

# **HYBRID TACTICS AS PART OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND ATTEMPTS TO INFLUENCE POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE EU**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Russian hybrid approach is based on their understanding of threats; Russians feel themselves as victims of Western policies, sanctions and information policy. According to Russian military doctrine and theory, information warfare is conducted continuously in peacetime and wartime alike. The Russian elite consider comprehensive hybrid approach as one of the most important elements in foreign affairs. It uses a combination of tools, such as wide-ranging political and diplomatic commitment, the leverage of the energy, economic retaliation, strengthening of the military capabilities, development assistance, propaganda, intelligence and cyber activities. The priorities of Russian information operations are promoting special bilateral relations with EU member states while exploiting the different interests and contradictions within EU. The goal of media-campaigns and propaganda is to undermine dominant Western media sources and narratives. As part of information operations Russia has begun to cooperate with and support radical and anti-establishment groups in the EU. The effectiveness of Russian information policy abroad comes at high costs but it is still limited in its outcomes. Russian policy in the EU will be increasingly directed towards polarization of different institutions, countries, parties and particular interest groups.

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### THE HYBRID TACTICS AND HYBRID WARFARE

Hybrid approach is based on a combination of different covert and overt tactics aimed at destabilising a functioning state and polarising its society. They can include a variety of methods ranging from cyber-attacks and electronic warfare to more traditional military means, from acts of terrorism and sabotage to political and economic pressure, from psychological operations to other forms of propaganda.

The hybrid warfare used term to describe contemporary conflict approach is defined as a combination of conventional and unconventional tools of warfare. The main elements of hybrid warfare are: regular military forces, special forces, irregular forces, cyber-attacks, information warfare and propaganda, diplomacy and economic warfare<sup>1</sup>. The essential feature of this approach is the coordinated use of regular and irregular forces with unconventional tools of warfare.

The concept has been largely discussed in relations to Russia's actions during the crisis in Ukraine (especially case of Crimea). What was characteristic to the Ukraine crisis was the particularly effective coordination between political, economic and military instruments.

### RUSSIAN UNDERSTANDING

The hybrid warfare concept in Russia was already developed in the second-third decade of the 20th century. During that period it was called the "active reconnaissance" and "national liberation movement in neighbouring countries".

The war in Georgia in 2008 served as a catalyst for the development and formation of hybrid approach, however the key elements were already there:

- Strategically important objects are captured in assault-like operations;
- Land, air and naval forces are deployed in a joint operation;
- Military action is accompanied by a cyber campaign and by political and economic measures;
- There is no declaration of war, the intensity of the conflict stays below a level that would prompt others to intervene;
- The escalation is followed by a quick but orderly withdrawal of deployed forces, a kind of de-escalation.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Jacobs, G. Lasconjarias, *NATO's Hybrid Flanks. Handling Unconventional Warfare in the South and the East*, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014\\_2019/documents/sede/dv/sede011015resarchpaper nato\\_/sede011015resarchpaper nato\\_.en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/sede/dv/sede011015resarchpaper nato_/sede011015resarchpaper nato_.en.pdf).

In a speech held at the Russian Academy for Military Sciences in January 2013, Chief of the General Staff V. Gerasimov lectured on the “The Value of Sciences in Prediction”<sup>2</sup>. In this lecture, he first characterised modern wars and then derived challenges for the Russian Armed Forces from his findings. He used the term “non-linear war”. The role of non-military means for achieving political and strategic military goals has grown and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.

This theory describes a holistic, harmonised approach that comprises political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military measures that are used in order to achieve a political goal determined by the government.

The Russian understanding of hybrid approach to conflict management does not exclusively rely on conventional warfare. Existing potential for conflict in the respective target country is fuelled deliberately, and resulting clashes are controlled politically and militarily. In order to do so, a broad range of measures are used, including:

- Propaganda measures;
- Deployment of troops without national insignia, and covert employment of military and paramilitary forces;
- Provision of specifically trained leaders for the insurgents (proxies).

According to Russian military doctrine and theory, information warfare is conducted continuously in peacetime and wartime alike. Information warfare is not just considered a matter for the Armed Forces. On the contrary, Russian military theorists envision strategic coordination of all government resources in order to affect an adversary<sup>3</sup>.

#### RUSSIAN THREAT PERCEPTION

Russian hybrid approach is based on their understanding of threats. During last five years the issue of hybrid threats has become highly politicised. In the Russian military theory debate, regime security has become the number one topic. The approval ratings of the political leadership are seen as matters of national security in Russia.

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<sup>2</sup> M. Galeotti, *The „Gerasimov Doctrine“ and Russian Non-Linear War*, <https://inmoscowsadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>.

