



PAVEL USOV

University of Warsaw, East-European Studies, Warsaw, Poland

 0000-0001-7289-2085

The concept of hybrid warfare in the context of Russian foreign policy

Due to the development of modern technologies and new methods of influencing people and State policies, the nature of these wars has changed significantly. As a result of the series of aggressive wars that Russia has implemented in the last decade against both its former colonial republics and in the global space, we are confronted with the phenomenon of hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare has evolved into a global political, ideological, and strategic confrontation, requiring a deeper understanding of its goals, structure, and mechanisms. Hybrid warfare is not a form of military action, but a multi-vector political, cultural, and informational impact on society and the state to capture it or establish a loyal regime for an aggressive state. It is assumed that, as its initial goal, hybrid warfare lays the groundwork for implementing a policy or a set of political influences (elections, sabotage, crises) that will allow the aggressor state to avoid an open armed conflict. At the same time, hybrid warfare does not exclude the use of armed means of influence, if necessary, as an extreme measure to seize the territory of another state. It must be understood that one of the main goals of hybrid warfare is to achieve specific geopolitical objectives: territorial expansion, military presence, and the destruction of political power, while concealing the aggressor state's interference and intentions.

Keywords: hybrid war, Russia, post-Soviet space, aggression, electoral campaign, influence, geopolitical interests, global conflict, international relations, artificial intelligence, internet

The concept of hybrid warfare

When studying the phenomenon of hybrid warfare, we should clearly answer two key questions: is hybrid warfare a new phenomenon characteristic of modern times, and what are its structural and qualitative differences from past military operations?

The very concept of hybrid warfare is considered relatively new and was introduced into scientific use in 2007 (Hoffman 2007). At the same time, it covered exclusively specific military actions, changes in the means of warfare, and actions aimed to find “more efficient modes of killing” (Hoffman 2007, p. 10). In fact, hybrid warfare was understood as a new tactic of armed

or quasi-armed confrontation. “Hybrid Wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts, including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects”. (Hoffman 2007, p.14).

Even in the latest publications, when defining hybrid warfare, the emphasis is often primarily on the military component and methods of conducting military operations, while other non-military parameters are secondary (subordinate) rather than basic. “The term *hybrid warfare* implies a combination of regular and irregular military operations, with the addition of non-military means, aiming at influencing the adversary’s mind” (Casey-Maslen et al. 2024, p. 7).

This approach limited understanding of hybrid warfare and led to critical assessments, since unconventional means of struggle (so-called complex wars, terrorist attacks, guerrilla actions, sabotage) have always been used during conventional wars. “In practice, any threat can be hybrid as long as it is not limited to a single form and dimension of warfare. When any threat or use of force is defined as hybrid, the term loses its value and instead causes confusion, rather than clarifying the “reality” of modern warfare (Van Puyvelde 2015).

At the same time, means such as ideological, informational, and psychological influence and impact were either carried beyond the concept of hybrid warfare and developed into separate directions, such as psychological and information warfare, or were considered to accompany the mechanism of war as such.

To clarify what hybrid warfare is today, it is necessary to put the armed, pure-military component on the back burner.

The peculiarity of hybrid warfare lies precisely in its complexity (Bilal 2021), combining various components and methods to influence both the state and society, with both militaristic and non-militaristic elements. It can be argued that military means, especially in the 21st century, are rather the last, final stage of hybrid warfare, an element of intimidation, if all the previous stages of hybrid aggression did not lead to the desired result. In other words, in the context of hybrid warfare, militarized operations are of secondary importance and subordinate to non-militarized means.

In turn, the non-militaristic means of hybrid warfare are understood as informational, political, and socio-economic mechanisms of influence that should weaken the state’s internal situation, discredit its political order, and provoke beneficial changes for the aggressor state.

In general, understanding that hybrid warfare is a special type of aggressive action that covers and simultaneously includes almost all spheres of political and socio-economic activity had appeared during the first war in Ukraine in 2014 (Baluk 2015). Then it became clear that the world faced new forms of military and political influence by hostile states (NATO 2014), undermining and destroying state stability, as well as ideological expansion driven by cultural and psychological mechanisms.

Of course, the interweaving of non-militaristic elements into the concept of war can be controversial. If non-military methods prevail in conducting a hybrid war, can a “hybrid war” be considered a war in this case? To answer this question, it seems necessary to define what war is and what its basic goals are.

At one time, Carl von Clausewitz (2010, p.24) gave the following definition of war: “War is an act of violence aimed at forcing the enemy to do our will. There are two key meanings in this definition: it is an act of violence, and the realization of *one’s own will* against an opponent. The concept of violence is complex, and although it most often refers to physical effects on a person or group, it also includes, among other things, moral and psychological effects, as well as the threat of such effects, and is associated with harm (WHO 2002). In addition, a number of unarmed actions systematically organized from the outside can be violent, for example, interethnic clashes, incitement of internal conflicts aimed at destroying the political system, are usually violent.

In turn, it should be understood that war is not merely a senseless act of aggression but a policy pursued by certain states with very specific goals and objectives. It is in achieving these goals that the political will of the state’s rulers is expressed (Post et al. 1995).

According to representatives of the concept of political realism in the theory of international relations, such as Carr (2021), Waltz (2023), and Mearsheimer (2021), the goals of any state are its own security and survival. These goals are achieved through the external expansion of the state’s power (will) and the weakening of competitors (other states), thereby establishing one’s dominance.

