

‘The Wise Man Will Be Master of the Stars’. The Use of Twitter by a Military Intelligence Service in Wartime: The Case of the GUR

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Abstract

The impact of social media communication strategies on the public perception of (military) intelligence services is a factor that cannot be overlooked. An effective communication strategy can help to build trust, while an ineffective strategy can erode public confidence. This is relevant in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, where both sides use social media to promote their perspectives and counter each other's narratives. Mid-2021, Ukraine's military intelligence service, the Main Directorate of Intelligence, commonly known as the GUR, joined the social media platform Twitter with the message: ‘Sapiens Dominabitur Astri’ (the wise man will be master of the stars). This chapter explores the presence of the GUR on Twitter and concentrates on how this service exploits sensitive communications intelligence (COMINT) on its Twitter feed.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine War, War and conflict, Digital influence operations, Communication strategy, Coercive intelligence disclosure, Narrative superiority

1. Introduction

On February 24th, 2022, Russia began a multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine aimed at seizing Kyiv and capturing or killing president Volodymyr Zelensky. Russia's goals are to overthrow and replace Ukraine's elected government, through territorial conquest and by subduing the entire country's populace to its political and informational influence.¹ Consequently, the information environment² has received significant attention from both Russia and Ukraine. Russia views controlling the information environment as a crucial step toward suppressing Ukraine, hence

¹ Mankoff, *Russia's War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict*, 1.

² Information environment: an environment comprised of the information itself, the individuals, organisations and systems that receive, process and convey the information, and the cognitive, virtual and physical space in which this occurs; “AJP-10, Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications,” 7.

Ukraine has made significant efforts to protect this environment, e.g., by prioritising the repair of telecommunications infrastructure and by executing multi-layered communications campaigns.³

Ukrainian activities in the information environment have been an integral part of its response to Russia's aggression. This effort can be tied to John R. Boyd's concept of moral conflict, which he explains in an article titled, 'Discourse on Winning and Losing.'⁴ Boyd did not define moral in a strictly ethical sense of right and wrong, but characterised moral conflict as a style of warfare that sought to weaken an opponent's confidence and cohesion. If trust is the foundation of an adversary, then one should seek to dissolve that.⁵ He emphasised the importance of non-physical factors in modern warfare, which is particularly relevant in the context of asymmetric warfare, where weaker forces are up against stronger opponents.⁶ Granted, Ukraine's conventional forces have steadily acquired strength and capability due to Western weapon deliveries and training, and the commitment and grit of Ukraine's military. However, the country cannot match Russia's ability to mobilise additional manpower. Therefore, Ukraine must also rely on psychological operations and other irregular tactics to create confusion, demoralisation, and disorientation among its Russian invaders and gain outside support.

To gain deeper insight into the tactics of Ukraine in the information environment, this chapter analyses the social media strategy of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, commonly known as the GUR (a transliterated acronym of the original Cyrillic). This military intelligence service joined the social media platform Twitter⁷ in 2021 with the message: '*Sapiens Dominabitur Astris*' (i.e. the wise man will be master of the stars).⁸ A remarkable aspect of the GUR's social media presence is the service's disclosure of raw intelligence, including sensitive communications intelligence (COMINT), on its Twitter feed as a means for interaction with outside audiences.

The distribution of intelligence to the public can be perceived as a coercive tool, in which disclosures of intelligence are made in an effort to change strategic judgements, decisions, or behaviour.⁹ Coercive intelligence disclosure is about

³ "o6 Integration of the Ukrainian tech sector for civil defense By Jerry England, TRADOC G-2 – Red Diamond Newsletters – Operational Environment and Threat Analysis Directorate."

⁴ Boyd, *A Discourse on Winning and Losing*.

⁵ Brown, *A New Conception of War*, 114.

⁶ Boyd, *A Discourse on Winning and Losing*, 138.

⁷ In July 2023, the social media platform Twitter was renamed X.

⁸ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], "Просто нагадуємо, що Sapiens dominabitur astris"  P.S. Ваше Головне управління розвідки UA." <https://t.co/CmDaFFZB5Q>.

