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**TOWARDS A MODEL FOR ANTICIPATING
RUSSIAN BEHAVIOR THROUGH THE LENSES
OF REALISM AND HYBRID WARFARE**

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Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School

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**NAVAL
POSTGRADUATE
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MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**TOWARD A MODEL FOR ANTICIPATING RUSSIAN
BEHAVIOR THROUGH THE LENSES OF REALISM
AND HYBRID WARFARE**

by

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December 2019

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THROUGH THE LENSES OF REALISM AND HYBRID WARFARE**

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ABSTRACT

Since 2007, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states have witnessed an increasingly assertive Russia that re-emerged as a military power during the brief war with Georgia in 2008, and succeeded in annexing Crimea in 2014. In this context, the terms “hybrid warfare” and “offensive realism” have become almost synonymous with Russia’s aggressive pursuit of its foreign policy goals. The international community and NATO did little to stop Russian interference in Crimea and, as recently as 2016 in Montenegro, seemed unable to detect any Russian action in advance. This thesis generates a model to help anticipate Russian behavior based on the independent variables of threat and opportunities, derived from a review of the literature on offensive realism and the intervening variable hybrid warfare. The variables embedded within a variables framework are then applied to two cases, Crimea and Montenegro, to analyze the behavior Russia employed to pursue its foreign policy goals. Patriotism, economics, and uncertainty about domestic, external, and regional actors are Russia’s primary considerations when assessing the importance of a certain region to its foreign policy. Such considerations help determine whether Russia is responding to a perceived threat or an opportunity. Regardless of its scale, Russian hybrid warfare centers on leveraging violence implemented by a pool of diverse specialized Russian and external forces that enable deniability.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Associate Agreement
BKV	Balkan Cossack Army
CFE	Conventional Forces in Europe
CFS	Montenegrin Federalist Party
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
DCFTA	Deep Area and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement
DDoS	distributed denial-of service
DF	Democratic Front
DoD	Department of Defense
DPS	Democratic Party of Socialists
EC	European Committee
EU	European Union
EUCOM	European Command
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FRY	Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
FSB	Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRU (GU)	Glavnoye razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye (Main Intelligence Service)
KAP	Kombinat Aluminijuma Podgorica (Aluminium Plant Podgorica)
KGB	Komitet Gusudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security)
KSSO	Komandovanie sil spetsial'nalnykh operatsii (Russian Special Operations Forces Command)
MAP	Membership Action Plan
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PCA	Agreement of the Partnership and Cooperation

PfP	Partnership for Peace
RISS	Russian Institute for Strategic Studies
SAA	Security Associative Agreement
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander Europe
SF	Special Forces
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
SFSR	Soviet Federative Socialist Republic
SKCG	Montenegrin League of Communists
SNP	Socialist Peoples' Party
SOCOM	Special Operations Command
SOF	Special Operation Forces
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
SVR	Foreign Intelligence Service
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UN	United Nations
UNR	Ukraine People's Republic
U.S.	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VDV	Russian Airborne Forces

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I. INTRODUCTION

Russia doesn't consider us as a partner, but an adversary and obviously we have to adapt to that.¹

Outgoing North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen's statement at a United Nations meeting in 2014, in which he acknowledged Russia as an adversary, is hardly a revelation. Indeed, this recognized relationship dates back to the Munich Security Conference of 2007 and a speech by Russian President Vladimir Putin. In this speech, he criticized the United States, which he claimed had "overstepped its borders in all spheres [to the extent that] finding a political settlement becomes impossible."² He also condemned "serious provocations" of further NATO expansions, the "pitiable condition" of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) "interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states."³

Putin's speech indicated a significant change in Russian foreign policy. Since 2007, Russia has been repeatedly confronting the West, starting the same year that Russia suspended the CFE, a landmark post-Cold war arms control agreement. The member states of NATO witnessed an assertive Russia dealing with its neighbors, culminating in Russia's reemergence as a military power during the brief war with Georgia in 2008, which paved the way for the Ukraine crisis and the final eventual Crimean annexation in 2014.⁴ In this context, the terms "hybrid warfare" as well as "offensive realism" have

¹ David Jackson, "Outgoing NATO Chief: Russia Considers Us an Adversary," *USA Today*, 2014, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/09/25/obama-nato-anders-fogh-rasmussen-russia-ukraine-syria-iraq-islamic-state/16172705/>.

² Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

³ Putin, "Speech," 2007.

⁴ Jackie Gower, "European Union–Russia Relations at the End of the Putin Presidency," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 16, no. 2 (August 1, 2008): 162–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782800802310084>; Duncan Hollis, "Russia Suspends CFE Treaty Participation," *ASIL Insights* 11, no. 19 (July 23, 2007), [/insights/volume/11/issue/19/russia-suspends-cfe-treaty-participation](https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/11/issue/19/russia-suspends-cfe-treaty-participation); Sumantra Maitra, "Realism in Russian Foreign Policy:," *CLAWS Journal*, 2014, 126–28.

become almost synonymous with Russian aggression in the pursuit of its foreign policy goals.⁵ These terms emphasize that Russian strategic thinking is based on the notion of being a great power, able and capable to control and influence certain areas outside its borders based on Russia's legitimate national interests.⁶ In addition, such terms acknowledge that Russia's use of hybrid strategies has grown markedly in recent years.

Beyond diplomatic protests and humanitarian aid, the international community and NATO did little to stop Russian interference in Ukraine and was still not able, as indicated through the attempted coup d'état in Montenegro in 2016, to detect any Russian action in advance. Instead, it seems that the 2014 statement is still applicable, revealing that NATO's actions are primarily reactive, and the international community does not or cannot foresee and adequately adapt appropriate countermeasures to thwart Russian aggression.

A. RESEARCH QUESTION

The often-delayed Western response to Russian action indicates that Russia's unpredictable behavior is a major challenge, difficult both to detect and to counter. At first glance, it appears that Russia's action and the strategic considerations leading to this decision to achieve its foreign policy goals are surprising, which sparks several questions for examination. Do Russian behavior and its foreign policy considerations follow certain patterns? How do distinct reflections of offensive realism influence Russian decision-making process? How does Russia tailor hybrid warfare to achieve its foreign policy goals? How would Russia most likely behave and act in future hybrid conflicts? By answering these questions, this thesis argues that Russian action may be more predictable

⁵ Christopher Chivvis, *Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare": And What Can Be Done About It* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7249/CT468>; Andrew Monaghan, "The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare,'" 2016, 10; Sam Jones, "Ukraine: Russia's New Art of War," *Financial Times*, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/ea5e82fa-2e0c-11e4-b760-00144feabdc0>; Paul D'Anieri, "Magical Realism: Assumptions, Evidence and Prescriptions in the Ukraine Conflict," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 60, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1627231>.

⁶ Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, *Russia's Global Ambitions In Perspective* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019), 4; Ria Laenen, "Russia's 'Vital and Exclusive' National Interests in the Near Abroad," in *Russia and Its Near Neighbours*, ed. M. Freire and R. Kanet (New York, NY: Springer, 2012), 17.

than has been assumed in the past. This sets the foundation to assure that Russia does not continue to impede effective response measures.

B. PURPOSE, SCOPE, AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this thesis is to create a model to anticipate Russian behavior, based on a variable framework that links particular offensive realism and hybrid warfare considerations to foreign policy goals. The process of answering the research questions to fulfill the stated purpose is based on three sequential blocks.

The first block lays the foundation. The starting point is an analysis of offensive realism in international relations and hybrid warfare. Two independent variables, Threats and Opportunities, are derived from the key findings of offensive realism. The key findings of the hybrid warfare analysis reveal the importance to leverage violence utilized by a diverse pool of forces, while the use of the information domain and denial and deception is embedded to support and enable these leveraged kinetic means. Hybrid Warfare is derived from this analysis as the intervening variable. These variables embedded within the framework are utilized within follow-on case studies. A study of the Russian perspective on hybrid warfare concludes this first block.

The second block analyzes the behavior Russia employs to achieve its foreign policy goals, drawing on two interpretive, descriptive case studies, Crimea and Montenegro.⁷ Analysis of both cases through the independent and intervening variables reveals how Russia synchronizes and leverages violence to identify common or advanced patterns of Russian hybrid behavior. In addition, it reveals how Russian foreign policy reflections are based on distinct ideas associated with offensive realism and how these strategic considerations influence the scale of Russian hybrid warfare.