War appears to be one of the key mechanisms for achieving state security and domination, namely by “destroying or bringing about changes in the enemy’s state” (Waltz 2023, p. 215). It is clear that such changes in the state can be achieved both through the open use of aggression, the policy of war, and a diverse set of forceful and non-forceful tools. To some extent, the use of non-coercive tools has been included in the definition of soft power. Soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies (Nye 2004, p.10).

Without a doubt, everything that forms the basis of a soft impact: values, culture, politics, and economics, can be included in what we today call a hybrid war if aggressive goals and intentions are hidden behind it. Aggressive intentions could mean weakening the enemy state internally and establishing forms of government that correspond to the interests of the aggressor state.

Thus, wars can change their form, nature, and instruments, but their essence and purpose remain the same – the subjugation of the political space of another state or its destruction. There is no doubt that a state carrying out a hybrid war (as we will see in the example of Russian politics), as an unarmed form of aggression, undoubtedly sets itself the same goals as a class war. What could once be achieved with weapons can now be realized through elections.

However, it should be emphasized once again that military means are not completely excluded from the concept and structure of hybrid warfare; rather, they are auxiliary.

Hybrid warfare is the result of a well-thought-out, long-term aggressive policy, which includes a number of violent and nonviolent actions, mechanisms of influence of a state or a union of states against another state or communities, in order to weaken or destroy its internal political and social institutions, and reformat the political and territorial structure in accordance with their own strategic objectives and interests.

It should be noted that hybrid warfare, in all its manifestations (military and non-military), manifests itself in the context of confrontation between global systems or states.

Such a broad understanding of hybrid warfare as the systemic, aggressive impact on society and political institutions of the enemy state makes us return to the Cold War period, when those phenomena now defined as hybrid warfare manifested themselves most clearly at the systemic level. The ideological, informational, quasi-military resistance between the USSR (the communist bloc) and the USA (the Western countries) could be defined as a First Hybrid World War.

In essence, the Cold War, as a confrontation between two systems, had specific goals: the destruction of the enemy's state system, the seizure of its geopolitical space, and the expansion of the victor at the expense of the losing side. The result of the war, which was not an open armed confrontation, was the death of the Soviet Union as a state and a geopolitical space. To achieve these goals, first of all, unarmed means were used, which, in our time, constitute the phenomenon of *hybrid warfare*.

In fact, Russia's desire to restore its influence and dominance in the region in the XXI century, the war in Georgia and Ukraine, has escalated into a global political and ideological confrontation with the democratic world. Moreover, it was the desire to oppose the West globally and to demonstrate its strength that led to open aggression against several post-Soviet republics (Dugin 2022). Thus, today's world is experiencing a new stage of hybrid confrontation or war.

Hybrid warfare as a result of the socio-technical transformation of society

Hybrid warfare as a phenomenon did not arise as a result of a change in the nature of war as such. This is the result of the general technical and social changes that have taken place in societies and States. These changes and the increasing complexity of socio-political and economic processes have affected the nature of the relationship, including the nature of the confrontation.

It can be argued that the general process of the hybridization of warfare was made possible due to four significant technical and socio-political processes:

1. In socio-political terms, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the role and influence of the broad masses, classes, and strata on political processes within states increased. On the one hand, societies, thanks to the development of democratic institutions and organizations, gain the opportunity to influence the formation of governments and their policies; on the other hand, these same societies (individual social strata) become the object of external influence and management.

The understanding that societies and their individual groups can be political weapons was reflected in the USSR's actions in the first half of the 20th century.

A detailed strategic plan for "conquering the broad social strata of the population" can be found in the *Program of the Communist International*. "In order to solve the historical task of conquering the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Communist Party must first set and fulfill the following main strategic goals: a) to ensure the decisive influence of the Communist Party on the broad mass organizations of the proletariat (soviets, trade unions, factory committees, cooperatives, sports, cultural organizations, etc.); b) Taking over the trade unions is especially important

from the point of view of winning over the majority of the proletariat; c) The conquest of the dictatorship of the proletariat also presupposes the exercise of the hegemony of the proletariat over the broad circles of the working masses.

To achieve this, the Communist Party must win over the masses of the urban and rural poor, the lower strata of the intelligentsia, and the so-called “petty people,” i.e., the petty-bourgeois strata in general (Comintern 1933). Today, this can be called the struggle for the electorate and the management of the protest masses.

Currently, there are all the necessary conditions, as well as opportunities to influence society through electoral and network technologies, political parties, NGOs, and so on, to a greater extent than it was 40-50 years ago.

2. The development and availability of nuclear weapons by global players have played a significant role in rethinking methods of fighting and waging war in a global sense. On the one hand, this led to the understanding that any open war would result in guaranteed mutual destruction; on the other hand, it forced us to seek new, effective methods of confrontation and influence without entering an open, hot phase.

The result of a fundamental rethinking of nature and methods of confrontation between the superpowers was the use of the terms „information war” (Rona 1976) and “psychological warfare” (CK KPSS 1967) in a practical sense. Today, in the context of the growing confrontation between Russia, the global authoritarian community as a whole, and the democratic community, it is hybrid warfare that remains the main form of struggle. In turn, the informational and psychological components comprise this war.

Of course, armed might and force are conditions for the State to wage other forms of war; it would have been captured as a result of direct military aggression by another state or a coalition of states. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (abandoning hybrid warfare) was the result of the belief that neither Ukraine nor the West had sufficient deterrence capabilities.

