



**PANORAMA OF GLOBAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT 2015 - 2016**



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# RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE IN EASTERN EUROPE: CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

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ROBERT PERSON

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## The concept of Hybrid War

While the concept of hybrid warfare is considered by many to be a relatively modern phenomenon, several scholars have noted that it shares many similarities with well-known strategies and tactics of warfare. This has led to comparisons and contrasts of hybrid warfare with concepts such as full spectrum operations, asymmetric warfare (McCuen 2008), irregular warfare (Deep 2015; Glenn 2009, 7), compound warfare (Hoffman 2009), comprehensive warfare, “whole of government operations” (Glenn 2009, 5), and a “contemporary form of guerrilla warfare” (Hoffman 2009, 1). Frank G. Hoffman, perhaps the preeminent scholar on hybrid warfare, offers the following definition that has been adopted throughout much recent scholarship: “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 state 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 generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict” (Hoffman 2007, 8). By contrast, retired U.S. Army Colonel John McCuen emphasizes the multiple battle spaces of hybrid warfare rather than the specific tactics used, noting that hybrid war involves “three decisive battlegrounds: the conventional battleground; the conflict zone’s indigenous population battleground; and the home front and international community battleground” (McCuen 2008, 107). Crucially, what makes the modern concept of hybrid warfare distinct from older concepts like irregular warfare is the degree to which hybrid operations are centrally coordinated and directed on both an operational and tactical level, a coordination that has been the hallmark of Russian hybrid warfare in Ukraine since 2014.

## Hybrid War in Russian military thinking

Elements of the concept of modern hybrid warfare can also be found in Soviet and Russian military thinking and doctrine. Maria Snegovaya argues that Moscow's current operations have adopted the older Soviet military principle of "reflexive control," defined as "a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specifically prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action" (Snegovaya 2015, 10). A component of Soviet military thinking since the 1960s, the essence of reflexive control is the use of disinformation to cause the enemy to take actions favorable to one's objectives. Similarly, the Russian tactic of *maskirovka*, defined as a comprehensive action plan intended as a form of "camouflage, concealment, deception, imitation, disinformation, secrecy, security, feints, diversions, and simulation" against an enemy has been practiced in Russia's military and nonmilitary campaigns dating back to the Napoleonic Wars (Bartkowski 2015, 8).

More recently General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed forces of Russia has articulated a concept of "modern war" – referred to as the "Gerasimov Doctrine" by many – that bears a striking resemblance to the concept of hybrid warfare and to Russia's subsequent actions in Ukraine. Writing of this new form of war in 2013, Gerasimov asserts: "The very 'rules of war' have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power and force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces. The open use of forces – often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation – is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict" (Gerasimov 2013; Coalson 2014).

Gerasimov outlines a six-stage sequence of conflict development: 1) covert origins; 2) escalation; 3) start of conflict activities; 4) crisis; 5) resolution; and 6) restoration of peace/postconflict settlement. Each stage is characterized by a blend of overt and covert efforts, including military and nonmilitary actions. In the early phases of conflict, these actions can include the formation of coalitions and unions within the target state; formation of political opposition; economic sanctions and embargoes; a break in diplomatic relations; political and diplomatic pressure; information warfare; military strategic deterrence measures; strategic deployment of forces; and conduct of kinetic military operations (AOWG 2015, 5).

Writing under a well-known pseudonym just days before the Russian annexation of Crimea, Kremlin advisor Vladislav Surkov discussed of a new form of "non-linear war" that involves "everybody and everything, all aspects of life, while still remaining elusive in its main contours" (Racz 2015, 43:37). Similarly, Russian military theorists Ser-

gei Chekinov and Sergei Bogdanov elaborate a concept of what they call “new generation warfare” characterized by a multi-phase approach beginning with an “extremely intensive months-long coordinated non-military campaign launched against the target country, including diplomatic, economic, ideological, psychological, and information measures” in concert with a heavy propaganda campaign intended to demoralize the enemy population and forces (Racz 2015, 43-38). The second stage consists of large-scale reconnaissance and subversive missions in addition to full-scale electronic warfare. Finally, the overt military phase witnesses the use of ground forces to isolate and eliminate remaining military and civilian resistance (Racz 2015, 43-39).

