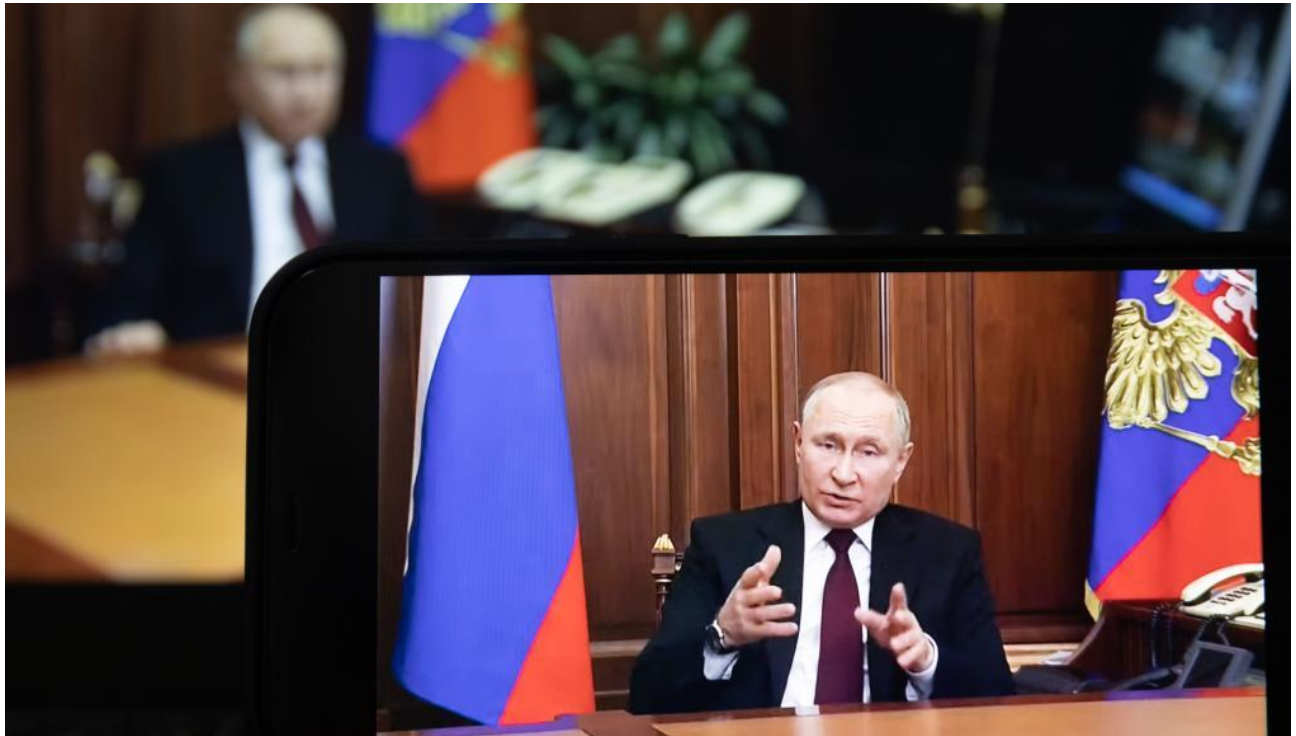




NATO Foundation
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HIMARS and Russian infowar

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The 24th of February 2022 the world witnessed with horror at a new aggression war, this time in Ukraine. In less than six months, the tactics of the Russian armed forces have changed several times: from a Blitzkrieg attempt to capture main cities and neutralise the leadership, the Russians switched to the tactic of creating cauldrons by the separation and encirclement of enemy groups, their logistic strangling, followed by their destruction or surrender. At the same time, a massive artillery shelling of the territory that the Russians are going to capture begins.



Figure 1 Map of territories occupied by Russians: in red the controlled areas and in pink those in the 70 km range of the rocket system HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System). Source: Babel.ua – Politico

The capture of Mariupol and the conquest of the steel Azovstal complex are considered by Russians to be one of the first significant victories. The encirclement, blockade of the territory and constant artillery shelling, in addition to ground penetrating radars [possibly the Oko-3 system already employed in Syria, Ed.] and interdiction by air bombardments, reinforced by the methods of agitation for surrender, led to the destruction of a considerable military force with sufficient weapons and food supplies. The term “Marsupialisation” [in 1940 the term was Coventrization, Ed.] began to be used in the Russian media to designate a successful tactic to seize territory.