At the same time, Russia uses the full range of hybrid actions against Western states, avoiding direct armed confrontation, due to its deterrent potential (nuclear weapons). At the same time, Russia is not afraid of armed influence from the West for the same reason.

3. The information and technological progress of human society in the late XX and early XXI centuries led to the emergence of completely new remote tools for implementing an aggressive policy of influencing both the technical infrastructure of the state and its social environment.

IT has become the basic condition for the existence of the state and society; without it, their stability and security are inconceivable today, and at the same time, the systemic vulnerability of both the state and society has increased. In today’s society, war is actually being waged in the pockets of the people, where smartphones are located. Civilians become active participants in the battlespace, the boundaries between everyday life and warfare blur, and military operations and intelligence activities are reshaped by civilian-generated content and the crucial role of technology companies in providing digital infrastructure (Ford 2025).

Table 1: Number of smartphones, Internet and social network users in the World

The number of the smartphone users	4,3 bln., people in 2023	5,7 bln., people in 2025
The number of mobile internet users	4,6 bln., people	5,6 bln., people in 2025
The number of internet users	4, 5 bln. people	6,04 bln., users
Social network users	3,8 bln users in 2020	5,66 bln., users

(Source: Kemp 2020; Petrosyan 2025; Ramirez - Lee 2025).

As of 2025, global average screen time across all devices is estimated to be between 6 to 7 hours per day, depending on age group and region, including smartphones, tablets, and PCs (Ramirez - Lee 2025). Using global and popular social networks such as *Meta, X, and Telegram*, hostile groups or states can make them channels and penetrable instruments for various forms of manipulation and, of course, create conditions for hybrid influence. Moreover, social networks have become an effective means of recruiting spies, transmitting sensitive information, and even organizing sabotage actions.

All the processes mentioned above change the nature of society, its behavior, and the structure of political and military confrontation. For example, Telegram users, a very popular network and communication channel, are being targeted by Russian intelligence agencies. They can monitor conversations in Telegram channels, identify users and administrators by their IDs, and track which channels they visit. It automatically creates detailed profiles of millions of people. Special software allows Russian services to monitor thousands of channels simultaneously and determine how loyal individual users are to Russia or what political position they hold (Urbancik 2025). Over the last couple of years, we have dealt with a new phenomenon: artificial intelligence. It is beginning to play a significant role in the information space and is being used as an instrument of hybrid confrontation, which warrants a separate study.

4. Institutionalization. Changes in the forms and mechanisms of state confrontation have created a new infrastructure for hybrid warfare. Many of the structures and institutions that were charged with conducting hybrid warfare and, in fact, made the war hybrid began to form during the Cold War. The main task in the development and implementation of hybrid warfare strategies in the twentieth century began to be played by intelligence communities, “the real armies of this battle” (Blake 1991).

Of course, the intelligence community carries the main burden of developing various types of operations, from informational and psychological influence to agents’ recruitment and the infiltration and promotion of agents of influence, to “active measures”: sabotage, attacks, and political uprisings.

In addition, the special services analyzed the social and ideological structures of societies, identified, created, and exploited weaknesses to further ideological influence, manipulation, etc. In fact, these tasks are still a priority for these structures today. The most famous institutions were the CIA, KGB, MI6, SBU, etc. These communities also had to counter such operations aimed at their own state. To get an idea of the scale of certain structures’ activities, attention

should be paid to the functioning of the so-called 5th directorate of the KGB of the USSR. This department was supposed to counter the same systemic hybrid influence on Soviet society from the West and, at the same time, implement retaliatory measures.

In a special note, the leadership of the KGB of the USSR stated the need to create a special directorate and noted that the West was waging a large-scale ideological war against the USSR, consisting of a number of measures aimed at the spiritual and ideological disintegration of Soviet society.

These measures included:

- acquisition of sources of political information in the country.
- ensuring the activities of organized, emigrant, nationalist, and religious groups within the USSR.
- the formation of sentiments of apoliticality and nihilism, especially among young people, and their development into politically harmful manifestations through the activities of subcultures: rockers, punks, football fans, mystical, occult circles.
- creation and use of a criminal environment to organize clashes with law enforcement structures (CK KPSS 1967).

In recent years, it has been Russian pro-Kremlin researchers who have openly viewed the entire intelligence apparatus as a state mechanism to fend off the threats of a “hybrid” war and its implementation. “It is necessary to actively coordinate and integrate, in the interests of Russia’s security and defense, the efforts of government agencies, the media, the security services of major Russian corporations, and state information and intelligence agencies to organize defensive and offensive information operations on the territory of Russia and beyond” (Panarin 2019).

A substantial number of socio-political structures and organizations that were created specifically for these purposes were and still are involved in the process of implementing hybrid impact and waging hybrid wars:

Information and propaganda structures: Radio Moscow, TASS, Russia Today, Sputnik, Radio Free Europe, etc. During the Cold War, news agencies were a crucial tool for propaganda and counterpropaganda, information warfare, and disinformation. “In retrospect, the approval to fund Radio Free Europe broadcasts to occupied Eastern Europe and subsequently Radio Liberty broadcasts to Russia was one of CIA Director Allen Dulles’s most critical decisions in the struggle against communism.

As a private citizen, Dulles had been an original founding member of the Free Europe Committee. He had many personal acquaintances on the boards of trustees of both that committee and the Radio Liberty Committee, which was formed in 1951 with confidential CIA funds by a group of American citizens at the government’s instigation” (Meyer 2000, p. 127).