The 2010 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation echoes these themes and enshrines them in official Russian doctrine. Contemporary military conflicts, the document notes, are characterized by “the integrated utilization of military force and forces and resources of a nonmilitary character...the intensification of the role of information warfare...[and] the creation on the warring sides’ territories of a permanent zone of military operations.” Such conflicts increasingly entail “the presence of a broad range of military-political, economic, strategic, and other objectives...[and] the prior implementation of measures of information warfare in order to achieve political objectives without the utilization of military force and, subsequently, in the interest of shaping a favourable response from the world community to the utilization of military force” (*Presidential Admin. of the RF 2010*). The December 2014 update to the doctrine added the following telling elements to the list of features of the wars that Russia expects to fight in the future: “participation in military operations of irregular military formations and private military companies...use of indirect and asymmetric methods of operations...[and] employment of political forces and public associations financed and guided from abroad” (*Presidential Admin. of the RF 2014*). Thus, it is clear that the paradigm of hybrid warfare in Russia has made the leap from military theory to military doctrine and practice in Russia over the last several years.

## Russian Hybrid Warfare in Practice

It is no accident that these descriptions of hybrid warfare in recent Russian military thinking resemble the form of warfare carried out against Ukraine since 2014, where Russia has enjoyed near-perfect conditions to execute hybrid warfare as a means of achieving its strategic objectives (Popescu 2015, 2). However, some doubt whether such favorable preconditions for Russian hybrid war can be found elsewhere, potentially limiting the application of a similar strategy against other adversaries (Kofman and Rojansky 2015).

Since the start of the conflict, Moscow has pursued an aggressive information war in an attempt to shape the narrative of events (Snegovaya 2015). This included accusations that the Maidan movement was comprised of fascists, and that the post-Yanukovich government presented a direct threat to the rights of Russian compatriots living in Ukraine (AOWG 2015, 40). The cornerstone of Russia’s information strategy in Ukraine has been the persistent, vociferous denial of any Russian involvement in the conflict waged by the “peoples’ republics” against Kyiv. Since the Russian-speaking populations in Crimea

and the Donbas already consumed media and news produced in Russia, they were easily reached and influenced by Russia's propaganda machine. Furthermore, broadcasting facilities were among the first pieces of critical infrastructure taken over by pro-Russian separatists, further cementing Moscow's ability to shape the conflict's narrative (Racz 2015, 81).

Native separatists in these regions have been central to Russia's hybrid warfare in Ukraine (Racz 2015, 78). These separatists (or their sympathizers) serve as targets for persuasion through propaganda efforts, they serve as coalition partners within the target country in the pre-conflict stages of operations, and – most importantly – they serve as “camouflage” for Russian military forces during the earliest stages of armed conflict. One reason the “little green men” in unmarked uniforms were successful is because they were able to operate under the cover of native separatists whom Kyiv was reluctant to suppress early on. This dose of plausible deniability injected just enough uncertainty and delay into the situation to allow Russia to complete its invasion and annexation of Crimea before the Ukrainian government and its international partners could mount an effective response.

Similarly, the presence of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in Crimea allowed for easy importation of special forces under the guise of regular troop rotations through the naval base (Perry 2015, 15). Russia's border with the Donbas region also allowed easy infiltration into Eastern Ukraine. In both cases, special forces served as unmarked vanguard forces central to the seizure of key government buildings and critical infrastructure (Andras 2015, 60; Perry 2015, 15). This vanguard laid the groundwork for an eventual inflow of active duty Russian forces, all under Moscow's blanket denial of any direct involvement in the fighting. One February 2015 estimate suggested approximately 14,400 Russian troops on Ukrainian soil supporting approximately 29,000 separatists in the Donbas. This was in addition to the 29,000 Russian troops stationed in Crimea and anywhere from 55,000 - 90,000 Russian troops massed on the Russian side of the border with Ukraine (Johnson 2015; Sutyagin 2015). Russian military units involved in combat operations in Ukraine include forces from the motorized infantry, airborne and air assault, special forces, interior ministry troops, armored divisions, rocket and artillery brigades, and combat support brigades (Sutyagin 2015). These forces have been able to operate under ideal conditions thanks to Russia's control of the Ukrainian border.

Another key element of Russia's hybrid war in Ukraine has been the provision of weapons to separatists. An expert report prepared by the Atlantic Council utilizes a variety of sophisticated digital forensic methods to document Russian heavy weaponry present in Ukraine. This includes the Buk surface-to-air missile system that shot down Malaysia Airlines flight 17 in July 2014, as well as the 2S19 Msta-S self-propelled 152 mm howitzer system, the BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicle, the Kama-43269 armored reconnaissance vehicle, the Pantsir-S1 anti-air system, the 2B26 Grad rocket system, and the T-72B3 main battle tank. This is not to mention the avalanche of shoulder launched surface to air missiles, mobile rocket launchers, anti-tank guided missiles, land mines, and small arms that have poured into Ukraine (Czuperski et al. 2015, 8–11).