The third block predicts Russia's future hybrid action and strategic considerations to achieve its foreign policy goals, by amalgamating the key findings of the case studies, as depicted within a model of anticipated Russian behavior. The outcome reveals several

⁷ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, BCSIA Studies in International Security (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 74–76.

fluctuating considerations. Most significant in regard to offensive Realism is that Russia's strategic considerations are not persistent, even though the perception of threat is an underlining persistent driver. They are tailored to the target state and are often opportunity related. Certain anticipated patterns shape Russia's threat- or opportunity-related engagement. Russia distinguishes its level of control and influence according to certain regions. Patriotism and uncertainty about domestic, external, and regional actors, as well as geostrategic and economic factors, are primary foreign policy considerations to assess the importance of a certain region. They are the foundation for the Russian choice between threat and/or opportunity related strategies and between a rather risk-averse or risk-tolerant approach toward a target region. These anticipated strategic thoughts drive the consideration of how and on what scale Russian hybrid warfare is waged. Most important concerning Russian hybrid warfare is that regardless of its scale, the leverage of violence remains at its core and is enabled by a tailored pool of diverse deniable external and Russian forces. The pivotal part of these forces remains the Russian intelligence apparatus, while additional internal Russian forces will increase towards a full-scale hybrid warfare commitment. The use of the information domain and distraction via overt and covert soft-power tools enables Russia to shape the battlefield and prevent early detection, while the narrative of Russian deniability, supported by an ongoing information campaign, remains consistent throughout and beyond the whole Russian hybrid warfare engagement. Finally, the thesis identifies useful areas for further studies and research.

Although other theories of international relations could be applied to analyze Russia, this thesis is limited to particular cases and is based specifically on consideration of offensive realism, claiming that Russian strategic considerations are closely linked to it. In addition, it is recognized that there is no widespread definition of or agreement on characteristics of hybrid warfare. Furthermore, this thesis considers that the ability to use violence is an essential part and key distinguishing factor of hybrid warfare. Hence, the use of solely non-military means is seen as a preliminary phase to Russian hybrid warfare, and not as hybrid warfare itself.

II. SETTING THE FOUNDATION

A. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION (LITERATURE REVIEW)

This chapter defines the theories and key findings on which the subsequent assessments of Russia's current hybrid actions are founded. The chapter begins by analyzing the theories of "realism and "hybrid warfare," and then distills that analysis into key findings. These findings contribute to the creation of the variables' framework, which serves as the analytic foundation for the case studies.

1. Realism in International Relations

Realism is the oldest international relations theory and one of the dominant schools of thought in political science worldwide. The theoretical tradition is often traced back to the Greek historian Thucydides and his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, written in 431 BCE. This book inspired subsequent theorists, such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, whose writings in the mid-17th century fostered the realist tradition, as well as contemporary international relations scholars.⁸

Despite its relevance, realism was especially challenged after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Many scholars, such as Friedrich Kratochwil, John Vasquez, or Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, claimed that its rigid premise of systemic determinacy was not suited anymore to explain complex international politics, due to its lack of focus on domestic-level or ideational variables.⁹ Thus, idealism and liberalism, emphasizing cooperation instead of competition and conflict, gained

⁸ W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz, "Political Realism in International Relations," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/Realism-intl-relations/>; Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (1998): 31–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1149275>.

⁹ Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (October 1999): 5–55, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228899560130>; John A. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Walt's Balancing Proposition," *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997): 899–912, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952172>; Friedrich Kratochwil, "The Embarrassment of Changes: Neo-Realism as the Science of Realpolitik without Politics," *Review of International Studies* 19, no. 01 (January 1993): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500117346>.

credibility in explaining international relations, and liberalism became one of the most popular international relations theories.¹⁰

Others, such as John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz, are unwavering in their position that realism is a strong, important theory that explains international outcomes.¹¹ Mearsheimer argues, in view of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, that liberalism won the debate after the end of the Cold War. As a consequence, the realist logic, which used to govern Europe, became obsolete and was replaced by a new, post-national order, promoting democracy in the countries of Eastern Europe, increasing economic interdependencies and advocating NATO expansion.¹² Within this context, Mearsheimer claims that current events, such as the Ukraine crisis, have proven that

Elites in the United States and Europe have been blindsided by events only to subscribe to a flawed view of international politics. They tend to believe that the logic of Realism holds little relevance in the twenty-first century and that Europe can be kept whole and free based on such liberal principles as the rule of law, economic interdependence, and democracy.¹³

Hence, despite harsh criticism, realism still has significant explanatory power nowadays in the field of international relations.¹⁴ Realpolitik in particular seems embedded in the policy of the adversary analyzed within this thesis: Russia. Indeed, in agreement with Sumantra Maitra: “Russian foreign policy discourse was always realist.”¹⁵ Realpolitik in this understanding refers to politics rooted in practical and

¹⁰ Korab-Karpowicz, “Political Realism in International Relations.”

¹¹ Kenneth Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 5–41; John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 5–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078>.

¹² John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” *Foreign Affairs* 93 (2014), 6–7, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.

¹³ Mearsheimer, 2.

¹⁴ Tim Dunne and Brian C. Schmidt, “Chapter 6: Realism,” in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, ed. John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, 6th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 99–112.

¹⁵ Sumantra Maitra, “Realism in Russian Foreign Policy,” *CLAWS Journal*, 2014, 116.

material factors rather than in theoretical or ethical objectives, based on the theoretical foundation of realism.¹⁶

Nevertheless, realism cannot be considered in this context as a single theory, as it encompasses a great many ways of thinking. Morgenthau's classical realism or, as he defines it, political realism, was the leading school of thought after World War II, dominated by its key concept of interest defined as power.¹⁷ He elaborates that power and survival are more important in international relations than morality and all other interests.¹⁸

Structural realists also view international politics as conflictual, led by the pursuit of power. Despite these commonalities, structural realists are opposed to the classical realists' state-level angle for a systematic approach and take their findings from the structure of the international system.¹⁹ Others, such as Randall Schweller or Jennifer Sterling-Folker, have criticized structural realists for not being able to explain new global phenomena of the 21st century.²⁰ Thus, adherents of this new strand, called neoclassical realism, additionally focus on domestic-level variables and therefore insist that it represents a significant improvement on existing realist approaches.²¹

¹⁶ John Bew, "The Real Origins of Realpolitik," *National Interest*, April 2014.

¹⁷ Hans J. Morgenthau, Kenneth W. Thompson, and W. David Clinton, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th ed (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2006), 10.

¹⁸ Dana Tandilashvili, "Classical Realist and Norm-Based Constructivist Analysis of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Annexation of Crimea," *Towson University Journal of International Studies*, no. 1 (2015): 2.

¹⁹ József Golovics, "Contemporary Realism in Theory and Practice. The Case of the Ukrainian Crisis," *Polgári Szemle*, 2017, <https://polgariszemle.hu/aktualis-szam/142-nemzetkozi-gazdasag-es-tarsadalom/907-contemporary-realism-in-theory-and-practice-the-case-of-the-ukrainian-crisis>.

²⁰ Randall L. Schweller, "NeoRealism's Status-quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?," *Security Studies* 5, no. 3 (March 1, 1996): 90–121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419608429277>; Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Realist Environment, Liberal Process, and Domestic-Level Variables," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1997): 1–25.

²¹ Norrin M. Ripsman, *Neoclassical Realism*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.36>; Nicholas Ross Smith, "Can Neoclassical Realism Become a Genuine Theory of International Relations?" In *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy*. By Thomas Juneau. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015. Glenn Diesen "EU and NATO Relations with Russia: After the Collapse of the Soviet Union", Routledge, 2016.; Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell and Norrin M. Ripsman "Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics", *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 2 (April 2018): 742–43, <https://doi.org/10.1086/696882>.

The main debate of the two schools of structural realism, labeled as “offensive” and “defensive” realism, is determined by pursuing an adequate amount of power.²² While Waltz’s theory of international politics represents the origin of structural realist thinking, it has often been labeled as defensive realism after the emergence of Mearsheimer under the banner labeled as offensive realism.²³ In his book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer casts Waltz as the leading defensive realist and his primary target.²⁴ In this book, Mearsheimer begins with the claim that great powers strive to “maximize their relative power” to ensure survival, a key narrative of offensive realism. Consequently, due to the anarchic system and its uncertainty, states favor gaining as much power as possible. In this view, stability is achieved through the imbalance of preponderance of power favoring one state above all the rest.²⁵ The notion of a hegemon is in this sense a predominant term in Mearsheimer’s theory. Hegemony is thus the favored strategy for a country to pursue whenever possible:

Offensive realists, on the other hand, believe that status quo powers are rarely found in world politics because the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs. A state’s ultimate goal is to be the hegemon of the system.²⁶

Contrary to offensive realism, defensive realists disagree that states want as much power as possible. They argue that hegemony will rather cause conflicts among states.

²² Golovics, “Contemporary Realism in Theory and Practice. The Case of the Ukrainian Crisis.”

²³ Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reissued (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1979); John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), <http://books.wwnorton.com/books/978-0-393-34927-6/>.

