SHAPING THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT THROUGH THE INTENTIONAL DISCLOSURE OF CLASSIFIED INFORMATION

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Abstract: The disclosure of classified information to the general public played an important role in the period before the start of the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. This strategy involved the disclosure of classified information at an unprecedented scale and speed, with the aim of achieving specific effects, while using emerging technologies such as those associated to the open-source intelligence toolbox. The hypothesis under consideration is that the state may intentionally disclose classified information in order to shape the reactions and behaviours of other international actors. The research approach was based on the case study on the disclosure of classified information in the period July 2021– February 2022 in the context of the imminent invasion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine. The data collected from open sources were correlated with the aim of analysing in detail the disclosure strategy of classified information, its characteristics, the factors that potentiate it and its effects. The obtained results lead to the conclusion that the disclosure of classified information belongs to the tools of the ways of exercising the state power, with multiple effects, from influencing opponents to increasing the resilience of own population to the phenomenon of fake news.

Keywords: international relations, intelligence, conflict, classified information, diplomacy.

Motto: „In an Information Age, in which credibility is the scarest resource, the best propaganda is not propaganda"
Joseph Nye

Introduction

The international security environment is defined as the representation of the complex interaction, on a global scale, of political, economic, social, technological and environmental factors with influences on the stability and security of nations[1]. Thus, by researching the international environment, issues such as geopolitical disputes, military capabilities, economic interdependence or the impact of emerging technologies on the

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[1] Buzan, Barry. 2014. *Popoarele, statele şi frica. O agendă pentru studii de securitate internaţională în epoca de după Războiul Rece,* Chisinău, Cartier Publishing House.

overall security landscape are examined, and the resulting analyses involve a multidisciplinary approach to understand the factors that shape the global security environment[2].

Starting from the premise that understanding the factors that influence interactions in the international environment is crucial in deciphering the challenges to the security of states, through this article we submit to research the hypothesis that the intentional disclosure of classified information constitutes a tool at the disposal of states to shape the geopolitical landscape in accordance with their own national interests. Through the present study, I aimed to deepen the concept of intentional disclosure of classified information, to reveal the conditions that make possible actions of this type, and to identify the consequences of the disclosure of classified information on the international security environment.

I dedicated the first part of the research approach to the study of specialized literature dealing with the theme of the research hypothesis, while in the second part I examined in depth, through an explanatory case study, the action of intentional disclosure of classified information regarding to a possible invasion of the forces of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, prior to the start of the conflict between the two states. The data used in the case study are derived from documents and multimedia files available from open sources: news agencies, official websites, blogs and social networks, available in both English and Russian. To understand the context and details of the case under analysis, I used manual data collection techniques and analysed more than 30 materials from open sources.

I chose the case study presented above because I believe it represents a complete new chapter in international relations, where new technologies coupled with new state policies have allowed classified information to be quickly declassified and disseminated to the general public in order to obtain specific results. Through this approach, I aimed to go beyond the stage of a simple description of the concept of intentional disclosure of classified information and to explain why and how certain effects occur when states use such a strategy. The results of the study lead to the conclusion that the action of intentional disclosure of classified information has multiple consequences on the international security environment, among which I list the influencing of public perception, the rapid coagulation of some international coalitions to support coercive measures or the increase of the population's resilience to fake news.

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[2] Williams, Paul D. and McDonald, Matt. Security studies: an introduction. New York: Routledge, 2018.

1. **Theoretical approaches to the concept of intentional disclosure of classified information**

In the study of specialized literature, I focused on the theoretical approaches that lead to the definition of the concept of intentional disclosure of classified information, as well as the identification of its main characteristics.

In its early forms, the intentional disclosure of classified information was part, along with the formation of alliances or the imposition of sanctions, of the inventory of political-diplomatic measures (political warfare), through which states project their power and interests against an adversary[3]. In this sense, disclosure of information was included in the category of manipulation actions, being executed both openly and covertly[4].

