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**RUSSIA’s HYBRID WARFARE**

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**Abstract:**

Hybrid threat actors seek to master unrestricted operational art in order to reconcile overmatch and protect or advance their interests. As interest-based rational actors, hybrid threats translate strategic intent into unrestricted distributed operations. As an unrestricted collective methodology, the hybrid concept bypasses the cognitive boundaries of traditional threat characterization and the application of organized collective violence. The paper aims to unveil, briefly, the evolution of the term hybrid threat and emphasize, by analyzing a few study cases, its energy component and possible future developments.

**Introduction**

The form of warfare which Russia has admittedly employed in Crimea, and tried to use in eastern Ukraine too, has come to be known as ‘hybrid war’.

However, it should be noted that the expression originally had a different meaning. Hence, it is necessary to briefly trace the development of both the concept of hybrid war and of Russia’s so-called new generation war in order to understand the military theory behind the origin of the war in Ukraine.

The aim is not to provide a full historical overview, but to list the main milestones in its theoretical development.

**I. The emergence of the hybrid war concept in military theory**

**1. Development of the hybrid war concept**

The term hybrid war first emerged in the work of Major William J. Nemeth in the thesis he wrote while at the Monterey Naval Postgraduate School in 2002, entitled *Future War and Chechnya: A Case of Hybrid Warfare*

**2. The hybrid war in Chechnya**

Nemeth argued that Chechen society was in a hybrid situation between a pre-modern and contemporary state, where the architecture of the modern society was built upon the basis of a traditional, pre-state clan and family ties.

This structure enabled Chechens to mobilize their society for war and provide widespread support for the fighting through family ties. The field commanders who emerged could also rely on the loyalty originating from kinship relations in addition to military virtues and demonstrated success against the Russians.

What is more important is that from this hybrid society a hybrid form of warfare emerged, which combined elements of regular and irregular warfare in a highly flexible and efficient way.

The Chechens were successful in synthesizing elements of Western and Soviet military doctrines with guerrilla tactics and the sophisticated use of modern technology.



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Reliance on their intimate knowledge of the terrain and the background support of kinship relations played an important role in their strong resilience. Their warfare put great emphasis on flexibility, enabling the Chechens to quickly switch from guerrilla warfare to more conventional, direct tactics and back again, depending on the Russian moves.

The main factor which made Chechen warfare exceptional in traditional guerrilla operations was that besides the conventional ambush tactics, the Chechens were also able to mount larger, well-coordinated, but at the same time fluid operations.

In addition to their highly flexible operational tactics the Chechens also used psychological and information operations against the Russian forces. Their detailed knowledge of Russian culture and fluency in Russian made their information operations very effective. Meanwhile, due to close kinship and religious ties as well as ethnic homogeneity, Chechen society turned out to be largely impervious to Russian propaganda efforts.

Besides undermining the morale of Russian soldiers, Chechens were able to drum up considerable political support and sympathy in the West as well.

At the same time, as the hybrid nature of Chechen society is hard for outsiders to understand, so was hybrid warfare, which hampered the operational capabilities of Russian military intelligence. The hybrid warfare employed by the hybrid Chechen society exhibited the following main strengths: innovative ideas, charismatic leaders, strong belief in the cause, society's ability to absorb even extreme damage, and decentralized tactics. Because the war involved the whole society, another phenomenon of hybrid warfare, according to Nemeth, is its total nature: it blurs the distinction between combatants and non-combatants and is ready to rely on the use of terrorism, massacres, extremely inhumane treatment of prisoners, and criminal methods as well.

All in all, the term 'hybrid warfare' in Nemeth's work basically signified a society-specific way of warfare, which combined irregular and regular tactics with modern information measures.

However, as will be demonstrated later, certain elements of the Chechen 'hybrid warfare' may well have influenced the contemporary Russian hybrid warfare, particularly when it came to the overall perception of the war.

### **3. Hybrid wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon**

Nemeth's theories were further developed by John McCuen in an article published in the March-April issue of the *Military Review* in 2008. According to McCuen, contemporary hybrid wars are fought on three decisive fronts.

The first of these is the conventional battleground, where one needs to face both symmetric and asymmetric threats, the second is the battleground of the population of the attacked country, where the often alienated and hostile locals need to be convinced, while the third front is composed of the home population and the international community, whose support is also essential, particularly in the case of long war.

Hence, McCuen defines hybrid conflicts as follows:

“Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.

Hybrid wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are



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generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of the conflict. These effects can be gained at all levels of war.”

Due to the fact that the hybrid war that includes both regular and irregular elements, these occurred in different places or in different formations, but act in a coordinated, coherent way, for the external observer as well as for the enemy, they may become blurred into a single force acting in a single, comprehensive battlespace.

The key to hybrid warfare is convergence and coordination, which allow the various actors to act together in order to achieve a synergistic effect.

Another important point raised is that hybrid wars do not announce the demise of conventional warfare, but instead represent a complicating factor in defence planning.

In other words, the emergence of hybrid threats does not make older tools and methods of conventional warfare obsolete and unnecessary. Instead, they add a new layer of threats which a modern armed force needs to be able to counter.

It is worth noting that as early as 2009 the US Joint Forces Command adopted a semi-official definition of hybrid threats, albeit only for the purposes of a conference held in Washington D.C.:

“Hybrid threat: Any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a tailored mix of conventional, irregular, terrorism and criminal means or activities in the operational battlespace. Rather than a single entity, a hybrid threat or challenger may be comprised of a combination of state and non-state actors”.