<sup>3</sup> U. Franke, *War by non-military means*, <http://www.foi.se/en/Top-menu/Pressroom/News/2015/War-by-Non-Military-means/>.

The Russian view is also fuelled by the perception of the world as a zero-sum game, where globalisation is reducing Russian security, and where Russia lags behind Western countries in terms of technology<sup>4</sup>.

The Russian official documents all paint a rather dark picture of the world – a place where information threats against Russia is commonplace. They also unanimously subscribe to a very broad concept of information warfare, ranging from psychological operations targeting individuals or entire populations, to computer network attacks and the treacherous influence of foreign mass media.

Traditionally, a core element of Russian strategic policy papers has been the threat perception. Putin’s revised national security strategy (2016)<sup>5</sup> highlights few major threats, among them the major one – the containment strategy of US and its allies against Russia, which includes “political, economic, military and informational pressure”. According to the document the following means are used against Russia:

- Restrictive political and economic measures (sanctions);
- Subversive potential of special services and information resources;
- Projection of military power and strengthening of military blocks, including modernization of offensive weapons, enlargement of NATO and moving its military infrastructure close to Russian borders;
- Western efforts to counter Russia-led integration processes and to raise tensions in the Eurasian region. In the context the document stressed in particular an “anti-constitutional coup d’état in Ukraine supported by US and EU”.

Among non-traditional global threats the revised strategy highlights:

- Military threats: attempts to grant NATO a global role; policy of “double standards” facilitating military conflicts, which as a result create uncontrolled zones spreading terrorism, nationalism and religious intolerance; non-compliance with international and regional arms control, limitation and reduction treaties;
- Political threats: migration flows from Africa and Middle East to Europe have demonstrated the weaknesses of the regional security system in the Euro-Atlantic region, built on NATO and EU; as well as competition of values and societal models, overthrowing of legitimate political

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> O. Oliker, *Unpacking Russia’s New National Security Strategy*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-russias-new-national-security-strategy>.

- regimes in many regions throughout “colour revolutions”; manipulation of public opinion via information/media technologies;
- Economic threats, including fight for access to global markets using instruments of financial, trade investments and technology transfer policies and regional trade agreements; energy security is also described as a global struggle – a competition for energy resources in the World Ocean, especially in Arctic zone; food security, access to water resources.

#### FOREIGN POLICY TOOLKIT

The national security strategy states that, as a new, polycentric world takes shape, there is an increased competition between states, involving a broader diplomatic and strategic toolkit, including the use of information, economic and financial instruments for explicitly geopolitical purposes. In the Russia’s view, the use of force in international relations is not declining. This underlines the fact that regional integration through such bodies as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) will remain of important foreign policy relevance to Russia.

Russia’s rationale of keeping the states of the post-Soviet area inside its own sphere of influence in order to establish itself as a centre of power in a multi-polar remains entirely unchanged.

The Russian language state controlled media is the main propaganda instrument used by the authorities to disseminate the Russian position and to influence public opinion in the former Soviet countries. It instils anti-Western sentiment among the people and highlights the need to collaborate.

Russia takes different kinds of foreign action, depending on its partner’s status, relevance and capacity to withstand Russian pressure. A comparison of political goals pursued in Georgia, the Crimea and east Ukraine reveals serious differences. In Georgia, it was all about cementing the secession of the break-away territories Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This goal was achieved through a temporary and locally limited occupation. The Crimea, in contrast, was annexed in a hybrid operation. In eastern Ukraine, support is granted to local separatists in a semi-covert approach so that Russia’s influence on all of Ukraine is restored. Russians feel themselves as victims of Western policies, sanctions and information. Therefore the authorities exploit this feeling to justify their hybrid policies and reinforce their popularity.

## RUSSIA'S INTERESTS IN THE EU

Currently, Russia pursues an aggressive policy of influencing political discourse and public opinion within the EU throughout media campaigns, information operations and other tools. The main aim of Russian information operations is to undermine the role and coherence of the EU. Immigration issues, the increased Western military presence in Eastern Europe and EU sanctions are the current issues in which Russia is investing its resources. The priority is to promote special bilateral relations with EU member states in order to accentuate and exploit the different interests and contradictions within the EU. As an example, Russia has become aware that one of the secondary effects of its military operations in Syria will be an increase in migratory pressure on the EU. Using this opportunity, Russia intends to put pressure on Europe in an attempt to force decision-makers to lift the economic sanctions against it.

## RUSSIAN TACTICS

Since 2013, Russia has increasingly used psychological operations (propaganda operations carried out by intelligence services) to influence media, civil society and politicians abroad. The Kremlin defines narratives which are systematically spread through multiple channels.