Starting from observation of the strategies adopted by Israel and based on interviews with politicians, representatives of the defence system or media in Tel Aviv, Ofek Riemer postulates a set of alternative perspectives. First, states engage in strategies of purposeful disclosure of classified information in order to support diplomatic efforts and shape the international agenda. Second, in an age of time-limited wars, classified information is no longer held for use in the event of a large-scale crisis escalation, but is selectively disclosed and used against adversaries, whose plans depend on secrecy. In this way, classified information has a strategic role in the information age, with the potential to shape the behaviour of international actors, in some situations even reaching a state of disengagement from the conflict by one of the parties involved[5].

After the start of the conflict in Ukraine, O. Riemer continues to theorize the concept, believing that the strategy of intentionally revealing secrets has as its main purpose the coercion of the targeted country to adjust its plans and intentions[6]. In this sense, the publication of classified information acquires a lethal character - weaponization of intelligence - and joins military and economic means as an instrument with a coercive role in the inventory of measures available to states or international organizations. In addition, disclosure is used to mobilize audiences, both domestic and international, with the aim of getting other state actors to align themselves with a certain type of narrative and consequently change their policies. The authors point out that coercive disclosure can be partially successful or even

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[3] Weiner, Tim. 2020. The Folly and the Glory: America, Russia, and Political Warfare 1945–2020. New York: Henry Holt and Co.

[4] Forest, James. 2021. "Political Warfare and Propaganda: An Introduction." Journal of Advanced Military Studies, Volume 12, pp. 13-33.

[5] Riemer, Ofek. 2021. "Politics is Not Everything: New Perspectives on the Public Disclosure of Intelligence by States." Contemporary Security Policy 42 (4), pp. 554-583.

[6] Riemer, Ofek and Sobelman, Daniel. 2023. "Coercive Disclosure: The Weaponization of Public Intelligence Revelation in International Relations." Contemporary Security Policy 44, no. 2, pp. 276-307.

fail when used against a state determined to act in a certain way or against a target that is resistant to public pressure[7].

According to Joshua Huminski, the main purpose of the disclosure of classified information was to convince the international community about the threat of the Russian Federation offensive, and in this way to facilitate the mobilization in support of Ukraine. To a lesser extent, this strategy also had a secondary goal of trying to dissuade Moscow from acting[8]. The author finds that the novelty in this case was given by the speed, frequency and extent with which information that was normally intended for a very limited number of people was declassified and disclosed to the general public[9]. At the same time, these disclosures also benefited from support, possibly unplanned, by the existence of an external validation system represented by users of intelligence from open sources. This emerging field provided a means by which at least some of the information disclosed could be verified in almost real time, with the validation helping to strengthen the credibility of the message.

S. Carvin thinks that the use of classified information in the pre-conflict phase in Ukraine, as well as in some subsequent circumstances, represents an effort made by the US to take the initiative in the information war. The author believes that this effort brings with it new challenges and considerations related to the need to protect the sources and methods of gathering information, the risk of policymakers selectively using classified information for political purposes, or the importance of tailoring messages to different audiences[10].

Bob De Graaf even proposes a double meaning approach to the concept of classified information. A first meaning that he attributes to classified information is that of a product that contributes to the knowledge and understanding of a situation. The second perspective looks at classified information from the perspective of potential for influence[11]. Thus, according to the first meaning, classified information is a factor that supports decision-making and policy formulation, while according to the second meaning, it contributes to the process of policy implementation. Information-knowledge is intended for a narrow audience, while information-action is part of a communication process designed to influence a larger audience, whether it is one's own citizens, allied states, or adversaries.

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[7] Idem.

[8] Huminski, Joshua C. 2023. "Russia, Ukraine, and the Future use of Strategic Intelligence." Prism : A Journal of the Center for Complex Operations 10, no. 3, pp. 8-25.

[9] Idem.

[10] Carvin, Stephanie. 2022. „Deterrence, Disruption and Declassification: Intelligence in the Ukraine Conflict." Centre for international governance inovation. 02 May, available at https://www.cigionline.org/articles/deterrence-disruption-and-declassification-intelligence-in-the-ukraine-conflict/, accessed on 20.01.2024.

