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Katri Pynnöniemi & Minna Jokela

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# Perceptions of hybrid war in Russia: means, targets and objectives identified in the Russian debate

Katri Pynnöniemi

*National Defence University, University of Helsinki*

Minna Jokela

*Finnish Border Guard*

**Abstract** *In this article, we analyse what hybrid war entails in the context of Russian military periodicals. Two dominant interpretations emerge from the debate. Hybrid war involves a conflict between civilizations and a geopolitical struggle for power. In both cases, the West is represented as an active participant in the conflict, intent upon undermining Russia's geopolitical status, cultural code and political system. The debate emulates Russian official rhetoric about national security threats and thus consolidates official interpretations, rather than offers alternatives to them. Russian analysts have also engaged in more abstract theoretical analysis in which hybrid terminology is rarely used or is approached critically. Further research is required to assess the ways in which this debate has been used in shaping public perceptions of threats towards Russia.*

## Introduction

Raymond Aron has insightfully observed that strategic thought draws its inspiration from ‘problems which events themselves pose’ (Aron 1970, 25). Later, Colin Gray paraphrased Aron and argued that ‘strategic thought draws its inspiration at each moment of history from the problems and opportunities flagged by officials acting as opinion leaders’ (Gray 2002, 1). Curiously, both of these formulations could be used to describe the emergence of the hybrid war concept in the lexicon of strategic thought. The Aron-style origin of the term is the second Lebanon War and the analysis derived from it by Frank Hoffman (2006a, 2006b). Accordingly, hybrid warfare refers to ‘a range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder’ (Hoffman 2007, 14). At this point, the concept was not known beyond the military theoretical literature.

The Russian military operation in the Crimean Peninsula in February and March 2014 brought the concept of hybrid war into public discussion. This was the Colin Gray moment of the concept. What used to be one among many concepts with which military analysts explained the evolution of warfare became the symbol of its changing nature (Lalu and Puistola 2015; Cullen and

Reichborn-Kjennerud 2017). However, as suggested by Colin Gray in the context of the RMA (Revolution in Military Affairs) debate, 'real strategic behaviour serves as oxygen to strategic intellectual combat'. In other words, what began as the politically convenient labelling of Russia's innovative use of military and non-military means duly spiralled into a heated debate about the actual and imagined feasibility of the concept for explaining Russia's actions and the future trajectory of warfare. (Angstrom 2017; Charap 2015; Bartles 2016; Chivvis 2017; Gaub 2015; Giles 2018; Giumelli et al 2018; Hoffman 2006a; 2007; Lanoszka 2016; Pawlak 2017; Pawlak and Petkova 2015; Popescu 2015; Raitasalo 2017; Schroefl and Kaufman 2014; Treverton et al 2018).

Paradoxically, one of the first studies published on hybrid war after 2014 argued that 'the hybrid war concept is not suitable as an analytical tool for assessing Russian military capabilities or foreign policy intentions' (Renz and Smith 2016, 1). According to Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith:

Interpreting Crimea as evidence of a grander master plan of Russian 'hybrid warfare' is reminiscent of the West's enemy image of the Soviet Union, which viewed the Soviet leadership as a chess master that was vastly superior in terms of centralisation, organisation and coordination. As it turned out, the Soviet Union leadership's centralisation and strategic foresight was not as strong as had been presumed (Renz and Smith 2016, 9).

Other scholars have also called for caution and have criticized the labelling of Russia's foreign policy as hybrid war (Charap 2015; Monaghan 2015; Cullen and Reichborn-Kjennerud 2017). Many Russian analysts share this view. For example, scholars from the Military-Medical Academy in St. Petersburg argue that instead of borrowing 'fashionable foreign linguistic constructions', Russian military thinkers should conduct 'serious theoretical and applied research to build our own, Russian-language terminological field which adequately reflects the modern war and armed conflict phenomenology' (Anisimov et al 2017; see also Bartosh 2016b).