Perhaps the defining feature of Russia's hybrid warfare in Crimea and Ukraine



has been the “near perfect coordination” among the various elements of hybrid strategy and tactics (Popescu 2015, 2; Racz 2015, 51). While elements of irregular, asymmetric, compound, and informational warfare have long been part of the belligerent’s toolbox, it is the application of the full spectrum of measures in concert with one another that defines hybrid warfare in theory and in practice in Ukraine, and there can be little doubt that all of the main threads of the conflict lead back to Moscow. This effective coordination helps explain Russia’s success in controlling the parameters of the conflict, raising concerns that hybrid war may become a “likely model for future conflicts on Russia’s periphery” (Kofman and Rojansky 2015, 1).

### **The spectre of Hybrid War in the Baltics**

Russia’s success in annexing Crimea, engineering a “frozen conflict” in Ukraine, and destabilizing the Ukrainian government has led to rising fears that the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania may be Moscow’s next targets of hybrid war (Blank 2016). Indeed, fears that these NATO members might be the subject of a Russian attack prompted a recent study by the RAND Corporation simulating a surprise Russian conventional attack, given current NATO forces stationed in the region (Shlapak and Johnson 2016). Similarly, an October 2015 analysis prepared by the United States Army’s Asymmetric Warfare Group explored the degree to which the Baltics might be at risk of a Russian hybrid threat (AOWG 2015).

These fears are based on an implicit comparison with Ukraine: like post-Maidan Ukraine, the Baltic states have pursued unambiguously pro-Western policies. Similarly, Estonia and Latvia are home to large minorities of ethnic Russians living within their borders. Twenty four percent of Estonia’s population is comprised of ethnic Russians, while Russians make up twenty six percent of Latvia’s population and six percent of Lithuania’s population. Many Baltic Russians carry more than two decades of grievances over citizenship, language, and cultural policies that have left these communities marginalized from mainstream political and economic life in the countries that they call home. These grievances have raised concerns that Russia may try to use the Baltic Russians as an entry point to execute a strategy of hybrid warfare, much as it seized on separatist protest movements in Ukraine as a basis for military intervention.

Several elements of the “Gerasimov Doctrine” have appeared in the Baltics over the last year, stoking fears of a Russian hybrid threat. This includes an aggressive informational campaign in the Russian-language media consumed by most Baltic Russians. These media outlets, all of which are produced or broadcast from Russia, portray the Baltic governments as neo-fascist regimes bent on the economic and political subjugation of ethnic Russians (AOWG 2015, 31). Similar accusations were made against the Kyiv government and served to mobilize separatists in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, leading many to fear that Russia is attempting to spark similar protests as cover for a hybrid invasion.

Similarly, there are well-documented political and economic links between Moscow and pro-Russian NGOs and political parties in the Baltics. These organizations have

worked to spread similar propaganda about nazification of the Baltics and discrimination against the Russian-speaking population (AOWG 2015, 41). While some Russian parties in the Baltics have sought to advocate Russian minority interests through normal democratic channels, the lack of transparency in the financial links between these parties and partner organizations in Russia raise questions about their independence. While the European Centre for Minority Issues has documented recent instigations of separatism in the Baltic States by a variety of organizations, as of yet these efforts have failed to gain a following among the Baltic Russian populations (Kuklys and Carstocea 2015).

Finally, Russia has carried out numerous large-scale military exercises over the last several years in proximity to its borders with Estonia and Latvia. Writes the Asymmetric Operations Working Group, "Russia appears to be testing the full spectrum of processes and people required for large-scale mobilization and maneuver" (AOWG 2015, 53). Furthermore, recent exercises have been "snap" exercises, executed on command with no prior notice as would be required for a surprise invasion. Recalling that massive troop mobilizations and exercises on the Ukrainian border served as a launching point of Russia's conventional tactics in the Donbas, some fear that these exercises are practice runs for future intervention in the Baltics.