In today’s world, information institutions continue to play a significant role in hybrid warfare; their influence is enhanced by technology and the emergence of new professions, such as bloggers and YouTubers. The latter play a key role in creating their own audiences, which can influence and control not only their opinions, but also their behavior, which is extremely important in critical conditions. In Putin’s Russia, there are many bloggers like Solovyov (with half a million followers on RuTube) and Sobchak (with 1 million followers on Telegram) who are popular not only in Russia but across the whole post-Soviet space.

Hackers and cyber-terrorists form a separate substructure whose goal is to destroy the network security infrastructure and the security systems of the attacked state. Separately, in this regard, we can single out the substructure of Internet trolls, whose task is to spread manipulative content and misinformation, as well as to exert psychological pressure on information opponents on the web. A new stage in this process has begun with the widespread use of artificial intelligence, which will allow the creation and dissemination of diverse content aimed at creating a negative image of the enemy, or disinformation (Grieg 2024);

Specialized analytical centers and think tanks that collect and systematize information on the country's socio-political situation, security issues, etc. These centers can develop strategies to influence and counter hybrid aggression.

It is necessary to understand that in the context of an escalating confrontation between states or groups of states, the social and political structure of hybrid warfare may expand. Public and religious organizations (such as the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate), political parties and movements, as well as the diaspora, national minorities, etc., can become tools and resources of a hybrid war.

Speaking about the institutionalization of hybrid warfare, it is necessary to pay close attention to a vital component: ideology. Any war, and hybrid war in particular, requires ideological justification, which enables mobilizing society and legitimizing aggression against another state. In the case of hybrid warfare, ideology becomes a central, psychological, cultural weapon. It is ideology and the values it embodies that should attract and involve social groups and individuals in the struggle against the state in which the hybrid war is being waged. During the period of confrontation between the USSR and the USA, two opposing ideologies were clearly articulated: communism and liberalism. Today, Russia's policy has become a challenge to the established international relations, and it has been forced to construct a new ideological system, expressed in the concepts of "Eurasianism" and "the Russian world."

The strategies and mechanisms of hybrid warfare will be considered below when analyzing the foreign policy hybrid strategy of the Russian Federation.

Russian Politics: from hybrid expansion to hybrid warfare

Russia's aggressive policy currently represents a necessary condition for the survival of the political regime that has been forming for 20 years. A militaristic, neo-totalitarian regime has emerged in Russia (Gudkov 2022). The specifics of Russian political power are determined by the fact that it fell into the hands of the intelligence community (Pacepa-Rychlak 2013), which predetermined the strategy of the Russian Federation in the international arena. On the other hand, the formation of an undemocratic regime in Russia, followed by the implementation of an expansionist policy, is the result of a special cultural and psychological structure of this space.

The preservation of the imperial vision of Russia's existence and development was characteristic of both Russian liberals and anti-democratic conservatives. For both of these ideological paradigms, imperialism was a condition for returning not only to internal stability, but also to their status as a great power.

Thus, one of the “fathers” of liberal imperialism, Anatoly Chubais (2003), writes: “In my deep conviction, Russia’s ideology for the foreseeable historical future should be liberal imperialism, and Russia’s mission is to build a liberal empire. This is exactly what we have naturally come to expect in our recent history; this is the invaluable thing we can and should learn from the twentieth century. This is exactly what is characteristic, natural, and organic for Russia - historically, geopolitically, and morally. Finally, this is a task of such magnitude that will help our people finally overcome the spiritual crisis and truly unite and mobilize them”.

Liberal imperialism envisaged maintaining its influence in the post-Soviet space through hybrid means.

Leonid Gozzman (2004), one of the founders and ideologists of the Russian Party alliance of right forces (SPS), noted in 2004 that the SPS had prepared a project of “liberal imperialism”. It was a more extended vision of A. Chubais, who maintained the following theses:

- Russia should call the post-Soviet space a “zone of responsibility”, trying to defend liberal and democratic freedoms in the countries of the former USSR.
- Russia should secure its own business interests in the post-Soviet countries based on a liberal market model.
- Russia should also take responsibility for defending the rights of the Russian-speaking population in the countries of the former USSR.

In fact, the liberal imperialism of the early 2000s fully shaped the Putin expansionism of the past decade: “You want to establish a state of your own: you are welcome! But what are the terms? I will recall the assessment given by one of the most prominent political figures of New Russia, the first mayor of Saint Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak. As a legal expert who believed that every decision must be legitimate, in 1992 he stated that the republics that had been founders of the Union, having denounced the 1922 Union Treaty, must return to the boundaries they had had before joining the Soviet Union. All other territorial acquisitions are subject to discussion and negotiations, given that the ground has been revoked. In other words, when you leave, take what you bring with you. This logic is hard to refute (Putin 2021).

Even conditionally liberal, Russia was not attractive to post-Soviet societies and could not serve as a source of democratization for the former Soviet republics, but rather the opposite. As evidenced by the Republic of Belarus’s modern history. Having discarded the screen of liberalism, the Kremlin returned to its natural mechanisms of expanding imperial influence – open aggression.

The formal articulation of the tasks set by the Russian political leadership occurred during Vladimir Putin’s speech at the Munich Conference in 2007. To some extent, this speech was a result of the events in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004-2005, which demonstrated Russia’s weakness in the post-Soviet space. Putin’s position stated that Russia would not accept the loss of its influence in the post-Soviet space and its peripheral states, nor the dominance of the United States in international politics.