²⁴ Glenn H. Snyder, “Mearsheimer’s World—Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay,” *International Security* 27, no. 1 (July 1, 2002): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228802320231253>.

²⁵ William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24, no. 1 (July 1, 1999): 5–41, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228899560031>; Anne-Marie Slaughter, “International Relations, Principal Theories,” *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Laws*, 2011, 1–28. https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/slaughter/files/722_intlrelprincipaltheories_slaughter_20110509zg.pdf.

²⁶ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 21.

Instead, they emphasize the stability of the balance of power to prevent the trigger of a counterbalancing coalition against states.²⁷ Waltz confirms this disagreement:

In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, and power. The first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their position in the system.²⁸

In regard to Russia's action and aggression, offensive realists tend to explain that its behavior is related to NATO's expansion. Hence, they claim that the Western attempt to alter the status quo of relative power reduced Russia's sense of security. Thus, aggressive action was motivated by the crude imbalance of power and the decision to achieve greater security.²⁹ Within this context, Randall Schweller introduces in his article "Bandwagoning for Profit" a compelling new approach, which needs to be incorporated to analyze Russia's behavior from different angles. He argues:

All sides in the debate have mistakenly assumed that bandwagoning and balancing are opposite behaviors motivated by the same goal: to achieve greater security. As a result, the concept of bandwagoning has been defined too narrowly—as giving in to threats. In practice, however, states have very different reasons to choose balancing or bandwagoning.³⁰

He claims that states tend to bandwagon for gain rather than for security, a view which was neglected in previous studies because bandwagoning and balancing were seen in an external threat scenario in which balancing was the preferred response. In this context, he elaborates on the so-called revisionist and status quo states embedded in a concept of balance of interests. Within this context status-quo powers, as Schweller argues, pursue self-preservation and the defense of values they already own: "They are security maximizers, not power-maximizers."³¹ While status-quo powers may seek to increase

²⁷ Dunne and Schmidt, "Chapter 6 Realism"; Slaughter, "International Relations, Principal Theories," 2.

²⁸ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 126.

²⁹ Golovics, "Contemporary Realism in Theory and Practice. The Case of the Ukrainian Crisis."

³⁰ Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539149>.

³¹ Schweller, 104.

their values, but they do not employ military means to achieve this objective. On the other hand, revisionist states value more than what they currently possess. Thus, they will use military force to adjust the current status in their advance. The gains from non-security expansion exceed the cost of the war.³²

2. Hybrid Warfare

The term ‘hybrid’ as a style of warfare has become a core term used widely in the debate about Russian actions. The term gained renewed importance after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. The measures employed by Russia in the annexation have been defined as hybrid warfare by Western countries and by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who publicly blamed Russia in July 2014 of waging hybrid warfare.³³ This has been declared as one of the highest security threats facing Europe and NATO, as the Atlantic Council recently reiterated: “Hybrid Warfare represents a security challenge not just for the frontline Baltic States, but also for all of NATO.”³⁴ Several related terms, such as “Gray-Zone Conflicts,” “Political Warfare,” or “Fourth-Generation Warfare” are used to describe this type of warfare.³⁵ The variety of terms can confuse rather than clarify the issue. Therefore, it is essential to illustrate the different meanings and characteristics of the term Hybrid Warfare to determine and justify the definition that this research employs.

The popularity of the concept of hybrid warfare is linked to a leading advocate for the study of this topic, Frank Hoffman. In his 2007 essay, “Conflicts in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars” he writes:

³² Schweller, 105.

³³ Safak Oguz, “The New NATO: Prepared for Russian Hybrid Warfare?,” *Insight Turkey; Ankara* 18, no. 4 (Fall 2016): 165–80; Andrew Monaghan, “The ‘War’ in Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare,’” *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2016): 65–74; Parameswaran Prashanth, “Are We Prepared for ‘Hybrid Warfare’?,” *The Diplomat*, February 13, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/02/are-we-prepared-for-hybrid-warfare/>.

³⁴ Richard Kols, “NATO Must Meet Russia’s Hybrid Warfare Challenge,” Atlantic Council, March 7, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nato-must-meet-russia-s-hybrid-warfare-challenge>.

³⁵ Christopher Chivvis, “Understanding Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’: And What Can Be Done About It,” § House Armed Services Committee (2017), <https://doi.org/10.7249/CT468>.

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.³⁶

The multimodality of this type of war can be conducted *multinodally*, meaning by two states and a variety of non-state actors. These multimodal/multinodal activities can be accomplished by one unit or separate units and, as the definition emphasizes, address more than just the interrelationship of regular and irregular activities. Within this kind of warfare, the various forces become indistinct as one force, commonly operationally and tactically led and synchronized within the same battlefield.³⁷ These elements have a level of centralized control to achieve synergy within the physical *and* psychological dimensions of conflict that works toward obtaining desired political objectives.³⁸

Hoffman tests his definition against several historical case studies and claims that during the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Hezbollah represented a prototypical rising hybrid threat. In this sense, even though it is a non-state actor, Hezbollah was able to combine state-like military capabilities with civilian means. Its objective could be achieved through “mixing an organized political movement with decentralized cells employing adaptive tactics in ungoverned zones.”³⁹ The group was, in this context, as Hasan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, described, neither a regular nor a guerilla army in the traditional sense, rather something in between.⁴⁰

Hoffman’s concept of hybridity has slightly evolved from its original form. Thus, concerning the original definition, Hoffman points to the aspects of crime, socially

³⁶ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 14, 29, 58, http://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf.

³⁷ Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing the Evolving Character of Modern Conflict,” *Strategic Forum* 240 (April 1, 2009): 5, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA496471>.

³⁸ Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” *Small Wars Journal*, no. 52 (January 2009): 36; Frank G. Hoffman, “‘Hybrid Threats’: Neither Omnipotent Nor Unbeatable,” *Orbis* 54, no. 3 (January 2010): 441–55, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2010.04.009>; Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Threats”: 5.

³⁹ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*, 36.

⁴⁰ David Walker, “RMA’s, Hybrid Warfare and the Gaza Flotilla Accident,” in *Drawing a Line in the Sea: The 2010 Gaza Flotilla Incident and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, by Thomas E. Copeland, Althea H. Cook, and Lisa M. McCartan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 93.

disruptive behavior, and mass terrorism, which were emerging factors in 2005, and considers them for inclusion.⁴¹ Furthermore, he stresses, that the “fusion of advanced capabilities with the fluidity of irregular tactics is key, as borne out repeatedly over the last decade from Hezbollah to Russian campaigns in Georgia and Ukraine.”⁴² Hoffman’s idea about the theory of hybrid warfare has captured the imagination of military thinkers, scholars, and strategists and has proven particularly popular among the U.S. military establishment; it has also gained interest among non-American scholars.⁴³ On the other hand, the (re)emergence and expanding use of the term, particularly to describe Russian aggression, has led to a scramble of definitions and approaches.

Remarkably, the U.S. military establishment has been reluctant to integrate the hybrid warfare theory within its doctrinal publications and has treated it rather as an “alternative concept about the ever-evolving character of modern conflict.”⁴⁴ Accordingly, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) does not list any definition of hybrid threats or hybrid warfare in its official dictionary.⁴⁵ Hence, especially within the U.S. Armed Forces, another concept called the “Gray Zone” has increasingly gained ground. The International Security Advisory Board points out within its recent *Report on Gray Zone Conflicts* that the most widely used definition of Gray Zone conflicts originated at U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), which defines the concept as: “competitive interaction among and within state and non-state actors that falls between the traditional war and peace duality, characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, the

⁴¹ Frank G. Hoffman, “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War,” The Heritage Foundation, *The Index of U.S. Military Strength*, 2016, 29, <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength-topical-essays/2016-essays/the-contemporary-spectrum-conflict-protracted-gray>.

⁴² Frank G. Hoffman, Statement before the House Armed Services Committee on The Evolution of Hybrid Warfare and Key Challenges, 115th Cong., 1st sess., March 22, 2017. (2017), 39.

⁴³ Ofer Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare”: Resurgence and Politicization*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018, 45.

⁴⁴ Hoffman, “Hybrid Threats,” 441.

⁴⁵ Department of Defense, “Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms” (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, February 2019), <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/dictionary.pdf>.

opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks.”⁴⁶

The definition embraces practically all international interactions, and further discussions about the terminology have failed to reach agreement on a more precise understanding. Though some argue that the zone falls between an imminent or later-defined convergent threat and the enemy’s attack,⁴⁷ others remove the threat connotation and argue that new challenges occur within an area “existing short of a formal state of war.”⁴⁸ Still others define Gray Zone strategies as “a form of asymmetric tools, a sort of multi-instrument insurgency.”⁴⁹ The International Security Advisory Board report concludes that today’s Gray Zone definitions encompass names such as political warfare, covert operations, conventional or guerilla warfare and the like.⁵⁰ The apparent difficulty of defining the Gray Zone indicates that the concept seems like a colorful bouquet within a no-man’s land between peace and war, where everybody can pick a flower suitable to explain everything.