There are indicators that such operations are ordered exclusively by the Kremlin through the members of the Security Council. The decision-making process regarding information operations abroad is driven by the so called "siloviki group" (people who have served in the Russian or Soviet security services as well as in defence, army and military institutions) because they have a dominant role regarding foreign and military policy issues.

Russian tactics to influence public opinion depend on each particular country and agenda and on current interests. Russia has short- and long-term tools; sometimes it uses a combination of various tools and approaches.

## PROMOTING PROPAGANDA

Regarding European audiences, the RT television network and Sputnik International are the major and most visible media networks created by Russia<sup>6</sup>. Offering the service in each country's language shows an at-

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<sup>6</sup> M. Kofman, M. Rojansky, *A Closer look at Russia's "Hybrid War,"* <https://www.wilson-center.org/sites/default/files/7-KENNAN%20CABLE-ROJANSKY%20KOFMAN.pdf>.

tempt not only to reach the Russian communities abroad but also the local population specifically.

In most cases, rather than aiming at a specific country or conflict, Russian broadcasting opportunistically seeks to “stir the pot” of public discontent and to promote confusion and distrust within different audiences. The goal is to undermine the credibility and visibility of dominant Western media sources and narratives, and to reduce public confidence in all types of institutions that Russia views as being under Western—especially US—control, from international financial institutions to the courts of parliaments of individual states. The above mentioned media tools achieve their objectives by giving disproportionate coverage to extremist politicians, “experts” of dubious background, and mainstream politicians whose views chime with the Kremlin’s chosen narratives.

#### USING RUSSIAN COMPATRIOTS

The “compatriots policy” is targeted primarily at Russian-speaking people who are poorly integrated into their host countries’ societies, who have a cultural and linguistic affinity with Russia and who are within the reach of the Russian media. Nevertheless, the Russian-speaking community abroad should be sufficiently stable to be used as an instrument for exerting influence on the host country’s home and foreign affairs in favour of Russia.

Moscow also institutionalizes the compatriots through various cultural organizations, including the “Russkiy Mir” Foundation and the “Russkiy Dom” network. By 2011 “Russkiy Dom’s” annual budget was some 30 million USD, with over fifty centres across the globe<sup>7</sup>. It is estimated that the Kremlin spends approximately 100 million USD<sup>8</sup> annually to fund umbrella organization “Russkiy Mir” which supports the implementation of its “compatriot policy” and finances NGOs promoting Russian interests abroad. “Russkiy Mir” also provides funds to film-makers and political entities that promote Russian policies targeted against EU member states.

Within the Russian government, responsibility for dealing with and looking after the diaspora lies with the federal agency “Rossotrudnich-

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<sup>7</sup> A. Grigas, *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire*, Yale University Press, Danbury 2016, p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> O. Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood*, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-04-14-agents-russian-world-lutsevych.pdf>.



estvo". It supports cultural centres in 80 countries with 93 offices<sup>9</sup>. Apart from its main task, the agency is also concerned with working against the prevailing negative perception of Russia abroad.

#### DEVELOPING PRO-RUSSIAN ENVIRONMENTS

Russia has begun to cooperate with and support radical and anti-establishment groups in the EU. The crucial factor here is that these groups can contribute to weaken the existing European value system. Thus Putin's Russia has become a partner to many anti-US, anti-EU and anti-globalisation groups in the EU. By openly defying the US, the West and the EU, Putin offers himself as a political alternative to those seeking one. In this way, Moscow plays on various fears and frustrations that exist in European societies, although it lacks an attractive alternative social model to offer.

Russian policy is defined by a very opportunistic approach to ideology of any kind. In some countries Russian policy targets the financial elites, preaching the idea of business without politics. At the same time, Russians go as far as financially backing or boosting anti-capitalist leftist groups-while also financing or giving a platform to right wing groups with nationalistic and anti-EU agendas.

The Kremlin's media provide support for the far right, far left and eurosceptic extreme in Europe<sup>10</sup>. RT and Sputnik give such politicians an international platform to publicise their views; in return, these politicians both advocate for the Kremlin's point of view in public and vote in favour of its interests when necessary<sup>11</sup>.

With regard to the migration crisis, Russia deliberately encourages xenophobic and nationalist groups that are critical of Islam to carry out high-profile actions against migrants throughout Europe. Moreover, the intention is to fuel conflicts between migrants and right-wing populist groups, with a view to derailing the EU's refugee policy and dividing society.

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<sup>9</sup> *Роскомпулдициество*, <http://rs.gov.ru/home/about>.

<sup>10</sup> P. Foster, *Russia accused of clandestine funding of European parties as US conducts major review of Vladimir Putin's strategy*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/12103602/America-to-investigate-Russian-meddling-in-EU.html>.

