entirely accurate in their definitions: this is really a subversive

activity, but Russia does not campaign against Donbas, but the whole of Ukraine, and in Ukrainian Donbas this subversive activity is held by military means, so it should be qualified in military terms, but specific ones like a gray war.

So, quite consistent with its name, the gray zone conflict is unambiguous and indefinite in its nature, but quite real; in its tactics, is different from cyber-attacks, propaganda and political wars, economic coercion and sabotage to sponsorship of armed militant intermediaries and creeping military expansionism, which in turn are absorbed by the “twilight” of disinformation and lies, in order to get rid of responsibility for their actions (Brands, 2016). The peculiarity of Russia’s actions in relation to Ukraine (and in the worst perspective, in Central Europe) is the creation of a large gray zone of conflict in the geopolitical dimension through the gradual growth of disguised aggression—the gray war. The realities of the territorial gray zone existence of this war (that will be discussed below), which is a kind of neutral strip between the parties to the hostilities, according to the authors’ observations, their essential characteristics are ‘no war, no peace’, rejection of formal laws, special ethics and the value system in favor of the existence of a limited right in the struggle for survival, are extrapolated to the geopolitical dimension of the gray zone conflict. In the “twilight” of the gray zone, political and socio-economic influence is exercised not so much by formal, but mostly by informal actors—military, “spontaneous (wild)” businesses, smugglers, humanitarian workers, etc.—and they turn into an influential and important survival factor, triggering the mechanism of action of the Stockholm Syndrome, when the population is ready to justify the actions of everyone on whom their being depends. In this way, Russia is trying to dilute international security structures with “gray” means, appealing not to the formal norms of international law but to fictional historical ones, turning the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine and the Baltic States into an object of splitting and subversive manipulations, implanting national-populism projects in the European community without abhorring interference in elections, direct bribery, and physical elimination. By analogy of the well-known fantastic work of the Strugatsky brothers *Roadside Picnic*, where the anomalous zone changes people and their usual rules of life, Russia is also trying to create the gray zones—“roadside picnics”, from which Russian diplomats, intelligence officers, and military stalkers are giving the political bribes to the Kremlin leadership, maintaining the conflict of the gray zone in the constant phase of activity, moving in small steps to the results that have almost been achieved in Ukraine.

The goal of Russia is the creation and distribution of gray zones to certain territories, which, like those temporarily occupied in the east of Ukraine, are not the purpose of rejection, unlike the Crimea, as well as control using the third

parties. The gray zone turns into an instrument of blackmail, destabilization of the state, within the framework of which it is being created, and then the process of incorporating it into global structures of collective security is inhibited, it is being pushed to the side of world processes, becoming a victim of the quasi-imperial concept of national interests and revisionist ambitions.

Using the notion of the gray zone conflict, we consider it expedient to distinguish features of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, applying the definition of gray war in this particular case, and its actions to create a gray zone conflict in other regions of the world, in particular Central and Eastern Europe. Dr. Michael Mazarr believes that the gray zone conflict cannot be understood as a war, because it is not connected with violence or bloodshed as the main approach, it is not aimed at clearly defined battles, there is no clear battlefield (Mazarr, 2015, p. 64). With regard to, for example, the pressure of China on the maritime borders and allies of the United States and partners in East Asia, this approach is fully justified. As for the actions of Russia against Ukraine, characterized by full-scale military aggression, it is advisable to use the terms 'war' and related ones. In addition, the terms 'aggression' and 'temporarily occupied territories' are vested in the national legislation (*Interfax Ukraina*, 2018). According to the authors, in the very distinction between the concepts of the 'gray zone conflict' and the 'gray war' lies a certain challenge to the international order. The states involved in the gray zone conflict are not technically "at war", so the solution and protection of many international wartime agreements from the UN Charter to the Geneva Conventions do not apply to gray zone contexts (Mazarr, 2015, p. 66). So, the gray zone conflict is dangerous in terms of its identification within the international legal framework. And hence are all the consequences of this conflict/war for Ukraine: refugees (who do not have refugee status in Ukraine like Syrian ones, but have the status of internally displaced persons), prisoners of war (whom Russia do not consider as ones despite keeping in such a status), material damage, victims who are difficult to be placed into international law. After all, there are consequences—but it looks like no war at all. The rupture of cause-and-effect relationships leads to not triggering the norms of international law. So, the gray zone is the possibility of existence by juggling the rules. This is how today's Russia lives, because this is the only salvation of its political elite—manual control and juggling the rules, and it is trying to impose such (dis)order on the rest of the world.