Referring back to SOCOM, within the recently published Commander’s Strategic Guidance SOCOM 2035, Gray Zones are defined as maneuvering below the threshold of traditional deterrence, widening the ambiguous space between conflict and peace.⁵¹ Thus, the avoidance of crossing the threshold seems to be a key determinant for Gray Zone conflicts. Still, the terminology itself, as John Arquilla stresses, “is an intellectual construct that confuses rather than clarifies the spectrum of conflicts, and plays into the

⁴⁶ International Security Advisory Board (IASB), *Report on Gray Zone Conflict* (Washington DC: Department of State, 2017), <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/266849.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Joanne M Fish, Samuel J McCraw, and Christopher J Reddish, “Fighting in the Gray Zone: A Strategy to Close the Preemption Gap,” *Strategic Studies Institute (SSI)*, 2004, 5–9.

⁴⁸ Philip Kapusta, “The Gray Zone,” *Special Warfare* 28, no. 4 (2015): 18.

⁴⁹ Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: The United States Army War College Press, 2015), 57, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1303>.

⁵⁰ International Security Advisory Board (IASB), *Report on Gray Zone Conflict*.

⁵¹ Joseph L. Votel, “SOCOM 2035 Commander’s Strategic Guidance” (US SOCOM, July 3, 2016), 4.

hands of smart, motivated aggressors who see the war in simpler ways.”⁵² The Gray Zone concept is not a clear, useful concept; it lacks precision and will hinder rather than benefit this paper, which aims to characterize and analyze modern threats imposed by the Russians, and to develop and define appropriate responses.

The Gray Zone concept, however, is conceptually linked to political warfare, and gained importance during the Cold War, a term attributed to the American diplomat George F. Kennan. He considered the conflict between the United States and Russia as a conflict of ideologies rather than as great power competition, in which politics turns out to be the primary means of conducting this type of warfare.⁵³ Within this concept Kennan emphasized the necessity to encompass a range of non-military activities during a time of peace:

Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz’s doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the *employment of all the means* a nation command, *short of war*, to achieve its national objectives.⁵⁴

Even though the terminology also encompasses military means, it does emphasize the use of non-kinetic means. Especially, the emphasis on activities “short of war” indicates the dominance of non-kinetic tools in the concept of political warfare.⁵⁵ Since it primarily lacks the physical employment of violence, the term warfare is misleading. Furthermore, the definition itself is too expansive and requires clarification, as it incorporates “all means.”⁵⁶ Especially with regard to Russia’s concept of hybrid warfare it is crucial to make a clear distinction between political and hybrid warfare, and not to

⁵² John Arquilla, “Paradigms Lost, Paradoxes Regained,” *Prism: The Journal of Complex Operations* 7, no. 3 (2018): 126.

⁵³ Linda Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 2, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1772.html.

⁵⁴ George F. Kennan, *The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare* (Washington DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1948), 1, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114320>. Emphasis added.

⁵⁵ Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare*, 4.

⁵⁶ Frank G. Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict,” *Prism: The Journal of Complex Operations* 7, no. 4 (2018): 35; Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare*, 3.

blend just the political with military because “they are two separate issues, two separate kinds of non-linear war, which have become unhelpfully intertwined.”⁵⁷

The U.S. reluctance to define hybrid threats and warfare came basically to an end in 2014 after the mass media described the Russian annexation of Crimea using the term “hybrid threat,” labeling Russian insignia-less operations on Ukraine soil conducted by “little green men.”⁵⁸ Nowadays, hybrid warfare is an important discussion point among officials within NATO and its 29 member countries, including the United States of America. The same DoD that seems disinclined to use the terminology recently quoted U.S. Army General Curtis Scaparotti, dual-hatted as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and Commander, U.S. European Command (EUCOM). He refers to Russia’s strategy as a hybrid war and stresses the importance of defining hybrid war, which is, according to him “a lot of things, and most of it is not in the military realm.”⁵⁹ This quote refers to NATO’s interpretation of hybrid warfare and threats, which has evolved from its early definition, in which hybrid threats included the employment of “conventional and non-conventional means adaptively in pursuit of their objectives.”⁶⁰ The recent NATO definition is much broader:

Hybrid threats combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces. Hybrid methods are used to blur the lines between war and peace and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of targets.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Mark Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibrinaya Voina? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right* (London: Mayak Intelligence, 2016), 4.

⁵⁸ Margarita Šešelgytė, “Can Hybrid War Become the Main Security Challenge for Eastern Europe?,” *European Leadership Network*, October 17, 2014, <https://medium.com/tspmitinklarastis/m-%C5%A1e%C5%A1elgyt%C4%97-can-hybrid-war-become-the-main-security-challenge-for-eastern-europe-b8ba9f14fc82>.

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, “NATO Moves to Combat Russian Hybrid Warfare,” September 29, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1649146/nato-moves-to-combat-russian-hybrid-warfare/>.

⁶⁰ Michael Miklaucic, “NATO Countering the Hybrid Threat,” *NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT)*, September 23, 2011, <https://www.act.nato.int/nato-countering-the-hybrid-threat>.

⁶¹ NATO, “NATO’s Response to Hybrid Threats,” NATO, July 2, 2018, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm.

Thus, it can be said that NATO’s definition is basically in line with the U.S. perception of Gray Zones, as indicated within SOCOM 2035, referring to the conduct of “SOF specialized missions in an environment characterized by hybrid or non-state conflicts and Gray Zones.”⁶²

Yet, Hoffman emphasizes the difference between NATO’s definition, which is, as just mentioned, theoretically adjacent to the Gray Zone concept. He argues that the majority of the conflicts and activities under the aforementioned approaches fall mainly short of armed conflict. Accordingly, the critical distinction is, therefore, the use of violence:

Both [Hybrid Warfare and Measures Short of Armed Conflicts] use combinations. The latter seeks to gain an advantage politically without the overt and explicit use of violence. Actors employing Measures Short of Armed Conflicts try to avoid violence.⁶³

This can be illustrated on a continuum of conflict scale (see Figure 1), which distinguishes the modes of warfare and their complexity, while still considering war as a holistic phenomenon.

Low Violence	Continuum of Conflict		High Violence
Measures Short of Armed Conflict (primarily: Gray Zone / Political Warfare NATO Definition on Hybrid Warfare)	Irregular Warfare/ Terrorism	Hybrid Warfare	Conventional Warfare (Limited Objectives to Theater-wide)
Unconventional Warfare			

Figure 1. Continuum of Conflict ⁶⁴

The discussion on hybrid warfare theory can be extended. Nevertheless, up until now no widespread definition of or agreement on its characteristics has emerged. For this

⁶² Votel, “SOCOM 2035 Commander’s Strategic Guidance,” 5.

⁶³ Hoffman, Statement before the House Armed Services Committee on The Evolution of Hybrid Warfare and Key Challenges, 6.

⁶⁴ In accordance with: Hoffman, 3.

research, it is acknowledged and reconsidered that within the discussion about hybrid warfare, determining whether to label a malicious state or non-state actor's actions as hybrid is often a semantic issue. It encompasses the risk that countermeasures will themselves be labeled with buzzwords. The tendency to consider the "whole-of-government" or "comprehensive" approach as a panacea for countering hybrid warfare, or on the other hand, the over-simplification of clear hybrid boundaries are indicators for this risk. Thus, in this research hybrid warfare will be defined as:

The deliberate choice of a state or non-state actor to synchronize and leverage violence through the use of covert and overt conventional and unconventional means, including terrorism and criminal behavior, often by utilizing proxy entities, to support strategic objectives, while simultaneously decreasing the inherent risk of a conventional warfare scenario.

B. KEY FINDINGS

The preceding review and analysis of relevant literature solidified the theories and terms this thesis uses to assess Russia's actions. This section highlights the key findings from that analysis related to the primary actor within the anarchic system or the leverage of violence in hybrid warfare, and consolidates these findings within a variables framework.

1. Realism in International Relations

The core assumptions of realism, especially those of offensive realism, will lead to options and strategies that might be utilized by an offensive realist actor. This thesis uses these considerations, while also incorporating new perceptions of bargaining and bandwagoning, to analyze Russia's behavior within the cases studied.

