



# A Closer look at Russia's “Hybrid War”

By Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky

Western observers have fallen into a now familiar parlance for describing Russia's annexation of Crimea and subsequent invasion of Eastern Ukraine. Frequently termed Russia's “hybrid war” against Ukraine, it is seen by the West as a threatening precedent—even a likely model—for future conflicts on Russia's periphery. In this view, a Russian campaign against the Baltic States, Kazakhstan or even Poland might employ a variety of tools, ranging from conventional to irregular combat operations, sponsorship of political protests, economic coercion, and a powerful information campaign.

“Hybrid war” may have become the defining label for Russia's operations in Ukraine, but on closer examination, it misses the point. “Hybrid war” can hardly be considered a definitive doctrine for Russia's future power projection in its neighborhood, much less a model that could be easily reproduced in far flung and diverse corners of the post-Soviet space. Rather than a genuine strategic concept built from the ground up by the Russians themselves, “hybrid war” is merely a label attributed to Russian actions in Ukraine by the West, in an effort to make sense of cascading phases of a security crisis in which all

sides but Russia seem to have been caught off balance. Moreover, the discourse around “hybrid war” mistakenly enfold Russia’s investment in shaping global public opinion, which may pose challenges for Russia’s neighbors and the West, but has much broader, more ambiguous and often inchoate aims.

### What “Hybrid War” is and is Not

The first part of the misconception around “hybrid war” is the term itself. Despite sounding new and in vogue, its analytical utility is limited. The “hybrid” aspect of the term simply denotes a combination of previously defined types of warfare, whether conventional, irregular, political or information. Even those who have put forward such a definition must admit that the combination of war across domains is not new, but in fact is as old as warfare itself. It is helpful to think beyond the contemporary definitions of war we have become accustomed to, but the term is inherently imprecise, and does not describe a new form of warfare. In an analysis devoted explicitly to what he called “not-so-new warfare,” Frank Hoffman, of the U.S. National Defense University, defined the hybrid threat as, “Any adversary that simultaneously employs a tailored mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior in the same time and battlespace to obtain their political objectives.”<sup>1</sup> The “hybrid threat” term has likewise already been adopted in U.S. Marine corps, Army and Navy doctrines along with national-level planning documents.<sup>2</sup>

From the Russian perspective, an approach to war that combines different types of power projection also is not itself reflective of any newly devised strategy. Rather, it is an illustration or

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acknowledgement by Russia of a growing trend in how wars are fought, whoever may be fighting them. Modern wars, simply put, are waged through a combination of many elements of national power. In Washington, this conventional wisdom has long been characterized by the beltway catchphrase of “using all the tools in the toolkit,” or the more recent mantra of using “smart power.” The “hybrid” concept is well established in modern Western military discourse today, while the problem set it seeks to define is not novel, but rather has been cited frequently under concepts of “unconventional” warfare and “political” warfare.

Thanks to the dysfunction of the Soviet system and the post-Soviet collapse, many elements of Russia’s national power were significantly underdeveloped, anemic or ineffective, including the military itself. However, Moscow has long recognized the prevalence of combined power projection in conflicts on its periphery and globally. Accordingly, Russia has cited in official statements and published documents for more than a decade the West’s use of economic, diplomatic, information and cyber capabilities, in conjunction with military operations.

In Russia’s 2010 Military Doctrine, modern warfare is described as entailing “the integrated utilization of military force and forces and resources of a nonmilitary character,” and, “the prior implementation of measures of information warfare in order to achieve political objectives without the

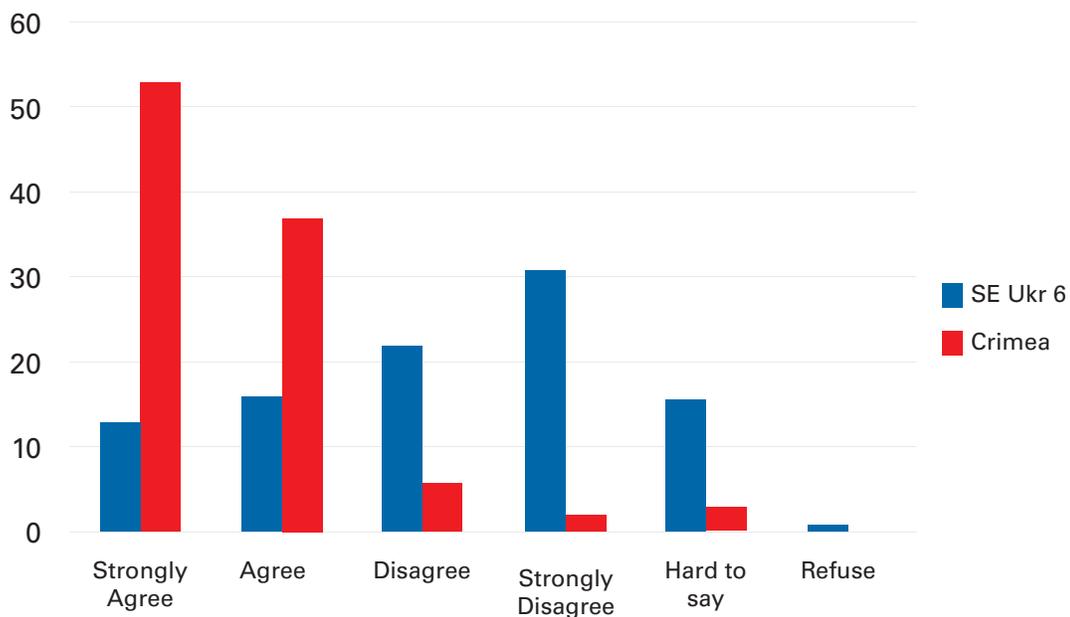


The Crimean polity was also distinct within Ukraine, influenced by the Russian media in a manner other Russian minorities have not been. In recent surveys on public opinion and media viewership in Crimea, Professors John Laughlin and Gerard Toal have found that while as many as 84% of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians in Crimea now support annexation, the “ratio of those who wanted to secede and join Russia undoubtedly jumped due to television-fed perceptions that ethnic Russians would become second-class citizens in Ukraine.”<sup>8</sup> An important conclusion of this polling, which suggests why Russian media proved effective, is that, “unlike residents of western and central

Ukraine who tend to readily self-identify in these terms, the strong majority (85%) of the population of Crimea do not perceive themselves as European.”<sup>9</sup> Early mistakes made by Kyiv’s interim government in the aftermath of the Maidan Revolution, such as declaring a possible change to the status of the Russian language, or firing the Crimean Berkut (elite riot police) units, created additional opportunities for Russia. In Crimea, unique history, timing, and military assets in place, conspired to create a singular opportunity for Moscow to conduct the kind of operation it did in late February and early March 2014.

## Agree/Disagree

### “The government of Russia is interested in a peaceful settlement of the current conflict with the Ukraine



John O’Loughlin and Gerard Toal, Mistrust about political motives in contested Ukraine *The Washington Post*, February 13, 2015. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/13/mistrust-about-political-motives-in-contested-ukraine/>

Russia's use of broadcasting tools for propaganda and psychological operations, part of a broader information campaign to support the Crimean annexation, caught both Ukraine and the West by surprise. After its independence, Ukraine never contested the information space in Russian language programming, such that Russian media, which had established complete dominance over the years, were able to quickly adjust their messaging in support of the Kremlin's objectives. Moscow amped up the alarmist content of its broadcasting in response to the Maidan, stoking fear and confusion in Crimea. Yet the same broadcasts fell relatively flat in other regions of Ukraine, despite the fact that Russian state channels held the attention of most of the Russian speaking populace.

The information warfare campaign in Ukraine entailed concerted use of Russian state-controlled media, but this is neither a new accompaniment to Moscow's interventions in the post-Soviet space, nor has it proven especially successful in the past. During the 2004-05 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, or the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, for example, Russia deployed information warfare tools, but



Armed men seize Parliament building in Simferopol on February 27, 2015. <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2014/02/28/multimedia/cctv-crimea-armed-seize/cctv-crimea-armed-seize-videoSixteenByNine1050.jpg>

to little apparent effect. Survey data from the past year proves that Russian broadcasting could not even persuade parts of the Eastern Ukrainian population that had long been sympathetic to Russia to support the separatist cause.<sup>10</sup> Moscow was surprised by the lack of positive response among the Russian-speaking Ukrainian population to its overt media campaign against the Maidan protests and the interim government in Kyiv. Russia's direct military intervention in the Donbas was therefore necessary, at least in part, because of the apparent failure to rally sufficient pro-Russian forces to sustain an entirely indigenous uprising. What many in the West are identifying as the climactic buildup of Russia's "hybrid war" against Ukraine appears instead to be the unplanned succession of different tools to fit different—often unexpected—operational realities.

### **“Information Warfare” or Public Diplomacy?**

The final misconception about Russian “hybrid war” is that it is causally linked with the rising visibility of Russian broadcasting and efforts to shape public opinion globally, including in the West—most notably through the RT (formerly Russia Today) television network and Sputnik International (formerly Voice of Russia) radio. Some fear that because information warfare is part of Russia's operations against Ukraine, other places where Russia's broadcasting and messaging can be felt may be future targets for “hybrid war” operations. Fortunately for the West, there is a vast gulf between Russia's global broadcasting and public diplomacy goals and its operational goals in the post-Soviet space.

Russia did not create powerful state media institutions, like RT, primarily to conduct information warfare in Ukraine or any other post-Soviet country. Using English language news to target Russian speakers abroad, which is the audience Moscow would have to influence in support of potential operations, is not a logical proposition. Instead, Russia has long invested resources in the infrastructure needed to degrade Western information dominance across the Internet and broadcast media. In most cases, rather than aiming at a specific country or conflict, Russian broadcasting opportunistically seeks to “stir the pot” of public discontent and distrust. The goal is to undermine dominant Western media sources and narratives, and to chip away at public confidence in all types of institutions Moscow views as being under Western—especially American—control, from international financial institutions to the courts or parliaments of individual states. Hence, RT’s motto is not “Russia is right,” but simply, “question more.”

Moscow wants as much of the global audience, and certainly its own citizens and those in the post-Soviet space, to question anything and everything coming from the West. These efforts appear to have gained momentum thanks to Russia’s poor showing in international public opinion following the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, which demonstrated how feeble the Russian press was in comparison to Western outlets. What many in the West see as a propaganda campaign with global reach, tailor made for the “hybrid war” in Ukraine, is in reality only one example of Russia’s far broader and still evolving global information strategy.

In Washington, efforts to encourage favorable attitudes towards the United States, its values and interests in international discourse and popular opinion is known as “public diplomacy.” In conjunction with other levers of U.S. influence, an appealing popular culture and a highly attractive development model, these efforts have had a considerable global impact. Moscow is paying close attention. Not surprisingly, the Kremlin’s conservative autocracy, with global great power aspirations, finds an international media and public opinion environment oriented toward democracy, human rights and the free market, unfavorable to its basic interests.

In its own version of “public diplomacy,” Russia has turned information into an instrument of national power and is using it to create space for itself and its interests in the international environment and global public opinion. By sowing doubt, Moscow creates room for maneuver for itself at home and abroad. In Ukraine, this tool of national power has been brought to bear in a targeted manner, but its primary purpose is to instill doubt in Western institutions and sources of information writ large.

### Clarity for the Future

Hybrid war has become the catchall phrase for the elements of national power Russia is employing directly in Ukraine, but it is a poor descriptor, and has already led Western analysts and policymakers down an unhelpful path. It appears to be an over-correction by the West for inadequate attention previously paid to Russia, resulting in a misguided attempt to group everything Moscow does under one rubric. Given current tensions in and around

Ukraine, which have resulted in a complete deficit of trust between Russia and its neighbors, fears that Moscow will continue to intervene in its neighborhood are fully understandable. But a domino-like repetition of “hybrid war” is the wrong lens for understanding the problem. Ukraine is not the first instance of a replicable “hybrid war” doctrine, or of a strategy for projecting Russian power in the post-Soviet space and beyond. It is important to understand the combination of tools in Moscow’s tool box, but the chances that it could simply repeat a Crimea or a Donbas scenario elsewhere are, fortunately, low.

Instead, Russia’s intervention in Ukraine should be understood in more flexible and basic terms—as an attempt to employ diplomatic, economic, military, and information instruments in a neighboring state where it perceives vital national interests to be at stake. This is a framework for the use of national power which the U.S. itself should find deeply familiar, and equally concerning. Looking forward, the most important question for policymakers will remain, not what are the idiosyncrasies of “hybrid war” or any other supposed model of warfare, but rather how to deal with a major power such as Russia when it chooses to employ its full range of national power. The US response will prove not only important to the outcome of the current confrontation and future conflicts on Russia’s periphery, but it will also shape global and regional challenges to be faced with other major powers in the coming decades.

## Endnotes

1. Frank Hoffman, “On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare vs. Hybrid Threats,” *War on the Rocks* (blog), July 28, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/>.
2. Ibid.
3. A translated text of the 2010 Russian military doctrine is available at “The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation,” February 5, 2010, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia\\_military\\_doctrine.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia_military_doctrine.pdf).
4. Michael Kofman and Roger McDermott, “No Return to Cold War in Russia’s New Military Doctrine,” *Eurasia Review*, February 3, 2015, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/03022015-no-return-cold-war-russias-new-military-doctrine-analysis/>. A Russian-language version of the military doctrine can be found on the presidential website or at *Rossiskaya Gazeta* (<http://www.rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>).
5. Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science in Anticipating” [in Russian], *Military-Industrial Courier*, February 27, 2013, <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>. This article by the head of the General Staff is cited in particular as revealing Russia’s new doctrine, and seen as illustrative of its approach to hybrid war. It describes NATO operations against Libya as an example of modern warfare by the West, and a model for Russia to closely observe.
6. Dmitry Gorenburg, a well-known analyst of the Russian military, described the proceedings on his blog on Russian military reform; see “Moscow Conference on International Security 2014, Part 1: The Plenary Speeches,” *Russian Military Reform* (blog), May 29, 2014, <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/2014/05/29/moscow-conference-on-international-security-2014-part-1-the-plenary-speeches/>.

7. Gerasimov, "The Value of Science in Anticipating."
8. An opinion survey in Ukraine was funded by the National Science Foundation and conducted by John O'Loughlin and Gerard Toal. Their results have been published on different sites; see, e.g., "The Crimean Conundrum," *Johnson's Russia List* (blog), March 6, 2015, <http://russialist.org/the-crimean-conundrum/>.
9. Ibid.
10. John O'Loughlin and Gerard Toal, "Mistrust About Political Motives in Contested Ukraine," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/13/mistrust-about-political-motives-in-contested-ukraine/>.



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