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Ukrainian elder statesman: How Russian hybrid war is changing the world order

Старійшина української державності про те, як російська гібридна війна змінює світовий порядок

Американський есеїст, письменник і поет Адріан Боненбергер взяв для Foreign Policy інтерв'ю у Володимира Горбуліна – одного з найбільш заслужених старійшин української державності. Після довгої і славної кар'єри вченого він взяв на себе керівну роль у мирному переході України до демократії після розпаду Радянського Союзу. Горбулін у своїх відповідях зазначав: «Важливий урок, який ми отримали від гібридної війни в Україні, полягає в тому, що такі війни починаються задовго до того, як звучать перші постріли. Важко розпізнати і зрозуміти ознаки [такої війни] на першому етапі. Коли свобода слова перетворюється в агресивну пропаганду, коли протести в країні надихаються зовнішніми силами, коли агресор використовує абсолютно демократичні інструменти для втручання у внутрішні справи суверенної держави, щоб блокувати діяльність міжнародних організацій, спрямовану на запобігання або врегулювання конфліктів, і так далі. Підготовчий період гібридної війни в Україні був довгим. Крім організації різних цивільних заходів на території України, Росія також приділяла підвищену увагу зміцненню боєздатності своїх збройних сил і спецслужб. На стратегічному рівні Росія не сприймалася як потенційний ворог України, і будь-яка загроза з боку Росії не бачилася як реальна. У той час Стратегія національної безпеки і Військова доктрина України були сфокусовані на мирі, засновані на принципі недоторканності державних кордонів і повазі до міжнародного права».

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/21/ukrainian-elder-statesman-how-russian-hybrid-war-is-changing-the-world-order/>

Volodymyr Horbulin is one of Ukraine's most accomplished elder statesmen. After a long and storied career as a scientist and administrator in the USSR, he took on a leading role in Ukraine's peaceful transition to democracy once the Soviet Union collapsed. Born in 1939, his father (like so many fathers and mothers in Ukraine) suffered consecutive invasions from the USSR, Nazi Germany, and the USSR. Through it all, Mr. Horbulin remained a patriot, and a believer in European-style human rights and Western Democracy.

I knew none of this when I clicked on a Facebook link shared by Olena Snihyr, a Ukrainian analyst with Ukraine's National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS). All I knew at the time was that NISS conducts cutting-edge analysis of Russia and hybrid war. After reading Mr. Horbulin's thoughts, I reached out, hoping to learn more about his assessment of the conflict with Russia, and what it portends for NATO, Europe, and my own native United States, with an eye toward helping formulate a potential response to the type of invasion Ukraine has experienced continuously since 2014. The following interview was conducted by email, as Mr. Horbulin is quite old, and has been lightly edited by myself for clarity.

ADRIAN BONENBERGER: When we discuss hybrid war, to what extent is this a question of access to information meeting education? 100 years ago, anarchists and socialists were carrying out operations without directive guidance from workers' Soviets, but generally

speaking in accordance with their objectives. Is it accurate to say that hybrid war takes social media and public perceptions and weaponizes it — weaponizes civilians, essentially, to carry out the ideological objectives of any group with which they sympathize?

VOLODYMYR HORBULIN: One of the main characteristic features of modern hybrid war is its destructive impact in the field of information. Access to information is almost unlimited now. But one must know how to use this information. That is why we should describe education not only as knowledge, but more in terms of understanding, the ability to develop critical thinking in citizens; education should be measured by in one's critical approach to information flow, the ability to analyze and draw conclusions, an ability to form accurate opinions based on reality. In this case, an educated person won't become a victim of information and psychological manipulation, especially via social networks.

Education must involve the formulation of critical opinion, critical perception, not simply provide knowledge. Knowledge becomes out of date faster than it appears. Therefore, in the first place education has to develop the skills to acquire and synthesize knowledge. It is good that there are plenty of such opportunities today.

Speaking of social networks, we really can say that we are talking about certain forms of "weaponization" here. I would even say that not only social media, but all kinds of social communication and all civil society institutions have been subjected to such a "weaponization" procedure. Hybrid conflict almost completely blurs the conventional boundary between "combatants" and "not combatants," between "weapons" and "not weapons."

We have to understand that today the world is infected with a kind of memo-virus to some extent – people want to consume more and more information, while they have less and less time to process and evaluate it. Hence the increased opportunities for manipulation. In this sense, social networks are probably the best tool by which to quickly spread information of dubious quality within broad masses. And we're not even talking about "rumors" — the traditional tool of information manipulation used by security services — these alternative facts or "fake news" are both a much easier and simultaneously much more powerful tool to use. Its influence on public opinion is increasing, and therefore public opinion, I agree with you, becomes a form of weapon. But this weapon is targeted primarily at the democratic governments that depend on this opinion, and which take it into account.

AB: It seems that one of the lessons learned by Ukraine was that the military and the police are not good at identifying hybrid war in its earliest stages. When the military and police cannot respond to what amounts to an invasion, is it fair to say that there must be civilian associations or groups that stand ready to counter civilian-led invasions or so-called separatist movements? If not, what is a good answer that does not play into an invading enemy's PR campaign by allowing videos of police or military killing ostensible civilians?