Russia creates a certain qualitative model of the gray zone conflict in Ukraine, which can be exported to any other region, but adapted in advance to local conditions. This statement is not something new in expert opinion, but lets us assume the courage that the real gray zone of the war in the east of Ukraine (including the occupied territories) may serve as a kind of research ground for

testing mechanisms and tools for developing controlled chaos instead of norms and rules, instead of state institutions designed to protect national interests—sovereignty, physical security of borders, internal stability, and the like. There is no secret that Russia will test its weaponry in a hot war against Ukraine, and the model of the gray zone can be rolled over. However, if you agree with Viktor Tregubov that subversion is not a prelude to the war, but a war itself (or foreplay doesn't always end with sex), because the serious weapons of the West are a deterrent, but Russia does not see constraining factors for exporting the gray zone (Trehubov, 2019). After all, it attacks on sites that are significantly beyond the “rules” and “norms”. Viktor Tregubov defines ‘chaos as a solution’ strategy as follows: “To weaken the enemy, the Russian Federation is striking its institutions.” (Trehubov, 2018). And now, according to a similar model, the Russian Federation is working in Europe, financing both far-rights and far-lefts at the same time, not being interested in the final result; it is important to create internal devastation, chaos, bring the society to the hysterics of “yellow vests”, confront the regions with the center, and the EU with the USA. To organize a gray zone. The main danger is that such actions of the Kremlin are not subject to be ceased. A gambler always wins the player who plays fair. And then lets this gambling be revealed, but the result has been achieved. In the United Nations documents, the creation of a gray zone conflict is not classified as aggression, as no responsibility is for the occupation of the sovereign territory of another state by “non-existent” military forces, the creation of quasi-“republics” thereon, the occupation of the information space of Ukraine.

3. Real gray zone — neither war nor peace

“People live here.” Similar signs on the doors of apartments and gates of houses can often be found in the front-line districts of Donbas. On the one hand, the inscription is informative, and on the other hand, it is quite revealing of the situation in the gray zone: do not shoot, do not plunder, do not break into—people live here. This is one of the hallmarks of the gray zone—the hope for the moral and human qualities of the “stalkers” that “hold” the zone: the combatants, smugglers, marauders, and others like that.

Lieutenant-General S. Naev, the Commander of the Joint Forces Operations (JFO), considers the concept of the gray zone which was formed as a result of hostilities in Eastern Ukraine unacceptable, since it is not enshrined in any document, and it was just invented by the media. Being in his status, it is clear

that the General will outline an official point, but unfortunately the realities are not always the subject to verbal military commands. Gray zone, as well as its borders should be taken in two ways. Literally, this is the territory between the extreme checkpoints that are not controlled by either the Ukrainian or the Russian troops. Actually, it embeds into a small stripe of “neutral” space, which in some places narrows to several hundred meters. Largely, it is a rural area with small settlements, which appeared to be on the so-called zero line of military confrontation. The number of people left here is difficult to be determined. According to rough estimates, it can be several tens of thousands of people. According to the official figures from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, of the 400,000 people living along the line of demarcation, 60% are elderly people over the age of 60. Of these, 70% are women, and 8% or 16,000 are bedridden people (*Ukrinform*, 2018). That is, it is mostly people who are not so much reluctant, but unable to leave their place of residence. There is also a small group of young people and middle-aged people who have decided to stay in the face of firing and lack of safe living conditions, mainly with their old relatives and loved ones. The density of population living in the “neutral” zone is not the same and depends on the proximity to large cities and the type of a terrain. So, in Priazovye and on the right bank of the Siversky Donets, where rural settlements predominate, the population is relatively sparse. In turn, densely populated regions of Donetsk and Gorlivka, which serve as a line of delimitation, still maintain a high level of settlement despite military actions. This, in turn, provokes an increase in losses among the civilian population.