⁹ Riemer and Sobelman, "Coercive disclosure: The weaponization of public intelligence revelation in international relations," 3.

deliberate intelligence release, rather than unauthorised or unlawful intelligence leaks in order to accomplish a particular objective.¹⁰ One of these objectives might be to support so-called narrative superiority, in which case the intelligence is disclosed in a way that strengthens the strategic communication themes or narratives a state or organisation wants to promote.¹¹

This article focuses on the rationale behind GUR's communication strategy on Twitter: To what extent does this strategy align with the existing concept of coercive intelligence disclosure? On a broader theoretical level, the article provides insight into communication strategies of a military intelligence service during wartime, specifically regarding the tension between secrecy and openness: disclosure of intelligence is considered expensive because it generally requires giving up state secrets, and it provides adversaries insight about the depth of knowledge an agency has.¹² Initially, the focus is placed on the content disseminated through the GUR's Ukrainian-language Twitter feed (@DI_Ukraine), which, as of September 2023, has garnered a following of over 259,000. Particularly, the attention is drawn to the method of distributing sensitive COMINT-related material via the GUR's social media platform. After this analysis, an assessment follows to determine the congruence between the GUR's social media strategy and the principles of coercive intelligence disclosure.

2. Researching GUR's campaign on Twitter

About the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, analysts noted that the use of telecommunications infrastructure by the Ukrainian government, specifically through the successful incorporation of smartphones, social media, and messaging apps, provided the Ukrainians with a significant advantage in terms of information over the Russian invaders.¹³ Nevertheless, minimal attention has been given to the role of Ukrainian intelligence services' use of social media.

2.1 Method

To gain insight into the recurring themes of the military intelligence service the GUR on Twitter, a qualitative content analysis was performed, using the

¹⁰ Riemer and Sobelman, 2.

¹¹ Dylan and Maguire, "Secret intelligence and public diplomacy in the Ukraine War," 2022, 47.

¹² Riemer and Sobelman, "Coercive disclosure: The weaponization of public intelligence revelation in international relations," 5.

¹³ "o6 Integration of the Ukrainian tech sector for civil defense By Jerry England, TRADOC G-2 – Red Diamond Newsletters – Operational Environment and Threat Analysis Directorate."

web-based tool www.vicinitas.io to collect real-time and historical tweets.¹⁴ The dataset consists of all 2,000+ tweets that the GUR has published on Twitter since opening an account in June 2021 through mid-March 2023. From this database, 209 tweets containing the Ukrainian language hashtag #ГУРперехоплення (GUR-interception) were extracted for further analysis. These specific tweets contained audio files in which Russian military personnel communicated with colleagues or relatives. This allowed for coding recurring themes (see paragraph 3.3) in released COMINT-related material using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), which combines the possibility of inductive and deductive approaches.¹⁵ An inductive method entails deriving meaning and identifying patterns from the information without any predetermined ideas, meaning that there's no anticipation of which patterns will surface. Consequently, it permits the patterns to be dictated by the data itself. On the other hand, the deductive approach initiates analysis based on an anticipated set of themes already believed to exist within the data.

2.2 Tweeting before the Russian invasion of February 2022

In the content of the GUR's Twitter feed, two distinct periods can be discerned: the first stage is the communication strategy before the start of the Russian large-scale invasion, and the second stage starts immediately after the Russian attack commenced on 24th February, 2022. During the first period, the GUR disseminated tweets on a wide range of topics, such as Ukrainian commemoration days, excerpts of interviews that the GUR-director major-general Kyrylo Budanov gave to media, and accomplishments and remembrances of the GUR personnel. Some remarkable examples of the pre-invasion period include: in September 2021 the GUR proudly tweeted that it had brought more than 700 people to safety in Kabul during the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in support of the international evacuation mission.¹⁶ Further, closer to home, the service regularly reported on incidents in the conflict zone where Ukrainian forces were deployed against Russian and separatist fighters of the breakaway Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics (LPR, DPR). Repeatedly, the GUR messaged on poor living conditions in these republics, civilians who resisted compulsory military service and the corruption of Russian

¹⁴ "Vicinitas."

¹⁵ Byrne, "A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis," 1396.

¹⁶ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [[@di_ukraine](https://twitter.com/di_ukraine)], "uaexclusive footage from the DIU special forces evacuation mission in Kabul🇺🇦 Ukraine managed to achieve a staggering result and get more than 700 people out from Kabul, although we did not have our own peacekeeping contingent in Afghanistan!" <https://t.co/JhFpoHXPz1>.

officers.¹⁷ Great pride was taken in the defence agreement with the United States in November 2021. Head of the GUR Budanov announced on Twitter that this agreement could also offer important opportunities to modernise Ukrainian intelligence services.¹⁸