In doing so, five key findings derive from offensive realism, leading to six possible "threat related" strategies of how a principle actor interacts to shift the balance of power if threatened. In addition, four strategies labeled as "opportunity related" are incorporated to ensure an impartial analysis of the cases, not based on a generic threat-response

scenario as a prerequisite. These key findings and related strategies are depicted in Figure 2 and are subsequently explained in more detail:

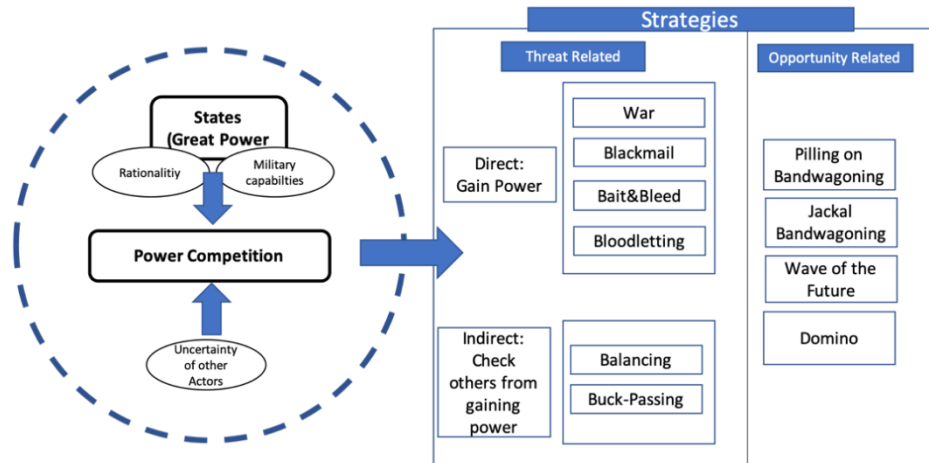


Figure 2. Realism: Key Findings and Strategies

Structure of the System: Anarchic. The international system is anarchic. This assumption is not related to a disordered or chaotic status quo. It is rather an “ordering principle” indicating that the international system is comprised of sovereign, independent states without any overarching power that polices states’ behavior.⁶⁵

Primary Actor within the Anarchic System: States (Great Powers). Realists generally agree that nation-states (usually abbreviated as states) are, by far, the most important and principal actors in world politics and international relations.⁶⁶ In this understanding, the impact of other entities, such as non-state actors, is negligible due to their limited influence in competition with states based on their lack of power, military,

⁶⁵ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 88–93; Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” 30–31.

⁶⁶ A great power is, according to Mearsheimer, mainly defined by the possession of sufficient military capabilities to compete with challenging actors. See: John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated edition, The Norton Series in World Politics (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 5.

and economic resources.⁶⁷ Also, internal differences, individual or domestic factors (e.g., culture, regime type, leaders' personalities) are not as significant as the state. Regardless of possible internal differences, the unified position will be the one that is of predominant interest to the state.⁶⁸

Driving Force of the Actors: Power Competition. The anarchic structure of the system creates incentives for states to ensure sufficient power to secure and defend themselves and to advance the necessary material interests to survive. Survival in this sense describes the state's objective to preserve its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the autonomy of its domestic political order (laws, political system, and the rules of society).⁶⁹ Foreign policy, therefore, is of utmost importance, as external factors are the drivers of states' objectives.

Actors' Intention: Uncertain. States within the anarchic system cannot rely on or appeal to any other state or entity and can never be sure of their intention.⁷⁰ Hence, international relations are inherently conflictual, leading to a permanent struggle and competition for power between states to ensure survival and security through possession of enough power and to counter adversarial intentions.⁷¹

Key Characteristics of the Primary Actor: "Rationality" and the Possession of Offensive Military Capabilities. From a classical realist's point of view, states, as the primary actors, are unitary and rational actors following the same goal of increasing their power or, as neorealists would argue, of pursuing security. They are reasonably successful in designing strategies that increase their possibilities of survival. Thus, they can strategically weigh options and possible actions relating to how other states will react and

⁶⁷ Legro and Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?," 7; Alan Dobson, "America in the World, 1776 to the Present," *International Relations*, 2016, 878.

⁶⁸ Slaughter, "International Relations, Principal Theories," 7–9.

⁶⁹ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 31.

⁷⁰ Mearsheimer, 3.

⁷¹ Dobson, "America in the World, 1776 to the Present," 878; Snyder, "Mearsheimer's World—Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security," 153.

how these actions will affect their own strategy of survival.⁷² This rationality within the context of this analysis refers to elements of Russia's specific strategic culture, that influences Russia's decision-making process and solution framing.

The ultimate goal of a state, following this rationale, is therefore to be the strongest of all, the hegemon in the system.⁷³ Since global hegemony is difficult to achieve, continuous competition takes place among great powers. Mearsheimer says a state is qualified as a great power in this sense if it has "sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world."⁷⁴ Within this context, the necessity of offensive military capabilities is embedded in the continuous seeking of opportunities to adjust the distribution of power in its own favor. Simply put, asserts Mearsheimer, "Great powers are primed for offense."⁷⁵

According to Mearsheimer, these aforementioned key considerations of offensive Realism lead to six strategies for states to shift the balance of power in their favor.

War: War is the main strategy for gaining power. Even though it is cost intensive, it can improve a state's power position and continues to be an option, if the benefits outweigh the costs.⁷⁶

Blackmail: This strategy offers the option to make relative gains by threatening a rival with the use military force, forcing him to concessions. However, this approach is unlikely to shift the balance of power, since great powers have, by definition, sufficient military strength to protect themselves from such threats. Consequently, this strategy is only effective against minor states.⁷⁷

Bait and Bleed: This strategy, as Mearsheimer claims, aims to cause a prolonged war between two competing powers, "while the 'baiter' remains unscathed and its military

⁷² Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 31.

⁷³ Mearsheimer, 2.

⁷⁴ Mearsheimer, 5.

⁷⁵ Mearsheimer, 3.

⁷⁶ Mearsheimer, 138; 147–52.

⁷⁷ Mearsheimer, 152.

power intact.”⁷⁸Risk of exposure makes this approach less attractive. Furthermore, there is also the danger that one of the rival states gains, rather than loses, power through a quick, decisive victory.

Bloodletting: In this strategy, a variant of the previous strategy, the two rival states wage war independently without ‘baiting.’ The continuation of the conflict, however, is fueled by the ‘baiter’ to ensure that one’s rivals are engaged in a long-lasting war, which drains their resources and therefore benefits the relative power of the state on the sideline involuntarily.⁷⁹

The following strategies aim to prevent rivals from shifting the balance of power at their expense. Mearsheimer claims that great power states’ investment in military capabilities and defense are usually sufficient to deter an aggressor from challenging the balance of power. Thus, this challenge will instead happen rarely, and if it occurs, it will involve powerful, aggressive states, such as a potential hegemon.⁸⁰

Balancing: This strategy entails three courses of action. The first consists of the exchange of messages through diplomatic channels to draw a proverbial line, warning the aggressor that a crossing would result in consequences. The second course of action entails the formation of a defense alliance, often called “external balancing,” which has a downside. According to Mearsheimer, this method is slow and ineffective. In the third course of action, commonly referred to as “internal balancing,” a state would mobilize its additional resources, such as increasing defense spending or implementing conscription.⁸¹

Buck-Passing: According to Mearsheimer this is the preferred option to balancing. It implies passing the burden of deterring or ideally fighting the aggressor to other states, hoping they will check the aggressor. Four measures can be taken into consideration. First, a state can seek good diplomatic relations with the aggressor to shift its attention to the buck-catcher. Second, a state may need maintain cold relations with

⁷⁸ Mearsheimer, 153–54.

⁷⁹ Mearsheimer, 154–55.

⁸⁰ Mearsheimer, 155.

⁸¹ Mearsheimer, 156–57.

the intended buck-catcher, to minimize the risk of being dragged from the sidelines into the conflict. Third, by mobilizing of its additional resources, a state can make itself an imposing target. Fourth, a state can allow or even facilitate the expansion of the buck-catcher's power to increase its likelihood of effectively containing the aggressor, which minimizes the risk of the buck-passer being dragged off the sidelines. Contrarily, the buck-catcher may end up stronger if he stops the aggressor successfully, which will upset the balance of power to the disadvantage of the buck-passer.⁸²

On the other hand, Mearsheimer denounces the strategies of appeasement and bandwagoning as alternatives for a threatened state. He argues that such strategies violate the logic of balance-of-power, because they intend to concede power to an aggressor.⁸³ Mearsheimer is hereby in line with other realists, such as Waltz or Walt, who claim that states usually balance and rarely bandwagon: "Balancing should be preferred for the simple reason that no statesman can be completely sure of what another will do."⁸⁴ This perception, as Schweller critiques, is based on the narrow view of seeing bandwagoning solely as a response to a threat.

This thesis, in line with Schweller, also considers that the adversary Russia might also respond and act based on opportunities, seeing the expectation of profit and easy gains within smaller, weaker states as a primary motivation. Thus, the logic has to go beyond the more general claim of a threat-response framework.⁸⁵ This does not underestimate the previously mentioned offensive realist assumption that if threatened with survival a state's primary concern becomes security, resulting in the six strategies as depicted in Figure 2. It just stresses and adds to the analyses of the cases studied, that without concern for security in the face of a threat, other considerations become important.

