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Russian Political Warfare: What It Is, What It's Not, and Why It Isn't Working

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This article defines Russia's multifaceted approach to political warfare and analyzes its effectiveness in achieving foreign policy objectives. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine is an exemplary case study to define the aspects of 21st-century Russian political warfare and analyze its efficacy as an approach to foreign policy. This case study will lend meaningful support to the claim that the utility of Russian political warfare is severely limited by the adhocratic foreign policy encouraged by the Kremlin—specifically, the lack of an overarching proscriptive foreign policy strategy and a functioning bureaucracy to enforce the pursuit of outlined objectives, definitive organizational purviews, and operational synchronization in the security and intelligence services. The Kremlin's adhocracy generates so much internal friction as to render a holistic, whole of force approach to political warfare both unworkable in the short term and unlikely in the long term.

Keywords: Russian warfare, Putin, Ukraine, hacking, gas politics

> *A serious problem in planning against American doctrine is that the Americans do not read their manuals, nor do they feel any obligation to follow their own doctrine.*—Steve Leonard

Although its actual provenance is unknown, this often-cited quote serves as a frame for analyzing distinctions between Soviet and Western political warfare during the Cold War and the evolution of the Russian approach to political warfare in the post-Cold War era. Soviet political warfare (*aktivnye meropriiatiia*) was the exclusive legerdemain of the KGB and GRU and was actively directed and managed by the Politburo. This holistic synchronization of forces with direct oversight enabled the coherent pursuit of foreign policy objectives, parsimony of resources in the face of Western advantages in economic power, and multi-domain exploitation of the open and transparent nature of Western institutions, notably information and media. In Russian eyes, this approach to political warfare also lost them the Cold War. The Russian Federation has deployed an updated, revised, and reinvigorated methodology of two different approaches to foreign policy aims in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The twinned approaches are determined by the echelon of conflict they are applied to. At the strategic and operational geopolitical level Russian power is projected using the hybrid warfare approach (*gibridnaya voina*). At the low operational and tactical levels, they utilize the doctrine of new-generation warfare.

Prior to the initial Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent occupations in Eastern Ukraine, a significant bloc of Western policy makers and academics believed that Ukrainian civil society and its military would prove totally ineffectual in stopping or affecting Russian designs on its territory and affairs. Professor Taras Kuzio of Kyiv Mohyla's National University took to the *Geopolitical Monitor* in 2022 to lambast this bloc for their initial hesitance to intervene in 2014 with meaningful economic sanctions, significant military and economic aid to Ukraine, and for advocating a Chamberlain-esque appeasement

approach to Putin's aggression (Kuzio). Experts believed that Russia's new-generation warfare approach at the low operational and tactical level, and its hybrid warfare methods deployed at the high operational and strategic echelons, would thoroughly outclass Ukrainian resistance and lead to a swift occupation and subjugation of the country. While Kuzio's objectivity could be called into question, he highlights a salient point: why was the West's perspective on the effectiveness of Russian agents of foreign policy so skewed and not representative of reality? Part of the answer lies in the muddied and politicized Western debate about what the doctrine of Russian political warfare in the 21st century is. Specifically, the distinction between its constituent elements of hybrid warfare and new-generation warfare, and the Western assessment of how interoperable the elements of these approaches are. To renovate this flawed Western perspective, definitions and distinctions must be made between hybrid warfare and new-generation warfare. These definitions will be supported by examples of their practical employment. Following that, an assessment must be conducted of how they have failed to operate in synchronicity during the Ukrainian conflict, to the detriment of the primary Russian foreign policy objective of reincorporating the Ukrainian aspect of the Russian empire.

The strategic and high operational approach to contemporary Russian political warfare is hybrid warfare, in Russian —*gibridnaya voina.* A useful definition of this tortured term is offered by Ofer Fridman in his work *Hybrid Warfare*: "The use of military and non-military tools in an integrated campaign designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative, and gain psychological as well as physical advantages utilizing diplomatic means; sophisticated and rapid information, electronic and cyber operations; covert and occasionally overt military and intelligence action; and economic pressure" (ix). Fridman then links the tasks to the purposes with the Russian explanation of *gibridnaya voina*: ". . . means and methods that amplify political, ideological, economic and other social polarizations within an adversary's society, thus leading to its internal collapse" (96). This approach is the direct inheritor of the Soviet political warfare strategy, updated with new weapons for the globalized capitalist economy, information space, and diverse political climate without the prohibitive rules of engagement of socialist ideology. Russia has deployed these strategic echelon weapons with the intent of dividing and distracting the Western powers outside of its near abroad, confusing efforts at cohesive responses to Russian aggression, and exploiting targets of opportunity.

