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**Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Approach  
to Foreign Policy and the West's Response**



*Russia's "Little Green Men" captured Crimea in 2014 Photo Credit: Euromaidan*

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# Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Approach to Foreign Policy and the West's Response



*Russian Tanks Loaded onto Trains to be shipped to Permanent Base in Russia; Source: NPR*

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought new focus on the military policies of both the Russian Federation and the West. Until the Russia-Ukraine War, little emphasis was placed into analyzing or combatting the tactics used by Russia to achieve political and security goals. This has especially been the case concerning Russian foreign policy following the rise of Vladimir Putin to office in 1999.<sup>1</sup> As the Russian war in Ukraine continues with no end in sight, policymakers must examine the soft-power methods through which Russia, under Putin, gains influence in former territories of the Soviet Union and beyond. Hybrid war is one such method Russia has used for its own ends since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. As time progresses and Russia stalls on the battlefields of Ukraine, Putin and his government will continue to use, and place more emphasis on, hybrid warfare as a means of obtaining allies in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and thus regain influence Russia had wielded during the era of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanislav Klimovich. 2023. "From failed democratization to the war against Ukraine: what happened to Russian institutions under Putin." *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 103

To fully combat the resurgence of Russian dominance in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the West under the helm of the United States and Europe must succeed in combatting Russian military tactics, especially in hybrid warfare. To do so involves understanding the political climates of nations essential in Russian efforts, considering historical animosity towards the Russian government, and observing Russian weaknesses in soft power. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has stepped up efforts to establish a unified alliance against Russia and deter Russia on the military front, conducting its largest military exercise in years. However, deadlock and conflict within NATO could hamper efforts at combatting Russian hybrid power in the former Eastern Bloc. Failure to defend against Russia's soft-power objectives and tactics will prove disastrous for long-term stability in the region.

*Hybrid Power in Russian Foreign Policy*



*Convoy of Russian Troops Arriving in Georgia in 2008 Photo Credit: France 24*

The Russian government is adept at utilizing soft-power techniques in its political games, and it understands when to combine soft power with hard power to keep its neighbors and its own citizens in check.<sup>2</sup> When the Russian government cannot install a loyal subject in a country of interest through the ballot, or when a loyal head of state is forced out of office, Russia will often fund and arm rebel groups that share their strategic interests and political values. This method of financing insurgents gives Russia plausible deniability while expanding its stranglehold on the state where the insurgency is taking place. Also, financing insurgents is a negligible risk to the Russian economy, public opinion, and importantly, Russian politicians like Vladimir Putin. This is the case for other countries that have used hybrid warfare tactics to achieve a political objective.<sup>3</sup> Russian-sponsored insurgents do not result in the direct loss of Russian troops, whose loss doesn't cause mass public resentment that can topple the political machine that holds Russia together. The minimal risk to Russian power is an important reason Russian leaders use hybrid warfare as their primary method of controlling their sphere of influence, especially Central Asia and Eastern Europe.

However, such insurgencies have their drawbacks. Citizens who do not support the insurgency will believe that it is solely an act of Russian aggression. The suspicion of Russian malevolence, in turn, diminishes the plausible deniability the Russian government desires from such insurgencies, resulting in a distrust of Russian policy.<sup>4</sup> Small public resentment can be dealt with quickly, but if a mass uprising persists then crushing such an uprising becomes ever more difficult, time consuming, and damaging to a country's reputation overseas, thus affecting the ambiguity provided by hybrid warfare.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, such insurgencies will get bogged down in combat, as was the case with the insurgencies in Donetsk and Luhansk.<sup>6</sup> The two Russian-loyalist insurgencies, supported by the Kremlin, had been engaged in a conflict with the Ukrainian government since the Euromaidan protests in 2014, after which Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich (2010-2014) was ousted for his support of Russia.<sup>7</sup> Following the unrest in

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 104

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Mumford, and Pascal Carlucci. 2023. "Hybrid Warfare: The Continuation of Ambiguity by Other Means." *European Journal of International Security* 197-198.

<sup>4</sup> Bachmann, Sascha-Dominik Dov, Dries Putter, and Guy Duczynski. 2023. "Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation: A Ukraine War Perspective." *Global Policy* 858.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Mumford, and Pascal Carlucci. "Hybrid Warfare: The Continuation of Ambiguity by Other Means." 198-199

<sup>6</sup> Bachmann, Sascha-Dominik Dov, Dries Putter, and Guy Duczynski. "Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation: A Ukraine War Perspective." 864

<sup>7</sup> Taras Kuzio. 2018. "Euromaidan Revolution, Crimea and Russia-Ukraine War: Why it is Time for a Review of Ukrainian-Russian Studies." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 529-553.

