



## Background notes

# Hybrid War – A New Security Challenge for Europe

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### Introduction

Russia's aggression in Ukraine by occupying and annexing Crimea in 2014 has changed the perception of threats around the world, especially in the European Union and the EU Eastern Partnership states. Russia's support to separatist groups in the form of training, weapons and troops has tarnished its reputation internationally. Hybrid warfare waged by Russia in Ukraine has forced NATO and its allies to reconsider their approach to defence planning. It is important to take into account that hybrid warfare is a tool that Russia is using to change the existing world order and to remind everyone once again of its regional and global ambitions, and thus revealing a much greater political challenge on the international level.

### What is hybrid warfare?

Various definitions of hybrid warfare exist. For example, one definition is that “hybrid warfare is a conflict executed by either state and/or non-state threats that employs multiple modes of warfare to include conventional capabilities, irregular tactics, and criminal disorder”. In 2010, the NATO Military Working Group (Strategic Planning & Concepts) approved the following definition: “A hybrid threat is one posed by any current or potential adversary, including state, non-state and terrorists, with the ability, whether demonstrated or likely, to simultaneously employ conventional and non-conventional means adaptively, in pursuit of their objectives.”

Hybrid conflicts involve multi-layered efforts designed to destabilise a functioning state and polarise society. Unlike conventional warfare, the “centre of gravity” in hybrid warfare is the target country's population. Although military experts have been discussing the methods of hybrid warfare for several years, Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 highlighted the importance of information warfare in the new generation of warfare. According to General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, this new generation of warfare includes the following elements:

- Military action is started during peacetime (without declaring war);
- Non-contact clashes between highly manoeuvrable specialised groups of combatants;
- Annihilation of the enemy's military and economic power by quick and precise strikes on strategic military and civilian infrastructure;
- Massive use of high-precision weapons and special operations, robotics, and technologically new weapons;
- Use of armed civilians;
- Simultaneous strikes on the enemy's units and facilities throughout all of its territory;
- Simultaneous battles on land, air, sea, and in the information space;
- Use of asymmetrical and indirect methods;
- Management of combatants in a unified information system.



According to Latvian security policy expert Jānis Bērziņš, the Russian view of modern warfare is based on the idea that the main battleground is the mind; consequently, application of information and psychological methods have special significance in the quest to achieve superiority in troops and weapons control, thereby morally and psychologically depressing the enemy's armed forces and civilian population.

### **Challenges to the existing international order**

On the one hand, Russia insists on its right to implement its own foreign policy. On the other hand, it disrespects Ukraine's right to make a strategic choice in favour of closer integration with the EU. Russia's policy towards Georgia and Ukraine allows it to move closer to the new world order described in the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (for 2008 and 2013). According to these Concepts, the world should be governed by large geographic centres characterised by cultural (civilizational) diversity. President Vladimir Putin has publicly announced that the annexation of Crimea was intended to preserve the Orthodox civilisation and to unite not only traditionally Russian territories but also the so-called *Russian world*. Military aggression based on such a concept is a stark violation of existing international law, which clearly defines when use of military force is acceptable and when it is not. Russia's argumentation is geared towards protecting an ethnic and cultural group rather than its citizens. In that sense, it resembles the foreign policy used by Nazi Germany against the Czech Republic on the eve of World War II.

Three key notions underlie the new world order propagated by Russia: 1) Russia is claiming the exclusive right to operate in its neighbouring countries in order to deny some former Soviet republics the right to pursue their own foreign policy; 2) the Russian government is prepared to resort to (clandestine) military means to interfere in other countries, claiming that expatriates are under threat; 3) the Russian government is willing to *turn a blind eye* on violations of international law committed by other international players in exchange for the same treatment of its ambitious regional plans.

The EU and its partners have to find ways to prevent efforts to legitimise exclusive control over certain areas of interest and to annex territories belonging to other countries. International order must be governed by international law, not the whims of some heads of state or brokers of power.

### **Threats posed by Russia to the EU Eastern Partnership countries, the Baltic states and the EU as a whole**

Several NATO and EU member states are already reviewing their defence plans and paying closer attention to mitigation of non-military threats and risks. This re-assessment must continue, and reviewers must take into account that, in the case of hybrid war, operations in the information space are much more important than military action. In this context, creation of NATO centres of excellence in the Baltics in recent years has been a significant step towards preventing non-military risks. The Cyber Defence Centre in Estonia, the Energy Security Centre in Lithuania and the Strategic Communications Centre in Latvia are already enhancing the security of all NATO member states. The EU should also work more closely with these NATO centres of excellence.

The EU as a whole and the Baltic states in particular should seriously consider how they should deal with the vulnerability of their media. They must avoid censorship, but at the same time they must restrict media activities that are incompatible with freedom of the press. It is worth considering the advice offered by media experts like Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss who think that it is necessary "to bring together international media and experts to define the terms of reference for "propaganda", with the purpose of agreeing on a common set of definitions, and explore the possibility of a ratings system for disinformation inspired by such methodologies as Freedom House's



Freedom Ranking or Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, to create a benchmark for behaviour.”<sup>1</sup> If we fail to implement such a response, other authoritarian or revanchist governments will follow in Russia's footsteps. The Russian government is planning to increase the 2015 budgets of news agencies under its control, and there are no signs of possible changes in its media strategy. Russia's neighbouring countries which have a large proportion of Russian-speakers in their population are the most susceptible to Russian propaganda and disinformation. Even though the Ukrainian scenario will probably not be repeated in Estonia or Latvia, the presence of Russian-controlled media and its diaspora policy are impeding social integration and democratic developments in both countries.

The EU Eastern Partnership countries – Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia – are the targets of Russia's regional ambitions. Russia is attempting to exert its influence on the strategic choices of these countries by using economic and political means, as well as mass media. Russia's paternalistic attitude towards its neighbours includes efforts to interfere in their efforts to shape their national identity by claiming that the destiny of these neighbouring countries and their people is to be more closely linked to Russia, not Europe. The Eastern Partnership of the EU must respond to Russia's neighbourhood policy, which seeks to obstruct the European integration of the Eastern Partnership countries.

### **Topics for discussion**

1. Russia's concept of world order in which a few regional centres of power unilaterally decide everything is unacceptable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What steps need to be taken to strengthen the rule of international law as the guiding principle for maintaining international order?
2. What should be the future common foreign and security policy of the EU in light of new security challenges emerging on the eastern border of the European Union?
3. NATO representatives have made numerous announcements claiming that the Alliance would not hesitate to invoke Article 5 if the Ukrainian scenario is used against any of its member states (including the Baltic states). That would mean an armed response, but how should we respond to political threats and the initial non-military phases of hybrid warfare?
4. Do the EU and Eastern Partnership countries need to review their position on some aspects of Russia's diaspora policy and mass media strategy in view of the fact that both of these policies are recognised as tools of hybrid warfare that have been used against the Ukraine?

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<sup>1</sup> Pomerantsev, P. and Weiss, M. (2014) *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*. NY: The Institute of Modern Russia, p.40.

