



Over five years of Russian hybrid warfare against Ukraine provide lessons how to make Ukraine stronger

Ralph D. Thiele

January 2020

Summary

Using the hybrid warfare model to advance its goals, Russia exploited vis-à-vis the Ukraine strategic ambiguity through a blend of soft and hard power. It used mercenaries to destroy regional infrastructure. It weakened the local economy and blocked state functions such as law enforcement, justice and social welfare. It caused a refugee crisis. In particular, it exploited social media and employed information warfare.

To improve the situation the Ukraine needs

- An international situation, where Russia is no longer an outsider;
- A government and government agencies that serve their people well;
- Armed Forces and other national instruments of power that are well prepared to combat national threats with multidomain capabilities;
- Comprehensive Situational Awareness across all relevant domains;
- Reliable partnerships.

About ISPSW

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is an objective, task-oriented and politically non-partisan institute.

In the increasingly complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, which occasions both major opportunities and risks, decision-makers in the economic and political arena depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, the economy, international relations, and security/ defense. ISPSW network experts have held – in some cases for decades – executive positions and dispose over a wide range of experience in their respective fields of expertise.



Analysis

1. *You refer to the “Russian” model of hybrid warfare to describe Russia’s annexation of Crimea and destabilizing activities in eastern Ukraine. Could you please elaborate as to a set of hybrid techniques that Russia has used in Ukraine since 2014, and what makes them so efficient?*

Using the hybrid warfare model to advance its goals, Russia exploited strategic ambiguity through a blend of soft and hard power. In particular Russia flooded the region with illegal weapons. It used mercenaries to destroy regional infrastructure. It weakened the local economy and blocked state functions such as law enforcement, justice and social welfare. It caused a refugee crisis. In particular, it exploited social media and employed information warfare. This hybrid approach has been reinforced by the threatened use of conventional and even nuclear weaponry.

Russia pursued its objectives through a combination of local sympathizers and Russian troops that consisted of low-footprint special operations without insignia to keep the narrative of local resistance alive as long as possible. Obviously, this approach worked well in the Crimea as it was in part supported by local population. In the Donbass it worked less well. Ukrainian military success against the separatists needed to be stopped by Russian military.

Four principal factors have contributed to the Russian efficiency.

- Thorough conceptual and operational preparation to include respective training and exercises;
- The lack of respective preparation, capabilities and resilience on the Ukrainian side;
- A lack of trust in the own government (due to corruption and weak governmental performance) and consequently a lack of societal resilience on the Ukrainian side;
- The strategic surprise of the Russian intervention and respective unpreparedness of international partners to support the Ukraine with adequate means.

In my judgement, all four factors apply until today. Of course, the surprise is gone. But not the insufficient international preparedness.

2. *Did Russia plan its hybrid warfare activities against Ukraine since the early 1990s?*

Not from my perspective. Of course, there has been discomfort with the separation of the Ukraine from Russian perspective. Obviously, a couple of important aspects such as Russia’s dependence on agricultural products from Crimea and from Ukraine’s military industry have been of strategic relevance. Yet, Russia had plenty of own problems in the early 1990s. I have been professionally dealing with these and recall food problems in St. Petersburg, shoot outs in major industries, mafia controlling banks and ten thousands of scientists tempted to leave Russia and taking their competencies and knowledge about weapons of mass destructions for good money to places such as Libya.

Yet, there is a valid point about the early 1990s - lessons learnt from U.S. technology meeting high end Russian technology during the liberation of Kuwait by U.S. troops. In 1991 Russia became aware of the enormous importance of electronic warfare (EW) capabilities and joint surveillance, acquisition, reconnaissance and targeting (JSTAR) in military operations. Although highly war experienced and equipped with modern Soviet military systems, the Iraqi forces had no chance to successfully resisting the U.S. military that could build its



attack on superior EW and JSTAR. This very devastating experience had a lasting effect on Russian operational and armament concepts and payed off during the Russian hybrid warfare against Ukraine.

Today, the modern challenges in dealing with Anti-Access/Area Denial environments, have brought EW back to the forefront. This applies, in particular, to hybrid challenges that emphasize ambiguity. If you look at the situation in August 2014 and January 2015, the Russian armed forces needed to run two large-scale offensives involving thousands of troops, to salvage the military situation and enable Moscow to negotiate favourable ceasefire agreements at Minsk. EW and ISR had a major role. Russian troops primarily used massive artillery fire to destroy Ukrainian units from the distance. Separatist militias were deployed as screening forces to reduce casualties among Russian regulars and to spot and identify targets for the artillery. Additionally, Russian forces were equipped with anti-air systems and sophisticated electronic warfare equipment in order to keep the Ukrainian air force at bay. Long-range systems explicitly served to deter a local conflict from escalating at Moscow's expense, for example via a Western military intervention. As a result, Russian forces could be deployed with a low footprint, primarily relying on local proxies, special operations forces, or private contractors while reinforcing the appearance of a local resistance movement.

3. Can we expect Russian military operation against Ukraine in the foreseeable future or Russia will continue to resort to the use of hybrid warfare techniques to destabilize Ukraine?