Those villages and settlements where there is no place to live are completely abandoned, and the level of danger is the highest: for example, a once elite cottage settlement of Pesky in the northern outskirts of Donetsk, or Shyrokin resort in the south. Without local authorities, there are about 400 inhabitants of Vodyane, Opytne and Spartak settlements. There are many other “gray” settlements with some inhabitants who did not abandon them. Basically, there are old people who survive on subsistence economy, which is rather dangerous because the fields where you can graze are mined. By the way, in the sixth year of armed conflict, Ukraine is one of the most mine-affected countries in the world (!). The overwhelming majority of hostilities take place near settlements, which resulted in a map of more than 15 million square meters of mined land on the territory of Donetsk and Lugansk regions developed by the mine experts. At the same time, the full level of pollution is not yet known, and the survey process is still ongoing. Landmines are currently one of the most dangerous threats in Eastern Ukraine: according to official statistics, in the period from

May 2014 to March 2018, about 355 civilians and 1,456 people were injured by mines and explosive remnants of war on the territory of Donbas controlled by Ukraine.

If the gray zone is perceived as a territory that is not under the control of Ukraine but is not annexed like the Crimea, its outlines are determined by the Decree of the President of Ukraine dated February 7, 2019 (Decree of the President of Ukraine no. 32/2019, 2019). So, the Donetsk region includes Boykivsky, Novoazovsky, Starobeshevsky, Shakhtarsky, part of Bakhmutsky, Volnovasky, Marinsky, Yasinuvatsky districts, Donetsk, Gorlivka, Makiyivka, Shakhtarsk, Torez, and others. In the Lugansk region, there are Antratsitovsky, Dovzhansky, Lutuginsky, Perevalsky, Slovianoserbsky, Sorokinsky, part of Novoaidarsky, Popasniansky, Stanychno-Lugansky districts, Lugansk, Alchevsk, Anthracit, Kadyivka, Rovenky and others. At the beginning of 2017, there were 382,300 people living in this territory with a tendency to decrease.

But there is also the third definition of the gray zone—less territorially delineated, but unequivocally wider than the first and second ones. This is a territory that is formally free from occupation, but whose population appeared in an uncertain situation as the result of a war and due to the lack of any prospects for further development. It suffers from lack of attention from the central government, unemployment, corruption, etc. This territory includes areas and settlements adjacent to the demarcation line and controlled by the Ukrainian army. However, life there did not actually change after the Revolution of Dignity, the power remained in the hands of the former “regional” elites, who supported the “Russian world” in 2014, but were not punished because of the deep crisis of the Ukrainian legal system. The well-developed everyday life of the inhabitants, mainly connected with industry and agriculture, was violated by military actions, the traditional orientation towards regional centers disappeared, but there were no new ones that could give economic impetus to the development of these territories. Prior to the war, most of the population of Donetsk and Luhansk regions was involved in the large industry, which belonged to large financial and industrial groups, first of all, SCM of Rinat Akhmetov. Among the rural population, the hired workers of the laity farm households dominated with the same subordination, and the farmers were a small percentage. In addition, this farming was mainly at a low technological level. A stratum of intellectuals was drawn up among the urban population, which depended directly on funding from local and central authorities. All this gave rise to the sociopolitical situation characterized by the relations of paternalism and clientism between the authorities and the owners of enterprises on the one hand and hired workers on the other. For a long time it allowed regional elites not only to control the

Ukrainian East but also to form national power structures. The events of 2014 showed the inability of both the authorities and large businessmen to control the “clients”, the confrontation between opponents and supporters of separatist ideas went beyond political contradictions. It became a manifestation of a sort of “class” revenge of the lumpen-proletariat and lumpen-intellectuals to local powers or simply more prosperous compatriots than the Kremlin used, creating and sustaining, with the help of Russian armed formations, self-proclaimed bodies that usurped the exercise of power in the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Lugansk regions, and next—the territory with “gray” power, formally controlled by Ukraine. During the war years in the gray zone, a qualitatively new ruling elite has not been formed, either the representatives of the old ones remained, or a personnel vacuum was formed, which was filled owing to the ‘Law on military and civilian administrations’ (2015). The war has also changed the occupations of the inhabitants of the gray zone. Taking into account the industrial disruption, the high level of mining of agricultural land and the destruction of the logistics, the population is forced to seek new ways of survival. In particular, there was a return to natural subsistence, which provides the primary needs of most of the population of the gray zone, not only in its narrow “neutral” sense, but also broadly, both in the occupied territories and those controlled by the Ukrainian government.

