UDC 327.5:[32.019.5:316.77]:355.48(470-651.2)

Madeline S. Kruszczynski,
Seton Hall University
ORCID ID: 0009-0008-1671-539X

Russia's tactics in suppressing Ukraine's sovereignty

Ukraine has long struggled to assert its sovereignty, from World War I to the Holodomor famine under Stalin, and now in its ongoing battle for independence amidst the Russia-Ukraine war, which escalated in February 2022 following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Whether through forced starvation or disinformation campaigns, Ukraine has repeatedly been tested, yet it continues to stand resilient. As technology has advanced, so too have Russia's methods for suppressing Ukraine's independence. This paper argues that Russia's suppression of Ukrainian sovereignty has evolved from physical oppression to digital warfare, marking a continuous and adaptive campaign that not only challenges Ukraine's independence but also the foundations of modern democratic statehood.

A significant early moment in Ukraine's struggle for sovereignty was the Holodomor famine, which occurred under Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in the early 1930s. The term "Holodomor" derives from the Ukrainian words for hunger (*holod*) and extermination (*mor*), reflecting the widespread belief that the famine was a deliberate act of genocide against the Ukrainian people. The famine was primarily caused by Stalin's collectivization policy, which forced peasants to surrender their land and agricultural production to state-controlled collective farms. This policy had devastating impacts, leading to severe food shortages that disproportionately affected Ukraine. Between 1931 and 1934, at least 5 million people died from starvation, with approximately 3.9 million of these victims being Ukrainian.

The famine was exacerbated by Stalin's crackdown on Ukrainization, a movement aimed at promoting Ukrainian language, culture, and political autonomy. As Ukrainians resisted collectivization, Soviet authority suppressed policies supporting Ukrainian identity, imprisoned cultural and political leaders, and repressed nationalist movements. The famine served both as a tool of repression and a means to weaken Ukrainian resistance to Soviet rule. This illustrates how the Soviet government, facing growing Ukrainian nationalism and domestic unrest, used forced starvation and cultural suppression to maintain control and ensure Ukraine remained under Soviet dominance.

Another pivotal moment in Ukraine's struggle for sovereignty was the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, which led to Ukraine's declaration of independence. The Soviet Union collapsed due to economic decline, military overreach, and Western containment policies, all contributing to its isolation and internal instability. Following the collapse, Ukraine held an independence referendum, in which an overwhelming 92% of voters supported breaking away from Soviet control.

At the time, Ukraine inherited the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal, a remnant of Soviet military infrastructure from the Cold War. However, with the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia claimed these atomic warheads as part of its former military assets. To resolve this issue, Ukraine, Russia, and the United States negotiated a trilateral agreement, which led to Ukraine's decision to surrender its nuclear weapons in exchange for three key guarantees: security assurances from Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom to respect Ukraine's independence and borders; economic compensation for the valuable nuclear materials; and U.S. assistance in dismantling and relocating the weapons.

This agreement initially suggested a period of stability, with Russia recognizing Ukraine's sovereignty. However, this peace would prove short-lived, as Russia's geopolitical ambitions grew, leading to renewed tensions and conflict in the following decades.

Decades later, Russia shifted to new forms of warfare aimed at destabilizing Ukraine's information systems and undermining its statehood. A key incident was the 2015 cyberattack on Ukraine's power grid. On December 23, 2015, Ukrainian power companies were hit by a coordinated cyberattack that caused unscheduled blackouts, leaving over 200,000 people without electricity. This highly sophisticated attack struck multiple sites within just 30 minutes. Hackers had stolen employee credentials, allowing them access to internal systems and VPNs, enabling precise manipulation of critical infrastructure. This marked a significant shift in Russia's strategy to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty, not through traditional warfare, but through cyberattacks targeting national stability.

As technology became more deeply integrated into daily life, these methods grew more invasive and destructive. A key escalation came in 2017 with the NotPetya attack, a ransomware-like virus that also originated in Ukraine. Unlike conventional ransomware, which is designed for profit, NotPetya sought to destroy data and disrupt systems. Disguised as a routine software update in the widely used M.E.Doc tax software, the malware spread rapidly, ruining thousands of systems worldwide and causing over $10 billion in damages. The attack coincided with Ukraine's Constitution Day, an intentional move by Russia to suppress a national celebration and blur the lines between independence and instability. These cyberattacks not only inflicted massive economic losses but also eroded public trust in digital infrastructure and democratic institutions. They highlight how sovereignty is now under attack, not just through force, but also through code.