VH: An important lesson we have learned from hybrid war in Ukraine is that such wars begin long before the first shots are fired. It is difficult to recognize and understand the signs of it at the first stage: When freedom of speech turns into aggressive propaganda, when protests in the country are inspired by external forces, when the aggressor uses absolutely democratic tools to interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign state to block the activities of international organizations aimed at preventing or resolving conflicts, and so on.

The preparatory period of hybrid war in Ukraine was long. In addition to organizing various kinds of non-military events on the territory of Ukraine, Russia also paid increased attention to strengthening the capacity and capabilities of its armed forces and special services.

During this time Russian security services took significant measures in Ukraine, creating a network of agents, anti-Ukrainian information fields, conducting informational and psychological brainwashing among part of Ukraine's population, creating undercover paramilitary groups in Ukraine, supporting separatist movements, and so on.

It was obviously the task for Ukrainian counterintelligence and law enforcement agencies to counter that influence from outside in the first place. The fact that the security sector of Ukraine appeared to be unprepared to effectively confront those threats and the new type of aggression which came from Russia was in many ways the result of betrayal on the part of the former state leadership and purposeful destruction of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in 2010-2013.

Let's also keep in mind that until 2014, Ukraine had continued an economic, energy, military-technical, and informational dependency on Russia. Ukraine almost completely ignored Russian activities that were aimed at gaining control over certain fields of the state economy.

At the strategic level Russia was not seen as a potential enemy for Ukraine, and any threat from Russia was not seen as realistic. The National Security Strategy and the Military Doctrine of Ukraine in force at that time focused on peace, and were based on the principle of inviolability of state borders and respect for international law.

Russian information products were freely distributed in the Ukrainian media. Russian TV and radio channels broadcast slogans about the inferiority of Ukraine and the futility of its existence as an independent state. It imposed the idea of the □□"Russian" identity of Crimea.

In such a context could NGOs have replaced counterintelligence, law enforcement, and other state bodies, and thereby have prevented the attacks on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine? Maybe yes, but only if a strong civil society in Ukraine had been formed much earlier, not in recent years. It would have strengthened the state and helped create a more positive external image that was clearer to the West, and it would have helped to resist the Russian aggression. But Ukrainian civil society was not able to stop the aggression, which was part of Russia's deliberate policy.

What should be the response of Ukraine to Russian hybrid war, which is specifically aimed at providing different means of long-term destabilization of the situation in Ukraine? Ukraine is not a member of any political-military alliance, so it contains an armed aggression and pressure of a much bigger and stronger state that has nuclear weapons on its own. In addition, Ukraine is almost alone in fighting the effects of this aggression. In particular, it is solving the problem of internally displaced persons who were forced to leave their places of residence in Donbas and Crimea and had to settle down in other regions of Ukraine (their number exceeds 1.8 million people).

In recent years, our country managed to significantly increase its defense and security capabilities and thus avoid the economic crisis and bankruptcy. The price which Ukraine must pay for its independence is very high — thousands of people were killed or lost everything they had, there has been a catastrophic decline in living standards, and Ukraine has lost control of part of its sovereign territory. Can a lone country without reliable allies win in a modern hybrid war? The experience of recent years shows that in order to win, democratic states have to join efforts.

Russian hybrid war is changing the world order, which had for a long time permitted peaceful coexistence after the Second World War. This is a big challenge for the United States, the European Union and NATO. In search of answers to new threats, Ukraine offers its assistance to the world — studying Ukraine's experience of countering Russian hybrid aggression. No other country in the world has such full-scale experience today. Exchange of knowledge in the security sphere will allow sincere, well-intentioned democracies to form an effective joint response to the aggression of a new type.

AB: Poland overcame a great deal of political resistance to lay aside its claims on territory [and history] as the USSR was collapsing. Do you see any similar will or ability in Ukraine to lay ancient rivalries aside in the name of alliance and stability?

VH: Poland's policy on its eastern neighbors (Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus) in 1990-2000 was really based on the renunciation of territorial and historical claims and attempts to avoid discussions about controversial problems of the common past.

As a co-chairman of the Advisory Committee of the Presidents of Ukraine and Poland (1994-2001), I can confirm this opinion. A significant role in this process was played by the Catholic Church and, of course, Pope John Paul II.

Unfortunately, recently the situation has changed significantly. I'm talking about the decision of the Polish Sejm in 2016 and some statements of Polish politicians.

Ukraine has not officially advanced territorial or historical claims to its neighbors.

However, it cannot allow foreign politicians and officials to dictate the interpretation of its own story. Moreover, their efforts do not look like a struggle for historical truth, but more like a tribute to the political conjuncture.

But it is necessary to recognize that unlike Poland, in Ukraine there is still no consensus on some events of the past, including the national liberation movement of the mid-20th century.

The reason for the controversy is understandable — our nation had been divided between different countries (often hostile to each other) for too long, and of course it left a mark on Ukraine's worldview and the political experience of its parts.