Just two days before the Russian invasion in February 2022 the lighter tone on the GUR's Twitter account was gone. A message by Minister of Defence Oleksiy Reznikov and Commander-in-Chief of Ukraine's armed forces Valerii Zaluzhnyi was placed on the GUR-account in which they stated that 'the aggressor, due to the determination of the Ukrainian soldiers, will not be able to take any Ukrainian city.'¹⁹ A few days later, possibly inspired by intelligence received from Western counterparts,²⁰ the GUR warned that the Russian Federation leadership considered organising a terrorist attack on civilians in the DPR and LPR, which would create a pretext for an attack, a so-called *casus belli*.²¹ On the 24th February, 2022, the day of the invasion, only a message about the availability of public shelters for air raids was tweeted on the GUR account.²²

2.3 Tweeting on the Russian invasion

At the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the GUR Twitter account remained silent for a few days. But on February 28th, 2022, the GUR tweeted a strong message in which its content producers expressed regret for the brief silence due to a focus

¹⁷ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], "!!#ГУРінформує  Командування ЗС РФ посилює пропаганду військової служби на ТОТ ДЛО. З початку жовтня збільшилися:  обсяги реклами  випадки безпідставного затримання чоловіків з примусом до проходження військового вишколу. 1/2 Детальніше." <https://cutt.ly/WRhfDRF> <https://t.co/Ul8hDNuSry>.

¹⁸ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], "⚡Виконання рамкової угоди зі США в оборонній сфері відкриває великі можливості для модернізації української розвідки – бригадний генерал Кирило Буданов Детальніше." <https://cutt.ly/ERM4CKF> <https://t.co/ja6xZfiWMP>.

¹⁹ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], "!! «Хто хоч раз дивився в очі нашим воїнам, точно знає – агресору не взяти ані Київ, ані Одесу, ані Харків, ані будь яке інше місто» – спільна заява Міністра оборони України Олексія Резнікова та Головнокомандувача ЗСУ Валерія Залужного Читати повністю .

<https://mil.gov.ua/news/2022/02/12/hto-hoch-raz-divivsya-v-ochi-nashim-voinam-tochno-znae-agresoru-ne-vzyati-ani-kiiv-ani-odesu-ani-harkiv-ani-bud-yake-inshe-misto-spilna-zaya-va-ministra-oboroni-ukraini-oleksiya-reznikova-ta-golovnokomanduvacha-zsu-valeriya-zaluzhnogo/> <https://t.co/8TDP4wDsLF>.

²⁰ Barnes, "U.S. exposes what it says is Russian effort to fabricate pretext for invasion."

²¹ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], "!!#DIUinforms  regarding threat of committing terrorist attacks at industry facilities of the so-called #DPR and #LPR 1/5." <https://t.co/nAz7eDfaI6>.

²² Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], "!!Список укриттів по всій Україні ДСНС України опублікували оновлену карту, яка допоможе знайти найближче бомбосховище.  Посилання .

https://armyinform.com.ua/2022/02/24/spysok-ukryttiv-po-vsij-ukrayini/?fbclid=IdwAR2BqkZl6kolsHLOVsYq_Eo7ZEK6ZlFXtdlgZov--dLXSCoJWP2kDfkzBrY <https://t.co/1Ziuo6eXIQ>.

on targeting Russian personnel and equipment. This tweet set the stage for a new phase in the GUR's social media strategy.²³

On March 1st, 2022, the GUR began the publication of lists with information on Russian and Belarusian military units.²⁴ These records included names, ranks, birthdays, and other personal information of military personnel. According to the GUR, the lists contained the names of military personnel who either participated in or supported the invasion. The intelligence service sought to encourage the surrender of enemy personnel with doxing – publishing personally identifiable information online – and justified it by claiming those people contributed to Russia's illegal invasion.²⁵

In addition to demonstrating its access to Russian sources, the GUR was also seeking to engage with Ukrainian and international audiences by soliciting assistance. This became necessary due to the Russian campaign launched in the autumn of 2022, which involved multiple waves of missile and drone strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure, including civilian areas and critical energy infrastructure. On any typical day, dozens of missiles and drones would be launched against Ukraine.²⁶ One of the weapons of choice for these attacks was Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones loaded with explosives. These drones detonated on impact and crippled energy infrastructure across Ukraine. To stem the incoming havoc, the Ukrainian military intelligence service, the GUR, requested the public via Twitter to provide information on the transport routes used by Iran to deliver drones to the Russian Federation and to identify the specific persons responsible for the supply.²⁷ In August 2023 the GUR reported to have discovered that the final assembling of the Shahed drones takes place in Russia.²⁸

²³ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “Вельмишановний український народі, вибачте нас за тимчасову соціальну тишу. Багато роботи, якщо ви розумієте про що ми... 😊 Працюємо у режимі 24/7, визначаємо розташування живої сили та техніки окупанта, знищуємо його без жалю! Ворога буде знищено! Слава Україні! Смерть ворогам!” <https://t.co/sCn8EdzYIc>.

