

HYBRID WAR & THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: WAITING FOR A CORRELATION

Following Russia's actions in Ukraine, the discourse of "hybrid warfare" became a hotly debated topic among political experts. While not new for practitioners, the scale and scope of this hybrid war, as well as the unpreparedness of EU member states and their partners, resulted in the need to face new challenges and to address unknown threats that cannot be addressed by single actors. In this article, the author analyzes the ways hybrid warfare targets the Eastern Partnership states, which in addition to Ukraine are second-level targets, and underscores the necessity to correlate European policy towards Eastern neighbors in consideration of the reality and threats of hybrid warfare.

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The Ukrainian crisis has popularized the use of hybrid warfare terminology, both in expert and public discourse. While discussions are ongoing – whether it is a new type of war in opposition to conventional warfare or an extension of old methods that have been in use since the time of the ancient Greeks – the fact remains the same: Europe faces an unprecedented situation on its Eastern borders. While the Cold War had its own logic – a high level of political confrontation and conflict without any military action between the main counterparts – hybrid warfare has involved more than political spheres; it is assaultive, and comprehensive. While Ukraine is a primary target, Russia’s hybrid war overflows national borders, having a strong transnational effect; it also targets other European countries, in particular those of the Eastern Partnership program and its promoters.

One of the main goals of this hybrid war is instilling a feeling of constant political and economic insecurity among the target state’s population. This pressure in the form of trade wars, energy blackmail, discreditable propaganda, diplomatic deceit, and coercion to join alternative regional integration projects has been felt by almost all Eastern Partnership states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine).¹ In this region, hybrid warfare aims less at the security and more at the stability of the region. Since their independence, most of the Eastern Partnership states have not felt that they live in a secure environment, because of existing frozen conflicts, among other reasons. In such conditions, the concept of stability became the most valuable and can easily be manipulated. The main idea is that there is no stability without Russia.

As the Eastern Partnership states belong – in Russia’s opinion – to its natural sphere of influence, any attempts to exit from that sphere are perceived as a threat. It is worth mentioning that, in contrast to the West itself, Russia has never separated NATO and the EU enlargements, presuming that one cannot come without the other. Despite Moldova’s constitutionally neutral status, Ukraine’s announced non-bloc status (dating back to 2010-14), and Armenia’s membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), their efforts to sign the Association Agreements with the EU have been seen in the same light as Ukraine and Georgia’s aspirations of receiving a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 2008 from NATO: a threat to the Russian national interests that should be stopped by any means.

This article will analyze the elements of hybrid warfare used in the Eastern Partnership space, including the targets and goals of such activities. Moreover, it will present the EU response and necessity to correlate the ongoing revision of the

¹ Hennadyi Maksak, “Policy Brief. Produced on the occasion of the 6th annual meeting of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. 20-21 November, 2014, Batumi, Georgia,” *Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum*, November 2014.

Eastern Partnership with the current challenges both the EU and its neighbors are facing, when nobody is a clear security provider anymore.

Means of Hybrid Warfare

Information war is one of the main aspects of hybrid warfare used in the Eastern Partnership area. Being in the same information space, due to the common use of the Russian language and habits of watching news from Moscow, citizens of the six Eastern Partnership states do not often, if ever, watch Western media. As such, they remain out of the information coverage of the EU. Even Moldova – where many citizens speak Romanian as their first language – is mostly retranslating Moscow news. One of the goals of such information campaigns is to cause confusion and undermine local governing structures, which, in turn, may lead to a weakening in the resolve of political elites, as well as the population at large, to defend their country.²

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Information warfare that is directed at one state nevertheless has a spillover effect and influences neighboring states. Unlike in traditional and industrial societies, in the information age, it is essential not only to have knowledge of the number of missiles, tanks, troops, combat aircraft, and ships, but also to possess data on the specifics of target audiences of global or local media in a given country. This includes public attitudes, as well as the identity and ideological stance of opinion-makers.³ Today, we can identify three groups that Russia’s information warfare targets: (1) the population inside Russia, to gain support of foreign policy actions and to procure acceptance of any sanctions and limitations introduced; (2) the population in Ukraine, to demoralize and decrease their support of the Ukrainian state authorities’ military actions in the East and to present a positive image of Russia; and (3) the population of third states, primarily in the post-Soviet space and the EU. In the case of the population inside the EU, it is necessary to create an image of Russia that is not so bad, with whom it is necessary to continue dialogue and to accuse Ukraine for ongoing hostilities.

