

RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE

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Abstract: *The annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine brought the notion of hybrid warfare in the public attention faster than ever. The aggressor is involved in hybrid wars with mostly irregular troops, as paramilitary groups, destabilization groups, diversionary groups, and agents operating inside local rebel groups or under security companies' umbrella. Moscow uses a combination of conventional and unconventional methods with new and sophisticated capabilities to limit Western influence. The actual strategy is a warning to the West that Russia is denying any NATO activity close to its borders.*

Keywords: *hybrid, Ukraine, Russia, NATO, private security companies.*

In the last two decades, Moscow's main goal, articulated in words and demonstrated in actions, was to reshape the international system from a unipolar world where the United States was the primary power with a multipolar world order in which Russia would have greater room for manoeuvre to conduct Kremlin's chosen strategy. Advocating for a "democratic" or "multipolar" world order was clearly directed against the dominating position of the United States and the cooperation with China contributed to the nowadays new competition between US and a communist giant.

Having the nostalgia for the old imperial order, Russia aims to secure and control the post-Soviet area by limiting the sovereignty of its neighbours. Confronting the West to reshape the sphere of influence and to limit its ability to act unilaterally in various crises through diplomatic or economic means, represents another objective of Moscow's strategy. This includes as well preventing closer cooperation between the West and former Soviet states by deterring with the ability to inflict a credible conventional, hybrid or nuclear threat.

The strategic goal for Russia is to have a ring of states along its periphery that relate to Moscow out of fear for their survival, while at the same time serving as buffer zones between Russia and NATO.

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In order to safeguard its strategic interests Russia does not need or want a direct military conflict with NATO. Therefore, it is highly unlikely to initiate military actions that would carry a high risk of direct military confrontation. However, if the Kremlin believes that its vital interests are threatened, especially in its near abroad, this assessment changes and is less predictable. In addition, we may take into consideration that any acceptable conflict should be one of short duration as Moscow has also concluded that its economy lacks the resilience to sustain extended war.

As stated in Russian main strategic planning documents, such as National Security Strategy, Moscow perceives and portrays the Alliance as its main geopolitical adversary and as a potential threat to its security and interests. Through these speeches, the Kremlin regime is aiming particularly to gain the society's support and to enhance national control. The political desire to regain influence over Russia's near abroad as well as its military posture and capabilities, are a source of regional instability and pose an increasing potential threat to the NATO members and an immediate risk for some NATO partners.

Sensing the opportunities brought by Western divergent priorities and military spending cuts, Moscow has shown that it is willing to use military instruments, including force, to achieve its strategic foreign policy goals and to reconfigure the European security architecture, through both conventional and hybrid activities.

The classic war is based primarily on the use of regular forces and conventional armament, and has a lower weight of unconventional instruments. The hybrid war however, reverses this weight rapport and, moreover, no longer comply with any agreed rules. This feature gives it an insidious, hidden character, difficult to anticipate and counteract. In this way, the aggressor manages to project its power outside of its own borders or outside the territorial area it controls, to compensate for the deficit of military assets compared to the aggressed entity or, to reach a geopolitical goal difficult to achieve diplomatically.

The hybrid warfare concept reached high visibility after 2014, as the conflict in Ukraine was the first in Europe that met elements of a hybrid crisis, the actors being, on the one hand, the Ukrainian state and, on the

other hand, the pro-Russian separatists supported in the shadows by the Russian state.

Mark Galeotti, a recognized specialist in Russian security affairs, reasoned that Russia's operations in Crimea and eastern and southern Ukraine are subject to hybrid conflicts, with Moscow's new tactics aimed at focusing on the vulnerabilities of the enemy and avoiding direct and open confrontation. Russia's strategy against Ukraine was based on the doctrine launched in 2013 by the head of the Russian General Staff, Army General Valeri Gerasimov: *“In the 21st century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template”*¹.

Certainly, we can endorse that Russia's actions in Crimea contain elements of hybrid conflict, such as the use of political, diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, informational, cyber means, complementary to the military support of the separatists and special infiltration operations to ensure their operational and tactical superiority. Gaining the minds and souls of the population through the so-called fifth column previously infiltrated was also part of the same non-combatant arsenal.