²⁴ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ОкупантиРФ !! Кожний українець повинен знати їхні імена! Особовий склад 23 вап ВКС РФ, який бомбить Україну та вбиває мирних громадян 🇺🇦 Ці військові злочинці будуть знищені! Ніякий бункер не допоможе вберегтись від гніву за вбивство нашого населення!” <https://gur.gov.ua/ua/content/osobovyi-sklad-23-vap-vks-rf.html> <https://t.co/l9Vr3kUn2f>.

²⁵ Watts, “Ukraine symposium – doxing enemy soldiers and the law of war.”

²⁶ Mackintosh, “Russian missile strikes pound Ukraine, knocking out power and putting entire country under air-raid alarm.”

²⁷ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “!!Gathering of information about supplying of Iranian weapon to the RF we ask to provide any information that will help to determine logistical routes of the supply of the Iranian weapon and to identify the specific persons responsible for the supply 🌐.” https://twitter.com/DI_Ukraine/status/1587795506746490881.

²⁸ Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, “Vadym Skibitskyi: We working to find out where exactly Russia manufactures ‘Shahed’ drones.”

2.4 *Communicating with COMINT*

Besides the described direct appeal for help to the public, even more remarkable aspects of the GUR's communication strategy on social channels can be discerned. This specifically pertains to the regular publication of voice files containing conversations between Russian military personnel amongst each other, or with their family members or persons otherwise related. The intercepted conversations published by the GUR are interceptions of GSM traffic through base transceiver stations (BTS) controlled by the Ukrainians. Russian servicemen are prohibited from using mobile phones, even on Russian territory, meaning that from a formal point of view, Russian command should be taking measures to block this channel of leakage.²⁹ However, Russian soldiers, especially on the front lines, still find ways to acquire phones, sometimes stealing them from the Ukrainian population, to call home.³⁰

Although the language and discourse used in the audio files indicate the audio fragments released by the GUR are genuine intercepts, there is no guarantee audio specialists might have modified the contents. Therefore, achieving absolute certainty about the reliability of the intelligence material released by the GUR is a challenging undertaking. Furthermore, the GUR only released excerpts of audio material which it deemed suitable for release to promote public discourse on themes suitable to its communication strategy. Nevertheless, this study presents an analysis of crucial aspects and themes related to the strategic communication practices of the Ukrainian military intelligence service in wartime.

The recorded conversations can be labelled as communications intelligence (COMINT), since it entails the interception and analysis of the communications of government officials, military personnel, and other groups or individuals. If it becomes public knowledge that an entity has access to this information, then that tends to mean the end of this access.³¹ Despite concerns over losing access to intelligence sources, the GUR started to release tweets containing audio recordings of which the majority fit into three main categories: alleged Russian war crimes, Russian disillusionment of the war including plans for desertion, and the weakness or corruption of Russian military leadership. In the researched period (February 2022 – March 2023) the GUR released 211 of these voice files on Twitter and other social media channels.

First category, examples of alleged Russian war crimes: on April 20th, 2022, the GUR released an audio intercept that revealed a command to kill Ukrainian prisoners of war in the Popasyana area of Luhansk Oblast in eastern Ukraine: ‘Keep

²⁹ “Makiivka.”

³⁰ “The mobile network battlefield in Ukraine – Part 2 | Enea.”

³¹ Clark, “The protection of intelligence sources and methods.”

the most senior among them, and let the rest go forever. Let them go forever, damn it, so that no one will ever see them again, including relatives.³² Ten days later, the GUR released audio, which revealed the ‘occupiers’ stealing solar panels and complaining about their losses.³³ Then on May 23rd, the GUR intercepted the audio of two soldiers from the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) discussing rape, extortion and looting by members of their unit.³⁴ Later in June, an intercept revealed the Russians captured a Ukrainian crew member of a tank, interrogated him, and then shot him, ‘as they did not leave prisoners alive.’³⁵ Furthermore, on August 2nd, a Russian admitted to using phosphorus ammunition, which is prohibited by the Geneva Conventions, and dismissed his father’s reminder of this prohibition.³⁶

The second category of released intercepts by the GUR provides a glimpse into the disillusionment felt by Russian military personnel during the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. On June 21st, 2022, a member of the Russian military discussed the potential encirclement by Ukrainian forces and the poor quality of their rear units.³⁷ Then, on June 27, a Russian confessed to his mother that many soldiers in his unit had given up mentally and wished to escape the war.³⁸ At the end of July, a Russian soldier

³² Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення !!«Плених в Попасной приказано убить» ▪ Головне управління розвідки МО України отримало аудіоперехоплення розмови окупантів, в якому йде мова про наказ вбити усіх військовополонених ЗСУ в районі Попасної (Луганська обл.)” <https://t.co/iRHoDhmKUi>.