Today, scholars recognize that Russia's campaign to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty has entered a new phase; one characterized by mass misinformation and weaponized propaganda. This digital attack spans multiple platforms, as evidenced in 2022 when a Kremlin-backed propaganda network impersonated a European news outlet on Facebook, part of a larger disinformation operation uncovered by Meta. Like many state-funded propaganda efforts, the goal was to shape global perceptions by promoting a pro-Russian narrative during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked a dramatic physical manifestation of the ongoing assault on Ukraine's sovereignty. Framed by the Kremlin as a "special

military operation," the invasion was an overt act of aggression aimed at toppling the Ukrainian government and reasserting Russian dominance. The war resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, mass displacement, and widespread infrastructure destruction. Despite the scale of the attack, Ukrainian resistance proved unexpectedly strong, fueled by national unity, Western military support, and global condemnation of Russia's violation of international law. The invasion underscored Russia's determination to end Ukraine's independence and further highlighted the stakes in Ukraine's struggle.

Propaganda has been a powerful tool in this conflict. One of the most influential platforms for Russian propaganda is Telegram, a messaging app known for its lax content moderation policies. Unlike mainstream platforms, Telegram markets itself as a haven for "free speech," but it has been criticized for enabling far-right extremism, violent rhetoric, and terrorist communications. Its founder, Russian-born entrepreneur Pavel Durov, is under legal scrutiny in several countries, including France, for the app's role in spreading global misinformation and inciting violence. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, Telegram has become a central hub for pro-Russian content and disinformation. This decentralized, crowd-sourced propaganda effort represents a new front in Russia's assault on Ukraine's sovereignty, where ideological information warfare transcends borders, and truth itself becomes a casualty.

Ukraine's fight for sovereignty has never been confined to a single tactic. From the forced starvation of the Holodomor to today's cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, Russia's methods have evolved to suppress Ukraine's autonomy and identity. What began as physical domination through famine and identity repression has transformed into digital warfare, where power outages, malware, and misinformation are used as weapons. The transition from tanks to Telegram and from collectivization to cyberattacks illustrates not a change in intent, but a shift in methods. Russia's overarching goal remains the same: to destabilize, delegitimize, and dominate Ukraine. Yet, despite these relentless efforts, Ukraine continues to assert its identity and resist subjugation. Understanding this historical continuity of oppression is crucial, not only for grasping the stakes of the current conflict, but also for recognizing that modern sovereignty involves defending not just physical borders but also the digital realm. Ukraine's resilience in the digital age is a testament to its enduring pursuit of independence – and a warning to the world about the new dimensions of geopolitical conflict in the 21st century.

References

Holodomor. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., *https://www.britannica.com/event/Holodomor.* Accessed 7 Apr. 2025.

Collectivization. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., *https://www.britannica.com/money/collectivization.* Accessed 7 Apr. 2025.

Pifer, Steven. The Trilateral Process: The United States, Ukraine, Russia and Nuclear Weapons. *Brookings*, 5 Dec. 2011, *https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-trilateral-process-the-united-states-ukraine-russia-and-nuclear-weapons/.* Accessed 7 Apr. 2025.

Ukraine Summary. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., *https://www.britannica.com/summary/Ukraine. Accessed 7 Apr. 2025*.

IR-ALERT-H-16-056-01: Cyber-Attack Against Ukrainian Critical Infrastructure. *Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency*, 25 Feb. 2016, *https://www.cisa.gov/news-events/ics-alerts/ir-alert-h-16-056-01*. Accessed 7 Apr. 2025.

Ainsley, Julia, and Odette Yousef. Russia Uses Deepfakes, Fake Websites and Social Media to Push Propaganda about Ukraine. *National Public Radio*, 6 June 2024, *https://www.npr.org/2024/06/06/g-s1-2965/russia-propaganda-deepfakes-sham-websites-social media-ukraine*. Accessed 7 Apr. 2025.

Allyn, Bobby. Facebook Takes Down Russian Network Impersonating European News Outlets. *National Public Radio*, 27 Sept. 2022, *https://www.npr.org/2022/09/27/1125217316/facebook-takes-down-russian-network-impersonating-european-news-outlets*. Accessed 7 Apr. 2025.

Russia's Information Manipulation: Telegram and X. Community of Democracies, Jan. 2025, *https://community-democracies.org/app/uploads/2025/01/Russias-Information-Manipulation-Telegram-and-X.pdf*. Accessed 7 Apr. 2025.

Silver, Laura. Key Facts about Telegram. *Pew Research Center*, 16 Dec. 2022, *https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/16/key-facts-about-telegram/*. Accessed 7 Apr. 2025.

How Telegram Became the Digital Battlefield of the Russia-Ukraine War. BBC News, 4 Apr. 2024, *https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg703lz02l0o*. Accessed 7 Apr. 2025.

Hern, Alex. Telegram CEO Faces Arrest amid Concerns over Russian Military Communications. *Politico*, 19 Feb. 2024, *https://www.politico.eu/article/telegram-ceo-arrest-pavel-durov-russian-military-communications-france/*. Accessed 7 Apr. 2025.