Soldiers without uniforms, described as “little green men”, an expression that delighted news television, significantly contributed to preventing Kiev from regaining control of the separatist territories, along with mobile, mixed groups of military forces acting in a space controlled by intelligence services. This situation has been made possible by the new facilities offered by modern command and control systems, which make military activities more dynamic and efficient.

Other recent conflicts, as Chechnya (1996), Lebanon (2006), Afghanistan (2001) or Georgia (2008) also displays attributes of hybrid warfare. The conflict between Israel, a state actor, using the regular armed forces, and Hezbollah, a non-state entity, a follower of asymmetric fighting tactics, in Lebanon 2006, was the first to receive the attribute of “hybrid”.

¹ Valeri Gerasimov, *The billionaire industrial courier*, February 27, 2013, available at: <https://inmoscowshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war>, accessed on September 9, 2020.

Following that war, in 2007, American defence researcher Frank Hoffman described the terms “hybrid threat” and “hybrid warfare” as the employment of multiple, diverse tactics simultaneously against an opponent. The mixed use of conventional tactics is mentioned, such as ambushes for armoured vehicles, with irregular ones, respectively strengthening the positions of missiles and placing launchers in apartments.

Unlike the conventional war, in the hybrid conflict the aggressor no longer makes, openly, officially, a declaration of war, no longer gives an ultimatum and no longer explicitly assumes the military component of his actions, although he uses it. In other words, hybrid warfare is a war through third parties, through proxies. Russia has perfected itself on this front in waging a war without a state of war being declared, and this state of affairs represents, perhaps, for military strategists, a new opportunity to argue and substantiate new concepts of military doctrine.

Romanian sociologist and political scientist Dan Dungaciu, considers that *“in the hybrid war, not only the military weaknesses are essential, but especially the societal ones, the non-military ones, which the one who generates the aggression tries to take advantage of: ethnic tensions, weak and corrupt institutions, economic / energy dependence, etc. (...) Weak state means a state without strong institutions, with citizens disengaged from the state or even hostile to it, economically dependent on potential enemies, crushed by corruption, so easy to infiltrate at the level of strategic decision”*². We would add to these vulnerabilities the lack or blurring of the unity of a nation in terms of identity, in terms of socio-cultural, spiritual, historically established, to the same ethnic community, which ensures its unity of action based on a common set of national values.

Russian implementation and application of its hybrid model, which leverages asymmetric capabilities such as information warfare, special operation forces, cyber warfare, electronic warfare, counter-space, GPS jamming, etc. All these capabilities are comprehensively interrelated and their employment is connected to social and economic factors to create ambiguity for NATO and its neighbouring countries.

² Dan Dungaciu’s interview for “ziare.com”, available at <https://ziare.com/Europa/-ungaria/este-romania-in-razboi-hibrid-ungaria-destabilizatorul-nato-interviu-cu-dan-dungaciu-1349463>, accessed on April 12, 2020.

This approach is designed to add confusion, creating the appearance of interfering rather than presenting evidence of aggression against a sovereign nation by providing reversible and/or deniable actions.

The collapse of the Soviet Union started an era when state sovereignty weakened in several regions due to a wide range of reasons such as separatism, asymmetrical conflicts, or radical Islamism and as a result, armed non-stat actors took over of some attributes of power belonging to state's entities. Starting in the '90, as much as state power declined, private forces' influence increased, and currently, private armies represent a useful option for wealthy nations or for those that do not have enough military expertise. Hiring private security firms has become part of the modern war, as some countries are using private military and security companies to accomplish national ambitions, while denying a direct link to mercenaries. These companies represent a convenient approach to provide political support and to make available services which are traditionally provided by the state, such as logistics, intelligence, training, force protection and fire support. The relevance of these security contractors increased and some are capable of conducting large scale combat operations in support of different regional actors.

This method has long been used by countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa or Israel, but recently security companies and proxies belonging to Turkey and Russia proved their efficiency.

Russian private security companies have been used by the Moscow since at least 2014 and deployed to foreign missions where regular forces would have been inappropriate, for political reasons. Companies such as Wagner Group, Shield, Vega, Slav Corps, RSB-group and Patriot, represent a suitable tool for achieving Kremlin's objectives. These contractors have been employed in countries like Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Central African Republic, Venezuela, South Sudan, Mozambique, etc.³, for security and enabling activities, but also in combat operations. By providing military support to local regimes and their armed forces, especially in Middle East

³ *Mercenarii Rusiei*, available at <http://tvr moldova.md/extern/mercenarii-rusiei-ce-sunt-si-cum-actioneaza-micile-armate-private-comandate-de-moscova/>, accessed on April 10, 2020.

and North Africa, Kremlin seeks to install its military facilities, and develop the political influence required to obtain favourable conditions for both armaments contracts and long-term mining investments⁴.

The strength of these private military companies has been assessed by Jonas Kjellén and Nils Dahlgvist, analysts of Swedish Defence Research Agency, in their study *Russia's Armed Forces in 2019* as being less than 5000 personnel⁵, but taking into account their demonstrated efficacy and efficiency is possible that this number has been increased. Through the controlled private security companies, Russia is able to extend its operations to more and more countries while assuming minimal cost and risk. In this way, Moscow's political influence is expanding at the expense of the West and new economic opportunities are exploited.

Russia cannot afford a full-scale global conventional war with NATO, so the most realistic possibility is a hybrid war and a surprise attack to seize specific regions with strategic relevance in order to result a "fait accompli". Moscow is aiming at achieving its objectives by conducting operations below the threshold of conflict, by making the recognized lined between peace and war indistinct.

To achieve its objectives and the "fait accompli" result, our assessment is that hybrid tools could be employed by Russia firstly to shape the targeted environment, afterwards to engage private security companies and special operation forces, to transition then into a stabilization phase, to quickly consolidate the obtained advantages. The shaping phase could be a continued Baseline Activities and Current Operations (BACO) activity that target a nation by exploiting its internal conflicts and difficulties, influencing the decision-makers and gaining economic leverage. Countering adversary shaping actions is a permanent BACO task for NATO's Phase 1 Situational Awareness of NATO Operations Planning Process.

During NATO BACO activities, especially large scale exercises involving troop's deployment from continental US and testing the possible

⁴ Filip Bryjka, *Russian "Contractors" in the service of the Kremlin*, available at: <https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-contractors-in-the-service-of-the-kremlin/>, accessed on April 10, 2020.

⁵ *Russia and Eurasia*, available at: <https://www.foi.se/en/foi/research/security-policy/russia-and-eurasia.html>, accessed on September 24, 2020.

logistic support solutions, Russia is usually responding and is exploiting these actions as training opportunities for disruptive hybrid activities, such as fostering of anti-NATO or anti-US protests to hamper deployments or disruptive cyber activities.

According to Iulian Chifu, a new Russian hybrid war tool is represented by military provocations through unprofessional, reckless manoeuvres⁶. However, we can find that these actions are generally used by rival actors, and sometimes even between NATO members. In the areas of interaction of Russian and US forces such as the High North, Baltic and Black Sea regions or especially Eastern Mediterranean and Syria, the aggressive posture and mutual challenges between their forces in the air, at sea or on the ground, complemented by electronic warfare measures, can lead to unexpected incidents or escalation.

In general, aggressor entities benefit from the lack of international legislation that can exert coercive actions on them using hybrid warfare instruments to achieve political objectives. Instruments like irregular and unassumed military actions, sabotage, media propaganda, ethnic, socio-cultural and ideological subversive actions, often describes as soft power, are easier to use, with considerably lower cost and reduced risks to suffer coercive actions of the international law than direct military actions, the hard power. In the Ukrainian conflict, for example, there is a gradual “fatigue”, European countries prioritized their resources in reducing COVID-19 pandemic’s effects and some are willing to re-establish relations with Russia as they were before 2014.

Nowadays increasing connectivity and reliance on information technology is a vulnerability recognised by NATO and national security doctrine as it is being targeted by cyber-attacks and subversion of democratic institutions carried out by disinformation. Hard to anticipate and therefore difficult to prevent, the hybrid conflicts require a major rethinking and reconfiguration of the response. Their characteristics as long duration,

⁶ Iulian Chifu, *Scărmănelile aeriene, navale și terestre, provocări și manevre neprofesioniste – noul instrument hibrid al Rusiei*, available at: https://adevarul.ro/international/rusia/scarmanelile-aeriene-navale-terestre-provocari-manevre-neprofesioniste-noul-instrument-hibrid-rusiei-1_5f5861535163ec4271ce4888/index.html, accessed on September 9, 2020.

insidious and cross-border nature also create security risks that are difficult to manage, both regionally and globally.