“I think it’s obvious that the process of NATO expansion has nothing to do with modernizing the alliance itself or ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it is a serious provoking factor that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have a fair right to ask frankly: who is this expansion against?” (Putin 2007)

In fact, Putin's Munich speech can be considered a starting point in preparing for a hybrid confrontation with the West. In general, the global objectives of the hybrid war that Russia has unleashed are as follows:

1. Restoring control and influence in the post-Soviet space.
2. The expansion of Russia's influence and political presence in European countries.
3. The expulsion of the United States from the European continent.
4. Weakening of military-political and economic alliances hostile to Russia in Europe.
5. Strengthening the political and military presence in Asia, Africa, and South America.

Since 2014, Russia's activity across various areas has increased, and since 2022, the hybrid confrontation with the West has taken on an openly aggressive form. The Russian Federation formulated its strategic vision in the so-called draft agreement between the Russian Federation and NATO, which was published on December 17, 2021. The plan provided for the establishment and consolidation of spheres of influence and ensuring Russia's vital interests, as well as laying the foundations for the political weakening of Western states and NATO in the future:

- Exclude further expansion of NATO, including the accession of Ukraine, as well as other states.
- Abandon any NATO military activities in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, Transcaucasia, and Central Asia.
- Not to deploy NATO military and weapons outside the countries where they were in May 1997 (before the Eastern European countries joined the alliance), except in "exceptional cases related to the need to neutralize the security threat" of the alliance members (Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021).

Moreover, to impose agreements with NATO and the United States, Russia aimed to return the post-Soviet space to international relations, recognizing it as a special and exclusive sphere of its own influence and a guarantee of security for Russia:

- The United States of America shall undertake to prevent further eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and deny accession to the Alliance to the States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.
- The United States of America shall not establish military bases in the territory of the States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that are not members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, use their infrastructure for any military activities, or develop bilateral military cooperation with them (Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021).

The Kremlin's diplomatic initiatives were part of a broader psychological campaign aimed at Western states. It should be noted that the "diplomatic activity" took place at a time when Russia could create the illusion of its military and strategic power and of the West's military-political weakness.

The political goal of the (hybrid) war is to ensure the security of the regime and the Russian state by achieving Russia's complete dominance in the post-Soviet space, weakening Western influence, establishing a multipolar world, and undermining the liberal international order. Eventually, the return to the status of a great power.

In the period from 2015 to 2019, hybrid warfare, in its designated sense, served as the conceptual basis of Russian international politics. In this regard, it is worth paying special attention

to the publication of the Russian professor Igor Panarin (2019), *Fundamentals of the theory of "Hybrid Warfare"*.

It should be noted that I. Panarin was one of the leading Russian political scientists: a full member of the Academy of Military Sciences, a member of the Expert Council of the Committee on CIS Affairs. Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Consultant to the Office of Political Cooperation, the Secretariat of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Coordinator of the CSTO Analytical Association, Professor, Doctor of Political Sciences.

Panarin emphasizes the need to build and develop a multidimensional infrastructure within Russian society and state institutions, necessary for conducting multidimensional hybrid wars to ensure Russian interests. "The preparation of the country's top management elite (political, economic, informational, and ideological) for active hybrid warfare in crisis situations (armed conflict, information conflict, economic conflict, etc.) is relevant. As a necessary basis for conducting a successful hybrid war to achieve concrete results, it is necessary not only to take preventive measures and countermeasures, but also to actively carry out well-thought-out systemic offensive actions".

At the same time, conducting a hybrid war was supposed to allow Russia to avoid a direct political clash with the West and international isolation at the initial stage. It should be noted that before the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, Moscow successfully coped with these tasks, despite Russia's actions in Ukraine since 2014.

Given that Russia is indeed waging a multifaceted hybrid war, having defined its global goals and objectives, it is necessary to analyze the main methods, mechanisms, and structures used to conduct it.

The way Russia is conducting a hybrid war: levels and structures.

Depending on the space in which Russia is trying to implement its hybrid warfare strategy, various forms, structures, and resources are used, including ideological ones, to achieve its goals. Therefore, it seems advisable to highlight two global spaces affected by Moscow's actions: namely, the post-Soviet and the Euro-Atlantic. As already noted, Russia's primary task in the post-Soviet space is to establish loyal, anti-national and anti-Western regimes, and further draw them into the orbit of its direct influence. Conventionally, such a process can be called a hybrid conquest or occupation (Usov 2022). Speaking of the Euro-Atlantic space, the main goal is to deconsolidate it and adopt a friendly policy towards Russia.

The post-Soviet space is the most favorable for the successful promotion of Russia's interests. A large number of vulnerabilities are found in this space, both institutionally and socioculturally.

The most typical are:

1. The weakness of civil and democratic institutions, which creates conditions for the formation of authoritarian systems that determine military and political dependence on Russia. The social and political specifics of post-Soviet societies create favorable conditions for corruption and the weakening of the state's internal security systems. In some cases (Belarus, Ukraine), this may weaken processes of national identity formation.

2. The functioning of business (oligarchic) groups associated with Russia, which can be used to consolidate pro-Russian political forces, slow down democratic reforms, and increase dependence on Russia. For example, the activities of Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia, Vladimir Plakhotniuk in Moldova until 2019, and the destructive activities of oligarchs (Medvedchuk, Akhmetov, Novitsky, etc.) in Ukraine.