This war can be reasonably called a war of artillery and drones. From the first days of the war, the Russian military command proclaimed that “a humane way of waging war” was underway because through the frequent use of high-precision Kalibr (Calibre) missiles and the Kinzhal (Dagger) hypersonic missile system, the Russian authorities tried to prove to everyone that they only hit military infrastructure. However, the number of casualties among the civilian population is constantly growing and the Russians explain this by the tactics of the Ukrainian military to place firing positions in the area of civilian structures. Moreover, according to the Russians, the Ukrainian anti-missile systems prefer to shoot down Russian missiles over residential areas, leading to civilian casualties. To say the least, it is a dubious explanation because evidently anti-missile systems have also to protect residential areas.

In this context, it is obvious that artillery and especially rockets and missiles become a main theme in the information confrontation. The morbid attitude of Russians towards foreign support for Ukraine with

modern weapons has led to the emergence of a new journalistic genre. Blocking its citizens from international information channels, the Russian government constantly shows the captured samples of foreign weapons in Ukrainian positions, nurturing the confidence in the invincibility of Russian weapons.

The main narratives on this topic since the beginning of the war were as follows:

- The Ukrainian military is not trained in the use of foreign weapons.

Therefore, these weapons do not pose a particular danger. Individual testimonies of Ukrainian prisoners of war about how they tried to understand the method of using weapons through a Google translator were massively distributed through all Telegram channels. Many types of heavy weapons do not have accompanying digital subsystems, which reduces their effectiveness. There was even information that Ukrainian prisoners of war taught Donetsk and Luhansk separatists how to handle captured foreign weapons systems.

- The weapons supplied to Ukraine are obsolete, part of surpluses that foreigners get rid of.

Easy to understand analytics about what types of weapons are supplied to Ukraine have intensified in the Russian media. The pragmatism of the NATO member countries in getting rid of obsolete weapons systems and getting new, modern ones in return is emphasized. Demands by NATO member countries to provide new weapons or to refuse to get rid of obsolete weapons without first obtaining new ones are being actively discussed. Quite ordinary logistical issues are presented by the Russian media as mega-problems due to the lack of consensus in the Alliance in supporting Kyiv. Thus, NATO's support for the Ukrainian defence is constantly minimised.

- Arms supplied to Ukraine are not a problem for Russian troops.

A photo or video of each foreign destroyed artillery weapon was used as an information proof with the description of the capture site, a story about the record and the characteristics of the destroyed weapon. All this is accompanied by the conclusion that Russian weapons are capable of suppressing foreign artillery used by Ukrainian troops. Russians do not miss the opportunity to underline the weaknesses of these systems: that Bayraktar (Standard bearer) drone, for example, could be easily shot down by Russian anti-missile systems, or that NLAW missiles (Next Generation Light Anti-armour Weapon) are far from the perfection that they are credited with. This means that the Russians are trying to weaken the confidence of suppliers and buyers of the system in order to reduce deliveries.

- During the first months of the war, the thesis about the omnipotence of Russian weapons in destroying the routes for the delivery of foreign arms to Ukraine was much stressed.

The destruction of each railway junction, warehouse, production workshop was presented as the destruction of places of accumulation and storage of foreign stocks of weapons. Several photos and videos from Ukrainian public pages served as evidence. Some debris masking nets, the presence of the military, information about the death of the Ukrainian military at that moment. At the same time the moments of the launch of the missiles were massively publicised. It was presented as a kind of art object; the phrase “First of all, it’s beautiful...” has come to be used in describing the launch of a deadly weapon.

It can be said that foreign weapons supplied to Ukraine have become one of the main subjects in the Russian media in the information support of the current war. The transition to a higher quality level in the use of information about weapons has become the history of the French Caesar (CAmion Équipé d’un Système d’Artillerie; Truck equipped with an artillery system) self-propelled howitzers. Information appeared in French social networks that two of the first four delivered howitzers were spotted at one of the Russian production facilities; the author of the information was angry at how easily the weapon ended up in Russian hands. Later this information was supplemented with new details. The Bulgarian edition of a military journal published information that on the front line the Ukrainian military sold two Caesar to figureheads who worked for the Russians. The deal was valued at \$1.000 per howitzer, while the real price was \$7 million. Official denials followed from the Ukrainian side. The Russians remain silent on this issue, which in itself is intriguing.