Measures for the blockade of the occupied territories have provoked the prosperity of negative survival practices: smuggling, illicit markets and transport, trade in “queues” at checkpoints, etc. A part of the local population turned into leaders through a delimitation line, providing an informal economic link between the free and occupied territories.

Thus, in assessing the socioeconomic situation of the population permanently residing in the “neutral” zone, we are forced to state the loss of most of the social guarantees that it enjoyed before. The lack of government authorities, the disruptiveness of economic and logistic connections led to the loss of tax control as well. At the best case, this population gets the opportunity to go to the nearest district centers thanks to the military or representatives of humanitarian organizations, at worst—it remains left to the mercy of fate. At the same time, the gray zones in Donbas retain significant internal and external conflicting potential, as their borders are dynamic on both sides, and local people do not know what location they will have tomorrow—Ukrainian or “republican”.

In the heads of the population of the gray zone, the war launched a syndrome of passivity. People get used to the limited conditions of being, the limited safety, health and rights, they do not see their future, are accustomed to the idea that it

does not depend on them, so there is no point in changing anything. Life on the principle of “between humanitarian aids” creates a gray zone in the strategy of survival, which, worst of all, is taken by children.

In this way, at a certain point the material and imaginary gray zone begins to acquire not only objective characteristics, but also gets a kind of subjective will, over time, turns from the effect to the cause under some qualitative parameters. Local residents make black jokes that the war on the return of the occupied Donbas will be on the checkpoints—the Ukrainian one and that of the invaders—for their preservation.

(Dis)order of the gray zone, manual management, and the formation of peculiar supra-legal practices that are lost in its “twilight”, have a huge potential for virulence for the whole of Ukraine. Most clearly, this is manifested in the gradual neglect of traditional laws and norms, a sense of the value of life and property. A permanent stay in an area where there is a threat to life devalues it, creates new rules aimed at securing one’s own needs in any way, pushing out value orientations from the consciousness, eroding identity, etc. Conscious vacuum is easily filled with populist content, the disoriented and exhausted population with the state of uncertainty, neither war nor peace, is incapable of expressing the will, the paternalistic model closes the circle. It is precisely this model that is a non-military instrument of the Russian Federation in spreading the gray zone conflict far beyond its real boundaries.

4. The silence zone

The information component of the gray war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine is perhaps the most extensive in modern history over time and with the resources involved, as evidenced by the huge amount of domestic and foreign scientific research on the problem. In the following, the information campaigns of the Russian Federation are considered both in the territory of Ukraine and within the Russian Federation, their participants and tools are outlined, information and psychological and propaganda methods are systematized, approaches to counter-propaganda activities are determined, and their effectiveness is argued.

The authors of the article did not set themselves the goal of studying the information component of the gray war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and are more interested in the gray zone of the silencing of this war. Indeed, in the information war, not only the loud “what is said” component is

important. No less important is what is not spoken about—a zone of silence. The gray zone of the conflict cannot exist without a zone of silence, and vice versa. The silence, on the one hand, is the condition for its existence, and on the other—the production of “gray”. The zone of silence applies not only to the aggressor state, which in the gray war tries to stay in the “twilight”, concealing the physical participation of “they-are-not-there” by the created, subordinated, armed, managed and funded groups of mercenaries. The virality of the silence zone of the aggressor country is to engage in its orbit, the compulsion to play the country according to its rules—an object of aggression. According to Jahara W. Matisek (2017, pp. 5–26), the “gray” aggressor conducts such a war in which he is better able to control information narratives, hurting the object of aggression to fully use the resources of “hard” and “soft power”.

Creating and distributing the gray zone of silence is an important component of the gray war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. As with the real gray zone, the main purpose of its creation is uncertainty, in this case—informative and discursive one.

The informal uncertainty lies in the systematic and persistent, rather swift, denial of the Russian Federation’s commission of the fact of aggression against Ukraine. It is presented to the international community in the form of a domestic armed conflict of a secessionist nature. The Kremlin assured the Russian citizens that a civil war occurred in Ukraine being provoked by a nationalist junta, and Russian-speaking fellows suffer from it, so they were to be defended in the best traditions of the “Russian world”. For the population of the temporarily occupied territories, the version of “Ukraine attacked itself” is quite successfully imposed on, and we will help to sort it out. For citizens of Ukraine, in one way or another, an informative mix from the above-listed versions is thrown in. Informational uncertainty is supported by the formation of a certain discourse, or rather, a systemic exclusion of the definitions of ‘aggression’, ‘invasion’, ‘occupation’ thereof.