3. The functioning of political elites, including members of the security apparatus, the nomenclature directly associated with Russian political circles, or those who lived and studied in the USSR, and later in the Russian Federation, for example, MGIMO, the Military Academy of the Russian Federation, etc. Almost all the countries of the former USSR faced this problem. For example, as of 2021, in Belarus, the leadership of the Armed Forces has almost completely passed through Russian educational institutions. It merges the ideological orientation of the Belarusian military with the Russian system of worldview and promotes acceptance of the strategic model adopted by Russia, in which Belarus is part of the joint strategic space (Usov 2021, p. 26). In many ways, this predetermined the events in 2022 in the Eastern European region.

4. The strong influence of Russian culture and tradition ensures emotional attachment to the Russian linguistic and mental space and promotes rapid assimilation of the ideology of the “Russian world”. The Orthodox Church occupies a special place in this process. Societies with weak national orientations are particularly susceptible to the ideology of the “Russian world”. As a result, representatives of the country’s democratic intelligentsia often become unconscious agents of Russian cultural influence and the weakening of national identity.

Here, it makes sense to cite, for example, the statements of the Belarusian writer and Nobel Prize in Literature winner, Svetlana Aleksievich, who is constantly accused of anti-national positions regarding Belarus. So, answering the question of the journalist *El Pais* how she feels about the fact that in Ukraine they abandoned the Russian language, the writer said: “I am against it, but I think this is a temporary phenomenon caused by despair, and not a permanent trend. Eventually, the languages left behind by the colonialists in Africa became the path to civilization. And that’s a good thing.” In terms of information and psychology, the intelligentsia with an anti-national position is becoming an important instrument of influence” (Bonet 2025).

In almost all the states of the former USSR, including Latvia and Estonia, there is a fairly significant part of the Russian diaspora, which is used both as a cultural and political lever of pressure on the authorities (Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan) and a resource for armed provocations (Ukraine). At the same time, a considerable part of the population who grew up in the USSR remains in the same space, and a number of narratives promoted by Russia are perceived positively by them.

It is important to pay attention to the fact that between 2014 and 2022, Russian information and propaganda agencies systematically introduced the idea of a strong nostalgia and the view that the majority of residents of post-Soviet republics believe that the USSR was better. “As a result of surveys conducted by VTsIOM, M-Vector, Ipsos, Expert Fikri, and Qafqaz research companies in 11 countries of the former USSR, commissioned by the Sputnik news agency (Russian propaganda resource – Pavel Usov), the following results were obtained. In almost all countries, the majority of people over the age of 35 believe that life was better in the USSR than after its collapse: in Armenia – 71% versus 23%, in Azerbaijan – 69% versus 29%, in Russia – 64%

versus 28%, in Kazakhstan – 61% versus 27%, in Ukraine - 60% against 23%, in Kyrgyzstan — 60% against 30%, in Belarus – 53% against 28%, in Georgia – 51% against 46%. Only residents of Tajikistan (39% versus 55%) and Uzbekistan (4% versus 91%) over the age of 35 believe that life has improved after the collapse of the USSR” (Biznes online 2016).

The likely purpose of such activity was to strengthen support for Russia’s policy in the future, which is allegedly aimed at restoring a new, equal community of states.

5. Frozen ethnic contradictions and conflicts that are used to create internal tension and open clashes between states. Most of the former Soviet states (Moldova, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan) faced these threats.

As for the Euro-Atlantic area, which is mostly culturally and socially independent of Russia, internal conditions for various forms of hybrid activity can be used. It could be either historical contradictions between national and political communities or current systemic socio-economic problems. For example, the Russian authorities use:

- anti-migrant sentiments, strengthening the positions of far-right political organizations in European countries.
- anti-Semitism, reinforcing the radicalism of left-wing organizations.
- regional separatism and the desire of individual communities for decentralization and independence.
- a neo-Marxist, socialist movement directed against American colonialism and Western imperialism. “We do not want Europe to become the arena of a new Cold War and an arms race. We want Europe to take responsibility for its security autonomously and independently of the USA, based on multilateralism and respect for international law. We continue to speak out against the expansion of NATO and the new arms race in Europe (European Lefts 2025).

By the way, of the 26 left-wing parties that form the European Left coalition, 6 are called Communist. Among the members, there are organizations directly linked to Russia, such as the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova, as well as left-wing separatist parties United and Alternative Leftists of Catalonia, and Socialists for Scottish Independence (European Lefts 2025).

The diverse political landscape in Europe, with contradictory views and approaches, can be exploited by Russia to conduct subversive activities.

In general, to exert ideological influence on certain political groups in Europe, Russian ideologists employ an impressive array of slogans. On the one hand, there are traditionalism, anti-globalism, and Euroscepticism, which are close to right-wing forces; on the other hand, anti-Americanism and Western expansionism, which are close to left-wing organizations. As analysts marked: “Interestingly, the main common denominator among these groups seems to be their discreet or open support for Russian President Vladimir Putin. Pro-Russia sentiment – which was once the preserve of the far left – is now espoused by the far right, and the Kremlin is happy to embrace and fund both” (Kampfner 2024).

To promote strategic interests, Russia uses people’s growing dissatisfaction with the government’s domestic and international policy (including involvement of the military support for Ukraine), general militarization of European countries, which is effectively used during electoral campaigns.

Based on the political and social conditions in which a particular state exists, Russia can use various tools and resources to achieve the goals of a hybrid war, which comprises its stages.