Practically since that moment, we have been observing the organization in the Russian media space of information operations regarding each type of weapons that are supplied to the territory of Ukraine. A logical chain for assessing this situation has been formed. In the ideal sequence, Russian intelligence controls the supply of every type of weapon and missile; finds out their location and lets them destroy by the armed forces with high-precision strikes of weapons. Photo and video evidence is attached. Repeated duplication of this information creates the impression of the total destruction of all foreign weapons.

Moscow has begun to use a new story line: the Russian armed forces use modern high-precision weapons on the battlefield, while the Ukrainians use the supplied weapons to shell civilians and civilian settlements. This story was reinforced by the spin that missile ranges approaching Russian territory clearly indicate the use of American systems: video and photographic evidence of rocket debris, as well as multiple casualties among the civilian population, are used to shape the public opinion sense of guilt in weapons supplying countries.

In this hide-and-seek propaganda game, Russia risks to be often late: when they tout in their information campaigns that one weapon type has been destroyed, they have to start all over again with a new type, catching up and finding new excuses.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, in the short term, Russians manage to form the right attitude among their public. This was the case, for example, with the 155 mm M777 towed howitzer. At first, all the successful artillery work of the Ukrainian troops was associated with the capabilities of these systems; when the indignation of the Russian population began to grow, the propaganda changed. As the Ukrainians came up with the name “Three Axes” (the number 7 looks like an axe) to underscore its effectiveness, unconfirmed information appeared on social networks about the seizure of these weapons by the Russians. Popular Muscovite military observers started rejoicing and explained that the M777 155mm howitzers were pinpointed by Russian systems, adding that the guns are controlled by NATO militaries, while the Ukrainians are guarding only the weapons emplacements. Then photos and videos of the M777 155-mm howitzer being hit by fire began to be massively distributed in Telegram channels.

Now every day you can read the headlines of Russian war correspondents about how detachments of the Brave (O grouping, otwashniy)¹ hunt down the Three Axes, sometimes with tones of a Western adventure. Thus: the adequate perception of very dangerous weapons is reduced in the public; the previous indignation is weakening and the topic of adequate assistance by the friends of Ukraine against the invasion fades into the background.

The topic of the highly mobile artillery missile system M142 (HIMARS), which quickly burst into the information space, qualitatively changed the tactics of information warfare during this period. Ukrainian media reports about the miracle weapon, which will presumably become the basis of the future counteroffensive and the liberation of the occupied territories, quickly flooded the Russian media. Once again, the information panic needed to be tempered. American MLR (Multiple Rocket Launcher) HIMARS have become a full-fledged participant not only on the battlefield, but also in information confrontation. Since the range of the 300 km ATACMS (Army Tactical Missile System) long-range missiles is measured in the media by the names of cities in Russia and the Moscow region as possible targets,² this information has reached the level of forming a political context regarding the use of nuclear weapons as a retaliatory step and as a preventive action.

¹ The Russians have symbols for three groups forces in this war: Z, B and O.

² By end of July 2022, ATACMS have not been supplied by the USA to Ukrainian forces. Unconfirmed Russian National Security Council sources think that it is probable that the supply will happen.

The tactics of using these missiles by the Ukrainian armed forces began to be considered in detail. The Russians began to talk about the Ukrainians first launching several rockets of the old images. This will activate the Russian missile defence, and the HIMARS at this point can reach their goal.

Following their tradition, the Russians designated the MLR HIMARS as a more primitive stage of the Russian Iskander missile. They are easily shot down by anti-missile systems of the Russian troops. In connection with the use of these complexes by Ukrainian troops, the topic of military confrontation with the United States began to intensify among the Russians. Given the fact that HIMARS are used in GPS navigation provided by the United States, these missiles become highly accurate, which greatly increases the degree of danger in their use.

At some point, the Russians apparently realized that they themselves became participants in the active promotion of the HIMARS theme, which formed the opinion of information consumers as a superweapon in this war. And at that moment, the topic began to escalate in the Russian media that the successful use of this type of missiles, the training of the Ukrainian military in the management of complexes is nothing more than an attempt to form the successful achievements of the current administration of the American president, since there are no other achievements.