³³ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення ¶Окупанти крадуть сонячні батареї та жалуються на великі втрати 📺Перехоплення за посиланням.” <https://youtube.com/watch?v=HsJoxcyiTqY> <https://t.co/l593ugkTeR>.

³⁴ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення 📺Згвалтування, мародерство, масові злочини – окупанти обговорюють останні новини в підрозділ. ▪ Двоє воїків з так званої «ДНР» діляться враженнями від перебігу подій в їхній частині. 📺Перехоплення за посиланням.” <https://youtube.com/watch?v=z6OjA-U8MkY> <https://t.co/umMbmgCW7C>.

³⁵ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення 📺Одного в плен взяли танкіста. Потім допросили нах*й і застрелили» ▪ Окупант розповідає про взятого в полон танкіста, якого вони після допиту застрелили, тому що одного-двох полонених в живих не залишають. Посилання на перехоплення.” <https://youtu.be/K9NM9WRzhnQ> <https://t.co/PeYL8Yq8o>.

³⁶ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення 📺О, фосфор полетел» Окупант розповідає, що вони використовують фосфорні боеприпаси ▪ Батько нагадав окупантові, що це заборонено Конвенцією, та Олексій відказав: «Папа, ты знаешь сколько тут всего используем, что запрещено в принципе.»” <https://t.co/eatGLrIrev>.

³⁷ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення 📺«Силовики, алкаш. Хорошого нічого немає» – рашист розповідає про можливе оточення з боку ЗСУ та про якість тилових підрозділів.” <https://t.co/MWoJUrZD42>.

³⁸ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення 📺«Половина взагалі духовно здались вже» – окупант розповідає матері про бажання втекти з війни.” <https://t.co/msPUoesnY2>.

compared the war in Ukraine with that in Chechnya and Afghanistan, expressing his negative attitude towards the Russian government and military command.³⁹ On August 21st, a Russian military officer told his wife: ‘We have a great number of people who refuse to fight. We should be committed to an offensive soon, but there aren’t enough people, because everyone declined.’ He hoped he would soon be withdrawn from the conflict.⁴⁰ Two days later, another Russian military officer shared information about the refusal of officers and soldiers to advance.⁴¹

Other audio intercepts obtained by the GUR highlight the dire situation faced by Russian soldiers on the front lines. On August 30, a Russian soldier in the Kharkiv region reported that they were surrounded by ‘American’ forces with no water or food left and discussed the destruction of the 7th company.⁴² On September 3rd, a military officer in the Donetsk region complained: ‘we are supposed to be the infantry, we are the strength. And now, out of three hundred people only 72 survived, the rest is dead.’⁴³ On September 4th, Russian soldiers objected about the poor supply of new units that arrived: ‘They arrive without proper clothing, no sleeping bags, or anything.’⁴⁴ Furthermore, on October 1st, 2022, a military officer in a difficult moral situation called his wife to say goodbye.⁴⁵

The third and final category of GUR tweets contained examples of weak or corrupt Russian leadership. These audio intercepts released by the GUR provide a

³⁹ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення «Чеченська і афганська – ясельки» – рашист порівнює нинішню війну з попередніми ▪ Чоловік розповідає дружині про своє негативне ставлення до російської влади і військового командування. «...»Ростовську частину розгромили. Там практично нічого не залишилось.»” <https://t.co/1dLVjrSyce>.

⁴⁰ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення !!»МЫ УЖЕ ВСЁ, У НАС ЛЮДИ СДАЮТСЯ» ▪Російський військовий розповідає про масову відмову солдатів та впевнений, що їх скоро виведуть.” <https://t.co/egZEavqfTA>.

⁴¹ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення !!”ВСЕ КОМАНДОВАНИЕ, ВСЁ НАШЕ, КОМАНДИР РОТЫ НАШ, КОМБАТ... ОНИ ВСЕ ОТКАЗ НАПИСАЛИ” Російський військовий ділиться інформацією про рішучу відмову командування і солдатів наступати.” <https://t.co/bxVAr1CaNB>.

⁴² Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення !!»У НАС НИЧЕ НЕ ОСТАЛОСЬ УЖЕ, НИ ВОДЫ, НИ ЕДЫ» російський військовий, знаходячись в Харківській області, розповідає, що їх ЗСУ взяли в кльце, та обговорює знищення їх 7-ї роти.” <https://t.co/oSI0xxLHNC>.