⁸² Mearsheimer, 157–62.

⁸³ Mearsheimer, 162.

⁸⁴ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 29.

⁸⁵ Randall L. Schweller, "New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting, Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997): 928–29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952176>; Schweller, "Neorealism's Status-quo Bias," 97.

Balancing is an extremely costly activity that most states would instead not engage in, but sometimes must to survive and protect their values. Bandwagoning rarely involves costs and is typically done in the expectation of gain.⁸⁶

Thus, four types of bandwagoning strategy are also be taken into consideration as possible strategies, based on states defined as lions, lambs, jackals, and wolves.

Jackal Bandwagoning: Lesser aggressors or a rising expansionist state, called limited-aims revisionist states, share in the spoils of victory for profit to improve the ‘jackals’ position in the system. In doing so, they often reach an agreement with the ‘wolves’ in certain spheres of influence, in exchange for supporting the revisionist leader in its expansionist aims. Aside from this desire, Schweller acknowledges that this type of bandwagoning may also occur with the goal of security from the lion itself.

Piling-on Bandwagoning: A form of ‘predatory-buck passing,’ this type of bandwagoning occurs when the outcome of the war has already been determined. In this case states who ‘pile on’ look for spoils of war and claim an unearned share of the cost, motivated by opportunity or the fear that the victorious party will punish the state, if it does not have strong side against the losers.

Wave of the Future: This happens when states believe that the stronger side represents the future orientation. Hence, they do not want to get caught lagging behind. This wave can also be described by a particular political theory. Thus, this type of bandwagoning strategy is typically induced by a charismatic leader and progressive ideologies.⁸⁷

The Contagion or Domino Effect: This type of bandwagon refers to the underlining dynamics and possibility of a chain reaction. Revolutions, for instance, can quickly spread as an initial internal regional event over to other regions. Similarly, the contagion effect refers to regionally linked alliances that fuel further conflict. These

⁸⁶ Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit,” 93.

⁸⁷ Schweller, 95–98.

dynamics, even though they are in essence destructive, can also have positive stabilizing effects on the international system.⁸⁸

Schweller categorizes states according to the four types of animals, which he describes as follows:

Lions. “Lions are states that will pay high costs to protect what they possess but only a small price to increase what they value.... As extremely satisfied states, they are likely to be status-quo powers of the first rank.”

Lambs. “Lambs are countries that will pay only low costs to defend or extend their values.... Lambs are weak states....”

Jackals. “Jackals are states that will pay high costs to defend their possessions but even greater costs to extend their values.”

Wolves. “Wolves are predatory states. They value what they covet far more than what they possess.”⁸⁹

The considerations of the state’s interest are conceptualized in Figure 3.

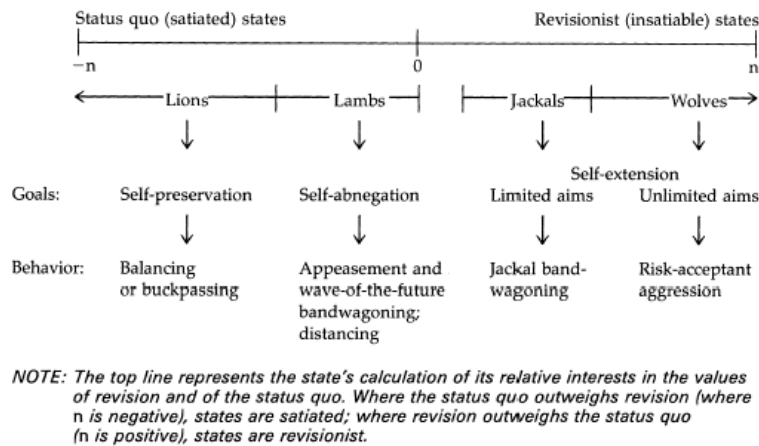


Figure 3. State Interest: Revision vs. Status Quo⁹⁰

2. Hybrid Warfare

Recapturing the underlying characterization, and as presented earlier, hybrid warfare is defined as:

⁸⁸ Schweller, 98–99.

⁸⁹ Schweller, 101–3.

⁹⁰ Schweller, 100.

The deliberate choice of a state or non-state actor to synchronize and leverage violence through the use of covert and overt conventional and unconventional means, including terrorism and criminal behavior, often by utilizing proxy entities, to support strategic objectives, while simultaneously decreasing the inherent risk of a conventional warfare scenario.

From this definition, this thesis derives seven key considerations that characterize hybrid warfare and enable analysis of the case studies, depicted in Figure 4:

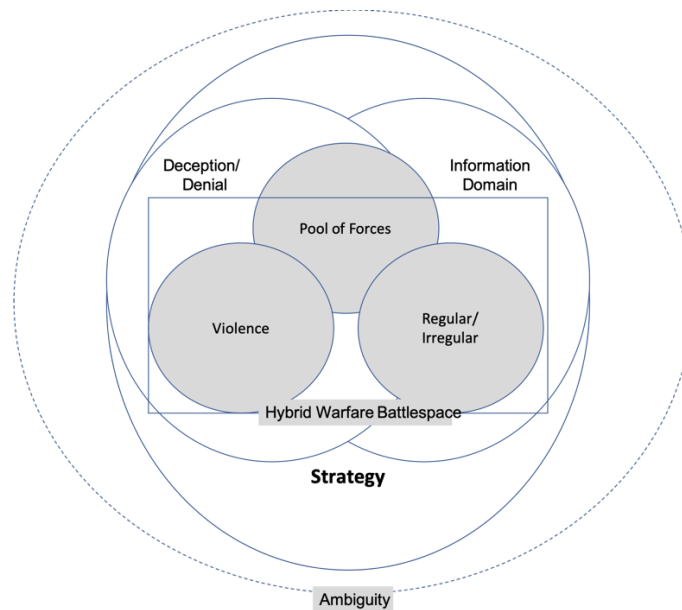


Figure 4. Conflating Relationship: Hybrid Variables

Ambiguity: Hybrid warfare serves to foster the uncertainty of conflict within and outside of the conflict scenario and is therefore, as Figure 4 depicts, the all-encompassing variable, defining warfare itself as ambiguous. Within this context, ambiguity is understood as deliberate aversive actions, aiming to impede appropriate responses. With regard to the depicted definition, ambiguity is designed to impede the opponent's

decision-making process to respond militarily, by staying under the threshold of a state of war.⁹¹

At its most basic level, the aim is to generate a situation where it is uncertain whether a state of war within the battlespace exists—and if it does, who is a combatant and who is not.⁹²

Strategy: To synchronize the various inputs within a hybrid warfare campaign, they have to be embedded within a strategy. Strategy, as Clausewitz points out, “is the use of the engagement for the war.”⁹³ Building on Clausewitz’s definition, within the U.S. Armed Forces, strategy is often loosely aligned with the trinity of ends, ways, and means. This trinity is based on Arthur Lykke’s strategic concept, in which these three elements represent policy, strategy, and military. In this understanding, policy, which equals the ends, represents the goals to achieve. Strategy, which corresponds to ways, refers to courses of actions to follow, and military, which is equivalent to means, indicates the resources to employ.⁹⁴ Often referred to as “Grand Strategy,” non-military means are parallel to military means within a comprehensive strategic approach of equal importance.⁹⁵

The same adaptation and criticism of the definition of strategy can be seen applied to Hoffman’s initial definition of hybrid threats. Thus, to apply to the nature of contemporary conflicts, in the same sense as the characterization of strategy has evolved

⁹¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015: The United States Military’s Contribution to National Security* (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, June 1, 2015), 4, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA619156>; Patrick Cullen and Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud, “Understanding Hybrid Warfare,” *Multinational Capability Development Center*, January 1, 2017, 2.

⁹² Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, 8.

⁹³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, reissued, *Oxford World Classics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 132.

⁹⁴ Harry R. Yarger, “Toward a Theory of Strategy: Art Lykke and the Army War College Strategy Model,” in *Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2006), 107–13, <http://marshallcenterciss.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p16378coll5/id/417>.