² Jan Joel Andersson, “Hybrid operations: lessons from the past,” *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, EUISS Brief Issue, No. 33, October 2015, http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_33_Hybrid_operations.pdf

³ Giorgi Targamadze, “Information Warfare Against Georgia,” *Georgian Foundation For Strategic And International Studies*, Expert Opinion No. 32, 2014, <http://gfsis.org/media/download/library/articles/targamadze/32-targamadze-ENG.pdf>

In the case of the Eastern Partnership states the goal is slightly different: besides the traditional arguments of having close connections (trade, cultural, linguistic, political, security), Russia expends significant efforts to ruin the EU image (posting fake information or employing stereotypes, like the necessity to adopt same sex marriage legislation for visa liberalization). The goal of this is to present the opinion that any protests (such as EuroMaidan) are being incited by the US or the EU, can bring only chaos and war, and that stability is more important than democracy. In some way, this is the promotion of the Russian concept of statehood.

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These activities are not limited to traditional media. Websites, as well as active groups of trolls and “independent” bloggers, which attempt to give a desired direction to internet discussions regarding the country’s orientation and other significant topics, are also being vigorously utilized as weapons.⁴ The personal connections between people living in the Eastern Partnership states (relatives and friends, due to the population shuffles during the Soviet-era) play a significant role in information dissemination, especially in the form of unchecked gossips and fears, resembling the spread of a virus. Taking into account that the level of trust between people considered “close” is higher than trust in the authorities, there is no room for proper counteraction, especially when there is no information security doctrine in the states of interest.

For Valery Kravchenko, a senior research fellow at the National Institute for Strategic Studies, the use of properly planned psychological pressure on the local population eliminates the need for the open use of force, as it is limited only to sabotage units that are prepared in advance and need not be numerous.⁵ Moreover, not just classical sabotage groups are used, but also so-called agents of influence. These may be local opinion-makers or so-called “gossip-spreaders,” those who transmit necessary information via informal means of communication and in public spaces where locals traditionally get together, e.g. bazaars.

Energy resources have also become important tools of leverage in hybrid war. For the Eastern Partnership countries, this has had two effects. The first has led to the

⁴ Targamadze (2014).

⁵ Valery Kravchenko, “Psychological aspects of ‘hybrid war’ between Russia and Ukraine,” 2015, https://www.academia.edu/7342730/Psychological_aspects_of_hybrid_war_between_Russia_and_Ukraine

dependency of these countries on cheap energy resources from Russia, while the second has created the perception that these states could not survive without Russian energy resources. Azerbaijan is the only state that can escape this dependency.

However, this dependency is sometimes exaggerated. The Ukrainian-Russian natural gas wars of 2005-2006 and 2008-2009 were the first elements in Russia's hybrid warfare, but were initially not seen to be part of a bigger, more complex picture. These gas wars have been perceived as not just a commercial dispute, but as an instrument of foreign policy. However, they were still regarded as a leverage to tighten the interdependency, rather than a hybrid warfare element. If these events can be considered as a preamble to Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014, they gave a strong signal to other dependent countries. By 2014-15, many EU member states were afraid to lose Russian energy supplies, even if the percentage of supply was not crucial. On 22 April 2015, the EU filed antitrust charges against Russian Gazprom – the world's largest natural gas producer – for abuse of market power. Amongst the allegations was the claim that Gazprom willingly manipulated and put undue pressure on countries to use Gazprom's infrastructure exclusively, and, most damningly, "pursued an overall strategy to partition central and eastern European gas markets."⁶ This first step, together with Ukraine's attempts to diversify its sources of energy supply, can also provide a good example for the neighboring states, and weaken Russia's ability to use energy as a foreign policy tool in the event of a new crisis.