[11] De Graaff, Bob, 2023. „Two souls in one body: the acknowledgement of intelligence as influence activity." Journal of Homeland Security Education 16, pp. 1-10.

Contributing to the development of the concept, Huw Dylan and Thomas J. Maguire introduce the distinction between the types of classified information intentionally disclosed to the public based on the criterion of their truthfulness. Thus, a first type is the one addressed to the internal audience, with the role of information, but also of obtaining public support on a certain topic. A second type refers to information disseminated with the primary purpose of influencing external audiences and can be described as a 'strategic action'. Finally, classified information, presented truncated, intentionally fabricated to support an act of disinformation, and intended to deceive the public, are categorized as part of the manipulation phenomenon. The authors remind that before the start of the conflict in Ukraine, all three categories could be observed: the first two, present in the speech of the leaders in London and Washington, and the last one, found in the statements of Kremlin officials who claimed that the neo- Nazi Kiev committed genocide against the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine[12].

The same authors also review the purposes for which states decide to intentionally disclose classified information, identifying five possible reasons. Thus, the motivation of states can be related to the desire to justify their own actions, to influence decision-making at the international level, to increase the level of resilience of their own civil societies, to expose another state regarding the actions and intentions inconsistent with international law or to put pressure on a third state by shaping domestic and international public perception of certain events[13].

From the analysis of theoretical approaches, we notice that most specialists in the field are of the opinion that the intentional disclosure of classified information is a tool available to the state, through which the general public is informed about an event, with the aim of shaping the adversary's decision by influencing external audiences, to obtain internal support by shaping the perception of the own public and coagulating ties with allied or partner states on certain topics of interest. We believe that the use of classified information in this way in the future will depend on the specific circumstances and objectives of each crisis. At the same time, the strategy of disclosing classified information marked an effort made by the US to regain the initiative in the information war, which had been largely dominated by the Russian Federation.

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[12] Dylan, Huw and Maguire, Thomas J. . 2022. "Secret intelligence and public diplomacy in the Ukraine war." Survival vol. 64, pp. 33-74.
[13] Idem.

2. Case Study: Intentional Disclosure of Classified Information in the Context of the Ukraine-Russian Federation Conflict (July 2021–February 2022)

The current conflict in Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, when Russian forces launched a multi-pronged "special military operation" from Belarus and the Russian Federation. Before the invasion, an eight-year conflict between the Ukrainian armed forces and Russian-backed separatists had been ongoing in eastern Ukraine.

Since the end of October 2021, high-ranking officials, especially from the US and the UK, have brought to the attention of the general public information regarding the movements of Russian troops and military equipment near the border with Ukraine[14]. The involvement of leadership as a communication vector brings into focus one of the features of the classified information disclosure strategy: the ability of leadership to transform quality intelligence into quality policy[15].

Another important feature of the classified information disclosure strategy was that credible intelligence was disclosed in the eyes of public opinion, based on the state's ability to plan, gather and interpret relevant data and information. The effect achieved was support from civil society and organizations that investigate the reality of the international environment through open-source information. Open-source intelligence analysts, independent or affiliated with private organizations, shared videos and images on social media showing how troops, tank units and self-propelled artillery of the Russian Federation are concentrated in Bryansk, Kursk and Jelnja regions, about 200 km north of the Ukrainian border[16]. The mentioned sources described precisely how, instead of returning to the deployment garrisons at the end of the Zapad 2021 exercise, groups of armed forces from several large units of the Russian Federation began moving to points near the border with Ukraine[17]. The build-up of Russian troops and equipment on the border with

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[14] Nardelli, Alberto and Jacobs, Jennifer. 2021. "U.S. Warns EU That Russia Could Be Planning to Invade Ukraine." Time. November 11, available at https://time.com/6116867/us-warns-russia-invade-ukraine/, accessed on 05.01. 2023.