Disturbing as these instances of Russian provocation are, it is important not to overstate the risk of a Russian hybrid invasion of the Baltic States: there are several critical factors that make full-scale hybrid warfare against the Baltics unlikely. First, we must consider Russia's motives in launching such a war. In Ukraine, there were several motives for intervention. First, Russia was able to solve once and for all the status of the Russian naval base in Sevastopol, long used as a bargaining chip by Kyiv against Moscow. Second, the intervention reinforced the red line that Moscow has drawn against Ukrainian membership in NATO. With open territorial disputes arising from the still-simmering conflicts in the east, NATO is unlikely to extend membership to Ukraine in the foreseeable future. Finally, Moscow's long-term strategy appears to use the simmering conflicts in the Donbas to destabilize the pro-western government in Kyiv in a bid to reinstall a pro-Russian government in Ukraine and thereby keep the country in Moscow's orbit (Person 2015a).

None of these objectives are possible to achieve in the Baltics, calling into question what Russia would gain from invading. Unless access to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad is threatened, Russia has no equivalent of Sevastopol to secure. Furthermore, unlike Ukraine, Moscow cannot veto or undo Baltic membership in NATO and the EU. That ship has sailed: a Russian attack on the Baltics would be met not with expressions of sympathy, outrage, and sanctions (as in Ukraine), but rather with a full NATO military response. This is a conflict that Russia simply cannot afford given its current economic woes. Nor could NATO shy from the fight: should the alliance fail to rise to the occasion for which it was formed, its relevance and credibility would disappear. Soon the alliance itself would follow. Finally, given the narrative of illegitimate Russian foreign occupation that has long been a strand of Baltic nationalism, it is hard to imagine Moscow (or its proxies) ever being allowed a seat of influence at the table in domestic Baltic politics. This is what Russia sought in Kyiv, but it is something that would never be allowed in Riga, Tallinn, or Vilnius (Person

2015b).

If clear motives appear to be lacking, so too are the “perfect conditions” absent in the Baltics. First, we have already noted that NATO membership is a crucial difference. Any hybrid threat, perhaps hidden under the guise of a separatist movement, would eventually require conventional military support. Sooner or later, Russia’s fingerprints would be found on that support, just as they were in Ukraine. This would inevitably provoke a response from NATO, the EU, and the United States far more severe than that in Ukraine given the interests at stake. Though we may dislike Putin’s policies, there is little question that he behaves rationally; any rational strategic thinker would think twice before picking a costly and devastating fight with NATO.

There is also reason to question whether the Baltic Russian populations themselves are ripe for manipulation and instigation of separatism. Despite legitimate political and cultural grievances, living standards for Baltic Russians have risen significantly since 1991, especially in comparison to their compatriots on the other side of the border. Most Baltic Russians recognize that they are materially better off in the Baltic States where they enjoy the benefits of EU membership as well. This orientation is especially strong among younger generations who have had an easier time learning native languages as required for socioeconomic upward mobility. Research has suggested that separatist sentiments, organizations, and movements have failed to take root in the Baltics to date (AOWG 2015, 47). Nonetheless, some would warn that it would only take a small separatist minority (perhaps imported from Russia) to provide the necessary cover for a larger Russian intervention.

## Conclusion

Though Russia is unlikely to launch a hybrid war in the Baltics, we cannot assume benign Russian intentions in the region. There is little doubt that Russia will continue its provocations, its propaganda, and its military exercises. But rather than prelude to eventual warfare, these measures should be considered long-term disruptive and destabilizing measures that are unlikely to escalate given the constraints noted above. Though these provocations are part of the hybrid warfare toolkit, their use does not necessarily imply a path that ends in war. To believe otherwise without a careful, sober analysis of interests, motives, and context threatens a dangerous mis-assessment of risk and costly misallocation of otherwise scarce resources.

If not laying the groundwork for hybrid warfare, what is the purpose of Russia’s provocations in the Baltics? These measures are more likely motivated by a desire to keep the Baltic States, NATO, and especially the United States off-balance and distracted, thereby complicating and constraining American action in the region and around the globe. Indeed, the achievement of a “multipolar world” in which the United States is constrained in its ability to act unilaterally without regard to the interests of other great powers has been a hallmark of Putin’s foreign policy since his famous Munich speech in 2007. Provocations in the Baltics, like military intervention in Syria, force NATO and the United States to contend with Russian interests in a way that they have not for many years. In Putin’s eyes,

this forced deference to Russian interests is the essence of great power status.

However, there are serious questions as to how long Putin can afford this great power status that he has purchased at immense cost in Ukraine and Syria. With no end in sight to low oil prices, a weak ruble, western sanctions, and anemic economic performance, even the Kremlin chess master may have under-estimated the long-term costs of his hyper-assertive foreign policy strategy. This may prove a blessing to the Baltics and a curse to Russia in the long run, though only time will tell.

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