Hence, even in 2009 there was little that was new in the combined use of state and non-state actors, as well as the simultaneous appearance of conventional, irregular methods as well as terrorism and criminal means. It is worth pointing out, however, that even this definition concentrated only on the various ways of using force and violence, and thus did not consider the use of political, diplomatic and economic tools.

American expert Russell Glenn gave another, even more detailed definition in 2009, connected to a joint US-Israeli war game concerning hybrid threats in 2008:

“An adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs some combination of political, military, economic, social, and information means, and conventional, irregular, catastrophic, terrorism, and disruptive/criminal warfare methods. It may include a combination of state and non-state actors”.

The main novelty of Glenn’s definition is that it already took into account the use of non-violent political, economic and other means as well. Hence, striking similarity may be observed if one compares this definition to the field events in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. In the spring and summer of 2014, Russian forces and pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine employed all the measures listed by Glenn.

The only exception (as yet) unseen in Ukraine is catastrophic terrorism, as well as natural or man-made disasters that cause extreme damage to the population, environment, society, infrastructure and governmental functions, such as blowing up a major river dam or a nuclear power plant.

However, the above-mentioned definition was not adopted by all. In 2012 a whole collection of essays was published about hybrid warfare, edited by Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor.



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They defined hybrid warfare as: “... a conflict involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars (guerrillas, insurgents and terrorists), which could include both state and non-state actors, aimed at achieving a common political purpose”.

#### **4. Russia ’s new-generation warfare**

As logical follow up to the Western developments, Russian military thinkers have also studied the changes taking place in the nature of warfare in depth, and the emergence of new forms of combat. In keeping with the previous sections, the goal of the present paper will not be to provide a full overview of the developments of Russian military thinking, but only to highlight some of the milestones that led to the warfare witnessed in Ukraine in 2014.

In his book *If War Comes Tomorrow*, first published in 1995, Russian General Makhmut Gareev argued that technological progress has fundamentally changed warfare, in relation to both the destructive effects of conventional weapons and the emergence of completely new forms of weaponry. He predicted that due to the increased range of missile and artillery systems, in a future war the depths of enemy territory could easily be penetrated in an attack.

Gareev pointed out that technological development made the methods and means of information warfare much more sophisticated than before. New computers and communication systems allow the swift collection of information and short-reaction command and control. He forecasted the widespread use of electronic warfare, aimed at disrupting the functionality of enemy communication, radar systems and command and control.

Regarding the new means and objectives of information warfare, Gareev argues that: “... systematic broadcasting of psychologically and ideologically biased materials of a provocative nature, mixing partially truthful and false items of information [...] can all result in a mass psychosis, despair and feelings of doom and undermine trust in the government and armed forces, and, in general, lead to the destabilization of the situation in those countries, which become objects of information warfare, creating a fruitful soil for actions of the enemy.”

So, as early as 1995 Gareev treated information warfare as an integral and often decisive element in future armed conflicts. He also argued that new information warfare methods may well imply that, instead of a direct armed attack, the struggle may get transformed into a hidden, latent, undeclared war.

Gareev’s ideas were further developed by General Vladimir Slipchenko, who characterized future wars as ‘non-contact’. According to Slipchenko, in a modern war, strikes will come from the air and space, executed with high-precision weapon systems in the depths of enemy territory. The focus will be on destroying military, political and economic targets, particularly the command and control infrastructure, without directly engaging enemy forces in a conventional attack.

The White Paper published in 2003 constituted an important turning point in Russian military operational art. The Paper perceived Russia as a country threatened from all directions, implying that Russia needs to be ready to take the strategic initiative. The document reflected many changes in modern warfare already mentioned by Gareev and others, including the fact that in-depth precision strikes and long-range fire combat are going to replace close-contact fighting, the increasing importance of information warfare, the emergence of global communication networks in command and control, and the need to employ combined strike capabilities.



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These ideas about future armed conflicts were significantly developed by General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, in the journal *Voennopromishlenniy kurier*, published in 2013.

By referring to the experiences of the Arab Spring, Gerasimov described a new form of warfare, called “new generation warfare”, which concentrates on the combined use of diplomatic, economic, political and other non-military methods with direct military force, instead of waging open war.

According to Gerasimov, the very rules of warfare have changed. The Russian general argued that the importance of non-military means in reaching political and strategic goals has increased, moreover, they are often more efficient than arms alone.

Gerasimov foresees the concealed, non-open use of force, such as paramilitary and civilian insurgent units, and emphasizes the need to rely on asymmetric, indirect methods. He urges that, besides the physical reality, war should include the information space as well, where the real-time coordination of the means and tools used is possible. He puts great emphasis on targeted strikes conducted well behind enemy lines and on the destruction of the enemy’s critical infrastructure, regarding both its military and civilian elements, preferably in a short timeframe.

Gerasimov also advocates the massive use of Special Forces and also of robotized weapons, such as drones. As he argues, regular forces should be put into action only in the late phases of the conflict, often under the disguise of peacekeeper or crisis-management forces.

Furthermore, although it is far from classical military theory, mention should also be made of an article by Russian presidential advisor Vladislav Surkov, written under his frequently used pseudonym, Nathan Dubovitsky. The essay speaks about a future war, which involves everybody and everything, all aspects of life, while still remaining elusive in its main contours.

Surkov/Dubovitsky called this new form of future warfare ‘non-linear war’. It is probably no coincidence that the article was published on 12 March 2014, only a few days before the official Russian annexation of Crimea.

Since then, Russian military theorists have continued to discuss new generation warfare. Sergei Chekinov and Sergei Bogdanov, for example, have elaborated on Gerasimov’s proposals, and have provided a much more detailed description of the ‘new generation war’. The authors declared the Gulf War to be the first ‘new generation conflict’ in human history and use it to illustrate their thesis about the characteristics of this type of warfare, along with the general concept of network-centric warfare.