Examples of Russian hybrid warfare begin with disinformation operations targeting Western social divisions like leveraging "private" enterprises such as the Internet Research Agency to spread Kremlin-approved fake news stories in the social media space utilizing trolls, botnets, and paid sponsorships (Bergmann and Kenney). One of the most successful of these operations was the incitement of the "Stop the Islamization of Texas Rally" in 2016, where social media pages/accounts managed by IRA operators incited unknowing American demonstrators on the U.S. political left and the right to physically demonstrate against one another over the issue of a new Islamic Center in Houston (Michel 77-58).

Russian hybrid warfare operations against Western political and ideological targets have also generated some noteworthy examples. Privateer and FSB/GRU cyber operators have been linked to several high-profile hacks of Western political targets and subsequent leaks of the collected information to support the election of pro-Kremlin Western leaders, or leaders they believe will further their destabilizing efforts through their own means. In the former case, private operators and GRU hackers were linked to the 2017 hack of French Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron's emails in an effort to bolster the French electorate's support for far-right candidate, and Kremlin connected, Marine Le Pen (Greenberg). In the latter case, GRU and FSB cyber operators were directly linked to the 2016 hacks of the DNC and Clinton presidential campaign chairman John Podesta during the hotly contested US presidential elections of the same year (Bergmann and Kenney; Geller). In both cases, Russian forces undertook offensive cyber operations designed to influence the election of candidates favorable in some manner to the Kremlin and exacerbate ideological divides in Western electorates.

Russia has weaponized its main economic advantage of hydrocarbon abundance into a flexible instrument of coercion at both the strategic and high operational levels. Strategically, the profits of Russian gas politics are used to capture and corrupt elites in Western Europe, notably in Germany and UK. These elites are then pressured to advance policy that deepens Western Europe's dependence on Russian gas supplies and discourage any organic measures aimed at decreasing this dependence or stemming the corrosive flow of Russian grey money in their nation's markets and politics. Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's championing of the Nord Stream 1 & 2 projects, and Italian far-right party Lega Nord's advocacy for Gazprom's planned South Stream project illustrate what Russian gas contracts and kickbacks can buy (Shekhovtsov). Operationally, gas politics are utilized to coerce dependent states within Russia's direct sphere of influence. In the Baltics, Latvia has been inundated with Russian energy investment seeking to fully capture its energy market. Lithuania has seen the

the price of Russian gas raised by over 450% from 2007-2014. Both cases represent offensive economic measures taken to weaken frontier NATO/EU member nations perceived as hostile actors by the Kremlin (Pomerantsev and Weiss 24-25).

The definition and key aspects of 21st-century Russian hybrid warfare are utilizing information operations, money, and coercive diplomacy to exploit or aggravate existing social, political, ideological, and economic divides in the target populace. The Kremlin deploys this strategy in the strategic and high operational echelons of conflict with Western powers to distract, divide, preclude cohesion, and exploit targets of opportunity. While covert and overt military force is one of the tools in the Russian hybrid warfare toolkit, it is more often utilized as a threat of violence to enhance the coercive capacity of the other tools of Russian hybrid warfare (Galeotti, *Russian Poltical War* 34-44). Thus, the key distinctions of hybrid warfare are the primacy of non-military weapons, its application at the highest levels of conflict with the West, and its use as a destabilizing smokescreen for other, more kinetic actions, taken against Russian perceived threats in their near domain.