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⁶ Christopher Hartwell, "The EU vs. Gazprom: The hybrid war continues," 27 April 2015, *Russia Direct*, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/eu-vs-gazprom-hybrid-war-continues>

⁷ Diego A. Ruiz, "Palmer Back to the future? Russia's hybrid warfare, revolutions in military affairs, and Cold War comparisons," *NATO Defense College*, Research Paper No. 120, October 2015, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=859>

⁸ András Rác, "Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine. Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist," The Finnish Institute of International Affairs Report No. 43, 2015.

countries of the Eastern Partnership, Central Asia, and the EU have started to learn their lessons. The scale of resources involved is a symbol of the weakness rather than the strength of Russia; Russia needed to use all of its instruments and resources to cover its involvement and losses to keep the crisis burning, and to maintain the support of the third states. In fact, only Armenia remained under this influence, as even Belarus chose the role of mediator rather than to be Russia's satellite.

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At critical moments in a hybrid warfare campaign, military power can be the indispensable enabler for soft power, facilitating or accelerating the emergence of a favorable outcome.⁹ In the case of the Eastern Partnership states, this is easier to implement either due to Russian military bases being deployed in some of the states, or Moscow's control of separatist regions with high levels of military cooperation. The recent attempts to establish a Russian airbase in Belarus have aimed to secure a military presence in case soft power and economic mechanisms do not work along with political pressure.

For András Rácz, a senior research fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, the attacker needs to be militarily stronger than the target country in order to limit the countermeasure potential of the defender.¹⁰ This is true in the case of a single Eastern Partnership state, as the five remaining are much smaller or weaker than Ukraine was. However, the balance can be tipped if this issue is considered a part of NATO-Russian or EU-Russian affairs, rather than, for example, purely Russian-Ukrainian ones. Therefore, for the Eastern Partnership states, it is extremely important to demonstrate that in case of provocations, the EU reaction will be more affirmative and not be as delayed as in the Ukrainian case. However, despite its military power, the Kremlin has been unable to consider military intervention; so many of the challenges that hybrid warfare presents are those for which the EU has more mechanisms to fight than NATO does.¹¹

Possible Reaction and Reprisals

According to Hennadiy Maksak, the head of the Polissia Foundation of International and Regional Studies, “As a political-economic association, the European Union is not

⁹ Ruiz (2015).

¹⁰ Rácz (2015).

¹¹ Michael E. Lambert, “Hybrid war at work in the post-Soviet space,” 24 May 2015 <http://estonianworld.com/security/hybrid-war-at-work-in-the-post-soviet-space/>

the institution that is ready to constrain when it comes to military-political questions.”¹² However, does a hybrid war need a military-political response? One needs to be aware that due to the very nature of the predominantly legal, mostly covert nature of the preparatory phase of hybrid warfare, no absolute defense is possible.¹³ Some elements of hybrid warfare can be just an instrument of foreign policy, the desire to apply more pressure or influence, which does not necessarily mean aggressive military continuation.

So far, the thinking on countering hybrid threats has largely been military-centric, particularly in the context of NATO. However, the non-military and predominantly unconventional nature of hybrid threats arguably requires them to be tackled also – and possibly, in some cases, mainly – by non-military means.¹⁴ The Eastern Partnership program has been avoiding security topics among its priorities. Neither the Alliance nor the Union can guarantee the absolute security of their partners in the face of future threats, but they can help them build resilience to hybrid tactics.¹⁵ However, it is necessary to accept that this resilience most probably will be constructed separately for EU/NATO member-states, and for their partners/neighbors, despite the fact that the threats are aimed at both, so the response should then be correlated. For many years whether the Eastern Partnership countries are security consumers or providers has been a topic of debate. Within the context of the the ongoing crisis in the Eastern neighborhood, the ability of the post-Soviet states to face hybrid threats will influence both the EU’s role in the region and how it is perceived.