The authors concur with Gerasimov in stressing the high importance of asymmetric actions aimed at neutralizing the enemy’s military superiority through the combined use of political, economic, technological, ecological and information campaigns.

By referring again to the Gulf War, the writers point to the need for integrating all these tools into a single, shared system of command and control in order to multiply their efficiency.

Similarly to Gerasimov, Chekinov and Bogdanov continue the defence narrative, describing new generation warfare as an operation possibly conducted by the United States or the West. They write very explicitly about the need to massively employ non-military methods prior to and during an armed confrontation. They concretely list the media, religious organizations, cultural institutions, NGOs, public movements financed from abroad and scholars engaged in research on foreign grants as possible components of a coordinated attack against the target country.



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They also accuse the United States of operating a specialized internet ‘troll’ army and of using Facebook and Twitter for propaganda purposes. The authors highlight the need to gain information superiority over the target country, both by conducting intensive propaganda prior to the actual attack, and by the continuous use of electronic warfare (EW) methods to disable enemy communication, command and control capabilities.

Hence, EW is transforming from a combat support activity into an important form of combat operation. Their forecast is that the main battleground for new-generation wars will be the information space. According to the authors, new-generation wars will be dominated by psychological and information warfare aimed at crushing the morale of enemy troops and the population, thus breaking their will to resist. In addition, they predict that in future wars the widespread use of non-traditional forms of fighting can be expected, such as weapons able to influence the weather or trigger earthquakes, as well as the increased use of robotized, possibly autonomous weapon systems. Genetically engineered biological weapons may also appear.

#### **5. New-generation war: step by step**

Chekinov and Bogdanov describe the phases of the way in which a new-generation war is likely to start in such a detailed manner that their description warrants further attention.

The authors divide the war into an opening and a closing period. The opening period starts with an extremely intensive, months-long coordinated non-military campaign launched against the target country, including diplomatic, economic, ideological, psychological and information measures. Added to this, a heavy propaganda campaign has to be conducted in order to depress the enemy population, spark discontent vis-a-vis the central government and weaken the morale of the armed forces. Deceiving and bribing governmental and military officers in the target country is an important way of decreasing the functionality of enemy armed forces in advance.

They prescribe that secret agents have to be deployed within the target country, properly supplied with funds, weaponry and other materials in order to commit terrorist acts, conduct provocations and create chaos and instability. The authors also anticipate the arrival of international militants in the target country to exacerbate the situation.

Directly prior to the start of the military phase, large-scale reconnaissance and subversive missions are to be expected, which use all possible means and methods of information gathering, ranging from diplomatic signalling tools to espionage in order to locate and map out enemy military units, key governmental facilities and critical infrastructure.

This is to be followed by a full-scale electronic warfare operation, an ‘electronic knockdown’ aimed at disabling the enemy’s government and military. Immediately thereafter, the real military attack would begin, probably with a massive aerial operation involving precision missiles, drones and other automated weapons, as well as long-range artillery. According to the authors, by the end of the opening phase, the enemy country would have its main government and military control centres destroyed, and critical infrastructure heavily damaged to such an extent that it would be rendered ungovernable. Hence, it would also be unable to properly deploy its defence forces.

The next, closing phase of a new generation war would see the attacker’s regular ground forces entering the target country, in order to isolate and destroy the remaining points of resistance. This second phase is much less detailed; in contrast to the several pages dedicated to the opening phase, the closing phase constitutes only one paragraph.



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This reinforces the impression that Chekinov and Bogdanov consider the first, predominantly non-military phase of the conflict to be much more important than the second. There is a striking similarity between the new generation war theoretically described by Chekinov and Bogdanov in 2013 and the events that took place in Ukraine in 2014, particularly prior to and during the Russian operation in Crimea.

As the authors prescribed, a several-months-long non-military preparatory campaign against Ukraine must have started well before the EuroMaidan, in mid-2013 at the latest, but probably even earlier.

Interestingly enough, the original Chekinov-Bogdanov article was published in the No. 10. issue of the *Voyennaya Misl'* in 2013. This may well mean that the Russian strategy that was already being employed against Ukraine was published at that time, which is indeed a rare case in military history. However, this did not help the new Ukrainian leadership that came to power in February 2014 to stop the hybrid war and prevent the Russian annexation of Crimea.

#### **6. How to name the conflict in Ukraine?**

From what can be reconstructed, the term hybrid war did not emerge immediately after the start of the Russian operation in Crimea. While the elusive, indirect and highly effective warfare conducted by the Russian forces took not only Ukraine but the whole world by surprise, experts and journalists were casting around for expressions to describe this suddenly emerging, unprecedented phenomenon.

When the Russian operation unfolded in late March, even the leading military and defence affairs journal *Jane's* had not yet come up with a concrete name, but spoke only about a 'novel approach' to warfare. So did Latvian expert Jānis Bērziņš in his April 2014 study, which was one of the first comprehensive analyses of the new Russian warfare being waged in Crimea.

Even long after the Crimea operation, several expressions have been used in parallel. Peter Pomerantsev used the expression 'non-linear war' in *Foreign Policy* in May 2014, referring to the already-cited work of Vladislav Surkov. The same 'non-linear war' term was used by Mark Galeotti, leading expert on Russian security structures in his essay published in July, based on the logic of warfare put forward by Gerasimov.

The use of the term hybrid war didn't gain traction until summer 2014, although there were several mentions before that. Dutch General Frank van Kappen called the Russian operations a hybrid war on 26 April 2014. Russian political scientist and former advisor to President Vladimir Putin, Andrei Illarionov, also mentioned the term in June 2014, pointing out the importance of information warfare in this new mode of warfare.

A breakthrough in the discourse came when NATO decided to adopt the expression. In a *NATO Review* video posted on 3 July 2014<sup>69</sup> NATO publicly declared this new form of warfare to be a 'hybrid war'. Shortly thereafter in August, the *Washington Post* also used the term, followed by the use of the expression 'hybrid warfare' more than once and as a well-elaborated, comprehensive term during NATO's Wales Summit in late September.

The Wales Summit declaration described 'hybrid warfare' as "a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures [...] employed in a highly integrated design".

It should be noted, however, that in addition to the increasingly dominant role of NATO's hybrid war discourse, new, alternative terms are also emerging. In their article published in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely argued for the name 'full spectrum conflict'.



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They proposed this expression because, as they argued, Russia uses several military and non-military means under a single central command, subordinated to a centrally-defined political goal, and a number of means are not at all of a military or violent nature, such as food bans.

Further, the use of *conflict* instead of *war* also better reflects the varying degrees of ambiguity and intensity in Russia’s actions. According to the authors, this is in stark contrast to the more binary Western interpretation, which perceives the absence of armed fighting as peace.

All in all, concerning the terminology to be used when describing Russia’s new mode of warfare as deployed in Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine, one may conclude that the expression hybrid war has become the most commonly used term. This occurred notwithstanding the fact that, strictly from the military science point of view, hybrid war originally had different, although related meanings.

The term hybrid war has already undergone such a transformation, well before Crimea. The original introduced by Bill Nemeth referred to the flexible, half regular, half irregular warfare of the Chechens in 1994–1996, but later evolved to describe the combined warfare of relying on conventional arms, irregular warfare, methods of terrorism and organized crime, as applied, for example, when talking about Iraq.

The same transformation of meaning is taking place once again, as hybrid war is gradually becoming the preferred term to describe Russia’s operation in Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine.

In addition to all of the above, it is also important to note the article by Lawrence Freedman published in the December 2014–January 2015 issue of *Survival*. Freedman argued that while from April 2014 the situation could be described as an externally sponsored insurgency in Eastern Ukraine, or as a hybrid war, this changed with the massive involvement of regular Russian forces in August 2014. Hence, he applied the term *limited war* to describe the post-August phase of the conflict.

According to Freedman, the war is still limited because no nuclear forces were used, massive armies were not deployed along the entire length of the Russia-Ukraine border, and direct diplomatic communication between the two sides continued, despite the high costs on both sides.

All in all, it is worth pointing out that the original denotations of hybrid war are not capable of completely describing the Russian warfare in Ukraine. Probably the most important difference is that in Ukraine a state, namely Russia, has been using hybrid warfare, while in all previous cases (in Chechnya, Iraq, and Lebanon) these tools were used by non-state actors. Hence, Russia’s operations in Ukraine have been much wider than any earlier analysts of hybrid wars could have imagined.

They included influencing even the highest levels of policymaking and the use of diplomatic and macroeconomic measures as well, none of which was mentioned in the earlier definitions – precisely because earlier analysts of hybrid warfare thought mainly about non-state actors, incapable of conducting high politics.

In contrast to the earlier studies, Russia’s hybrid warfare was not concentrated solely on the battlefield or in the operational theatre, instead, the main emphasis was put on other, non-military methods, which mitigated the necessity for an armed confrontation.



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## **II. Case studies analyses**

### **1. Moldova (1992-2016)**

Moldova's eastern region of Transnistria declared its independence in September 1990. Moldova's central government ignored the claim and declared its own independence from the Soviet Union a year later. A brief war ensued in 1992 between Moldovan and Transnistrian forces, the latter supported by the Russian 14th Army.

Russian military forces remained stationed in Transnistria after Moldovan independence, and a security zone was established along the line of conflict, policed by a tripartite peacekeeping force of Russian, Transnistrian, and Moldovan forces.

Russia's objectives in Moldova have been to maintain Russian influence and prevent the former Soviet republic from building strong alliances with the European Union and NATO. Russia's military presence in the frozen conflict over Transnistria allows it to threaten Moldova with internal destabilization and, possibly, territorial fragmentation.

Moldova is highly dependent on Russia as an export market for its agricultural products, as a major source of foreign investment, as a job market for Moldovan workers, and as a provider of energy—particularly gas, which is needed to operate Moldovan electricity plants.

Russia has employed a continuous, long-running hostile-measures campaign against Moldova. A mix of nine short- and long-term hostile measures applied against Moldova from 1992 through 2016 have come up in to the light have so far:

- forward stationing military forces in Transnistria that threaten Moldovan security;
- support for Moldovan communists and coercion of other political parties;
- saturation of Moldovan cable television with pro-Russia programming;
- cultural influence (e.g., engagements, religious affiliations) to influence opinion;
- periodic economic sanctions targeted at Moldovan light-industry products;
- restricting the mobility of the Moldovan labour force, thereby hindering employment;
- leveraging Transnistrian labour and industry to undermine the Moldovan economy;
- manipulating energy supplies, including cuts to vital natural gas in winter;
- applying compatriot policies, including issuing Russian passports to Transnistrians.

Operational intensity and focus have wavered over time, but some measures—including the military presence in neighbouring Transnistria—have been in place without change for decades.

Learning from the Moldova Case Process Russia's hostile-measures campaign in Moldova offers considerable opportunity for pattern tracing. As in other cases, Russia employed both immediate and long-term hostile measures in Moldova. Immediate measures are targeted and appear intended to achieve specific, near-term tactical effects. Long-term measures appear intended to apply constant pressure against the target and to set a permanent change in the status quo.

The two categories of hostile measures overlap to a large extent: Long-standing hostile measures give Russia the ability to “surge” at specific times or provide the terrain for more-aggressive discrete actions. The combinatory pattern of immediate and long-term measures appears to be typical of the Russian approach.



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Russia has succeeded in executing hostile-measures tactics against Moldova for nearly three decades. However, this campaign of tactical successes has not generated strategic success.

As of early 2019, Moldova was not on an official track toward NATO membership, but cooperation with NATO was improving.

Moldova also increased trade with the EU to offset its trade losses with Russia, increased energy imports from the West to offset lost imports from Russia, and increased military cooperation with the West in at least partial reaction to a fear of Russian intervention.

In 2014, Moldova and the EU signed a formal agreement aimed at improving both political and economic cooperation. If Russia's primary objective was to keep Moldova in its sphere of influence and to prevent a westward shift in Moldovan alliances, it has thus far failed. In fact, the entire long-running Russian hostile-measures operation appears to have backfired. Constant existential threats, economic punishment, vitriolic diplomacy, and insidious manipulation of the Moldovan population were never matched by sufficient incentives that could have enticed Moldova's leaders or population in the opposite direction.

In many ways, these results should have been foreseen. Russia might find ways to reverse this westward lean, but its efforts can best be described as a slow-burning, low-grade, and a mostly self-induced strategic failure. At this point this operation was rated in the specialised publications as a tactical success and a strategic failure.

## **2. Georgia (2004-2012)**

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia has sought greater independence from Russia and Russia has worked to maintain its influence over Georgia and the South Caucasus. The relationship between the two countries has been overtly hostile since the 2003 Rose Revolution brought a pro-Western regime to power in Georgia.

Some of the gravest points of disagreement have revolved around the status of the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Georgia's aspirations to join the EU and NATO.

Mikheil Saakashvili, president of Georgia from 2004 to 2013, is a Western-educated politician with an aggressively pro-Western agenda.

The five day war, for control of South Ossetia, came only a few months after Georgia's application to the NATO membership action plan at the Bucharest summit in early April 2008. Russia's actions against Georgia continued well beyond the brief period of direct combat.

Russia had four objectives in this case:

- keeping Georgia within its sphere of influence and preventing its accession to NATO,
- maintaining control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia,
- discouraging European leaders from pursuing energy policies that would have reduced dependence on Russia, and
- signalling a clear threat to other former Soviet states to keep them within the Russian sphere of influence.

A mix of 12 Russian hostile measures have come up in to the light have so far, in this case:

- pressuring the Georgian energy sector with price gouging and alleged sabotage;
- applying trade sanctions and undermining Georgian international trade;
- suspending diplomatic relations ;



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- severing transportation and postal delivery services;
- expelling Georgian migrant workers from Russia;
- compatriot policies: issuing passports to South Ossetians and Abkhazians ;
- directing Russian support to both South Ossetia and Abkhazia ;
- shooting down a Georgian surveillance drone;
- deploying Russian military forces to the Georgian border ;
- conducting cyberattacks, specifically distributed denial of service attacks ;
- launching a concentrated media campaign supporting Russian military actions;
- officially recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Russia’s hostile-measures campaign flowed across the period of open combat and increased temporarily to support combat operations.

Learning from the Georgia Case Process Russia succeeded in executing its tactical campaign and achieving what might be termed an operational objective of stopping immediate Georgian accession to NATO.

By 2013, Saakashvili had been removed from office and replaced (temporarily) by a pro-Russia leader. Russia also established a frozen ethno-territorial conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia that has made Georgia less attractive for NATO accession as NATO membership might carry with it a quick spiral to defensive actions in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

Russia delivered a crushing military defeat to Georgia, eliminating its ambitions to control the breakaway republics, dampening public confidence, and instilling existential fear of Russian military intervention. While Russia’s tactical measures may have made NATO accession more difficult, its long-term strategy in Georgia appears to be failing.

Relatively aggressive and consistent Western support likely helped Saakashvili stay in power for two presidential terms despite constant Russian pressure. Georgia had not joined NATO as of early 2019, but the United States has increased its support to the Georgian government. In 2009, the United States signed a strategic partnership agreement with Georgia, and since the end of the 2008 conflict, it has delivered hundreds of millions of dollars in direct support to develop Georgia’s military and democratic governance. U.S. objectives for Georgia are specifically to “increase its resilience against Russian pressure.”

In 2014, NATO approved the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package and reconfirmed Georgia’s eventual accession, stating that the package of initiatives was designed to “help Georgia advance in its preparations towards membership.”

In August 2017, Vice President Mike Pence again reaffirmed U.S. support for Georgia. In March 2018, Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili was invited to the NATO summit and met with officials.

Continuing Western support for Georgia since 2008 may have deterred Russia from pursuing even more aggressive hostile measures.

Russia temporarily halted Georgia’s accession into NATO, but it did not stop its westward shift or the increasing economic and military support provided by NATO. The Nabucco pipeline project was cancelled, but it is not clear that Russian hostile measures led to that outcome.

At best, Russia delayed Georgia’s westward shift, and at worst it may have solidified Georgian pro-Western sentiment. At this point this case was rated, in the specialised publications, as a tactical success and a strategic wash.



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### **3. Estonia (2006-2007)**

This crisis evolved when the Estonian government chose to relocate a statue commemorating Soviet liberation of Estonia in World War II. Russia sought to prevent the relocation but also took the opportunity to pursue other objectives:

- sustaining and increasing Russian influence in Estonia, particularly among its Russian and Russian-speaking populations;
- deterring Estonian civilians from supporting westernization and, more directly, NATO;
- partially destabilizing Estonia to ensure its continuing vulnerability to Russian influence.

A mix of Russian hostile measures have come up in to the light have so far, in this study case:

- fomenting protests against the Estonian government using proxies;
- pressuring Estonian political leaders through public diplomacy actions condemning Estonian actions;
- applying indirect economic sanctions through Russian companies;
- facilitating a civil siege of the Estonian embassy in Moscow;
- conducting an aggressive anti-Estonia, pro-Russia media campaign;
- reportedly conducting cyberattacks against government and civil infrastructure.

Learning from the Estonia Case Process: this was a narrow, targeted, and apparently well-coordinated effort that was, for the most part, contained by both time and geography.

As in the Moldova case, Russia successfully executed most of its tactical operations.

For the process tracing, maskirovka made it difficult to attribute several of the measures.

Russia successfully executed its hostile-measures tactics, but the operation failed. Russia did not succeed in its immediate objective of preventing the relocation of the statue.

At best, this intense application of hostile measures instilled fear in the Estonian population and leadership: Russian actions served as a firm reminder to Estonia that Russia could interfere in its internal affairs at a moment's notice and with minimal risk. To some extent, Russia succeeded in undermining perceptions of Estonia's stability.

However, even this successful intimidation undermined Russian strategic objectives in Europe. Since the Bronze Soldier incident, Estonian leaders have sought increasingly closer cooperation with the EU and NATO. As with Moldova, Russian hostility has pushed Estonia away rather than drawn it closer. Arguably, Russian gray zone aggression in Estonia activated a gradual awakening in NATO, helping to set the stage for current overt opposition to Russian aggression.

This operation was rated as both a tactical failure and a strategic failure.

### **4. Ukraine (2014-2016)**

Russian leaders have perceived their influence in Ukraine as pivotal to maintaining control over security policy in former Soviet states. Crimea and its strategically important port city, Sevastopol, provide a buffer against Western encroachment, and the peninsula has long been a domestic security concern for Russian leaders.



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As the pro-Russia Ukrainian government collapsed in early 2014 and the new government's interests shifted to the West, Russia saw gray zone operations as an appropriate and effective way to achieve its objectives while avoiding direct confrontation with NATO.

Russia had several likely objectives in Ukraine:

- to preserve a pro-Russia status quo along its borders and prevent revolutionary behaviour;
- to restore Russia's position as a global power;
- to prevent NATO and the EU from inching closer to Russia's borders;
- to create a viable Eurasian Union that includes Ukraine;
- to weaken NATO.

The following Russian hostile measures applied against Ukraine beginning with the 2014 crisis, some of these continued at least into early 2019:

- politically annexing the Crimean Peninsula
- providing direct and indirect military support to separatists in eastern Ukraine
- using irregular proxy forces in Crimea and eastern Ukraine
- conducting snap military exercises and building up forces along the Ukrainian border
- exploiting compatriots (ethnic Russians or Russian speakers in Ukraine)
- engaging in media manipulation, pro-Russia public diplomacy, and cyberattacks
- claiming legal justification for hostile measures
- increasing energy prices to squeeze the Ukrainian government
- enacting economic embargoes and suspending free trade.

Russia executed its hostile measures in indistinct phases, mixing clandestine, covert, and overt military and intelligence actions with an array of information, diplomatic, and economic activities.

This was Russian reactive opportunism at its finest. Russian leaders responded aggressively to three major triggers: loss of a historically important ally that served as a status quo-bearing state on Russia's immediate border, hostile Western encroachment into Russia's perceived sphere of influence, and the prospect of another successful colour revolution that could indirectly destabilize the Russian state. The emerging situation in Ukraine in early 2014 triggered all the major Russian sources of worry.

How Russia and the West perceive the relative success of the operation is another matter.

On its face, the Ukraine operation, executed in various fits and starts, could be interpreted as modern strategic maskirovka: although the onset of the operation could have been predicted, its different steps might have been brilliantly orchestrated with off-tempo unpredictability.

The Western world instead takes a different view, sharing the broader consensus of Russia analysts: the initial operation in Crimea was opportunistic but tightly controlled, the follow-on operation in eastern Ukraine was less well controlled, and the continuing conflict has perhaps moved beyond Russian control.

Indeed, it may have resulted in a strategic setback.

Did Russia succeed? Tactically, Russia succeeded in annexing Crimea but has thus far failed to help its proxy forces secure eastern Ukraine. Prior to 2014, there was effectively no NATO military presence in Ukraine. After the onset of Russia's hostile-measures operation,



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NATO and, separately and directly, the United States invested billions of dollars to support the Ukrainian military, government, and economy.

The United States has also established the Joint Multinational Training Group–Ukraine to help build up to five battalions of Ukrainian soldiers per year. Russia may have sought to push NATO away from its borders, but, in early 2018, Ukraine was formally listed on the alliance’s website as an aspiring member.

Although Ukraine is not yet a NATO member and has not signed a mutual defense treaty with the United States, the declaration by Secretary Mattis bears remarkable similarity to the cooperative defense language in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which states that an attack on one NATO member constitutes an attack on the alliance.

Russia may have annexed Crimea and created an interminable frozen conflict in eastern Ukraine, but it has, if anything, accelerated Ukrainian westward political movement. Russia’s actions in Ukraine have drawn considerable unwanted attention to its influence activities in Eastern Europe and its economic behaviour internationally.