At the low operational and tactical level, Russian political warfare is prosecuted using new-generation warfare. Quoting Fridman, "The theory of new-generation warfare is closely associated with the work of two Russian officers, Colonel (ret.) Sergey Chekinov and Lieutenant General (ret.) Sergey Bogdanov, both from the highly influential Centre for Military and Strategic Studies of the General Staff of the Russian Federation" (127). Chekinov and Bogdanov define their theory as, "A war, in which the leading role is taken by the information-psychological struggle, directed to achieve superiority in the sphere of command and control, as well as to suppress the morale of the military personnel and the population of the adversary" (Fridman). New-generation warfare is the distillation and adaptation of Russian hybrid warfare principles to the physical battlefield. Specifically, it leverages the same toolset of information operations, cyberattacks, and economic warfare, which are all conducted in concert to reduce the capability of the target populace to resist the inevitable kinetic military operations. New-generation warfare then extends and amplifies these effects by utilizing kinetic military force in the physical domain. This practice shifts the emphasis from indirect effects to tangible gains on the physical battlefield. The work of Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov shows a clear influence from the aforementioned theorists. In his frequently cited work, "The Value of Science in Prediction," Gerasimov extends the new-generation theory by making a case to reaffirm the integral part conventional forces play in exploiting the battlefield conditions set by indirect effects and maximizing their impact (qtd. in Galeotti, "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine'"). Further, he states that once these gains have been physically exploited and retained at the tactical level the impetus shifts again to strategic leaders. Specifically, with these conditions set, higher organs of state foreign policy or diplomacy are enabled to negotiate with the belligerent target from a position of marked advantage utilizing the means and methods of hybrid warfare (qtd. in "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine'"). A relevant example of the practical application of Russian new-generation warfare is found in the current conflict in Ukraine. This vehicle facilitates analysis of the events surrounding the first incursion into Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014, with a focus on information operations, the role of the intelligence agencies and their criminal network proxies, and covert military special forces.

The Kremlin had been perfecting the art of the false flag for years prior to the 2014 occupation of Crimea. In "How to Manufacture a War," Brian Whitmore outlines the new light shed on the unrest in Eastern Ukraine prior to the Russian intervention and annexation of Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts by the public release of the Glazyev tapes and the Malofeyev strategy memo. The tapes outline alleged conversations between Kremlin aide Sergei Glazyev and contacts in Ukraine discussing financing, coordinating, and directing civil insurrections across Eastern Ukraine. These actors also outlined the goal of insurgent forces seizing the means of government and formally appealing to Russian forces for intervention and occupation of Ukrainian territory (Whitmore). While the Kremlin denied the authenticity of the recordings, the operations discussed within them are corroborated by the leaked Kremlin strategy memo attributed to individuals working under Kremlin insider and oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev. Prominent portions of the memo state, "Russian policy towards Ukraine must finally become pragmatic"; and, "In order to launch the process of 'pro-Russian drift' in Crimea and Eastern Ukrainian territories, events should be created ahead of time that can give this process political legitimacy and moral justification" (qtd. in Lipsky). These examples represent the low operational application of new-generation warfare tactics. These tactics are applied to information operations in order to generate "chaff" in the information space and grant plausible deniability to the application of covert and overt kinetic forces.

In the new-generation warfare context the intelligence services play a preparatory and secondary role to covert and overt military force. With that said, their non-kinetic actions and tactics are crucial to preparing the battle space for kinetic forces. They also mobilize covert kinetic forces of their own to support legitimate Russian military formations. Galeotti highlights their contributions to the Crimean campaign in *Russian Political War* noting that both FSB and GRU elements were crucial

in paralyzing Kyiv's ability to respond to the Russian infiltration. They accomplished this with an operational cocktail mixed with equal parts cyberattacks, suborning Ukrainian civil and military command structures, camouflaged terrorist attacks in the capital, and mobilizing paramilitary forces (88-90). They activated and organized Ukrainian-based gangsters with deep organizational ties to Russian-based criminal organizations, and subsequently Russian intelligence. The gangsters were used as rear echelon fifth columnists during the Russian intervention, seizing and occupying government buildings, manning access control points, and holding other key terrain by function of numbers, thus freeing Russian special forces to conduct their portion of the new-generation force continuum (Whitmore). The Russian intelligence forces act as the bridge between operational resources and tactical formations in new-generation warfare, facilitating unique capabilities and acting as force multipliers for traditional military units.

Outside of the security and intelligence services, Russian special forces and *Spetsnaz* formations have benefitted the most from Putin and the General Staff's perpetual program of reforms. This was reflected in their signature involvement with the operations in both the Donbas and Crimea. In the Donbas, Russian special forces took on a remarkably similar role to the Unconventional Warfare mission set of the USASOC Green Berets. They provided military training to militia and volunteer forces, aiding in operational planning, providing access to Russian air and fire support, and acted as a contact point for supplies and weapons. In Crimea, Russian special forces undertook a mission set much more focused on short duration/high intensity combat operations that included direct action raids on key personnel centers, sabotage, and seizing critical infrastructure to cripple the Ukrainian command and control network. Two of the key operations they undertook during the Crimean campaign was the seizure of the Internet Exchange Point in Simferopol, and the destruction of the submerged telecommunications cables linking the peninsula to the mainland (Galeotti, *Russian Political War* 76-77). The mission sets of Russian special forces represent the pure tactical application of kinetic force in the new-generation warfare context. Covert, deniable, and lethally effective, they are the primary effort in this context and are heavily supported by the non-military weapons maintained by the information operators, intelligence services, and their proxies.