⁴³ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “!!Seventy Two Servicemen Remained Alive from Among 300 Ones, the Rest Are Either Wounded or Killed Russian Soldier, Being in the Donetsk Region, at a State of Alcoholic Intoxication Talks about the Losses of Personnel.” <https://t.co/SWbPBI7WHE>.

⁴⁴ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “!!Young People Have No Clothes, No Sleeping Bags, Nothing at All Russian Soldier Told about Bad Provision of New Units, Which Enter at the Positions.” <https://t.co/7Qdw6sPBLl>.

⁴⁵ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine].



Figure 5.1: A screenshot of a social media post on the Twitter account of the GUR, which contains an intercepted phone call in which a Russian military member complains about his 'cowardly command' and 'deserters'

window into the mindset of Russian military personnel towards their leadership during the conflict in Ukraine. On September 14th, a Russian military member in the Kharkiv area complained about the incompetence of his superiors: 'there is no organization at all, I thought it was an army, but there is no army.'⁴⁶ Similarly, on November 28th, a military officer described his commanding officers as idiots who were hiding themselves in the rear area, however assigned their troops on dangerous missions: 'there is a minefield in front of you, start an attack.'⁴⁷ On December 26th, a Russian military member near Donetsk talked about the

⁴⁶ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], "#ГУРперехоплення !!"Я ДУМАЛ, ТУТ АРМИЯ, А ТУТ НЕ АРМИЯ.А ТАМ ПРОСТО МОЧИЛОВО ДРУГ ДРУГА, ДА?" військовослужбовець рф на харківському напрямку розповідає про дезорганізованість і некомпетентність власного військового керівництва." <https://t.co/Mmiwt8yOwV>.

⁴⁷ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], "#ГУРперехоплення !!"ВСЕ "ВОЕННЫЕ ПОЛИЦИИ" ЗАБИТЫ. НАРОД УХОДИТ,ИХ ВОЗВРАЩАЮТ. НИКТО ВОЕВАТЬ НЕ ХОЧЕТ, УЖЕ ВСЁ, НАЕЛИСЬ» Військовослужбовець #рф про ідіотів у командуванні, небажанні воювати та настановах від тітки "хапати все, що погано лежить" https://youtu.be/8tI_FK_gKKI <https://t.co/VRGQG9PQ5l>.

cowardice of staff officers, deserters, and vain hope of withdrawal from the combat zone (see Figure 5.1).⁴⁸

Further audio intercepts obtained by the GUR highlighted the challenges faced by Russian soldiers on the front lines. On January 4th, 2023, a Russian soldier talked to his mother about the forgery of soldiers’ places of death and alcoholism.⁴⁹ The verbal attacks by late Wagner CEO Yevgeny Prigozhin in May 2023 on Twitter of Russian military incompetence lend credence to what the GUR Twitter account claims.⁵⁰ In this context it is worth mentioning that the GUR released an interception in January 2023 in which a Russian soldier tells his father about a shooting incident between his unit and one of Wagner’s groups.⁵¹ This was months before reports of tensions between Wagner and regular Russian army units started to seep through from the Bakhmut area.⁵²

3. The rationale for the GUR’s disclosure of intelligence

The traditional view is that intelligence services operate covertly and discreetly to avoid public scrutiny. Intelligence is typically perceived as an asset that governments safeguard against exposure, fearing the loss of access to sources.⁵³ Then again, as Israeli scholar Clila Magen explains, in the social media age intelligence services face a new set of challenges, including a dramatic reduction in the ability to control and manage information. This inherently puts pressure on intelligence

⁴⁸ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення !! «МЫ НОЧЬЮ ЕЩЕ 20 НАШИХ БЕГЛЕЦОВ НАШЛИ. ОНИ ЧИСТО ПО ДОРОГЕ ШЛИ, МЫ ИХ НЕ СТАЛИ СТРЕЛЯТЬ» Військовослужбовець #рф розповідає про боягузливе командування, дезертирів і марні надії на виведення із зони бойових дій. 📢” <https://youtu.be/jNBtpJoj6t8> <https://t.co/5IJop6LR8N>, *Tweet, Twitter*, 26 December, 2022.

⁴⁹ Defence intelligence of Ukraine [@DI_Ukraine], “#ГУРперехоплення !! «СТАВЯТ, ЧТО ПОГИБ В БЕЛГОРОДЕ, А НЕ В УКРАИНЕ» Військовий #рф розповів матері про фальсифікацію місця загибелі військових та про алкоголізм на позиціях. 📢.” <https://youtu.be/WVbCmJU26qw> <https://t.co/8EbtCIVsLr>.