The United States, the European Union, and Canada have enacted tough sanctions against Russia in response to its operations in Ukraine. Some analysts argue that the sanctions have had a negligible impact on the Russian economy, while others believe that they have achieved their desired effect. According to NATO, they have “been a success in terms of the proximate goal of inflicting damage on the Russian economy.”<sup>24</sup>

A strategic assessment must take into account the fact that Russia’s economy has been at least partly undermined and that Ukraine has moved closer to the West and to NATO.

This operation was rated as a tactical wash and a strategic failure.

But beside all this, the Ukraine crisis offers some important energy security lessons: when it comes to energy, geography it still destiny, energy security should always be an integral part of national security, dependence on Russia can be a strategic liability and that the interdependence between the producer and the consumer will not encourage stability as long as the producer can last longer without revenue than the consumer can go without the gas.

To destabilize Ukraine, Russia applied a combination of military, semi-military and strategic communication tools but also managed to integrate the energy (by expropriating Ukrainian energy assets and pressure on gas prices) in to this strategy.

After the events surrounding Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea focused, predictably, was on the most outrageous aspects of Russia’s hybrid approach, such as soldiers without insignia as well as Russian troops “vacationing” in Eastern Ukraine. By contrast, energy was not seen as part of the hybrid warfare narrative.

A closer look, however, reveals a far more complicated situation than it was common knowledge: Russia occupied Ukraine’s gas fields, in and around Crimea, by traditional military means. It exerted economic pressure on Ukraine, including by gas cut-offs, the same time trying to deter other European countries from assisting Ukraine with reverse gas supply. Russia also pushed a narrative about her irreplaceable role in Europe’s energy security, and about the risks Europe was creating for itself should it support Ukraine.

Before its annexation by Russia, Crimea received almost all its energy from mainland Ukraine. In order to establish effective political control of region, Russia “nationalized” the Ukrainian company operating in Crimea – Chornomornaftogaz – and all its energy assets onshore and offshore. This way Russia ensured itself a stable supply of energy to the region, but also the independence from mainland Ukraine.



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Since some these offshore gas installation – 4 natural gas fields, with drilling rigs – extend from the Crimean coast all the way to the maritime border with Romania, Russia also significantly extended its geographical dominance in the Black Sea area off the western coast of Crimea. Hence in addition to previously Ukraine owned energy infrastructure and company (estimated value at 1.2 billion USD) and over 2 million cubic meters gas storage in Crimea, Russia has acquired a massively extended maritime area with the claim to underwater resources estimated to trillions USD value.

For Ukraine, the loss of its opportunities to exploit what may amount to the best deep oil and gas reserves in the Black Sea is a massive setback to its future economic prospects.

With regard to the Donbass region, energy it is even more important: the region produces 90% of Ukraine`s coal and it has massive gas fields, underground gas storage sites and transit pipelines. As result, by losing control over this region Kiev became even more dependent on imported energy.

The Stavropol-Moscow and Krasnodar-Moscow gas pipe lines transit the Donbass region. In addition, branches to Luhansk and Donetsk enable the provision of Russian gas to these cities independently from Kiev.

For Moscow it was impossible to organize an operation to illegally occupy Crimea without ensuring an independent energy supply for the area.

Ukraine`s high energy inefficiency and dependence on Russian gas imports have made energy the tool of choice for Russia to exert pressure. The crisis brought this to another level: the annexation of Crimea also returned the Sevastopol Naval Base to Russia, Moscow no longer feeling obliged to grant Ukraine lower gas prices over 600 million USD/year for the use of the Naval Base. Even with respect to coal the crisis provided Russia with additional leverage, the fighting inn Eastern Ukraine affected the coal mines in the region and the railways used to transport coal to the power plants, forcing Ukraine to declare a state of emergency on electricity market (November 2014).

## **5. Turkey (2015–2016)**

On November 24, 2015, the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber flying in the Turkey-Syria border region. In response, Russia employed a series of hostile measures against Turkey. Russia had four objectives in its hostile-measures operation:

- punish Turkey and illustrate to other NATO countries the costs of attacking Russian assets;
- deter Turkey from engaging in any further action against Russia`s military assets or intervening in northern Syria;
- drive a wedge between Turkey and its NATO allies, particularly by appearing to side with the United States in its support for Kurds in northern Syria;
- posture for a domestic audience in Russia.

Russia employed six types of hostile measures from November 2015 to April 2016. This case study focuses exclusively on the hostile measures that we could clearly link to the downing of the Su-24. It does not cover measures taken by Russia and seemingly hostile to Turkey that originated before the November 2015 crisis:

- launching public diplomacy attacks against Turkey, including accusations of legal violations



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- forward deploying advanced air, ground, and naval military forces
- supporting anti-Turkey Kurdish militias in northern Syria
- enacting economic sanctions on food and natural resources
- exerting pressure on the energy sector, including terminating collaborative projects
- cancelling cultural exchanges and high-level diplomatic meetings.

Russia’s active support to Kurdish militias in Syria represents its most consequential measure against Turkey. Allowing the militias to consolidate along the Turkish border was a sensitive matter for Turkey, which has a long history of conflict with the Kurds and views them as a destabilizing presence and an almost existential threat.

Russia responded to the Su-24 incident rapidly, aggressively, and with what appeared to be a tightly knit set of coordinated hostile measures. This was a genuine whole-of-government hostile-measures campaign involving several ministries, diplomats, economists, and military units.

Tactically, the effort was both well run and successful, and it demonstrated an interagency approach to international action that is not often employed by other states. However, the operation also had some adverse effects for Russia.

First, it demonstrated Russia’s relative international isolation. No other country committed to supporting Russia’s various accusations or seconded the sanctions against Turkey. Only Armenia publicly supported Russia’s stance.