[15] Dylan, Huw and Maguire, Thomas J. . 2022. "Secret intelligence and public diplomacy in the Ukraine war." Survival vol. 64, pp. 33-74.

[16] Muzyka, Konrad. 2021. "Russian land forces' movements in October." Rochan Consulting. October 31, available at https://rochan-consulting.com/russian-land-forces-movements-in-october/, accessed on 06.01.2023.

[17] Concern in US, Europe. washingtonpost.com. October 30, available at https://-www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-troop-movements-near-ukraine-border-prompt-concern-in-us-europe/2021/10/30/c122e57c-3983-11ec-9662-399cfa75efee_story.html, accessed on 10.01.2024.

Ukraine continued throughout November and December 2021, so that by January 2022 their number had exceeded 100,000 soldiers[18].

It could be argued that disclosures of classified information, validated by data circulated on social media or from private companies, provided enough clues and the warning should have been obvious. But while detecting military capabilities - personnel, equipment, and infrastructure - was relatively simple, assessing the Russian Federation's intent was not. This was most likely the reason why there were different perceptions among NATO allies. Thus, French and German officials did not share the perspective of their US and UK counterparts, believing that invading Ukraine would have a "monstrous cost and that the Russians had other options". French Chief of Defence, Thierry Burkhard, suggested that French military intelligence concluded that an attack was imminent only the night before the attack[19], while the head of the German foreign intelligence service – BND, Bruno Kahl, had to be rushed out of Ukraine by a special forces mission, being in Kiev when the conflict started.

While Western officials presented information on the manoeuvres of the Russian military forces, the Kremlin categorized these actions as speculation by Western leaders, mere "baseless attempts to incite tensions" and insisted that the Russian Federation was acting to secure its own security through the prism of "increasing NATO challenges" at its borders[20]. On December 17, 2021, the Russian Federation published the draft of a document requesting NATO "to stop the expansion to the east" and return to the geopolitical situation of 1997, prior to the first wave of NATO expansion after the end of the Cold War[21]. The document, an additional argument regarding the Russian Federation's intentions, represented a plea for the Kremlin's revisionist manifestations and aimed at a change in the political order on the European continent, part of the Kremlin's propaganda regarding the reaffirmation of its strategic interests in the vicinity of the Euro-Atlantic system.

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[18] Harris, Shane and Sonne, Paul. 2021. "Russia Planning Massive Military Offensive against Ukraine Involving 175,000 Troops, U.S. Intelligence Warns." December 4, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/-2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad_story.html, accessed on 10.01.2024.

[19] Abdalla, Davies and Wagner. 2022. "Intelligence and the war in Ukraine." War on the rocks. May 11, available at https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/intelligence-and-the-war-in-ukraine-part-1/, accessed on 15.01.2024.

[20] "Developments in Donbass look like genocide — Putin." TASS. December 9, available at https://tass.com/world/1373489, accessed on 16.01.2024.

[21] "Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. December 17, available at https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en, accessed on 16.01.2024.

In parallel, top U.S. intelligence and officials continued to purposely leak classified information about Russian intentions to invade Ukraine, some of which are listed below: the U.S. State Department released satellite images that showed the concentration of Russian forces near the border with Ukraine and accused Moscow of planning a large-scale military intervention[22]; the director of the US national intelligence community warned that Russia was preparing to launch a multi-pronged offensive against Ukraine[23]; the US Defense Intelligence Agency has released a detailed report on Russian military capabilities and intentions in Ukraine, revealing that Moscow has mobilized six army corps, two airborne divisions and a naval infantry brigade to the border, along with forces for special operations, cyber specialists and propaganda teams[24]; the US Central Intelligence Agency has revealed it intercepted communications between senior Russian officials discussing a plan to install a pro-Kremlin leader in Ukraine after a military invasion, with the potential candidate identified as Viktor Medvedchuk, an Ukrainian oligarch and close ally of V. Putin[25]; the US National Security Agency revealed that it had detected Russian cyber attacks that targeted Ukrainian critical infrastructure, government networks and media outlets, attributing the attacks to a unit within the Russian military intelligence service known as the GRU[26]. The above examples highlight another important feature that has led to the success of the strategy of disclosing classified information: the Western intelligence system receives the benefits of the cooperation of state-level intelligence structures. Moreover, we believe that the competition between the various intelligence agencies has also generated strategies such as the disclosure of intelligence as new ways of exercising the power of a state.

After talks with the US and NATO on January 10 and 12, 2022 produced little progress, Russian officials said negotiations had reached an

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[22] Rochan Consulting. 2022. "IMINT Analysis: Russian Forces near Ukraine." Rochan Consulting. January 5, available at https://rochan-consulting.com/imint-analysis-russian-forces-near-ukraine/, accessed on 17.01.2024.

[23] Atlantic Council. 2022. "Will Russia make a military move against Ukraine? Follow these clues." atalnticcouncil.org. January 20, available at https://www.atlanticcouncil.-org/blogs/new-atlanticist/will-russia-make-a-military-move-against-ukraine-follow-these-clues/, accessed on 17.01.2024.

[24] Sabbagh, Dan. 2022. "Britain Steps up Ukraine Warnings despite Assurance from Moscow." *theguardian.com.* February 17, available at https://www.theguardian.-com/world/2022/feb/17/russian-forces-closer-ukraine-border-uk-sources, accessed on 18.01.2024.

[25] Risen, James. 2022. "US Intelligence says Putin made a last minute decision." theintercept.com. March 20, available at https://theintercept.com/2022/03/11/russia-putin-ukraine-invasion-us-intelligence/, accessed on 20.01.2024.

[26] Nakashima, Ellen. 2022. "Microsoft Discovers Destructive Malware on Several Ukrainian Government Agency Networks." washingtonpost.com. January 16, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-hacking/2022/01/-16/31f26c3a-7707-11ec-9102-d65488c31bb1_story.html, accessed on 21.01.2024.

"impasse," with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stating on January 14, 2022 that Moscow has "run out of patience" and will not wait indefinitely for a response to its requests for security guarantees[27]. We believe that the juxtaposition of the Kremlin's provocative tone with the disclosure of classified information, validated by independent analysts, indicating imminent aggression against a neighbouring country, has shaped the perception, at least among the Western population, that the Russian Federation is emerging as an aggressive state that intends to use, unprovoked, its exceptional military capabilities to conquer new territories and increase its sphere of influence.

While Western officials presented truthful information, validated by independent analyst communities, on the other hand, Russian Federation officials presented false information with the aim of misleading both domestic and international audiences. The Kremlin's speech mainly focused on two themes: the military support that the West gave to Ukraine in the conflict in Donbas (tass.com 2022), respectively the rise of the neo-Nazi current in Ukraine. We believe that this approach derives from the Russian Federation's belief that a maskirovka operation will mitigate the effects of intelligence disclosure, through techniques of mystifying reality[28].

As Ofek Riemer and Daniel Sobelman believed, the determination of the Kremlin leadership to invade Ukraine made the aggression of the Russian Federation unable to be prevented by the disclosure of classified information[29]. However, the intentional disclosure of classified information made it possible to discredit the Kremlin's narratives and limit, even neutralize in some cases, the effects generated by fake news spread through the Russian Federation affiliated propaganda vectors. The reaction at the level of the population of the NATO member states, in the first months after the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine, was, in general, of supporting Ukraine and condemning the Russian Federation. In May 2022, 73% of Europeans polled called Russia responsible for triggering the conflict, 54% supported the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees in European Union countries, and 62% approved cutting off all economic ties with Russian Federation. However,

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[27] "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answers to media questions at a news conference following talks on security guarantees with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Geneva, January 21, 2022, available at https://www.mid.ru/en/maps/us/1795493/?TSPD_-101_R0=08765fb817ab2000cfb7bb7c0ec8a08854ddd692a578ebab268eeab7992a6fac024d 547ed94893880869211b5b1430008d61e6b6a87b8d810b0a34063ea91be67b11072246b826 04d26b951713d4d765a6b52881dcea99d9ba53f60ad8e222e4, accessed on 21.01.2024.