“A revision of the Eastern Partnership program presents a chance to (...) promote a joint vision on hybrid warfare and a response to other common challenges.”

While relying primarily on its long-term transformative power in its neighborhood, the EU should also be able to respond more quickly and strongly to short-term political and security developments.¹⁶ In clear acknowledgment of the serious challenges presented by the EU’s neighborhood, and the inadequacy of its own policy, the EU

¹² Hennadyi Maksak, “Policy Brief. Produced on the occasion of the 6th annual meeting of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. 20-21 November, 2014, Batumi, Georgia,” Commissioned by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, November 2014, http://eap-csf.eu/assets/files/Policy%20Brief_en.pdf

¹³ Rácz (2015).

¹⁴ Jan Joel Andersson and Thierry Tardy, “Hybrid: what’s in a name?,” *EUISS Brief Issue* No. 32, European Union Institute for Security Studies, October 2015 http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_32_Hybrid_warfare.pdf

¹⁵ Nicu Popescu, “Hybrid tactics: neither new nor only Russian,” *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, Issue Alert No. 4, January 2015.

¹⁶ Laure Delcour, “In Need of a New Paradigm? Rethinking the European Neighbourhood Policy/Eastern Partnership,” *Estonian Eastern Partnership Center*, Eastern Partnership Review, No. 20, 2015.

recently launched a review process. A revised policy for Europe's East has to have European values at its core, with an unambiguous and adamant projection of the EU's normative model, which has brought peace, development, and democracy to large parts of Europe. The security needs of individual countries and the region as such need stronger emphasis.¹⁷

Thus, the Eastern Partnership revision is mostly considered separately from the Ukrainian crisis. It is more of a means of modernization; lessons learned from the signing of the Association Agreements and the special positions of some states, rather than the comprehension of new threats and challenges in the region. There is the need to establish new institutional links in case the EU would like to play a more significant role, as politics without security will not be considered anymore. During the European Council summit in June 2015, the EU Heads of States and Governments acknowledged the importance of hybrid threats, and now both the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Defense Agency (EDA) are engaged in assessing their implications for capability development in Europe.¹⁸ For Jan Joel Andersson, senior analyst at the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), the newly established EU strategic communications team is an important step in addressing hybrid threats.¹⁹ But the question remains open as to how effective this team can be if it is comprised only of 10 Russian-language experts from member states who will monitor Russian media and develop communications products and media campaigns to better explain EU policies to the Eastern Partnership states. It would be more effective to establish local teams that can assist in monitoring and provide better understanding of the local context.

Moreover, currently there is a prevailing focus on information security, while other aspects of the hybrid war and their interconnections usually lack attention or are left for NATO consideration. Cyber-attacks, sabotage, dual-citizenship, sponsoring of political parties and NGOs, organization of public events and "deployment" of agents of influence, use of blackmail over political leaders and their dependency on the corruption schemes, manipulation of the sentiments of national minorities, and traditional media work – all are possible instruments that can be used in hybrid war.

The six states of the Eastern Partnership remain the main target of these activities. Seen as a sphere of interest and a buffer zone between the West, one that is associated with both the EU and NATO, as well as the Russian Federation, these states

¹⁷ "Reviewing the European Neighbourhood Policy: Eastern Perspectives," Edited by Alina Inayah and Joerg Forbrig. *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, Europe Policy Paper, No. 4, 2015.

¹⁸ Jan Joel Andersson, "Hybrid operations: lessons from the past," *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, EUISS Brief Issue, No. 33, October 2015, http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_33_Hybrid_operations.pdf

¹⁹ Andersson (2015).

are vulnerable. A revision of the Eastern Partnership program presents a chance to enhance the effectiveness of the program not only by answering the needs of the EU to establish institutionalized relations with the post-Soviet states without membership perspective, but also to promote a joint vision on hybrid warfare and a response to other common challenges. Security, even without military cooperation, should become one of the new priorities in which the EU does not have a manual for resolution. By drawing on important lessons from the Ukrainian crisis, the EU can develop a comprehensive framework for addressing hybrid threats in the region together with the states of the Eastern Partnership.