⁹⁵ Murat Caliskan, “Hybrid Warfare through the Lens of Strategic Theory,” *Defense & Security Analysis* 35, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 42–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2019.1565364>.

and often criticized, the hybrid warfare definition has accordingly.⁹⁶ Hoffman himself acknowledges that his definition does not “capture non-violent actions, such as economic, financial, subversive acts or information operations.”⁹⁷ Even so, within Hoffman’s definition, these actions are not specifically excluded; the main difference is that *solely non-violent actions are not considered as Hybrid Warfare*. The used hybrid warfare definition follows the idea of looking through the adversary’s mindset, instead of anticipating a Western approach to hybrid action. Therefore, with regard to the definition of hybrid warfare used in this thesis, non-violent actions, such as within the information domain, are not neglected, but considered solely within the ‘war scenario.’ In doing so, it is in line with the Russian understanding of a clear distinction between non-military methods for two scenarios ‘war’ and ‘political understanding.’⁹⁸ This supporting/enabling function of non-military actions reaffirms the characteristic ambiguity of hybrid warfare, in which a blend of the full range of methods, modes, and regular and irregular components within the same battlespace is possible and anticipated at all levels—not just the strategic level.⁹⁹ Within this understanding, the leadership at the political level is incorporated within this strategic approach:

Thus, hybrid warfare is embedded within a holistic strategic concept planned and executed by the civilian and military leadership to support and enable leveraged kinetic means through non-kinetic measures, in which strategy aims to achieve the overall desired goals of policy.

The use of the Information Domain and Denial and Deception are, as Figure 4 illustrates, aligned within a strategy and seen as overlapping within and beyond the battlespace.

⁹⁶ Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare,”* 101–4; Caliskan, “Hybrid Warfare through the Lens of Strategic Theory,” 51–52.

⁹⁷ Frank G. Hoffman, “On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare vs Hybrid Threats,” *War on the Rocks*, July 28, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/>.

⁹⁸ Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare,”* 130–34; Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibrinaya Voyna? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 14–17.

⁹⁹ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, 29.

Information Domain: The successful and time-critical exploitation and superiority of the information domain within hybrid warfare is a key determinate of success, which can serve as a force multiplier and a war-winning tool.¹⁰⁰ It serves therefore not only as an adjunct to a hybrid campaign, but also as an enabling and shaping activity launched before, during, and after the hybrid campaign. Therefore, it has a primacy in hybrid operations, indicating its overlapping function, as depicted in Figure 4.¹⁰¹ Within the mindset of the adversary, the information domain is an extension of the battlespace.¹⁰² In this sense, success within an “information war” reduces the employment of hard military power within the physical battlespace, because the population of the defender is used as a force-multiplier for the attacker itself.

Thus, the attainment of information superiority and the use of mass media within an initial stage of a hybrid conflict can be seen as a preliminary action to prepare the battlefield, shape subsequent hybrid actions, and/or to influence target groups. Thus, it can stir up disorder and confusion in an adversary’s government and military management and control system, giving the attacker an advantage in employing further hybrid means.¹⁰³

Dissemination of information can be manifold via, for example, television stations, radio, social media, or leafleting.¹⁰⁴ It can also incorporate cyber activities, such as cyber-attacks involving the release of cyber viruses, capturing electronic warfare frequencies,

¹⁰⁰ Mark Galeotti, “Russia’s Hybrid War as a Byproduct of a Hybrid State,” *War on the Rocks*, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/12/russias-hybrid-war-as-a-byproduct-of-a-hybrid-state/>; Rod Thornton, “The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare: Responding to Russian Information Warfare,” *The RUSI Journal* 160, no. 4 (July 4, 2015): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2015.1079047>.

¹⁰¹ Galeotti, “Russia’s Hybrid War as a Byproduct of a Hybrid State”; Thornton, “The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare: Responding to Russian Information Warfare,” 44.

¹⁰² Timothy Thomas, “Russian Forecasts of Future War,” *Army University Press*, Fort Leavenworth, KS: 2019, 85–86.

¹⁰³ Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 14; Thomas, “Russian Forecasts of Future War,” 81.

¹⁰⁴ Janis Berzins, “Russia’s New Generation Warfare in Ukraine. Implication for Latvian Defense Policy,” 2014, 5–6, <https://sldinfo.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/New-Generation-Warfare.pdf>.

or influencing activities via the use of non-attributed social media trolls or bots.¹⁰⁵ Thus, according to the analyzed hybrid aggressor, Cyber Warfare is understood as “one component of Russia’s understanding of information warfare.”¹⁰⁶

It is important to emphasize that within the Russian mindset the use of information operations, based on a distinct bifurcated approach, falls within hybrid warfare and seen as a means of “preparing and supporting the battlefield function.”¹⁰⁷

Deception and Deniability: The use of information is inherent embedded within the hybrid actor’s ability and confers the initial advantage to confuse the target and stymie a coherent response, to conceal the actor’s true intent, and to mitigate the risk of a conventional warfare scenario by denying and obfuscating intent and involvement. In doing so, the hybrid actor can utilize physical and psychological denial and deception measures, scaled to its needs. The toolkit can be cherry-picked. Thus, for instance, he can deploy covertly, irregular assets that are non-attributable to the aggressor, proxies, attacks (e.g., cyber) or support in conveying its narrative through different information channels.¹⁰⁸

To clarify confusion the possibility of denial of covert action analysts Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich posit, that the use of covert means within a hybrid scenario should not be seen limited, aiming to hide sponsorship.¹⁰⁹ Covert in this sense involves multiple levels of exposure and audiences and is in most cases ‘implausibly’ deniable: “Hybrid Warfare forms a timely example of implausibly deniable operations creating

¹⁰⁵ Todd C. Helmus et al., *Russian Social Media Influence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 13, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2237.html.

¹⁰⁶ Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare*, 101.

¹⁰⁷ Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibrinaya Voina? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 51.

¹⁰⁸ Danny Pronk, “Hybrid Conflict and the Future European Security Environmen,” *Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations*, October 2018, 2, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/Strategic_Alert_Hybrid_Conflict_Sept2018.pdf; Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibrinaya Voina? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 58; Galeotti, “Russia’s Hybrid War as a Byproduct of a Hybrid State,” 4.

¹⁰⁹ Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, “Gray Is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (May 1, 2018): 477–94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy067>.

exploitable ambiguity.”¹¹⁰ Hence, even if the evidence would indicate an engagement, deniability of covert action will remain important because otherwise, such an action could foster condemnation, coercive response, and retaliation by the defender.¹¹¹

Russia’s use of deception (*Maskirovka*), based initially on the “principles of camouflage, maneuvers intended to deceive, concealment, the use of decoys and military dummies, and disinformation within conventional scenarios,”¹¹² has evolved into a whole-of government approach. Thus, it includes coercion, media manipulation, cyber-attacks, political agitation, and the deployment of military forces in a clandestine status. In this sense deception and denial is not only a force-multiplier, it is almost a ‘force’ itself, effectively utilized to exploit ambiguity and to mask the coercive power of a hybrid aggressor.¹¹³

The leverage of violence utilized by a pool of forces, regular or irregular in its character is essential to placing hybrid warfare within the continuum of conflict (see Figure 1) and to the placement of the hybrid warfare battlespace as depicted in Figure 4.

Leverage of Violence: Violence within this thesis is understood as the use of physical violence through the application of force to lethal effect. Thus, a hybrid actor must be willing and capable to employ and select levels of violence through his own capabilities or sponsorship of external entities within the battlespace. This succinct definition enables analysis of the cases and is in line with the perception of Russia, seeing non-kinetic so-called political war as separate from hybrid war. The second includes the

¹¹⁰ Cormac and Aldrich, 490.

¹¹¹ Thornton, “The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare,” 44.

¹¹² Lucy Ash, “How Russia Outfoxes Its Enemies,” *BBC News*, January 29, 2015, sec. Magazine, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31020283>; J.Q. Roberts, *Maskirovka 2.0: Hybrid Threat, Hybrid Response*, Occasional Paper (Joint Special Operations University, Center for Special Operations Studies and Research, JSOU Press, 2015), 2–3, <https://books.google.com/books?id=4Y01tAEACAAJ>; Mark Kelton, “Threat Report 2018: Russia’s Military Doctrine of Deception and Deniability,” *Fortuna’s Corner* (blog), May 31, 2018, <https://fortunascorner.com/2018/05/31/threat-report-2018-russias-military-doctrine-deception-deniability/>.

¹¹³ Mark Galeotti, “Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New Is Russia’s ‘New Way of War’?,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2 (March 3, 2016): 291, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2015.1129170>.

deployment and use of lethal force as an integral part, in which political means are used to shape the battlefield before and for support during military actions.¹¹⁴

Furthermore, acknowledging that there is debate among experts as to whether cyber-attacks are acts of violence, this thesis follows theorists such as Thomas Rid or John Stone who argue that these types of attacks cannot be considered as acts of war because they lack a direct relationship with lethality.¹¹⁵ In line with this view, cyber-attacks will be considered as measures short of armed conflict on the continuum of conflict scale.¹¹⁶

Ability to Use a Diverse ‘Pool of Forces:’ Due to the physical means of violence, a hybrid actor has to rely on a ‘pool of forces,’ which goes beyond the actor’s own means. State actors have the ability to apply and operationalize the key principles of hybrid warfare and ambiguity from the tactical to the strategic level and can, therefore, integrate all means of state power to achieve their political goals. In particular, centralized authoritarian regimes are able to coordinate their instruments of power, due to their internal penetration and control mechanism, which enables them to create synergetic force multiplying effects. Even though non-state actors are equally able to use an increased level of military sophistication and capabilities, they do not have the resources to slide across the full spectrum of violence, as state actors are able to do.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Galeotti, Hybrid War Or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right, 51.