The preventive approach to “hybrid” security crises involves a careful analysis of the security environment, a realistic assessment of their own vulnerabilities, a comprehensive knowledge of potential adversaries and their ability to promote their interests, but also a constant communication with the potentially affected population.

Counteracting hybrid threats is first of all a national competence, but many European states face common threats, which may target cross-border networks or infrastructure. Consequently, both NATO and UE support their member and partner states’ efforts to counter hybrid threats and improve their resilience when faced with these threats, linking national and collective instruments more effectively.

For decades, NATO prepared itself for conventional military conflicts, but starting 2001 its focus was redirected to non-article 5 operations in response to unconventional actions. After 2014, the Alliance was preoccupied to further adapt its strategy and capabilities to properly address the threats raised by the hybrid actions against its members and the freedom of movement limitations raised by Anti-Access and Area Denial systems. NATO developed instruments to prepare, deter, and defend against hybrid threats, instruments that combine military tools, intelligence and information sharing with civil-military preparation and resilience measures of the governmental agencies and major economical agents.

NATO is constantly adapting its structure and posture to face new emerging threats and to increase its readiness and responsiveness in all operational domains. The Alliance’s adaptation process comprised reactions to hybrid and cyber encounters as well as the development of policies and capabilities for the newly declared space operational domain. Following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the hybrid aggression in Ukraine, the Alliance started shifting its effort away from expeditionary stability operations and back to territorial defence.

NATO is consolidating the allies’ resilience in training activities that include hybrid threat scenarios cooperating with the European Union and partner countries in the Crisis Management domain. The EU has been increasingly exposed in recent times to hybrid threats consisting of hostile

actions aimed to destabilize a region or a state. The European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy adopted a common framework in April 2016 to counter hybrid threats and strengthen the resilience of the EU, its member states and partner countries, while stepping up cooperation with NATO to address these threats⁷.

The framework provides a comprehensive approach to improve the common response to the challenges posed by hybrid threats to member states, citizens and Europe's collective security. It brings together all relevant actors, policies and instruments to counter and mitigate the impact of hybrid threats in a more coordinated manner. The framework is based in particular on the European Security Agenda, which the Commission adopted in April 2015, as well as on sectoral strategies such as the EU Cyber Security Strategy, the European Energy Security Strategy and the EU Strategy on Maritime Security.

The NATO-EU cooperation in this area has also been improved by the efforts of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki, Finland, which has produced valuable work on education, training, table-top exercises and building resilience to hybrid threats.

The Alliance is able to support its members with Counter Hybrid Support Teams⁸, NATO Special Operations Forces, and other military advisory teams (in cyber domain, electronic warfare, and CBRN threats). The EU established a new structure to manage the information exchanged between member states and Brussels, the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, part of the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre-INTCEN within the European External Action Service. The EU Hybrid Fusion Cell receives, analyses and disseminates classified information between countries, the European Commission and the External Action Service.

⁷ The framework responds to the political guidelines of European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who emphasized the need to “*work for a stronger Europe in terms of security and defence*”.

⁸ In 2019, the first NATO counter-hybrid support team was deployed to Montenegro to help strengthen the country's capabilities in deterring and responding to hybrid challenges.

Russia's response to potential threats is considered by Valery Gerasimov, "*the strategy of active defence*"⁹, describing a combination of military and non-military capabilities. This new-generation warfare includes all instruments of national power, Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economic, but the military force pays special attention to irregular groups, diversion, armed private security companies, information operations, and offensive cyber.

Russian special operation forces, together with private security companies and Anti-Access and Area Denial systems represent key power multipliers and impressive enablers embedded in a hybrid Russian defence concept that is effective in times of tension, conflict, or war, and constitutes Russia's long-term conventional deterrence response to modern warfare.

These capable, offensive systems are well defended and are augmented by Russia's ability to conduct asymmetric offensive operations against Alliance's computer networks and satellite systems. These capabilities allow Russia to conduct asymmetric escalation against allied computer networks, communications systems, or civilian infrastructure during a period of heightened tension.



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⁹ *General Gerasimov on the Vectors of the Development of Military Strategy*, available at: <https://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=585> – March 2, 2019, speech delivered at the Russian Academy of Military Science, accessed on October 29, 2020.

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