It must be admitted that Russia’s creation of the gray zone of uncertainty in the international informative discourse field surrounding its aggression against Ukraine coincided with the wishes of European political circles in this uncertainty. Only Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland expressly spoke about the definition of an act of aggression, since they directly threatened themselves. The reaction of the rest of politicians can be conditionally outlined by the expression of the French President: “If it turns out that Russian troops are present in Ukraine, it will be unbearable and unacceptable” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2014). It took more than three years of war, thousands of dead and wounded,

half a million conditional refugees (in domestic and international discourse, internally displaced people, because when they fled the war, nobody called it a war), large-scale destruction, so that the international community in the face of international organizations recognized the involvement of the aggressor in aggression. At the same time, the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), which have expressed more or less unequivocally on this issue, carry out diplomatic functions as a forum for discussion, and therefore have rather limited possibilities to drastically affect the settlement of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. And vice versa. The UN International Court of Justice, the most reputed authority on the practical application of mechanisms for determining liability for violations of international law, acts in a most cautious manner. That is, efficiency is directly proportional to responsibility and vice versa. Despite the sanctions and loud statements, the inertia of the policy of “deep concern” is quite satisfactory for the Russian Federation, since uncertainty is a guarantee that, during the sixth year of the war, the OSCE’s Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights will continue to censor the words of the Euro-deputies, and to stubbornly call Russia’s war against Ukraine as a “conflict in the East”. And the scandalously known Russian TV journalist O. Skabeeva repeatedly claims in her talk show that it does not matter that Ukraine claims the presence of Russian military, no matter what, Ukraine provides different evidences. The main thing is that they are not officially recorded by the monitoring mission.

By removing the definitions of ‘aggression’ and ‘occupation’ from the internal informative discourse, Putin first of all cared about the problem of “zinc coffins delivery” from Donbas. It was forbidden to publish the loss of soldiers in peacetime, and the Council of Soldiers’ Mothers was proclaimed as foreign agents. In early March 2019, Putin signed the amendments to the Law ‘On the status of military men’ adopted by the State Duma, which not only prohibited Russian soldiers from reporting to the media and to place information in the internet about themselves and other military personnel of the RF Armed Forces, those released to the reserve, members of their families, activity of the military management bodies, but for the time of the service also confiscated electronic gadgets that allow to store and distribute audio, photo, and video materials, geolocation data to the internet (The Federal Law ‘On amendments to Articles 7 and 28/5 of the Federal Law on the status of the military personnel’, 2019).

According to Valentin Melnikov, head of the Russia Union of Councils of Soldiers’ Mothers, if the second Chechnya (the second Russian-Chechen war) was “hermetic” in informational terms, then the war in Ukraine is completely closed from the point of view of Russia. And the Russians calmly resigned with this urgency. But the party who carefully hides the traces of the crime is fully

aware that this is a crime, and he himself is to be blamed. To hide and mask means one is doing something forbidden.

Creating a silence zone in temporarily occupied territories and a real gray zone is much easier for the Russian Federation. Having created the appropriate conditions for being for the population, the Russian authorities have deprived them of the opportunity to critically perceive informational discourse under the general slogan “Ukraine attacked herself and you are the victims” in the situation of neither war nor peace. Critical evaluation of information is a large resource expense. Mental one, but still expense. When a person has all his or her life’s resources going to the struggle for survival in the gray zone, he or she does not have enough energy to “think”. The population simply takes the offered information in blocks. According to Robert Sheckley, in an information war the one who tells the truth always loses because he is limited by truth, while the liar can say anything.