¹¹⁵ John Stone, “Cyber War Will Take Place!,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 1 (February 2013): 101–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.730485>; Thomas Rid, “Cyber War Will Not Take Place,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 1 (February 2012): 5–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.608939>.

¹¹⁶ Christopher J. Finlay, “Just War, Cyber War, and the Concept of Violence,” *Philosophy & Technology* 31, no. 3 (September 2018): 359, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-017-0299-6>.

¹¹⁷ Ahmed Salah Hashim, “State and Non-State Hybrid Warfare,” Oxford Research Group, March 30, 2017, <https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/Blog/state-and-non-state-hybrid-warfare>; Hoffman, “Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing the Evolving Character of Modern Conflict.”

A state-led hybrid threat also often includes the use of a proxy force, which can be a non-state actor or the combination of a non-state entity with the state actor.¹¹⁸ These proxies enable the state actor to pursue its interest without direct intervention. On the one hand, proxies often have better domestic roots, connections, and local knowledge, while on the other hand, the state has the necessary financial or military resources the proxy lacks. This mutually beneficial relationship, in a sense a trade deal of empowerment for influence and support varies in its degree based on the autonomy of proxies and the sponsor's influence.¹¹⁹ The use of proxy force and its composition varies and therefore ranges from non-violent proxy confrontation to the military result, proxy war. Thus, proxies can, for example, promote the sponsor's narrative, provide troops, recruit volunteers, or engage as additional assets on behalf of the hybrid state aggressor. Whether as non-governmental organizations (NGO), volunteers, mercenaries, criminals or even terrorist groups, each proxy entity gives the hybrid actor the ability to extend its sphere of influence and to deploy political and coercive power, while denying any engagement.¹²⁰

Fuse Regular and Irregular Tactics within the Same Battlespace: The use of internal and external entities enhances and supports the hybrid actor's ability to blur the lines between conventional and irregular warfare.¹²¹ Clear lines to describe forces of a state actor as conventional, or non-state actors as irregular, are therefore misleading. The use of irregular tactics and forces is instead a deliberate choice, based not on the weakness

¹¹⁸ A non-state actor in this understanding is defined as an organized political actor, interrelated with the state actor by pursuing aims that affect state interests (Wendy Pearlman and Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "Nonstate Actors, Fragmentation, and Conflict Processes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (February 1, 2012): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002711429669>.)

¹¹⁹ Kristina Kausch, "State and Non-State Alliances in the Middle East," *The International Spectator* 52, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2017.1347250>.

¹²⁰ Orysia Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood* (London: Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2016), 12, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-04-14-agents-russian-world-lutsevych.pdf>; Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibrinaya Voyna? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 58–63.

¹²¹ Merle Maigre, "Nothing New in Hybrid Warfare: The Estonian Experience and Recommendations for NATO," Policy Brief (Washington DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, February 2015), 1; Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud and Patrick Cullen, "What Is Hybrid Warfare?," Policy Brief (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2016), 2.

of a hybrid actor to utilize conventional means, but on the effectiveness of applying those tactics within the same battlespace with regular forces, if needed.¹²² Thus, either a state or a non-state actor is capable of employing some combination of methods. The blend can range from criminal activities to terrorism combined with conventional tactics within the same battlespace, conducted by conventional or proxy forces.¹²³ Thus, a state actor with advanced military capabilities may sponsor a proxy entity, supplying it with modern weapons systems (like unmanned aerial vehicles) or advanced technologies (such as cyber warfare capabilities or secure communication), which were traditionally used only by a state actor, and enable the proxy forces to conduct combined arms or cyber-attacks.¹²⁴ Accordingly, the proxy force extends the state's sphere of influence and mitigates the risk of official responsibility.

C. VARIABLES FRAMEWORK

The key findings of offensive realism and hybrid warfare serve as the bedrock of the case studies in this thesis. As such, this chapter concludes by amalgamating these central thoughts to specify the variables utilized in the qualitative analysis of the cases.

The following questions have to be answered to specify the variables for the case study, as per Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett:

- What is the defined dependent (or outcome) variable to be explained?
- What independent (and intervening) variables comprise the theoretical framework of the case study?
- Which of these variables will serve as parameters (held constant) and which will vary across the cases?¹²⁵

¹²² Hoffman, "Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing the Evolving Character of Modern Conflict," 5.

¹²³ Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats. Joint Operating Concept. Version 2.0.* Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2010: 8-10
https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joc_iw_v2.pdf?ver=2017-12-28-162021-510.

¹²⁴ Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen, "What Is Hybrid Warfare?" 2; Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict," 38.

¹²⁵ George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 79.

The key findings of offensive Realism have pointed out that states, as the primary rational actor within the anarchic system, seek to maximize their power. The need to possess offensive military capabilities is embedded in exploiting opportunities to adjust the distribution of power and is furthermore required within this conflictual system, characterized by uncertainty about the other actor's intention. As elaborated, depending on a threat- or opportunity-related perception, the state can choose a certain strategy or a combination of these strategies to achieve the goal to shift the power to one's own advantage.

Thus, in answering the questions, this study derives two independent variables from the key considerations, characterized by the terms threat and opportunities. These independent variables serve as parameters, while their characteristics (see depicted in Figure 2) will vary across the cases, based on the specific case analysis. The intervening variable used is Hybrid Warfare, as defined in the literature review and using the key deductions as depicted in Figure 4. The dependent (or outcome) variable, to be explained or predicted within the case study, is defined as the term Russian Hybrid Foreign Policy, which is analogous to power maximization in offensive Realism theory.

Hence, as shown in Figure 5, the cases are analyzed using these variables and their interrelationships in the next chapters. The outcome of this case analysis should facilitate the prediction of Russian hybrid actions and intent to create a model that defines possible Russian future actions.



Figure 5. Variables Framework

III. RUSSIA'S PERCEPTION OF HYBRID WARFARE

The term hybrid war re-emerged in Europe after Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in south-eastern Ukraine in 2014. At that time, officials, researchers, and practitioners in the West employed the term to describe Russia's action as something new. Descriptions of the multidimensionality of Russia's action as hybrid war aimed to conceptualize the effectiveness of Russian military performance and its successful combination of non-military and irregular means and activities in different dimensions, such as political, cyber, or information.¹²⁶

The characterization raised the Western threat perception that Russia had developed a new way of war. Many Western experts shifted focus toward the role of non-military means, claiming that an article by the Russian chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, introduced this new Russian approach, labeling it the 'Gerasimov Doctrine.'¹²⁷ Hence, basically everything was labeled as hybrid, from 'little green men' to online disinformation or the flow of dirty Russian money. In addition, Western counterparts, and especially NATO, started to consider how to respond to these new non-military threats from Russia. This discussion is misleading, however, because it focuses on the Western perception of Russian conduct of warfare.¹²⁸ To assess Russian hybrid warfare accurately, it is essential to consider the Russian perspective on so-called *gibridnaya voina* (hybrid warfare), which is the focus of the analysis in this thesis.

¹²⁶ Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 8–9; Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid*, First edition, Routledge Focus (London ; New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 1–2; Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare"*, 107–8.

¹²⁷ Molly K. Mckew, "The Gerasimov Doctrine," *Politico Magazine*, 2017, <https://politi.co/2KZQlKd>; Jolanta Darczewska, "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study," *Point of View* 42 (2014).

¹²⁸ Galeotti, *Russian Political War*, 12–13; Michael Aaronson et al., "NATO Countering the Hybrid Threat," *Between States*, no. 4 (1999): 112.

This chapter reveals that at first Russia considered itself threatened by Western hybrid aggression—*gibridnaya voina*—and therefore Russia defines hybrid aggression differently. Secondly, Russia does not shift its focus away from the use of military forces toward the use of non-military means as a new way of war. Russians, as indeed expressed within Gerasimov’s article, consider the nature of war to have changed and acknowledge that non-military means play an important role. Nevertheless, in contrast to the Western conceptualization of hybrid warfare, Russians draw a conceptual division, revealing different perspectives within Russia’s military and civilian national security community.¹²⁹ Consequently, Russia defines the pure use of non-military means in responsibility of the civilian leadership and draws a clear line toward the use of non-military elements in support of the use of armed forces.¹³⁰ Thus, the latter has to be directed by the armed forces. Consequently, as Mark Galeotti points out:

What the West considers ