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PERSPECTIVES



Rethinking Russian Hybrid Warfare

By Matej Kandrik

Russian hybrid warfare has been prominent in security policy-related debates in recent years. The concept emerged in the military analysts' community and spread quickly into media, public debate, and decision-makers' vocabulary. The term attracted a lot of attention. Some praised it as the advent of a new warfighting era while others criticised hollowness and a lack of analytical utility. The purpose of this paper is not to bring final judgment on these debates. Instead, the author's ambition is to distinguish between two different approaches to Russian hybrid warfare. Exploring Georgia as a case study provides for a different understanding of hybrid warfare than the one that emerged from the events of 2014/2015 in Ukraine. Last but not least, the author would like to find ways to salvage valuable bits of intellectual efforts spent on conceptualizing hybrid warfare before abandoning it. Despite all the [controversies](#) and [politicisation](#) surrounding the concept and the urgency to refocus on more traditional hard security issues such as conventional warfare or deterrence, threats emanating from the so-called grey-zone area are here to stay. It's an important part of the intellectual contribution to the national security of scholars and researchers bringing [clarity and critical reflection](#) to key policy discussions.

Crimean Origin

While the initial academic conceptualisation of hybrid warfare can be traced back to the First Chechen war or the 2006 Lebanese war, these were very different from the so-called Russian hybrid warfare. For William J. Nemeth, the [Chechen insurgency](#) was as a reflection of a hybrid pre-state and modern society. For Frank Hoffman, [hybrid warfare](#) consisted of the integration of conventional and irregular methods of warfare. Both, in principle, examine the use of violence, force, and fighting. In striking contrast, the Western imagination of Russian hybrid warfare evolved into a concept centered around the non-military, non-kinetic part of the strategic toolbox of states and non-state actors.

The annexation of Crimea and the subsequent armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the Donbas region was especially surprising, shocking, and indeed, confusing to Western observers. To explain the rapid, smooth, and successful Russian actions leading to the Crimea takeover, there was a need to come up with an explanation outside the ordinary. The author will argue that this fundamentally changed the perception of how states use non-military means to achieve dominance. As a result, Russian hybrid warfare was born.

Since 2014, hybrid warfare or hybrid threats have become ["fashionable"](#) and entered the official documents of NATO, the EU and most of its members, including most





CEE countries. Its understanding has evolved significantly, gravitating inevitably towards highly [politicised use](#). However, debates over hybrid warfare have not avoided serious misconceptions.

The most explicit of these is certainly the so-called [Gerasimov doctrine](#), which has been widely misconstrued, but has nevertheless stimulated the imagination of many who should know better.

Many would argue that Russian hybrid warfare is just another alteration of the shiny object syndrome in the academia-think-tanks-policy-making nexus, and we should [get rid of it](#) as soon as possible.

Yet, the Russo-Ukrainian war is changing security and defense-related debates. To put it bluntly, why care about the hybrid war when there is a real, brutal war?

Hard Security Regains Focus

Kinetic parts of war, like bombing and shooting, are understandably getting the most attention. Spectacles of physical violence and massive destruction are qualitatively completely different from cyber-attacks, energy coercion or disinformation campaigns.

Military considerations in armed conflict are overtaking non-military considerations. This is also reflected in the volume of operational analysis, insights into tactics, or logistics debate now present in media daily.

Hard security discussions and defence policy preparation are back and at full strength. Many of those who, for a long time, have been eager to put hybrid warfare into the grave now have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to fully shift focus to force structure, capabilities, readiness, defence planning, armaments, and other traditional aspects of state-on-state conventional warfare.

An important question is if this is sensible and whether there is something valuable to salvage from hybrid warfare debates before we move on. To do so, it might be helpful to discuss the beginning of the current war in Ukraine, the events of 2014 in Crimea and the current case of Georgia.

Lessons Learned

It is intriguing how the invasion from February 2022 can be used to make two very different arguments about hybrid warfare.

First, one would assume that the Kremlin saw its attempts to influence Ukraine through hybrid warfare as inconclusive since Kyiv stayed dedicated to its pro-Western orientation while Russian influence waned. Therefore, the decision was made to escalate and use military force directly for regime change, which is the ultimate way of controlling the decision-making of another polity. Such thinking would be derived from a conceptualisation of hybrid warfare based on the annexation of Crimea.

Major political goals, such as the annexation of part of opponents' territory, are traditionally obtained through the use of significant military means. While the military element certainly was a part of the "Crimean mixture", let's not forget about the infamous little green men. Western debates have increasingly focused more on non-military elements. Moreover, Allies usually emphasised precise orchestration and sequencing of different actions, a "hybrid essence", leading to synergic effects. In this approach, hybrid warfare was seen as the main effort for achieving the desired strategic effect.

The second argument goes in a different direction. Russian President Vladimir Putin believed Ukraine was ripe for conquest because he believed it was weak, divided and highly vulnerable to weaponised corruption, energy coercion, propaganda, cyber-attacks and a [network of collaborators organised by his secret services](#).

Similarly, after the Capitol insurrection and problematic withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US might have been seen as distracted and unable to respond. Europe always had an issue with divergent threat perception, especially with the ["Franco-German engine"](#) looking everywhere but east. With high energy dependency, societies vulnerable to disinformation campaigns and strong local and national level actors aligned with the Kremlin, the rest of Europe seemed incapable of taking any meaningful action.



Looking back, it is clear that these miscalculations by Russia have come at great cost and have put into jeopardy the success of its War in Ukraine.

Yet, as far as we know from [open sources](#), Russian intelligence was running their polls inside Ukraine, showing relatively low approval of President Zelenskyy (less than 30 per cent) and limited willingness to defend Ukraine (only 48 per cent). Over 600 individuals were arrested and charged with treason, suggesting that the FSB worked diligently in Ukraine before the invasion.

It was openly admitted by Kyiv that Russian forces quickly overtook Kherson through the help of collaborators which had been planted in advance into the security forces tasked with defending the region. This line of thinking understands hybrid warfare more as the setting of conditions and incremental environment-shaping activity without expectations of delivering substantial results. In such an approach, hybrid warfare acts as a supporting effort for achieving desired strategic effect by other means.

The remarkable success of Russian actions leading to Crimea's annexation led us to unrealistic expectations and subsequent misinterpretation of the capabilities of hybrid warfare. Also, by overemphasising the non-military dimension, many in the West somehow missed the important role of armed violence by special forces, proxy militias, and mercenaries but also directly by Russian armed forces in Crimea and Donbas.

An important lesson to learn from all this is to never use one outlier case as the cornerstone of a new theory.

Georgia: A Hybrid Warfare Case Study

Approaching hybrid warfare as environment-shaping activity can be [well-illustrated](#) by analysing the ongoing issue of Georgia. Georgia evolved from a NATO and EU integration champion into a country struggling with state capture by a Russia-tied oligarch and his cronies in 2022.

The country, with 20 per cent of its territory under Kremlin-backed occupation since 2008, didn't join Western sanctions against Russia. Moreover, the Georgian government grounded a plane with volunteers heading to Ukraine and has [recently been in discussions](#) with Moscow over reopening direct flights between countries.

That is not to say that all political changes in Georgia since 2012 are a direct of Russian hybrid warfare. Yet, an increase in the Kremlin's influence in the country is undeniable. The governmental push for a Kremlin-style "[foreign agents bill](#)" aimed at suppressing potent and universally pro-European civil society is the most recent attempt to sway the country into the Russian zone of influence. Massive protests as a counter-reaction to the bill show clearly that there is a popular struggle for a different political direction. Following the [ominous threat](#) to Georgians by the Twitter account of the Russian MFA Office in Crimea, there were no doubts about whose interests were involved. Popular sentiment, which supports Ukraine, contrasts starkly with the [government's fence-sitting positions](#).

It is valuable to compare Georgia and Ukraine from a hybrid warfare perspective. Were the Crimea annexation and subsequent armed conflict with separatists really successful for Moscow when its actions pushed Kyiv toward the West? Should we instead study and understand Georgia's slow and gradual change, "frog cooking", as the real triumph of hybrid tactics? Looking at Georgia, [Moldova](#), significant parts of the [Western Balkans](#) and also at Slovakia, we see countries with contested basic national identities, fragile foreign policy orientation and serious corruption issues, which is a perfect vulnerability mix for the Kremlin's subversive influence.

This debate holds important implications for policymaking. Our enchantment with Russian hybrid warfare should be deeply rethought to correctly assess the scope of its threat. Portraying it as larger than life, ever-present, and overly ominous is not productive.

The quick, decisive, up-to-date, unwavering help from Europe and the US to Ukraine (in comparison with weak, halfhearted reactions to the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia or 2014/2015 aggression against Ukraine) is strong evidence that Russian hybrid warfare effectiveness has been overestimated. The incredible [resilience and resistance](#) of Ukrainian society has shown us the serious limitations of the Kremlin's hybrid toolkit. At the same



time, abandoning hybrid warfare altogether in a full shift towards conventional war preparedness and state peer-to-peer confrontation leaves us with a serious gap in our security. Going from one overreaction to another would not be wise nor helpful. Economic coercion, espionage, lawfare, strategic corruption, multidomain use of proxies, cyber-attacks, and propaganda are [all malign tools](#) used by our adversaries, both state and non-state, that will continue to be used in the future.

Struggles over legitimacy, credibility, and political and economic access in a highly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment will define international relations for the foreseeable future. Looking only at the high-end part of the threat spectrum can be a dangerous mistake.

Western national security systems typically function like stovepipes, which makes them especially vulnerable to threats that do not fit well into the narrowly defined agenda of a specific ministry or agency. Therefore, hybrid warfare, in principle, if not in name, should stay with the West as an integral part of strategic competition.

About the Author:

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