As it has been mentioned above, the silence zone is dangerous for its virality. One of the most troubling areas of Ukraine, which is the most vulnerable in its strategy for the occupied Donbas, is the fate of the occupied population. The Law of Ukraine ‘On the peculiarities of the state policy of ensuring the state sovereignty of Ukraine in temporarily occupied territories in Donetsk and Lugansk regions’ (dated January 18, 2018, no. 2268-VIII), which, by the way, is the only legal document that has so far declared the purpose of the liberation of the temporarily occupied territories (and this also applies to the production of a zone of silence), does not refer to the protection of state sovereignty from the activities of the collaborators, and vice versa, the occupied population from the possible effect of the “gibbet law” during the liberation. As a matter of fact, the very concepts of ‘collaboration’ and ‘collaborant’ are in the zone of silence in the official domestic discourse. And this is despite the fact that Verkhovna Rada registered three bills devoted to this most important problem in Ukraine’s policy regarding Donbas. The silencing of this problem in the information and legal fields has already led to the personnel policy of the “bootlickers”: those in the local authorities who unequivocally supported the “Russian world” in word and, in fact, the majority of them were not subject to lustration, were not punished for encroachment on the sovereignty of Ukraine, and still remain in managerial positions in government bodies, in particular in the gray zone. This creates a real danger in the form of a “fifth column”, and it causes natural dissatisfaction in society, undermining the authority of the authorities. The Russian Federation, on its part, successfully uses the policies of the Nazi occupation authorities, already tested during World War II, to intimidate with liberation. As soon as another “frog jump” of the Ukrainian Armed Forces into the gray zone is

carried out, or the issue of peacekeeping forces rises on the diplomatic front, the Russian Federation immediately “flies” a reminder of the “Pravuy sector” that will massacre the local population during the liberation. Putin’s reassurance on preventing a “massacre in Donbas” is deliberately designed to be inversely proportional in the effect. And there are many similar examples. Russia every once in a while draws the distorted truth—the post-truth—into the world, and Ukraine becomes a hostage to its silence zone—pensioners, internally displaced persons, military men take the bait of propaganda and seek the perpetrators in the Ukrainian government, society, and so on.

Consequently, the zone of silence in the gray war is almost as dangerous as the “speaking” zone. If any propaganda can be opposed with counter-propaganda, then the methods of distributing the silence zone are more effective. According to the concept of anthropomorphic transfer of the society, for public institutions, as well as people, it is advantageous to close their eyes in unpleasant and unacceptable situations (if I do not see it, it does not exist), especially if it is properly spurred towards it. Europe, which itself suffers from the sanctions imposed on Russia, is advantageous for the “conflict” in the east of Ukraine not to have the status of intergovernmental one, at least there are quite visible efforts to push it inside the Ukrainian politics. Average Russian citizens, frightened by the shooting of the horrors of the war in Donbas by not existing *Life News*, permanent pictures of the life of the “outrageous” Ukrainian junta, are ready to tighten their belts, because “do you want it to have the same?” Tired of war, the inhabitants of the gray zone are ready for any decision from anyone, as long as “nobody shoots”. The population of the temporarily occupied territories is also ready for everything, but is still afraid of NATO, “Pravuy sector”, the State Security Service of Ukraine, FSB, and so on. The Ukrainian authorities divert attention from the problems of displaced people, pensioners, collaborators, the socioeconomic restoration of the occupied territories, their political, cultural, educational restructuring, and the non-existent strategy of liberating the occupied territories, since it is more difficult to recognize unsettled problems than to ignore them. And so the gray zone of silence and lies spreads successfully, turning into a powerful tool of the gray war.

5. General conclusions: what shall we do?

The authors of the article have taken the responsibility, instead of traditional conclusions, to propose their own vision of possible options of confrontation in the gray war, based not only on the analysis of the military, political and socioeconomic situation, but also by drawing on the long experience of staying in the temporarily occupied territory, and in gray zone.

The essence of the gray zone conflict, and in our case, the gray war, is not a war under the rules; it is the “surreptitious” war even though the one who solved it does not recognize himself as the initiator, but still trying to reset the blame for the war on another actor, the Ukrainian leadership in this case.

The gray zone conflict, the gray war in our case, is very dangerous in terms of its identification within the international legal field. And hence are all the consequences of this conflict/war: refugees (who do not have a refugee status in Ukraine like Syrian ones, but have the status of internally displaced persons), prisoners of war, material damage, and victims who are difficult to be placed into international law. After all, while there are consequences, it looks like no war at all. The rupture of cause-and-effect relationships leads to not triggering the norms of international law. So, the gray zone is the possibility of existence by juggling the rules. This is how today’s Russia lives because this is the only salvation for its political elite—manual control and juggling the rules, and it is trying to impose such (dis)order on the rest of the world. After all, this is no longer a matter of living well, but a question of life and death. Unfortunately, the problem of Russia’s survival (or that of its political elite) has become inversely proportional to the problem of the survival of liberal democracy.