[28] Devlin, Kayleen; Horton, Jake; and Robinson, Olga. 2022. " Ukraine crisis: Is Russia staging 'false flag' incidents?. February 23, available at https://www.-bbc.com/news/60470089, accessed on 22.01.2024.

[29] Riemer, Ofek and Sobelman, Daniel. 2023. "Coercive Disclosure: The Weaponization of Public Intelligence Revelation in International Relations." Contemporary Security Policy 44, no. 2, pp. 276-307.

within the European Union, the public perception of the war and the positions of the officials varied depending on the location of the member state, the participation in political or military alliances and the economic and historical ties with the Russian Federation[30], but it allowed the coagulation of a coalition of states to support Ukraine's defence effort by supplying military equipment. The participation of European countries in the economic sanctions against Russian Federation followed a similar pattern. All EU members, including Hungary—which opposed restrictions on Russian energy exports—agreed to adopt an extensive package of sanctions "intended to prevent further Russian Federation's aggression"[31].

The study under consideration leads us to the conclusion that, in the case of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, the intentional disclosure of classified information benefited from truthful information originating from the coordination of several intelligence services, validated by independent analysts and transmitted through credible and highly visible communication vectors. Post-factum, the strategy generated multiple effects, some of which are still difficult to outline completely, in the sphere of shaping public perception, with the role of influencing the political decision at the state level, of discrediting Russian Federation or of the rapid formation of coalitions to provide political and military support to the aggressed state, Ukraine. A future in which technology becomes even more advanced and accessible, in which the human-mobile phone binomial turns us into a source or a validation system for intelligence, makes it plausible that states' strategy of intentional disclosure of classified information becomes a permanent component of the modelling tools of the international security environment.

Conclusions

Looking back over the past century, intelligence success has often gone hand in hand with the ability to maintain secrecy, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows the extent to which this is no longer entirely true. Historically, states have resorted to the tool of classified information disclosure to support foreign policy decisions, but in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the scale and speed of this effort is remarkable. The strategy followed a relatively simple pattern: it was based on true information, repeated the same theme from different angles, had a specific objective and was well timed.

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[30] European Commission. 2022. EU response to the war in Ukraine. June 01, available at https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2772, accessed on 23.01.2024.
[31] European Council. 2024. *EU Restrictive measures against Russia over Ukraine.* January 03, available at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/, accessed on 27.01.2024/.

We believe that the effects of the classified information disclosure strategy can be included in the following three categories: influencing public perception by portraying Russian Federation as an aggressor state (as opposed to the failure to do so at the time of 2014 - the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula); the rapid formation of an international coalition that supported the imposition of sanctions against Russian Federation (NATO and EU member states, but also other international actors); respectively obtaining international means for supporting Ukraine by supplying weapon systems to fight against the Russian Federation aggression.

The communication channels and information propagation vectors, which benefited from the help of the technologies available in the field of open sources, categorically differentiate the moment under analysis from any other similar situations in the past. The private sector and social media users have played an important role. Images presented by the American space technology company Maxar or posts uploaded on social networks and specialized blogs supplemented the intelligence disclosed by Western officials, adding clarity to the unfolding of events.

If the Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine could not be prevented, the disclosure of classified information made it possible to take the initiative in the fight against Russian attempts at denial and deception through fake news, rejecting and discrediting such efforts. At the same time, the warning gave Western states time to equip and train the Ukrainian armed forces in preparation for a possible defence operation against a Russian invasion. Seen from this perspective, the success of the classified information disclosure strategy in the context of the conflict in Ukraine makes it possible to replicate actions of this type in future crisis situations, possibly with an even greater amplitude, which may involve at yet unsuspected levels a combination of open-source intelligence, data analysis and artificial intelligence algorithms.

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