Twenty-first century Russian new-generation warfare is defined as the primacy of covert or overt kinetic forces in seizing, consolidating, and holding ground on a battlefield systematically prepared for their operations by non-kinetic forces. The secondary non-kinetic forces play a crucial role in the stated purpose of new-generation warfare, that of degrading the will, morale, and capability of the enemy population and forces to resist kinetic action. They accomplish this primarily through offensive information operations, and traditional and non-traditional intelligence operations to include deniable acts of terrorism and cyberattacks, mobilization of paramilitary forces, and criminal networks.

While the previous examples highlight short term and singular battle successes, they must be evaluated holistically to assess their effectiveness in Russia's long term, overall geopolitical campaign strategy. In the theory of 21st-century Russian political war, new-generation warfare is meant to be used in conjunction with hybrid warfare to achieve foreign policy objectives. This synthesis blends non-kinetic hybrid warfare practitioners conducting strategic *maskirovka* or masking of actions against the West at large while the kinetic practitioners of new-generation warfare take, consolidate, and hold territory in the foreground. Both of these paradigms share the common, albeit vague, goal of returning Russia to great power status with its historic empire intact. In practice, Galeotti's metaphor of Putin's foreign policy arms as a many-headed hydra is incredibly apropos because it describes the dissonance between goals and outcomes. The heads of the Russian security and intelligence monster spend as much or more time fighting amongst themselves as they do against any foreign enemy ("Putin's Hydra" 1). Galeotti goes on to highlight the key points of failure for the practical application of Russian political warfare: the lack of clear strategic guidance and prescriptive foreign policy strategy, and the lack of an independent government oversight body dedicated to tasking and deconflicting the separate arms of the security, intelligence, and military services (3-13). This dearth of cohesiveness prevented Russian foreign policy makers and strategists from consolidating the gains of the 2014 incursion in an opportunistic fashion in 2020.

Similarly, Galeotti highlights the lack of a detailed and prescriptive foreign policy strategy. He states:

> To some, this multi-vectored challenge represents an extraordinarily complex and disciplined campaign . . . And yet, it is clear that many, even most, individual initiatives [amongst the Russian security and intelligence services] are largely unconnected, often opportunistic . . . They connect only sometimes, and frequently clumsily. There appears to be no detailed masterplan, but rather a broad strategy of weakening the European Union (EU) and NATO, distancing Europe and the United States from each other, and generally creating a political and cultural environment more conducive for Moscow and its interests. (*Russian Political War* 58-59)

Galeotti goes on to support this statement with the example of the Kremlin capitalizing on the spread of the fake news narrative surrounding the "Lisa Case" (*Russian Political War* 59). However, one can also see the lack of strategic coordination in the events surrounding the DNC and Clinton campaign hacks in 2016. In this case the GRU, FSB, and SVR were, once again, all conducting separate cyber operations against the same target at the same time (CrowdStrike). The lack of interagency coordination and sloppy tradecraft led to the identification of Russian cyber operators from those agencies, linking them to the cyber exploits and subsequent leaks of proprietary data. In addition, it led to indictments for twelve Russian intelligence agents by the Department of Justice (*Netyksho, et al. Indictment*). The Kremlin and security services considered this operation a success because it stoked divisions amongst the American electorate, added fuel to an unproductive partisan debate, and weakened faith in American democratic institutions. Objectively, it could have been even more successful if the actions of the individual intelligence and security services had been coordinated in such manner as to maintain the plausible deniability of Russian state actors, achieving the objective of sowing discord in the West, and precluding Western security and intelligence services from addressing infrastructure insecurity and vectors in the information domain. This outcome was impossible for two reasons; one has been addressed in the lack of guiding foreign policy strategy that defines clear objectives and limits the power of the individual Russian foreign policy organs. The other is the lack of an institutional body dedicated to oversight of the security and intelligence services, specifically in the areas of deconflicting organizational purviews, vetting intelligence products as quality control, and synchronizing operations to achieve Russian geopolitical objectives.