Kyiv, Russia invaded then annexed the Crimea in a referendum deemed illegitimate by international observers.<sup>8</sup> The conflict in the Donbas dragged on well after Russia's military set foot in Crimea, near a stalemate. Within eight years, Russians would find themselves directly at war with Ukraine when Putin declared a special military operation in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

Russia attempted a similar tactic in the former Soviet republic of Georgia in 2008. Two areas within Georgia with large communities of Russian loyalists, the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, seceded from the state of Georgia to gain independence and ultimately join Russia. The two communities had a history of conflict with the Georgian government since the formation of the modern Georgian republic in 1991, providing reason for Russia to intervene.<sup>10</sup> Russia invaded Georgia and occupied the country for five days before scaling back operations to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There they continue to maintain a presence, with the hope that the two entities will unify with the Russian federation soon.<sup>11</sup> With the invasion of Georgia, Russia's government achieved the objective of undermining Georgian sovereignty and strengthening its hegemony in the South Caucasus. However, Russia failed to win the hearts and minds of either the Georgian public or the Georgian government, who continue their rapprochement with NATO and the European Union (EU) at the expense of Russian political interests.<sup>12</sup> Also, the Russian invasion of Georgia took away the element of surprise and the plausible deniability the country's government desires when conducting such an operation or invasion in one of its neighboring countries.

Russia has long held tight constraints on its allies without the use of insurgents and direct military force. Russia oversees an alliance of former Soviet republics it calls the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).<sup>13</sup> CIS member states began distancing themselves from Russia after the country invaded Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> Because the Russian government perceives of its sphere of influence in Central Asia and Eastern Europe as extensions of Russia, the country often overreacts to changes in national policy that may damage Russian influence. This can be seen in

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<sup>8</sup> Bachmann, Sascha-Dominik Dov, Dries Putter, and Guy Duczynski. "Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation: A Ukraine War Perspective." 864

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 858

<sup>10</sup> Laetitia Spetschinsky, and Irina V. Bolgova. 2014. "Post-Soviet or Post-Colonial? The relations between Russia and Georgia after 1991." *European Review of International Studies* 112.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 117

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 119

<sup>13</sup> Yaryna Turchyn, Olna Ivasechko, and Oleh Tsebenko. 2023. "The EU as a Promoter of Democracy in Eastern Partnership Countries." *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 147

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 128

how Putin and his government managed the crises that occurred in Belarus and Kazakhstan.<sup>15</sup> In both countries, a formidable opposition movement arose against the Russian-loyalist authoritarian regimes that had governed each country since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is especially the case with Belarus, where Svetlana Tikhanovskaya came close to ousting the long-time ruler of Belarus, Aleksandar Lukashenko, in 2020. Lukashenko won the election, and the opposition group was crushed.<sup>16</sup> However, the events of 2020 in Belarus represent a major, albeit limited, threat to Russian influence in the country, as well as the wider region. If such revolts erupt to the same extent as they had in 2020 in Belarus, Russia's military and diplomatic capabilities could be stretched to the point of collapse, ending any dreams Putin had of serious political hegemony in Europe.

*The West's Response to Russian Hybrid Warfare*



*Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy shaking hands with U.S. President Joe Biden at NATO Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, 2023. Photo credit: Reuters*

Russian hybrid warfare is prevalent throughout Europe. Nonetheless, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the West has constructed and

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Ambrosio. 2022. "Belarus, Kazakhstan and Alliance Security Dilemmas in the Former Soviet Union: Intra-Alliance Threat and Entrapment After the Ukraine Crisis." *Europe-Asia Studies* 1700.

<sup>16</sup> Yuras Karmanau. 2020. "Belarus president closes some borders, puts army on alerts." *Associated Press (AP)*. September 17. <https://apnews.com/article/alexander-lukashenko-belarus-svietlana-tsikhanouskaya-violence-elections>.

expanded upon the resources that can curtail Russian hybrid warfare. The West possesses two of the most important economic and collective security organizations to exist: the EU and NATO. The European Union provides its member states with a vast and heavily interconnected trade network through which goods, services, and especially people can move freely. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, meanwhile, grants defense capabilities against Russian aggression through hybrid tactics.<sup>17</sup> This is especially the case because the United States, the world's largest military power, is a founding member of NATO.<sup>18</sup> With NATO and the EU, Central and Eastern European countries can meet their economic and security needs without the assistance of Russia, and thus are able to do so without capitulation of the Russia Federation.

Both organizations expanded rapidly following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic were the first Central European states to be granted NATO status, and most other Eastern European states have followed. NATO has even expanded into former Soviet Republics, when it granted membership to Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.<sup>19</sup> The European Union followed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's lead, although the organization has done so at a slower pace, with more concessions to be made, and greater limits placed on member states, than NATO. Under the command of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine applied for EU membership to pivot from Russia following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> Due to the eastern expansion conducted at the end of the Cold War, both NATO and the EU have encroached on what Russia considers to be its sphere of influence, testing Russian soft power.