Almost with jubilation in the Russian media, the topic of changing the parameters of the flight range of HIMARS, which are supplied to Ukraine, was perceived. If 300m, as mentioned earlier, then this is almost a suburb of Moscow. In this regard, in the statements of officials, information appeared about the expansion of the geography of the war to protect Russian territories from this type of missiles. According to official data from the US military, deliveries of 80-meter range HIMARS by the Russians are perceived satisfactorily. The Russian media emphasized the Americans' understanding of the consequences of using nuclear weapons. In fact, the flight range of HIMARS has become an occasion to strengthen the thesis about adequate and inadequate US policy in the Russian media. In interviews with well-known Russian military observers, the idea began to sound that both in the United States and in the Pentagon, there are

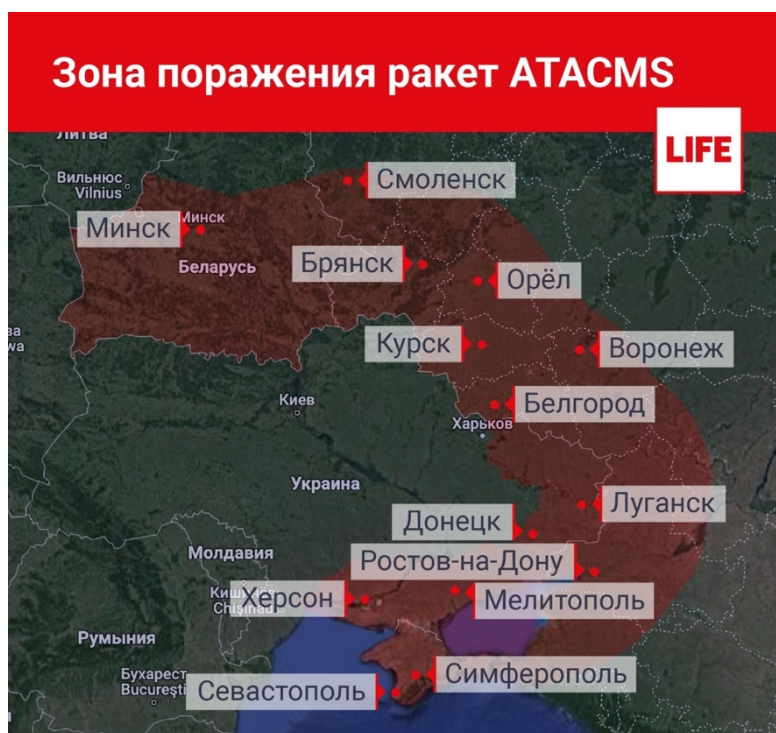


Figure 2 Estimated striking zone of the US ATACMS (Army Tactical Missile System). Cities potentially targeted are (from South to North): Kherson, Sevastopol, Simferopol, Melitopol, Rostov-na-Donu, Donetsk, Bryansk, Belgorod, Kursk, Voronezh, Orel, Bryansk, Minsk

enough smart and sober people. Moreover, they supposedly realized long ago that Ukraine lost the war and that there is simply an opportunity to play for time to wear down Russia. The Russians have strengthened their information positions in order to justify the beginning of the existing contradictions on the part of the Western partners of Ukraine and the EU. In the Russian media, the idea of the global, liberating role of the Russian army began to sound not only on the territory of Ukraine.

Thus, we see that the initial bravura assurances of the invincibility of Russian weapons develop into a need to explain why the Ukrainian armed forces are successfully hitting targets. Half-justifications-half-explanations turn into direct threats and develop into large-scale campaigns to discredit both the weapons themselves and the manufacturers. We can say that this is a new type of information warfare. The situationality and unpredictability in the formation of the information space depend precisely on reality. In this case, from the decision of Ukraine's Western partners to supply one or another type of weapons. And in this case, the side that promptly and convincingly organizes the substantiation of its point of view will be more successful.

Readiness to scaling a simple event and the formation of standards for its perception by the target audience requires flexibility from specialists in the information and communication sphere. It can be said that the Russians are forced to depend on what decisions on the supply of weapons will be made by Ukraine's Western partners. But, despite the constant criticism of the conduct of the information war by Russian citizens, special ideological military structures very quickly adapt to current events. Within a few days, information about a direct threat to the Russian troops turns into an informational occasion for the publication of a large number of videos and photos of evidence of the successful work of the Russian military. Each micro-fact grows into a macro-event and becomes decisive in the promotion of Russian narratives.

It is obvious that today the Russian war against Ukraine has shown the need to form new standards of information counteraction. And, today's events indicate that in addition to the technical parameters of the dissemination of information, the quality of the content and the context of its use play an important role. There is no doubt that the information war is gradually moving into a more complex stage of influencing the sphere of awareness and the formation of value systems.

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