<sup>11</sup> B. Nimmo, J. Eyal, *Russia's information warfare – airbrushing reality*, <http://www.stop-fake.org/en/russia-s-information-warfare-airbrushing-reality/>.



### USING BUSINESSES, PR LOBBIES AND SECRET SERVICES

Russia intends to use diplomatic and subversive means in order to undermine the EU's Russia policy and the sanctions. Within this framework, Russia continues to actively encourage the European companies which have sustained sanctions-related losses to demand alleviation of the sanctions.

The Russian elite cares a great deal about how Russia is viewed in the West, and the Kremlin has invested significant resources in public relations campaigns, working with Western-based PR agencies<sup>12</sup>.

Russian foreign policy-making is characterized by strategic farsightedness, tactical expediency and a very good ability to coordinate subversive capabilities, diplomacy, business and industry to secure vital national interests. The secret services play a central role in this process. They use their own tools to provide direct and indirect support for Russian influence abroad. They involve experts, foreign journalists, institutes, think-tanks, news agencies, undercover officers and agents working in such institutions, diplomats and members of the diaspora. The secret services are also responsible for putting into circulation information using the internet (trolling, hacking), disinformation, military deception operations, cyber-attacks and computer network operations.

### EFFECTIVENESS OF THE POLICY

Russian elite places considerable importance on its soft power strategy and policy. According to Russian perception, the main strength of Russia's soft power strategy is President Putin, due to the fact that he is being considered as a strong leader. Russian policy promoting "traditional values" has a growing potential. Measured using certain Russian objectives, the information campaign has made substantial achievements in controlling the domestic media environment and challenging Western media reporting (and hence influencing some sources of information available to policymakers).

The strong points of Russia's international media policy are its highly centralized decision-making process, compatibility with internal propaganda, ingenuity, adjustment to current needs, knowledge of the information environment abroad and support by special services. At the same

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<sup>12</sup> A. Foxall, *The Kremlin's Sleight of Hand: Russia's Soft Power Offensive in the UK*, <http://www.stopfake.org/en/the-kremlin-s-sleight-of-hand-russia-s-soft-power-offensive-in-the-uk/>.

time, it is characterized by high costs and a lack of short-term results. Russian media policy has not yet been able to significantly improve the image of Russia, or gather wider support for Russian foreign policy.

The effectiveness of Russian information policy abroad is limited in its outcomes and is dependent on the special operational environment in the targeted countries. Since this media offensive is conducted across a variety of platforms, languages and transmission methods and over a sustained and relatively lengthy period of time, the Russian message is not always entirely coherent; the execution of the policy is more random and poorly thought out than is commonly assumed.

Russian information policy towards the EU is targeted more at elites (political, business), decision-making bodies and specific social groups (far-right, far-left, Eurosceptic, etc.) than at the general public. From a public opinion perspective, Russian policy has not reached its goals. More than two thirds of Europeans (68%)<sup>13</sup> still consider Russian global leadership as undesirable. Under President Putin's rule, Russia is even increasingly losing supporters across the world.

## CONCLUSION

The focus of Russia's security concerns remains firmly on the West. Russia does not exclude the possibility of co-operation with the EU, the US or even NATO. However, the expansion of Western influence in what Russia regards as its zone of privileged interests is regarded as a direct security threat to the Russian state. The national security strategy underlines the regime's conviction that Western democracy promotion in the post-Soviet space is a cover for US power projection.

As a result, the Russian elite consider hybrid "toolbox" and information policy as one of the most important elements in foreign affairs. Therefore, despite economic and financial problems, Russian government, for example, will continue investment in its own international media operations within the framework of its hybrid policy to promote its interests. Because of cultural and historical ties in the post-Soviet area and in the Baltic states, Russia will promote the Russian language media, also involving the groups and organizations sponsored by foundations like "Russkiy Mir" or similar government establishments.

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<sup>13</sup> The General Marshall Fund, *Transatlantic Trends 2014*, [http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2012/09/Trends\\_2014\\_complete.pdf](http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2012/09/Trends_2014_complete.pdf).

Russians hope that their hybrid approach in the long term will undermine EU-US cooperation, cohesion and policy coordination. So, Russian policy in the EU will be directed towards polarization of different institutions, countries, parties and particular interest groups.

Putin and most of his entourage firmly believe that the West poses a real threat to their regime. Thus, from this perspective, standing up to the US and the EU is not merely a precondition for maintaining the status quo, but a necessary part of the campaign for the general recognition of Russia as a major global power.

Despite Russia's public image problems, Russian decision-makers hope that their international media efforts will in the long term contribute towards undermining EU-US cooperation and to weakening the coherence of the EU by polarising different institutions, countries, parties and particular interest groups. In this regard, no fundamental policy change is expected in the short term.

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