In general, the structure of hybrid warfare can be divided into 3 basic phases: 1) Hybrid influence; 2) Hybrid attack; 3) Hybrid operation. Collectively, they should undermine stability, destroy the political structure, establish the necessary political regime, and secure the state's geo-political (territorial) seizure.

Depending on the unfolding phase of a hybrid war or an individual operation, different specialized state institutions and structures could be involved. It should be clearly understood that during the conduct of a hybrid war in a state like Russia, all social, cultural, religious, political, state, and military institutions act in an integrated and coordinated manner.

Undoubtedly, at the stage of development, goal setting, active phase, and completion of hybrid activity, the key role will be played by the Russian special services: the FSB, SVR, GRU, as well as coordinating political institutions, such as the Presidential Administration.

They are entrusted with a multidimensional task:

- Elaborating on the strategy, stages, and direction of the war.
- Analysis and assessment of weaknesses in the system of public and political security of other states.
- Recruitment and infiltration of agents into the political structures of the state, as well as security services.
- Formation and financing of additional political and public organizations, including mass-media structures, and coordination of their activity.
- Bribery and blackmailing politicians or journalists, as well as organizing or coordinating different active measures (provocation, sabotage, clashes, and assassinations).

As for long-term analytical support, strategy development, and political coordination, these functions are assigned to special departments within the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation. It seems appropriate to mention some of them, as they have played a key role in many processes in the post-Soviet world.

Until August 2025, there were two departments within the Presidential Administration: the Office for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and the President's Office for Cross-border Cooperation. These structures not only collected and processed information on the state of affairs in the former Soviet Union but also provided recommendations to the head of state and could indirectly influence the course of political processes in certain states.

One of these strategic documents, which appeared in the public domain in 2023, was the plan for the progressive seizure of Belarus (Dosje 2023). In 2025, based on two separate departments, Vladimir Putin created a new presidential Office for Strategic Partnership and Cooperation, whose task is to coordinate the actions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and law enforcement agencies in international affairs, as well as determine policy in Africa and Central Europe (Astarian 2025).

Additional analytical support is also provided by Russian quasi-academic autonomous analytical centers. One of these is the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, established in 2020 and headed by the former chief of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, Mikhail Fradkov. One of the tasks of the institute is "the study of current international and military-political problems,

issues of military and military-industrial policy of the countries of the world, the socio-political and economic situation in neighboring countries, and the identification of prospects for the development of bilateral relations between the Russian Federation and other states. Analyzing and forecasting developments in individual countries and regions that may lead to crisis situations, as well as developing proposals on ways and means of resolving such situations (RISI 2020).

Among other institutions and resources used in hybrid warfare, both as a whole and to ensure certain stages of its implementation, they are involved:

- Embassies and diplomatic missions.
- mass media network communities (troll factories): Russia Today, Sputnik, VGTRK;
- pro-government organizations and foundations operating outside the Russian Federation and involved in working with the Russian diaspora, such as Rossotrudnichestvo and the Russkiy Mir Foundation.
- a network of organizations (NGO, Political Parties) focused on Russia in the countries of the near and far abroad.
- financial institutions (banks): Gazprombank, Vnesheconombank, Promsvyazbank and others;
- military, paramilitary organizations, subversive groups.

When considering the individual phases of hybrid warfare, a brief analysis of the actions of the structures and institutions mentioned above, along with the resources involved, will be provided.

A Hybrid influence is a long-term process aimed at preparing the social, cultural, and information infrastructure to strengthen the hidden presence of the pro-Russian network, reveal internal weaknesses, and exacerbate contradictions within the state. All possible structures engage in hybrid influence, from cultural and religious spheres to military and intelligence plans. In the post-Soviet space, this process is much simpler and faster.

As a result of the system implementation, stable positive attitudes towards Russia and the Russian one has been formed on the part of the indigenous population, and anti-Russian sentiments have been neutralized or marginalized.

The key role in this regard is assigned to Russian media and cultural organizations, such as Russia Today, the Foundation Russkiy Mir, the *Public Diplomacy Foundation named after Gorchakov*, *Rossotrudnichestvo*, and many others. Education, scholarships, and cultural ties (all elements of soft power) create a social base for advancing Russia's political interests.

As for informational influence, before the start of Russian aggression in 2022, the Russia Today channel's weekly audience reached 100 million worldwide (Belokonieva 2018). In 2024, the total number of video views on social networks of all the channel's projects reached 23.8 billion (Telekanal RT 2025).

A separate instrument of influence is the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which openly promotes Russian ideology and justifies Russian aggression in Ukraine. In some countries, it also serves as a cover for Russian special services' activities and as an active means of implementing foreign policy (Lukin 2018). A special role could play Russian so-called private initiatives and foundations, such as, for example, the St. Basil the Great Foundation, founded by Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev and involved in various ideological and paramilitary hybrid operations (RBK 2014).

– the introduction and support of information and analytical influencers that could influence public opinion and policy decisions on a systemic level. The most well-known in this regard are: Tucker Carlson, an American conservative political commentator and journalist; Yakov Kedmi, a former Israeli statesman, diplomat, and head of the Native Service (1992-1999), specializing in relations with Jews in the former Soviet Union; Dimitri K. Simes is a Russian-American political scientist and historian. Former President of the Center for National Interests (Washington, USA). Publisher and Chief Executive Officer of the American magazine *The National Interest*.

– establishing direct political influence on representatives of the ruling elites: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, former German Chancellor Scholz; Karin Kneissl, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria (2017-2019), now she lives in Russia. Support for anti-systemic political opposition and business structures, for example: the Freedom Party of Austria, the National Rally (France), Alternative for Germany, and so on.