However, in order to reach unity and stability we should not leave aside historical contradictions but address them in an open discussion based on the principles of objectivity and impartiality. I can confirm that opinion polls show that the majority of the citizens of Ukraine support a policy that promotes national historic reconciliation. As an example, the Law of Ukraine, "On the legal status and Honoring the Memory of Fighters for Ukraine's Independence in the Twentieth Century," from April 9, 2015 is supported by 42 percent of citizens. 22 percent don't support it.

The temporarily occupied areas of Donbas must become an important element of reconciliation policies. Such policies could be a compromise among different ethnic, ideological, and regional politicians in the name of national unity.

AB: Speaking of ancient history — you mentioned the delivery of a Studebaker to your father's factory in 1943. What was the practical and emotional effect of U.S. assistance during World War II? Was it real and important?

VH: The question of land-lease was for a long time influenced by ideological stereotypes. In the context of the Cold War, the Soviet authorities did everything possible to downgrade the importance of assistance that was given to the Soviet Union by its allies during the war. However, an objective assessment made by professional historians can pay tribute to the contribution these supplies made to victory.

To begin with, we should recall the statistics of assistance provided by allies. It came to the Soviet Union through three channels — the Arctic, Pacific, and Persian routes. Within the framework of the land-lease program the United States sent to the Soviet Union about 12,000 armored vehicles and more than 11,000 planes, 400,000 vehicles, nearly 2,000 locomotives, and many other resources. The estimated cost of this assistance was about 11 billion U.S. dollars. During the war, within the framework of specific agreements, Britain and the dominions sent the USSR over 7,000 planes, more than 10,000 tanks and anti-tank cannons, 4,000 vehicles, about 1,500 radars, 15 million pairs of military shoes etc.

Soviet historians emphasized the poor quality and quantity of vehicles that came to the Soviet Union from its allies, compared to Soviet models. In opposition to this I will just adduce some arguments. The famous Soviet aces such as Alexander Pokryshkin, Grigoriy Rechkalov and Nikolai Gulyaev won a significant number of their air battles using American P-39 "Airacobra" fighter planes. They noted the high efficiency of this model and its fighting qualities.

Soviet power creatively hushed the importance of supplies in other areas that were also vital to winning the war. I mean food that was delivered from the United States — American canned goods were considered a delicacy and were very popular among the military and civilians, and remained popular even after the end of hostilities.

Together with a practical, strictly military importance of land-lease, we should also remember its role as a factor of moral support for Soviet people.

Allied tanks and planes, trucks, and canned goods were a clear demonstration that the Soviet Union was not alone in fighting its enemy, that it had a support of leading countries. In that difficult war it was extremely important for ordinary people, it gave them strength and inspired them to fight.

Now some Russian politicians declare categorically that the Soviet Union could have done without allied assistance during the war. This position is not new — we've already heard that Russia didn't really need the efforts of all Soviet republics to achieve victory over fascism. Although it is better to leave a comprehensive study of the problem to professional historians, it should be stressed that in any case every ton of allied materials, every tank or plane, truck or can with tinned meat that the USSR received, improved the state of ordinary Soviet people — in the trenches, on the frontlines, and in the hard living conditions in the rear. To forget about it means to twist, distort history. And the current Russian leadership pretends to be against it.

AB: Finally — there has been a great deal of hand-wringing in the West about anti-Semitism in Russia and Eastern Europe; many seem to feel that there is something essentially or fundamentally anti-Semitic about the Slavic people. Is it fair to say that education during the USSR was geared toward emphasizing class solidarity, and that one consequence of this education was that ethnic or religious explanations of The Holocaust were dismissed in favor of anti-capitalist screed?

VH: When the Nazi regime started repressions against Jews it had considerable resonance in Europe. The Soviet Union, however, had a different political agenda. There was industrialization, militarization, and the fight against so-called "enemies of the people." Enemies included intellectuals and party leaders, and millions of villagers who wanted to run their own households. The artificial famine of 1932-1933 in Ukraine had signs of class struggle, but at the same time, it was targeted at the whole Ukrainian nation and was intended to stop the processes of national self-awareness and self-determination.

Thus, the events that took place in Ukraine were no less dramatic than those in Europe and the entire Western world. And it is not only a matter of education or stamps of official propaganda, but, above all, of collective traumatic experience. Maybe that is why the tragedy of Holocaust did not have such a significant resonance in the USSR, as in the Western world. The reason is not anti-Semitism, but the closeness of the Soviet system and the large-scale violence that took place inside it and affected everyone living there.

After all, people in the West also didn't know much about the tragedies that happened in the former Soviet Union. Remember: Outside the former Russian Empire, there was little sympathy for the victims of the Holodomor in Ukraine.

Adrian Bonenberger is an essayist, writer, and poet who splits his time between the United States and Ukraine. In addition to publishing his war memoirs and co-editing an anthology of veteran fiction, his writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, Foreign Policy, Commonweal Magazine, Deadspin, and other outlets. Along with four other veteran intellectuals, he co-edits The Wrath-Bearing Tree.