Because there is no cogent strategy, there is no institutional body to ensure compliance. Rather, there is an adhocratic and unofficial network that governs which intelligence agencies have access to Putin and his advisors. And what intelligence products are incorporated into their decision-making process. In "Putin's Hydra," Galeotti delineates the convoluted flow of Russian intelligence products. Specifically, how the intelligence and security agencies are played off against one another in an effort to provide the most appealing version of events for Putin's consideration. These efforts are further obfuscated by the need to pass through informal gatekeepers in either the Security Council or the Presidential Administration team. An additional layer of confusion is added when intelligence agencies utilize informal channels based on personal rapport with Putin to bypass these internal checks and balances (9). This hopelessly convoluted system ensures that the intelligence products that do reach the president have been so adulterated and analytically spun so as not to remotely resemble the information that required analysis in the first place. Poor inputs guarantee poor outputs, and Galeotti points to the initial Donbas intervention as exemplifying this. The initial intervention appeared to be based on overly optimistic Russian intelligence estimates of the target. Primarily, that by occupying the Donbas regions the Ukrainian government would see the hopelessness of resisting Russian foreign policy aims and capitulate their governance to Putin's whims (*Russian Political War* 83). It logically follows that this entropic system of intelligence analysis has only worsened in correlation with the degrading Russian position in Ukraine following the invasion in 2022.

There is no better example of the dysfunction of practically applied Russian political warfare than the missed opportunity of the US presidential election of 2020. The hybrid warfare target of opportunity that Russia exploited in the 2016 hacks, and subsequent disinformation operations, had exceeded any rational expectation in aggravating a significant populist minority. This group was absolutely convinced that the Democratic Party had stolen the presidential election and that President Biden had been fraudulently elected. The situation devolved into a media firestorm, months of civil unrest, and culminated in the Capitol Riots in January of 2021. The Kremlin could not have orchestrated a more opportune time to invade Ukraine: its hybrid warfare measures had been successful in stoking division and could continue to capitalize on unrest in the US; their new-generation warfare measures had prepared the battlefield for occupation in the Donbas and Crimea in 2014; and Russian conventional forces were massed on the Ukrainian border in an offensive posture. And yet, at the time when the West was so fractured by internal division and strife that it had no hope of supporting Ukraine in any way approaching the level or speed with which it actually did in 2022, Russia did not launch its invasion. They were not able to take advantage of this opportunity for several key reasons. Namely, without an institutionally defined foreign policy strategy, they did not have

an operational plan that could be taken off the shelf and applied quickly. Without a functioning and objective intelligence oversight committee, Russian strategic leaders did not have an accurate picture of how divided, distracted, and vulnerable the US in particular was, or more importantly for how long. And finally, because the Russian foreign policy establishment had been conditioned to reactionism under Putin's leadership, none could realistically present this course of action to the president. While this counterfactual scenario is revisionist, it highlights the key failures and weaknesses of the 21st-century Russian political war approach. In addition, while not seeking to take any measure of honor away from the Ukrainian armed forces and people, it is based on the reality that without timely Western military and civil aid, Ukraine would not have been able to resist Russian aggression as well as it has, and possibly not for any length of time.

To understand Russian 21st-century political war, a distinction must be made between the methods applied at different echelons of conflict. At the strategic and high operational level, the Kremlin applies the tactics, techniques, and procedures of hybrid warfare. This level is defined by its use of non-military means to achieve political, informational, and psychological objectives with a special emphasis on exploiting existing divisions in the target population. At the low operational and tactical level, the Kremlin employs the precepts of new-generational warfare. Conversely, this level is marked by the use of covert and overt military force supported by non-military assets to prepare the physical battlespace for occupation, and to set conditions favorable to Russian foreign policy. The "Cracks in the Kremlin Matrix" (Pomerantsev) appear when analyzing the level of cohesion between these two methods in the context of Russia's long term geopolitical aims. The effectiveness of Russian political war in application is limited by a lack of a prescriptive, specific, and defined geopolitical strategy, and the lack of an institutionally sound oversight body responsible for the conduct of the security and intelligence services. This analysis shows little to no cohesion between the two methods of conducting Russian political war, no synchronicity of operations, and an inability to achieve outsize effects with parsimonious planning. These dysfunctions have been repeatedly seen during, and within the context of, the Ukrainian conflict, from the bungled hacks of 2016 to the missed opportunity in 2020, and the ongoing ineffectual "special military operation" launched in 2022.

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