As for the post-Soviet space, the long-term influence is more pronounced here, leading to catastrophic consequences for the country (providing unlimited political and strategic influence). One example is Belarus, which has become a Russian springboard for direct aggression against Ukraine and hybrid attacks against the EU. Another example of systemic influence is Georgia, where the current government openly focuses on Russia and pursues an anti-democratic policy (Zmina 2024).

Of course, one of the strategic goals of long-term hybrid influence is to ensure the direct introduction of agents into the political, military, and intelligence community of a state that becomes the target of aggression. For example, since the beginning of the war, the Security Service of Ukraine, together with military counterintelligence and with the support of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, has discovered 207 Russian agents working against Ukraine. There are 52 active military personnel among them (Kinash 2025).

A hybrid attack is a set of actions aimed at creating threats and tensions at different levels (sabotage, provocations, etc.) and is part of a broader action – a hybrid operation. Examples of Russian hybrid attacks aimed at creating tension or assessing the effectiveness of the security systems of member states of the European Union are the migration crisis on the border with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and drone flights over the critical infrastructure of European states.

Hybrid attacks include cyberattacks on information infrastructure, as well as direct sabotage on the territory of European and other countries, to undermine confidence in the government and law enforcement agencies. Examples of such actions can be: Vrbětice ammunition warehouse explosions in the Czech Republic in 2014, organized by the GRU special group, and arson of the Trade Hall at Marywilska Street in Warsaw, organized by citizens from Russia and Ukraine, recruited by the Russian special services (Dziennikarze Onet Wiadomości 2025).

A hybrid operation could be the final stage of a hybrid war in a specific geopolitical area or direction, culminating in political subordination or the seizure of the state. All previously created hybrid potentials and infrastructure are used for implementation. The components of a hybrid operation can be: elections, revolution, armed conflict with the organization of a humanitarian mission, or armed actions under a false flag. Depending on the situation's development, these components can be implemented as separate measures or as stages of a single strategic operation.

For example, during election campaigns, the selection of the right candidate precludes further interference. In the event of the defeat of a “hybrid candidate,” this triggers protests that should lead to a revolution, re-elections, or broader clashes within the country. It is precisely such a mechanism as the “color revolutions” that Russian theorists consider and have adopted as a tool of hybrid warfare. “The color revolutions are a hidden civil war aimed at destabilizing society. It acts as a mechanism for seizing power in a hybrid war using all means, from intelligence to political models” (Panarin 2019).

It must be said that elections have become one of the most expressive components of hybrid warfare. Russia uses both democratic institutions and processes within the country, as well as illegal information and financial means of influence. There are many examples of this. Thus, during the 2025 presidential campaign in Moldova, the CEC registered 11 candidates, 6 of whom were, to varying degrees, connected to Russia. Throughout the campaign, the Russian Federation, using shadow business and criminal structures associated with the pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Shor, attempted to directly bribe voters. In September 2024, more than 130,000 Moldovan citizens received over \$15 million in accounts opened with the Russian *Promsvyazbank* (Redakcia «Viorstka» 2024).

In Romania, an unprecedented decision was made to cancel the 2024 presidential campaign results. The favorite of the race was the pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu. His campaign succeeded thanks to TikTok messaging and revealed the obvious influence of Moscow. “The declassified Romanian documents allege that paid influencers, along with members of extremist, right-wing groups and people with ties to organized crime, promoted Georgescu’s candidacy online” (Politico 2024). In Romania, Russia has achieved some success. Firstly, it discredited democratic institutions and procedures in the country; secondly, it consolidated the anti-Western electorate, which will be used in political processes to aggravate the situation.

To influence electoral behavior in Western countries, Russia uses modern technologies to launch massive information attacks aimed at discrediting or supporting certain politicians. The organized process by which the system’s political influence operated was called *Operation Doppelgänger*. This operation was implemented by three Russian information agencies, the *Social Design Agency* (SDA), technology company *Structura*, and *ANO Dialog*, and was started in 2022 and intensified depending on the situation in a particular country in Europe. Allegedly, these structures set up approximately 60 fake news websites, created fictitious social media accounts, and posted staged videos and memes (Chawryło 2024). One of the key objectives of this operation was to influence the election results in the USA and Germany. As for Germany, the goal was formulated as follows: “increase the AfD’s share of the vote to 20 percent for the election in 2023, and increase the percentage of people admitting to ‘fear for the future’” (Widzyk 2024).

Although certain election campaigns did not end with direct military and political interference by Russia (the exception is the presidential elections in Belarus in 2020, which ended with the republic’s rise to geopolitical subjectivity, which requires a separate broad analysis), nevertheless, elections created grounds for further political influence, political crises, and confrontation. Often, only the harsh and timely reaction of Western governments preserved the internal stability of the political system.

Hybrid warfare will remain the main means of implementing the Russian Federation's foreign policy in the near future. This process is mediated by the very existence of an undemocratic regime in Russia, which will depend on achieving the goals of this war, both in relation to the post-Soviet space and to Western states.

The success of the goals is associated with the establishment of direct influence and complete geopolitical dependence of the republics of the former USSR, as well as the support of political forces in the West that will ease pressure on Russia, help it break out of isolation, and recognize the new geopolitical reality. The understanding that Europe (the West as a whole) has entered a new global hybrid war should contribute to revising security strategies and to the military-political consolidation of European states.

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