⁵⁰ Dmitri [@wartranslated], “[Explicit Content Warning! Prigozhin Films Himself in Front of a Large Number of Corpses, and in an Unusually Aggressive Manner Puts Forward Demands to Russian Military Leadership to Provide More Ammunition.” <https://t.co/ZjikU2EnZM>.

⁵¹ Dmitri [@wartranslated], “In This Call, a Russian Soldier Tells His Father about an Accident with Wagner Mercenaries Where Officers Shot Mobilised Soldiers, and Discusses Rumours Such as That 2/3rd of the Ukrainian Army Are Now Poles and Blacks.” <https://t.co/r4PaEcA7qh>.

⁵² Melkozerova, “Massive split in Russian military forces as Wagner vows to quit Bakhmut on May 10.”

⁵³ Riemer and Sobelman, “Coercive disclosure: The weaponization of public intelligence revelation in international relations,” 20.

services to respond to public enquiries.⁵⁴ At the same time, intelligence services have learned that they can be proactive and use the media to achieve their goals.⁵⁵ The disclosure policies observed in the context of the Russian invasion raise questions about the potential use of intelligence for influencing operations.⁵⁶ Israeli researchers Riemer and Sobelman argue that states can leverage intelligence as a coercive instrument. They describe coercive intelligence disclosure as the public disclosure of secrets or the signaling of an intention to do so, which can exploit the vulnerabilities of other actors.⁵⁷

Riemer and Sobelman contend that coercive intelligence disclosure can achieve three aims.⁵⁸ First, it can prevent adversaries from achieving their strategic and operational goals by interfering with their operations, forcing them to refocus their resources, and inducing them to adapt to the reality that their secrets have been made public. Second, by influencing their domestic communities and eroding their political standing, it might exert indirect pressure on the targets. Third, it might help the discloser create or support a compelling narrative that persuades other international actors to act. This third notion is tied to the notion that the controlled release of intelligence can help to achieve narrative superiority.⁵⁹ This idea is based on Russia's time-tested strategy of influencing the information environment to its advantage, during the takeover of Crimea in 2014.⁶⁰ For example, narrative superiority was gained early 2022 by British and American intelligence-led exposures revealing how Russian intelligence agencies in the run-up to the invasion exploited media assets to disseminate disinformation.⁶¹ This undermined Russian propaganda that relies on fabrication.⁶²

As explained, the disclosure of audio intercepts on Twitter has been an established *modus operandi* by the GUR since the start of the Russian invasion in February 2022. Applying Riemer and Sobelman's concept of coercive intelligence disclosure, one of the possible motives behind the GUR's sensitive intelligence disclosures is to compel Russia to modify its operations, thereby thwarting Russian efforts to accomplish their objectives. Naturally, the GUR is vested in the cessation

⁵⁴ Magen, "Strategic communication of Israel's Intelligence Services: Countering new challenges with old methods," 272.

⁵⁵ Magen, 273.

⁵⁶ Dylan and Maguire, "Secret intelligence and public diplomacy in the Ukraine War," 4 July 2022, 61.

⁵⁷ Riemer and Sobelman, "Coercive disclosure: The weaponization of public intelligence revelation in international relations," 3.

⁵⁸ Riemer and Sobelman, 3.

⁵⁹ Riemer and Sobelman, 24.

⁶⁰ Dylan and Maguire, "Secret intelligence and public diplomacy in the Ukraine War," 4 July 2022, 47.

⁶¹ Dylan and Maguire, 47.

⁶² Dylan and Maguire, 47.

of Russian operations in Ukraine and the termination of violence against civilians and Ukrainian prisoners of war. However, Russian leadership in Moscow has yet to issue orders to the armed forces to alter their behaviour or tactics, despite the GUR's dissemination of evidence on social media relating to Russian war crimes, ineffectiveness, and declining morale.

A second possible motive for the GUR's disclosure of intelligence on Twitter is to sway public opinion in Russia and make its citizens demand better conduct of the Russian military in Ukraine. Although the use of Twitter has been restricted in Russia from time to time, Russian citizens can still approach the platform through Virtual Private Network (VPN) connections. Further, the GUR posts similar content on YouTube and Telegram (widely used in Russia). According to an analyst of the National Institute of Strategic Studies (NISS) in Kyiv, the initial hope of the GUR leadership was indeed that their reports about bad morale and disillusion of the Russian military in Ukraine could influence public opinion in Russia. However, after several months, the GUR leadership concluded that its social media content was of limited influence in Russia. This was given the outright denial and disinterest for widely documented Russian military acts of violence against the Ukrainian population.⁶³