On the basis of our analysis we argue that, although Russian authors did in fact borrow foreign terminology, they have interpreted it anew. In the context of Russian debate, hybrid war offers a general framework to explain threats towards Russia. More specifically, the ensuing debate on hybrid war does not reflect the concept's analytical feasibility, but instead, applies it in explaining consistent Western attempts to subvert and destabilize Russia. In this context, hybrid war denotes three interlinked but separate objectives. First, hybrid war is civilizational conflict aimed at the self-destruction of the target by means of hidden subversion. Second, hybrid war is a tool used in an effort to maintain Western hegemony in world politics. And third, hybrid war—and, thus, Western expansion—can be limited by fostering alliances and other means of constructive influence. The debate emulates Russian official rhetoric about national security threats and thus consolidates official interpretations, rather than offering alternatives to them.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section we will briefly describe the initial stages of the hybrid war debate in Russia and introduce the main

forums and nodes in which this debate has taken place. This section also outlines the sample of texts included in the research analysis. The third section will outline the results of the analysis. This will begin with a discussion on the means of hybrid war and will be followed by an analysis in which we have identified two complementary types of conflict that explain what hybrid war entails: civilizational and geopolitical. In the fourth section, we briefly discuss the theoretical origins of hybrid war. In the conclusion, we will argue that, notwithstanding significant differences in interpretation, in both the Russian and Western context the debate on hybrid war addresses the increasing complexity of contemporary conflicts.

### The hybrid war debate in Russia: forums, nodes and channels

Even if the military concepts have their roots in ‘problems which events themselves pose’ (Aron 1970, 25), the vocabulary used is not devoid of politics. Each term in the military doctrine gives meaning to the politically accepted vision of future war. The Russian Military Doctrine is not an exception in this regard. Interestingly, while revisions made to the 2014 version are compatible with the idea of hybrid war, the term hybrid is not mentioned neither in the doctrine nor in the Dictionary of Military Terms (Russian Military Doctrine 2014; Pynnöniemi and Mashiri 2015, 35–37; Fridman 2018, 98; also Russian National Security Strategy 2015).

Since 2014, Russian scholars have sought to define what hybrid war means for Russia. Some of these works have sensationalized titles such as Panarin’s *Hybrid war against Russia. 1816-2016* (Panarin 2017), whereas others address the problem from a theoretical vantage point (Chekinov and Bogdanov 2015; Gapich and Lushnikov 2014; Chvarkov and Lihonosov 2017). Russian military thinkers have provided a number of explanations for the changing character of war, emphasizing, for example, its asymmetric nature (Gareev 2008) or identifying elements of the new generation of warfare (Chekinov and Bogdanov 2013).

The debate on hybrid war is part of this larger discussion on new elements of contemporary conflicts. The events in Ukraine provided a context for several round-table meetings and workshops organized in order to discuss the problem of hybrid war (Fridman 2016, 81). For example, in February 2015, Moscow State University (MGU) organized a round table that sought to make sense of the concept amid speculation in the media about Russia’s involvement in the conflict in Ukraine (Tsygankov 2015, 257). The Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya gazeta* also organized two round-table meetings that addressed the same issue.<sup>1</sup> Participants in these meetings included retired Russian military officers, journalists, university researchers and political commentators. Since our priority is a content analysis of the debate, we may only make some preliminary observations on its scale. For this purpose, we have used the Integrum search engine for newspaper articles and the East View search

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<sup>1</sup> The first round-table meeting was held under the title ‘War of organized chaos: lessons for Russia’ in October 2014. The second session in February 2015 focused on ‘Hybrid war: problems and perspectives of the post-conflict situation’. Summaries of the discussions are published on the NVO website and provide part of the empirical research material for this article (Vladykin 2014a; Vladykin 2014b; Odnokolenko 2015a; Odnokolenko 2015b).

engine for military periodicals. A search conducted with the Integrum shows that during the time period from January 1, 2014 until June 30, 2019, the term 'hybrid war' (*gibridnaya voyna*) was mentioned in 221 articles published in the Russian central press.<sup>2</sup> A search of Russian military science periodicals for the precise term 'hybrid war' returned 56 articles for the same period. This search was conducted with an East View service that includes 83 Russian military journals. We also expanded the scale of the search using only the term hybrid (*gibridnaya*) in the title, which returned 80 articles, the majority of which were published between 2016 and 2018. In both cases, the major node of the debate appears to be the military section (*Nezavisimaya voennoe obozrenie*, NVO) of the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* newspaper.

One of the most active participants in the debate has been a retired military officer and corresponding member of the Academy of Military Science, Aleksandr Bartosh. In fact, he is probably the single most frequently publishing author on the topic of hybrid warfare in Russia. A closer look at his publications shows that a text that first appeared in NVO was later published in a slightly modified version in the *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk* (AVN) or in the Russian General Staff journal, *Military Thought* (*Voennaya Mysl*). Bartosh has also written two books on this theme. (Persson 2020)

In this article we focus on the initial stages of the debate on hybrid warfare in Russia. Since we have identified NVO as a hub of the initial phase, we will focus on the texts published in this context. The core sample of texts includes 31 articles written by Bartosh between 2013 and 2019 (Bartosh 2013a; Bartosh 2013b; Bartosh 2014a; Bartosh 2014b; Bartosh 2014d). In addition, we include in the analysis official documents (particularly the Military Doctrine) and other official texts. The latter include speeches given by Russia's Chief of General Staff, Valeriy Gerasimov, which were published in *Voenny-Promyshlennyi Kurier* (the Military-Industrial Courier), a private newspaper owned by the quasi-government-controlled Almaz-Antey Company. Although there are clear differences in emphasis, and even in the terminology used, we argue that there is a certain synergy in the debate. The analytical usefulness of the hybrid war concept seems secondary to what can be conveyed with this term in the public sphere. Our hypothesis is that NVO has served as a channel for shaping the public debate and with it a general understanding in Russia of what hybrid warfare entails.

## Explaining the meaning of hybrid war

*The means of hybrid war: hidden subversion and disruptive/constructive influence*

In a speech that was later infamously labelled the 'Gerasimov doctrine' (Galeotti 2014), the Russian Chief of General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, reflected on changes in contemporary warfare. He argued:

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<sup>2</sup> The search was conducted using the precise phrase *gibridnaya voina* from a sample including the central press, central news agencies and central internet publications. The period chosen was 1.1.2014 to 30.6.2019. In total, the term was mentioned in 495 documents. The main Russian newspapers (*Kommersant*, *Izvestiya*, and *Rossiiskaya gazeta*) had only one or two articles each, whereas the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* military section had 34 articles that mentioned this term. A search using the term *gibrid\* vojn\** returned a similar result (557 documents). However, a search using the term *gibridnyh vojn\** (including *gibridnyuyu*, *gibridnoi*, and *gibridnaya* in the results) returned 23,174 documents, of which 3,393 were in the central press.

The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness ... The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special-operations forces. The open use of forces – often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation – is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict (Gerasimov 2013).

As Mark Galeotti later remarked, ‘Gerasimov was not presenting a blueprint for a future without conventional military operations, nor yet for a type of hybrid war as understood in the West. Instead, he was expressing Russia’s conviction that the modern world was seeing more complex and politically-led forms of contestation alongside regular warfare’ (Galeotti 2019, 27). It was only in his 2016 speech at the Russian military academy that Gerasimov explicitly referred to ‘hybrid methods’, describing them in the following way:

Their content includes the achievement of political goals with minimal armed effects against the enemy, mainly by undermining economic and military potential, by informational and psychological influence, by active support of internal opposition, partisan and sabotage methods of conducting an armed struggle (Gerasimov 2016, 20).

This latter speech is also important because it signals Russia’s official take on this matter. Accordingly, hybrid war may entail the organization of a state coup (‘colour revolution’), the creation of an internal political crisis (total chaos) in the target country, manipulation of refugee flows, and systematic manipulation of information resources (global internet) for the purposes of mass subversion of the elites and the general public (Gerasimov 2016, 20). Indeed, in 2014, President Putin himself listed a set of direct and indirect methods used to destabilize Russia. Addressing members of the Russian Security Council on July 22, 2014, Putin argued that:

Attempts are clearly being made to destabilize the social and economic situation, to weaken Russia in one way or another or to strike at our weaker spots, and they will continue primarily to make us more agreeable in resolving international issues. So-called international competition mechanisms are being used as well (this applies to both politics and the economy); for this purpose the special services’ capabilities are used, along with modern information and communication technologies and dependent, puppet non-governmental organizations – so-called soft force mechanisms. This, obviously, is how some countries understand democracy (President of Russia 2014).

The Security Council meeting was organized a few days after the downing of MH17. With his opening remarks, Putin sought to distance Russia from any culpability for the tragedy, and to present the country, instead, as a victim of outside interference. Similar framing was subsequently used in the expert debate on hybrid war (Bartosh 2014b; Voenny-Promyshlenny Kurier 2017; 2015; The New Times 2016).

The results of the analysis are outlined in Table 1, which identifies the means, targets and objectives of hybrid war as presented in the Russian

**Table 1.** Outline of the means, targets and objectives of hybrid warfare.

Means	Target	Objective	Time period	Type of conflict
Hidden subversion	Mentality Cultural code Identity Historical memory	Self-destruction	decades	Civilizational
Disruptive interference	Political system Geopolitical integrity Economic potential	Maintenance of the Western hegemony	months, years	Geopolitical
Constructive influence	Mass public perceptions Elites, opinion-leaders Decision-makers	Creation of alliances & perception management	days, years	Geopolitical

debate. The means of hybrid warfare include three distinct but interlinked forms of outside interference: hidden subversion, disruptive interference and constructive influence. In the Western context, disruptive interference is better known by the term ‘active measures’ (Pynnöniemi 2016), whereas constructive influence refers to public diplomacy and the use of soft power. These means are compatible with the model of reflexive control theory developed in the Soviet Union in the 1960s (Vasara 2019). However, in the context of hybrid war debate, authors do not refer to this theory.

Hidden subversion refers to the long-term manipulation of public consciousness. This is achieved through the manipulation of an *algorithm*, a *mechanism* or a *technique* that unlocks the information-psychological influence. The consistent use of these terms indicates that authors share a common system theoretical background, although systems analysis or cybernetics is not discussed in this context. This link would not be surprising given the strong position that system analysis and dialectical materialism have in the current Russian military theoretical thinking (Lalu 2014, 368; Vasara 2019, 32). For example, in one of the first articles on this topic, Bartosh (2014b) defines a colour revolution as ‘a *technology* of organizing a coup in the conditions of artificially created political instability’ (Bartosh 2014b, emphasis added). Later, he refers to the ‘algorithms of information and network warfare’ (Bartosh 2014e) and the ‘algorithm of colour revolution’ (Bartosh 2017a). In both cases, the term algorithm refers to the hidden management of ‘diverse and not always conscious motivations and, in general, the behaviour of a wide range of participants in public affairs’. Due to the hidden control of various channels (e.g. the internet, television, literature, educational programmes, NGOs and religious sects), the target ‘gradually loses sensitivity’ to the destructive influence and voluntarily accepts a new cognitive model’ (Bartosh 2014e). To summarize, Bartosh defines hybrid war as:

Undeclared, covert subversive actions in which the aggressor state attacks the government structure, law enforcement forces and the enemy's regular army with the help of local rebels and separatists supported by weapons and finance from abroad and some internal structures (oligarchs, organized crime, nationalist and pseudo-religious organizations) (Bartosh 2015a; see also Bartosh 2018).

It is assumed that each hybrid war has a distinct 'algorithm' and the process is carried out by means of 'technologies' that can be both disruptive and constructive (Bartosh 2014c; Odnokolenko 2015a; Vladykin 2014a). The term 'disruptive technologies' is rather vaguely defined. In general, it is a synonym for colour revolutions that stand for systemic measures aimed at the destabilization of society and a violent change of the political regime (state coup). The malign outside influence aims to divide and demoralize society (Bartosh 2013a). It may include the following 'indirect' measures:

The promotion of liberal democracy and market reforms, an increase in economic standards and resource requirements, and the improvement of living standards among the so-called elites of society, replacing traditional values and ideologies in the public consciousness (Bartosh 2013b).

Constructive influence, on the other hand, is identified as a method used in countering hybrid warfare or colour revolutions. It includes various means aimed at enhancing the integrity of society and the consolidation of a positive image of the country (Bartosh 2013a; Bartosh 2014a; Nagornyh 2016). For example, Bartosh uses the term 'public diplomacy' to describe Russia's strategy to counter hybrid war:

The convincing use of Russian public diplomacy tools in the annexation of Crimea, and in covering the operations of the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria demonstrate the effectiveness of the Russian strategy to counter hybrid war (Bartosh 2017b).

The representation of Russia's actions in Crimea as 'public diplomacy' runs counter to the actual events in February and March 2014 and what is usually meant by this term. However, this description does fit the general narrative relayed in various articles that Russia is lagging behind the West in developing non-military means of warfighting. A well-known Russian military theorist, army general Mahmut Gareev, together with specialists in information-psychological influence Evgenii Derbin and Nikolai Turko, argue that Russian military theory has only recently started to study the 'problem of indirect means in the military sphere as a key component of the military-political struggle' (Gareev, Derbin and Turko 2019, 5). In their article, the authors develop the concept of interstate hostile actions, which would better reflect the current situation. Accordingly:

Interstate hostile action [is a] form of eliminating contradictions between the subjects of interstate relations in open violent confrontation or in the course of indirect (hidden) actions, aimed at changing the [targeted country's] policy or its foundations [sovereignty] (Gareev, Derbin and Turko 2019, 6).

The first part of the definition refers to open and direct military conflict where parties to the conflict use military power and, depending on the scale,



the conflict can be described as local, regional or large-scale war (Russian Military Doctrine 2014). The latter part of the definition is actually similar to the 'political confrontation' thesis put forward by Chekinov and Bogdanov (2013). In the event of political confrontation, non-military means are 'intended to be a substitute for military deployment' (see Fridman 2018, 131; for a discussion on Chekinov and Bogdanov, see also Thomas 2017, 130–132). However, the authors emphasize that the role of military force (warfighting power) is maintained and it may even increase in future wars. Nonetheless, the use of non-military means, especially of an information-psychological nature, will be a key factor in the new breed of warfare (hybrid war) (Chekinov and Bogdanov 2015, 43–44). Colonel (ret) Viktor Murakhovsky also emphasised this point when discussing Russia's ability to use multiple means to break adversary's will to resist during the Crimean operation (Lalu and Puistola 2015, 4).

In this section we have outlined three types of non-military means identified as a part of hybrid war. This may not yet mark a step towards the 'common conceptual definition' that Filimonov (2018, 30–31) has called for but, there is at least a shared understanding of this typology. In fact, there also seems to be a consensus on what hybrid war entails, which is the topic of the next section.

#### *The target and objective of hybrid war*

Hybrid war, as argued in the previous section, consists of a set of hostile actions that range from the splintering of cultural-philosophical traditions to importing foreign socio-political models. Taken together, these actions are used in advancing the 'self-disorganization and self-disorientation of the target state' (Bartosh 2013b). The self-destruction may take different forms; from a weakening of the cultural code and destruction of spiritual values to the disorientation of public consciousness and the decision-making capacity at a crucial phase of the conflict. We have identified two complementary types of conflict: civilizational and geopolitical (see Table 1).

First, in terms of civilizational conflict, hybrid war entails a long-term struggle between competing power centres that represent different cultural-political traditions, value systems and worldviews (Derbin 2017; Bartosh 2014f; Bartosh 2017c). This interpretation echoes contemporary Russian political discourse that emphasizes the difference between Russia and Europe when it comes to values and norms (Surkov 2019). In the context of the debate on hybrid war, civilizational conflict has replaced the ideological competition of the Cold War (Bartosh 2017b; Vladykin 2014b; Bartosh 2013b). The goal, as explained by Bartosh, is to distort the foundations of national culture ...

...to spread the mutual alienation and enmity among the population, strengthening separatist movements, creating a 'fifth column' among the intelligentsia under the pretext of various pseudo-opposition movements, and force it to move in a direction which is most favourable for the other side, to fully support, propagate and implement pseudo-reforms (Bartosh 2013b).

When it comes to the role of economic policy, the reference point in the discussion is the collapse of the Soviet Union. With very few exceptions, most

analysts participating in this debate argue that the Soviet Union was defeated as a result of Western non-military means, and that the West has been waging a continuous non-military offensive against Russia ever since (Fridman 2018, 133; Panarin 2017; Panarin 2010). For example, Chekinov and Bogdanov argue that the Cold War did not end but 'the means of the Cold War have been supplemented by the elements of traditional war, as well as by new forms of influence, such as subversive operations on an enormous scale in the spheres of politics and economics' (Chekinov and Bogdanov 2017, 40). The imitation of Western economic policies is interpreted as a form of manipulation that will lead to the destruction of Russia's economic potential and increase the dependency of the Russian economy on natural resources (Bartosh 2013a; Bartosh 2013b; Bartosh 2014b; Bartosh 2016c). The underlying idea is that hybrid warfare, just like information warfare, constitutes 'rivalry between social systems in the information sphere, aimed at gaining control of the strategic resources' (Venprintsev et al 2011, 318–319). This interpretation challenges Russia's Western orientation and prospective integration. An orientation and integration suggested, for example, by the Russian military doctrine approved in April 2000 which identified the consolidation of democratic governance as one of the means of improving Russia's military security (Pynnöniemi and Mashiri 2015, 67). Today, the democratic governance model is dismissed as an option for Russia (Surkov 2019) and human rights advocates or civil society activists are framed as part of the external interference in Russia's internal affairs (Laruelle 2019). The West is seen as a source of Russia's economic and political turmoil. This leads us to the second type of conflict, which is geopolitical in nature.

The geopolitical framing of hybrid war is also rooted in the historical interpretation of Russia's relations with the West as being primarily antagonistic. The ultimate purpose of hybrid war is to facilitate realization of the West's 'geopolitical expansion model' and plan for global dominance. To achieve these ends, explains Bartosh, 'the strategic plan is to destabilize the selected countries and regions by artificially forming hotbeds of internal conflicts, which should be resolved on conditions dictated by the West' (Bartosh 2015a; also in Voitolvskii 2019, 130; Bartosh 2013a). This view repeats the official Russian description of the conflict in Ukraine (Russian National Security Strategy 2015, Article 17; see also Pynnöniemi 2016, 71–91; Pynnöniemi 2019). Furthermore, the revised doctrine from 2014 defines several types of external military dangers, including 'the establishment in the states adjacent to the Russian Federation of regimes [...] whose policies threaten the interests of the Russian Federation' (Russian Military Doctrine, Article 12h). This view is also echoed in the discussion above.

In sum, the debate frames hybrid war as an instrument to weaken Russia's geopolitical status and to undermine the political and economic cohesion of the country. This serves one major objective: the maintenance of Western hegemony, the achievement of which requires the destruction of Russia's power (Bartosh 2014e; Bartosh 2014a; Belozarov 2014). In this way, these articles shape the discourse on Russia's threat environment by representing the US and NATO as Russia's 'geopolitical opponents' and, essentially, as aggressors (Bartosh 2014d; Bartosh 2015b; Kartapolov 2015).

### Theoretical origins of hybrid war

The theoretical origins of hybrid war are firmly rooted in Western military theory, but this heritage is interpreted with a twist in the Russian context. In fact, Ofer Fridman (2018, 92) has argued that the Russian understanding of hybrid war is completely different from Hoffman's original formulation. As Fridman states, where 'hybrid warfare represents the complexity of military threats in the twenty-first century, based on a mixture of regular and irregular tactics, technologies and capabilities, *gibridnaya voyna* (hybrid war) focuses on ways that political actors can undermine their adversaries by eroding their domestic and international political legitimacy and stability' (Fridman 2018, 95). Based on the analysis presented in this article, we agree with Fridman's observation. However, it is also important to note that, in the Russian context, 'hybrid war' provides an explanation for threats towards Russia, rather than serving as a tool for analysing these threats.

Professor Igor Panarin and Alexandr Bartosh exemplify this difference in their usage of the term. They both draw a parallel between the Cold War and hybrid war. For Panarin, this link is obvious. According to him, a key element in the West's success was the destruction of the 'Stalinist security service'. Without it, the Soviet Union could not effectively neutralize the Western information war against it and 'save the country from collapse' (Panarin 2010, 9). In a book published in 2017, Panarin tells the same story but frames it anew. The Western 'hybrid war against Russia' originated as early as 1816 when the European powers, in an effort to contain Russia, supported internal forces that were trying to overthrow the tsarist government (Panarin 2017, 8). In Panarin's view, the concept of 'hybrid war' offers an explanation for the measures adopted by the West in the destruction of the Russian and the Soviet empire. On only two occasions has Russia been able to conduct strategic 'anti-hybrid war' operations, namely with the annexation of Crimea and the fight against ISIL in Syria (Panarin 2017, 6). Thus, hybrid war has become a part of the historical trajectory whereby Russia is portrayed as a 'besieged fortress' under constant threat of disintegration and revolutionary chaos. In this way, the debate about hybrid war activates existing patterns of thinking about threats and the possibility of conflict with the West.

When it comes to Russian military theory, the name Yevgeni Messner, a tsarist Russian military officer who emigrated from Soviet Russia in 1921, often comes up in the discussion. For example, Savinkin (2014) argues that hybrid war is actually a worldwide subversion war (*myatezhevoyna*), a concept developed by Messner. Fridman (2018, 52–53; Fridman 2017) and Panarin (2017, 200; see also Belozеров 2014) also refer to Messner as one of the theoreticians whose ideas, although overlooked during the Soviet years, have influenced later Russian thinking on new forms of warfare. Aleksandr Svechin, one of the Russian military classicists, is also mentioned in this context (Savinkin 2014).

However, the most active participant in the Russian debate, Alexander Bartosh (2017d), refers to Messner on only one occasion as an example of a theoretician of non-traditional (subversion) war. Instead, he argues that the roots of this phenomenon lie in the chaos theory developed by Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers together with Ilya Prigogine, a Russian émigré scientist and the winner of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1977 (Bartosh 2013a).

In 1984, they published a book titled *Order out of Chaos: Man's new dialogue with nature* in which they sought to 'offer a new paradigm for science' (Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Coffey 1995, 24). Alvin Toffler summarized the message in Stengers and Prigogine's book as follows: 'it projects science into today's revolutionary world of instability, disequilibrium, and turbulence' (Toffler 1984, xxvi). For Bartosh (2013a; 2013b; 2014d), the 'controlled chaos' reads as a manual of the US Cold War strategy aimed at undermining the Soviet system. Western-created institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO, together with semi-public forums (e.g. Bilderberg Club) and research institutes (e.g. RAND Corporation) form a network of subversive actors that promote Western interests globally (Bartosh 2013a; Bartosh 2014d). According to Bartosh, the US and NATO member states have developed a 'comprehensive interdepartmental, intergovernmental and international strategy that is based on a system-holistic approach to planning and implementing a set of tasks to destroy a country that is the object of aggression' (Bartosh 2016a). It is noteworthy that the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev has recently framed the US global anti-terrorism policy as a technology of 'controlled chaos' (Patrushev 2019). With this, Patrushev gives further credence to the interpretation of the West trying to maintain its hegemonic position vis-à-vis aspiring great powers, Russia included.

Although these explanations derive from the assumption that the most effective means of hybrid war is hidden subversion, neither Bartosh nor other Russian authors refer to the theory of reflexive control developed by Russian mathematician Vladimir Lefebvre in the 1960s. As explained by analyst Timothy Thomas, reflexive control is 'a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action' (Thomas 2004, 237). This description is identical to the ideas expressed in the Russian debate on hybrid war. This raises a question as to why the theory of reflexive control is not mentioned in this context. One plausible explanation is that the debate itself is a form of strategic deception (Pynnöniemi 2016). The exclusion of the reflexive control theory from the debate is logical only if the purpose is to emphasize the *foreign* roots of hybrid war, rather than Russian excellence in conducting information-psychological operations. In other words, the debate about hybrid war can be seen as a part of Russia's strategic communication to the extent that the debate amplifies officially accepted vision of threats towards Russia.

This is difficult to prove, but it at least merits further study. Previous research offers insights on the balance between deception and communication in this sphere. Heuer (1987, 45) has argued that the Soviet military periodicals served as channels of disinformation and propaganda during the Cold War. In the late 1990s, Russian analysts had suggested that the military doctrine should contain both descriptive and reflexive elements, a purpose of which is to channel opponent's action into desirable direction. (Vasara 2019, 70) However, Garthoff (1958, 270), who gained access to the security-classified versions of military periodicals and compared those with the published material, argued that although 'published statements *can* be falsified and deceptive, the writings in Soviet military journals on doctrinal and strategic views have proved remarkably accurate'. The main point, according to Garthoff, is that in terms of

doctrine, 'Soviets simply cannot afford to mislead their own officer corps merely in order to try to mislead us' (Garthoff 1958, 272).

A hypothesis that emerges from the analysis is that the Russian military periodicals publish both 'doctrinal' articles that fit Garthoff's description of accurate information as well as opinion pieces, the purpose of which is to steer the debate in a specific direction. The challenge for outside observers is to recognize to which category a particular text belongs. We would argue that the majority of the texts about hybrid war aim to shape the debate to a particular direction. Whereas, those articles published in the same military periodicals that discuss new forms of warfare without explicitly referring to hybrid war may better reflect the evolution of Russian military thinking on this issue (see e.g. Chekinov and Bogdanov 2015; Kartapolov 2015; Gareev and Turko 2017). This shows that a comparison of different types of texts is important when we evaluate what Russians mean by specific concepts used in the discourse.

## Conclusion

In the current Western parlance, the hybrid prefix has various meanings. Most often, it is used to describe the increasing unpredictability and diversity of threats towards nations. Since 2014, the term hybrid has been associated with Russia and the success of malign external actions, including the use of military force in achieving strategic objectives. The annexation of Crimea and Russia's interference in the US elections have become a yardstick against which all future 'hybrid operations' are measured. However, since hybrid influencing is a context-specific phenomenon and may include legal and illegal, as well as open and covert, activities, establishing a 'standard' model of hybrid war is difficult, and almost illogical. Yet, there is clearly a temptation to explain any complex and unclear issues as hybrid. If this poses a challenge for Western practitioners and scholars, in the context of the Russian debate, things look simpler. Hybrid war is primarily framed as a Western concept that describes tools used against Russia. Although the sample of articles included in the research is rather limited and any far-reaching conclusions are therefore premature, we may distinguish two broad, interlinked yet distinct, frames for interpreting hybrid war and its meaning for Russia.

Firstly, hybrid war is about a conflict between civilizations. It is seen as a continuation of historical Western enmity towards Russia. Unlike in the West, where 2014 is seen as a rupture or breaking point, in Russia the conflict in Ukraine is interpreted in the context of previous external attacks against Russia. In this way, the public debate on hybrid war strengthens existing perceptions of Russia as a besieged fortress. The role of military periodicals such as *Nezavisimaya Gazeta's* military section (NVO) in fostering this image among the Russian public is rather limited, compared, for example, to the role of Russian state TV. Since many of the articles focusing on hybrid war were written by one author, Aleksandr Bartosh, we may question how vibrant the *debate* actually is. Instead of providing many complementary and critical approaches to the phenomenon of hybrid war, the debate in the Russian context repeats the same argument over and over again. The argument is that hybrid war is a tool used to overthrow regimes if, and when, those governments oppose US strategic interests.

Secondly, hybrid war is about the geopolitical struggle for world domination and power. In this framework, the West is seen as actively pursuing malign techniques, algorithms and mechanisms in countering Russia. These techniques aim at hidden control and management of behaviour and motivations of the general public leading to destructive influence. With hybrid war, the West challenges Russia's geopolitical status and duly seeks to maintain its hegemonic role in global politics. Russia's activities are represented as counter-measures and labelled 'constructive techniques', such as public diplomacy or soft power. Further research is required on the overall context of the Russian debate on future war, especially on the possible emergence of different schools of thought and their influence on Russian military and foreign policy.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes on contributors

Assistant Professor **Katri Pynnöniemi** holds a master's degree and a doctorate in international relations from the University of Tampere, Finland. Since August 2017, she has worked as Mannerheim Chair of Russian Security Studies at the National Defence University, and at the University of Helsinki. Previously, she worked as a senior researcher at the Finnish Institute for International Affairs. Her current research projects include the evolution of Russia's strategic thinking, strategic communication of threats, and conceptualization of information warfare in Russia. She has published widely on the system change in Russia and on Russian foreign and security policy. Her latest publications include: 'Information-psychological warfare in Russian strategic thinking', in Kanet E. Roger (ed.) (2019) *Handbook of Russian Security Policy*; and 'Russia's National Security Strategy: Analysis of Conceptual Evolution', in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (2018). Email: [katri.pynnoniemi@helsinki.fi](mailto:katri.pynnoniemi@helsinki.fi)

**Minna Jokela** holds a master's degree and a doctorate in international relations from the University of Turku, Finland. Previously, she worked as a teacher and researcher at the political science department of the University of Turku and at the Finnish Border and Coast Guard Academy. Her main research interests are in the fields of border security, hybrid threats, internal and external security of the EU, and the role of the EU in global politics.

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