However, in the decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the European Union has become deadlocked in granting countries in Eastern Europe member statuses, preferring to strengthen its relations with existing member states. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sweden and Finland applied to join NATO, extending the organization's northern defense to most of Russia's northeastern border.<sup>21</sup> However, Turkey stalled on Finland's application until capitulating to allow the country to join NATO, which Finland did on April 4, 2023.<sup>22</sup> Hungary

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<sup>17</sup> Giray Sadik. 2021. "How Can NATO Effectively Counter Terrorism and Other Threats? Analyzing the Benefits and Pitfalls of Joint Synergies." *Perceptions* 62.

<sup>18</sup> Eunika Katarzyna Frydrych. 2008. "The Debate on NATO Expansion." *Connections* 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 15

<sup>20</sup> Angela Charlton. 2023. *Ukraine's a step closer to joining the EU. Here's what that means, and why it matters.* December 14. <https://apnews.com/article/european-union-ukraine-membership-questions>.

<sup>21</sup> John R Deni. 2022. *Sweden and Finland are on their way to NATO membership. Here's what needs to happen next.* August 22. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/finland-and-sweden-in-nato-looking-beyond-madrid/>.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Kauranen and Andrew Gray. 2023. *Finland joins NATO in historic shift, Russia threatens 'counter-measures'.* April 30. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finland-set-join-nato-historic-shift-while-sweden-waits-2023-04-04>.

had stalled on accepting Sweden's NATO bid for almost two years until February 26, 2024. Meanwhile, Turkey's parliament signed off on Sweden's membership bid on January 23, 2024.<sup>23</sup> The delay in the approval for NATO membership for Finland and Sweden has demonstrated conflict within the organization that Russia will take advantage of if said conflict is not addressed. Crises within NATO pose a serious risk to Western policy against Russia. A unified front against Russia is the most important weapon the West has in its arsenal against Russian aggression. That unity is too fragile to be disrupted or disturbed by national politics.

To deter Russia's government from conducting further aggression, NATO is organizing the largest military exercise in decades along its eastern flank, named Operation Steadfast Defender 24. According to the Associated Press, the exercise will last until mid-May, during which 90,000 troops will be deployed throughout NATO's European territorial frontier.<sup>24</sup> It will include dozens of ships and jets, and hundreds of tanks and artillery.<sup>25</sup> Steadfast Defender 24 comes at a time when the Russia-Ukraine War has entered a stalemate, one which will inhibit Ukraine's ability to effectively combat the Russian military. Because a stalemate benefits Russia, the United States and its NATO allies will need to make sure the military exercise is conducted as efficiently as possible, and with as few bureaucratic and logistical hurdles as possible, to provide for a deterrence that is powerful enough to deter Russia from escalating the war in Ukraine to a greater extent than it has already done. As of writing, the exercise is in its preliminary stages, and will test Western unity in the face of Russian aggression. Time has yet to determine how effective the exercise is in achieving the goal of deterrence.

## Conclusion

Russia can withstand a long war against Ukraine, while Ukraine cannot. The Russian government under Putin enjoys greater firepower and manpower than the government of Ukraine under Zelenskyy, who are dependent on Western economic and military aid to survive its war against Russia. Russia has proven itself to be a formidable, though flawed, opponent both on the battlefield and in the battle for public opinion. Furthermore, the Russian government desires to

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<sup>23</sup> Hayatsever, Huseyin, and Tuvan Gumrukcu. 2024. *Reuters*. January 23. <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-set-approve-swedens-nato-membership-bid-after-long-delay-2024-01-23>.

<sup>24</sup> Associated Press. 2024. "NATO holds its biggest exercise in decades next week, involving 90,000 personnel." *Associated Press*. January 19. <https://apnews.com/article/nato-ukraine-russia-wargames-exercises-security>.

<sup>25</sup> Reuters. 2024. "NATO to hold biggest drills since Cold War with 90,000 troops." *Reuters*. January 18. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-kick-off-biggest-drills-decades-with-some-90000-troops-2024-01-18/>.



maintain its sphere of influence from what it believes is Western encroachment at whatever cost, both economic and humanitarian. Therefore, one must analyze Russia's foreign and military policy to gain a grasp of what lies ahead for Ukraine if a stalemate on the battlefield in the country's eastern region continues.

Western states and organizations should understand that they are what has kept Ukraine above water as the war has progressed, and that understanding should encourage them to maintain support for the years to come. The European Union and NATO have contributed significantly to the decline of Russian soft power since the Cold War, by offering an alternative to Russian economic and military aid. A unified front and an open policy in accepting new member states has kept the Western bloc strong enough to hold Russia at bay. However, as both organizations have stalled in allowing in new member states, especially those along the fringes of the European continent, the two organizations, and the wider US-European alliance, risk the threat of reducing their soft power and opening the door to Russian encroachment. Such encroachment poses grave consequences on the future of a liberal order for which the West has strived to achieve.

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