The main reason for the ongoing intelligence disclosures by the GUR is that it helps to support a compelling narrative that persuades other states and international organisations to act. This is the third option Riemer and Sobelman researched: the belief that the controlled release of intelligence can help to achieve 'narrative superiority.' The recurrent messaging by the GUR on Russian misbehaviour against civilians and military personnel, low morale of Russian military personnel, and weak leadership, ties into a wider Ukrainian government communication strategy in which narratives like this are regularly stressed, both to international and domestic audiences. Time and time again, Ukraine asks for international attention and action, and tries to mobilise actors to act against alleged Russian war crimes. The release of raw intelligence by the GUR, containing testimonies of Russian misconduct, adds an extra layer of credibility to strategic communications not just towards Western audiences, but also towards its own population. Ukraine assesses there is a public relations benefit in releasing intercepted material that embarrasses the Russian military and reveals details of Russian atrocities on the battlefield.⁶⁴

⁶³ (name known with author), Analyst National Institute Strategic Studies, Kyiv, 4 July 2023.

⁶⁴ (name known with author), Analyst National Institute Strategic Studies, Kyiv.

4. Going beyond traditional boundaries with a purpose

The release of COMINT related material, which is traditionally considered highly classified and sensitive, by the GUR can be seen as a modern development where very few secrets are likely to remain secret forever. Carefully selected declassified intelligence can be used to inform the public and seize the moral high ground.⁶⁵ This is within the scope of how Riemer and Sobelman defined coercive intelligence disclosure and narrative superiority.

To explain the specific effort of the GUR to contribute to Ukrainian narrative superiority, it is useful to look at the concept of shame. Shame is particularly effective when it can stimulate emotions such as anger or concerns within target audiences.⁶⁶ The best way to stimulate such strong emotions is to represent themes that are regarded as repugnant from the point of view of the target audience's norms, ideas and values and which can clearly be presented as direct faults of shameful actors.⁶⁷ The release of audio interceptions, that depict a negative image of the Russian armed forces, fits this pattern. Repetitively, the GUR points out the opponent's corrupt leadership, logistics shortcomings and lack of respect for the lives of its soldiers. This negative image is reinforced by reports of ill-treatment of civilians and Ukrainian prisoners of war. In this case, shame is meant to damage the Russian image and to exert public pressure on foreign decision makers and the Ukrainian people, mobilising them to support or continue the resistance against foreign invaders.

Therefore, the GUR has its analysts purposefully select chatter that is degrading to the Russian war effort, from much larger streams of Ukrainian interception of Russian communications. It can be inferred that audio intercepts containing information that would give a tactical advantage to the Ukrainian military are directed through compartmentalised channels towards the armed forces for targeting purposes. However, material that is useful to name and shame the opponent gets selected and prepared for release on social media channels. This is done in support of the strategic narrative that Ukraine fights a just war against a disgraceful foreign invader.

⁶⁵ Magen, "Strategic communication of Israel's intelligence services: Countering new challenges with old methods," 272.

⁶⁶ Hirschberger, "External Communication in Social Media During Asymmetric Conflicts," 25.

⁶⁷ Hirschberger, 26.

5. Reflection and concluding remarks

The practices of the GUR are part of a longstanding development in which intelligence is used beyond its traditional territory of informing key decision makers and military commanders and is integrated into information warfare. Within this information warfare spectrum, from communication to indoctrination, information can be used to undermine trust and amplify emotional resonance.⁶⁸ The GUR effort sets a precedent in terms of quantity since their program of releasing sensitive intelligence goes beyond the occasional trickle of a few documents, surveillance footage or satellite imagery to influence an outside actor. Within a year's time frame, the GUR has consistently released sensitive audio intercepts on an almost daily basis. Future research is needed to expand knowledge about the active strategic communications posture of the GUR and the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), which is at least as active when it comes to activities on social media.

In conclusion, the Ukrainians have employed an approach in their social media strategies that draws upon the concept of moral conflict, as elucidated by John Boyd. The approach by the GUR, emphasising abject Russian behaviour, aims to maintain public opinion against the invasion in both western countries and Ukraine to gain narrative superiority. By maintaining a strong international opinion opposing the Russian invaders, Ukraine sustains essential support of training and weapons from Western governments, while preserving the loyalty of the Ukrainian populace in wartime. Both are critical for Ukraine's survival and reflect Boyd's concept of moral conflict where the successful integration of material and moral imperatives are prerequisites for victory.

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⁶⁸ Clack and Johnson, *The World Information War: Western Resilience, Campaigning, and Cognitive Effects*.

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