Second, Russia’s hostile measures had the temporary effect of pushing Turkey closer toward the West.

Third, the economic embargoes negatively affected the Russian economy and were clearly not intended as an indefinite measure.

Turkish response was muted, and the international community, including Turkey’s NATO allies, did little to help deflate tensions. While Turkey temporarily shifted its attention westward, by mid-2017, it had achieved rapprochement with Russia. Russian diplomats may have helped ease the situation, or perhaps the accumulated hostile measures had their desired effect.

A more likely explanation for this reversal was a change in Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s perceptions in the aftermath of a 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. By late 2017, Turkey was purchasing Russian military equipment, and economic engagement had resumed.

Did Russia succeed? As in the other cases, it successfully executed its tactics. Turkey was duly punished for its actions. This could be chalked up as a tactical success. Assessing Russia’s strategic success is more difficult. Although Russia has long sought to distance Turkey from NATO and has taken other hostile measures against the country, it is not clear whether or how this specific set of tactical hostile measures in response to this single incident contributed to Turkey’s ultimate rapprochement with Russia. It is also not clear that this intensive set of actions was anything more than opportunistic and reactive.

Therefore this case was rated as a successful tactical operation with unclear strategic objectives and results.

In this case, it was ultimately not the hostile measures that Russia imposed on Turkey but the turnaround in Turkish-Russian relations in the years that followed—particularly Turkey’s purchase of Russian air-defence systems over the objections of the United States and other NATO allies—that succeeded in isolating Turkey from the alliance, at least temporarily.



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### **Conclusions**

Over at least the past century, Russia has naturally and effectively evolved a deeply institutionalized and highly expert hostile-measures capability. Hostile measures are an excellent match for Russia’s currently limited, non-ideological, transactional, purposefully deceptive, and mostly tactical approach to problem solving.

In sum, the Russia Ukraine crisis demonstrated the effectiveness of hybrid war, including in its energy dimension. While Ukraine’s unique geographical position as well as its energy dependence allowed Russia a degree of influence that should act as wake-up call for many other countries, there are nevertheless reasons for Western concern.

Unlike leaders in many NATO member states, Russian leaders are rarely conflicted about their national objectives, and they are less likely to be restrained by humanitarian concerns. While they would prefer to be respected and even liked by the international community, they appear to be quite comfortable facing the consequences for their often disruptive and mostly unilateral actions. Even as Moscow’s aggression modulates along with the state’s resources, its approach to international relations remains generally consistent and foreseeable. Putin reflects rather than constitutes the Russian state idiom when it comes to the use of hostile measures.

The characteristic worry-driven, transactional ruthlessness in pursuit of state survival will almost certainly outlive him. But even in the cloud of reactive fear triggered by Russia’s recent adventurism, we see growing expert consensus on the limitations of Russian strategic power. Viewed with cold objectivity, Russian aggression in the gray zone reflects no small amount of weakness. Although Russia uses hostile measures opportunistically and routinely, its best-known hostile-measures operations—including those against Moldova, Georgia, Estonia, Ukraine, and Turkey—were reactive, sometimes frantic, and, by our interpretation of Russian grand strategy, ineffective.

At the apparent height of Russia’s post-Soviet power, it finds itself increasingly surrounded by NATO members and allies. In Europe, Russia’s tactical gray zone successes have caused localized disruption but, with the notable exception of Crimea, no state expansion. It would be difficult to argue that the lives of Russian-speaking people or Russian citizens living in Eastern Europe have been markedly improved by Russia’s cyberattacks, assassinations, economic embargoes, and military incursions.

If the European democratic experiment is failing, Russian gray zone attacks are not the proximate cause.

If we are in a difficult phase of European and, specifically, NATO cohesion and power, then Russia’s strategic failures are all the more noteworthy.

In 2014, political cartoonist Robert J. Matson stated, “Sometimes a bear is just a bear.” He was arguing that some contemporaneous assessments of Russian prowess and global reach were overstated. His statement suggests both threat and limit: Bears are scary and dangerous when cornered, but they are relatively predictable, and they can be managed.

Russia is strategically limited but tactically strong. Its institutional capabilities to disrupt and punish deserve a healthy dose of respect. A bear is just a bear, but a bear is still a bear. While we cannot predict actual behaviour or tactical hostile-measures actions that Russia would pursue in a given scenario, we argue that it is possible to forecast Russia’s strategic behaviour in Eastern Europe with some degree of confidence. Russia will continue to do what it has done for the past



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century: apply hostile measures to preserve a favourable status quo, avert internal disorder, and disrupt Western states that represent what Russian leaders perceive to be existential threats.

NATO can and should take positive measures to present steel to the probing Russian bayonet. Its actions to date have been helpful but are insufficient. If the alliance is serious about living up to its Article 5 commitments, then it will have to match Russia’s institutionalization of hostile measures with an institutionalization of moderated but hard-nosed security in Eastern Europe.

The alliance faces another serious challenge: how to distinguish between a gray zone hostile measure and an Article 5 trigger. Precisely which of Russia’s hostile measures, applied in which circumstances, constitute an act of war against a NATO member state? Russia’s use of hostile measures is long-standing, but cyber, information operations, and other actions that leverage emerging technologies are new and novel, and it may be difficult for NATO to identify an appropriate response.

Finally, NATO military planners and political leaders must do more to incorporate hostile measures into considerations for high-order war. Whether or not the community of analysts intended to create the unhelpful conceptual gap between MSW (measures short of war) and war, it exists, and it undermines the clarity and effectiveness of the alliance’s military planning and policy.

Collectively, the West must assume that hostile measures are viable tools in any conflict and that Russia will apply them reflexively and with considerable tactical expertise.

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