Proceeding from the abovementioned, the authors, first of all, suggest a clear delineation of the interpretation of the gray zone. Under the constant pressure of the Ukrainian Army over the Russian troops, a gradual narrowing of the gray zone in the narrow sense is taking place, the distance between today’s positions is from several tens to several hundred meters, often the parties control the neighboring streets in a single settlement. Thus, there is a gradual transition to a positional war with a clearly defined front. Consequently, the real gray zone will collapse on its own.

If we take into account the understanding of the gray zone as an occupied territory, then we should not, in our opinion, deceive ourselves with a slogan of the priority of diplomacy over the military methods. Under the current conditions, the return of the occupied Donbas under the control of Ukraine is

possible only if the Russian occupation contingent is withdrawn and the territory is fully liberated. The victory over the aggressor must be clearly documented. Otherwise, it will be a formal “push” of a region that has been destroyed and exhausted by the war to Ukraine in terms of political and financial responsibility. Only after the restoration of a military control over these territories, political, socioeconomic, educational and other transformations are possible.

The most difficult is the treatment of the problems of the gray zone in the broad sense, including aggressor-free territories adjacent to the line of demarcation. It is impossible to apply a military solution here. The first place is for the civilian methods that provide for the prospect of these neglected territories, the formation of a positive vision of the future, which would offset the loss of military action. Unfortunately, at the same time, we do not have to hope for wide-ranging support both among the local population and local power elites because of the total distrust of the actions of the center. It is possible to revive this trust only through the effective and long-term process of transformation of the gray zone society, which would affect not only the liberated territories, but also Ukraine as a whole. In fact, this should be a program of “internal integration” that would crystallize Ukrainian national identity. Here the victory should be fixed in our minds.

Among the measures to be undertaken, the authors consider it necessary to focus on the transformation of the hereditary type of industry from an oligarchic type of orientation towards the legal and semi-legal small and medium-sized businesses, which is now one of the opportunities to survive in the occupied territories and in the gray zone and can become a social base for the redevelopment of Donbas. Gradual curtailment of the large-scale involvement of human resources in coal mining and metallurgy will help prevent the fate of Detroit. A landmark should be the creation of small and medium-sized enterprises in the cities of Donbas, which did not turn into hostages of individual businessmen, and local communities. Underdevelopment in the sphere of services in the context of the war gives the prospect of further rapid development in the case of a favorable legislative, fiscal and investment climate. At the same time, a priority in the policy of re-assimilation of Donbas is to be given to an educational and cultural policy that should consolidate previous military success. The teachers must win this war.

In other words, the gray zone should be taken out of the twilight, and the Donbas should be painted in various colors.

On an international scale, the gray zone conflict (gray war, in our case) can only be resolved effectively when an aggressor country and a country against

which aggression has been committed will not be placed outside the scope of international law. Leaving the illegal gray zone deprives this conflict of meaning, makes it impossible to speculate on its means of freezing such as the “Saidik Plan”. The final decision in such a conflict is to be set by Nuremberg 2.0.

As to the possibility of applying “gray” methods in a victory in the gray war, Ukraine’s struggle against the “open-air” aggressor does not preclude the use of such aggressor-fighting tools as the aggressor utilizes itself. The complaints about the unlawfulness of the use of such actions are entirely blasphemous: Ukraine, defending its sovereignty, defends against the aggressor in its state territory, to which this sovereignty applies. Thus, the use of the arsenal of “gray” methods to counteract the aggressor—from military intelligence, sabotage, information operations in temporarily occupied territories to the elimination of the Russian information space in the country, the prohibition of Russian television channels, social networks, Russian showbiz, the boycott of Russian goods by the public—are quite adequate responses to appropriate threats.

Finally, what would the experts say about the new methods and tools of the old war, as the gray war is a new war, wrong, and therefore incomprehensible in a sense of actions of the one who imposes it. Only the term is old—the war. Flue also remains a flue, but its virus mutates so that old good medicines do not help, we need new ones. And let our mistakes and vaccinations become lessons for Europe and the whole world in confronting Russia’s “gray” threat.

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