The answer depends on future Ukrainian approaches in dealing with the crisis. Russia is interested to keep the situation in "limbo", as it is – a weak and vulnerable Ukraine and the West not capable to intervene. To my understanding Russia will not allow any significant change unless the international boycott ends that has been launched in response to the Crimean crisis and the Russian military intervention in Ukraine and Russia is reintegrated and respected again as global player in the international community. Until then, the Ukraine remains a training space for the employment of Russian hybrid warfare techniques.

4. Has Ukraine currently successfully combated Russia's hybrid warfare techniques since 2014? What steps should Ukraine take to address them more effectively?

Clearly not. Russia can freely choose, what elements of hybrid warfare it wants to employ and in what composition. Russia can escalate and deescalate the situation at its own disposal. The main weakness and consequently the preferred angle of attack remains corruption in the Ukraine. Corruption weakens the trust of people in the government and its institutions. This weakens resilience against Russian hybrid threats.

To get over the "limbo" situation as of today the Ukraine needs

- An international situation, where Russia is no longer an outsider
- A government and government agencies that serve their people well
- Armed Forces and other national instruments of power (intelligence services/ police/ etc.) that are well prepared to combat national (traditional and hybrid) threats with multidomain capabilities. This requires well considered and implemented Jointness, Interagency, Information sharing concepts with a capable C4I backbone, building on evolving disruptive technologies such as 5G, artificial intelligence, drones, space, EW and cyber.
- Comprehensive Situational Awareness across all relevant domains – land, air, sea, space, cyber space.
- Reliable partnerships. Yet, why should anybody help the Ukraine, if it cannot help itself?



5. *Have there been any substantial changes in Russia's military and informational capabilities influencing its overall strategic approach towards Ukraine since 2014? Where do you think Russia has failed and succeeded in Ukraine and what lessons Ukraine could learn from that?*

In principle, in the Ukraine (and beyond) Russia undertakes on the job training in hybrid warfare. Its strategic objectives have been achieved, i.e. to achieve political fragmentation of Ukraine via federalization and retain Russian influence. Operationally Russia acts agile and ready to learn.

It would be an overstatement to link rising Russian military capabilities with the developments in the Ukraine. The driving factor for Russian planning are likely contingencies in its geopolitical areas of interest and competitive capabilities vis-à-vis the USA, NATO and China and in particular the capability to successfully deal with Anti-access (A2) and area denial (AD) challenges.

In A2/AD traditionally the focus is predominantly on sophisticated, longer-range adversary capabilities and methods – such as ballistic missiles, submarines, weapons of mass destruction, and offensive space and cyber-space assets. A critical gap has been the consideration of A2/AD challenges emerging from outside the realm of traditional military competition and violence. When opponents effectively combine political, economic, and informational tools with important military capabilities, the A2/AD challenge becomes more acute and potent. Thus dangerous, no less technical methods such as terrorism, proxy warfare or weaponized social media have opened alternative “hybrid fronts”.

Information warfare (IW) is part of the game. It appears that Russia has the global lead in contemporary IW. Russian IW has contributed to the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing crisis in eastern Ukraine. In Ukraine, social media-based, narrative-focused Russian attacks including disinformation have been common. The ubiquity and anonymity of internet communications has offered Russia new IW opportunities. Among the latest developments in this arena has been the rise of professional “trolls” and other “opinion agents”. Yet, such operations can be de-camouflaged and countered through the effective, real-time analysis of open source information. This requires artificial intelligence and dedicated, sophisticated tools. Of course, it remains a challenge.

In sum, the weak state and the lack of trust of the population provide for outstanding attack vectors. These are at the core of Ukraine's vulnerability. Everything else can be tackled step by step. The good news is: Ukraine certainly doesn't lack gifted people with outstanding IT competencies.

Remarks: The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

This analysis first appeared in *UAINFocus*, October 2019.

<https://www.uainfocus.org/post/over-5-years-of-russian-hybrid-warfare-against-ukraine-provide-lessons-how-to-make-ukraine-stronger>



About the Author of this Issue

Ralph D. Thiele, born in 1953, is President of EuroDefense, Germany, Managing Director StratByrd Consulting, Germany, Chairman Political-Military Society, Germany and Member Advisory Board German Employers Association, Wiesbaden. He is a retired Colonel, held in his 40-year military career in the German Armed Forces key national and international positions. He

- Commanded troops up to the battalion level;
- Developed concepts and capability requirements in the Ministry of Defence;
- Drafted speeches and policy papers for Federal Presidents, Ministers of Defence, Major NATO Commanders and Service Chiefs;
- Drove educational innovation at the German Armed Forces Command and Staff College (Director Faculty) and at the NATO Defense College (Chief of Staff);
- Shaped the Bundeswehr's path towards network enabled capabilities (Commander Bundeswehr Transformation Command).

In his honorary and business functions he advises on Defence Innovation and Cyber issues in times of digital transformation. He has been frequently consulting, publishing and lecturing in Europe, America and Asia.

Ralph D. Thiele is also a member of the ISPSW Speaker Management Team. Further information at ISPSW website: <http://www.ispsw.com/en/speaker-management/>



Ralph D. Thiele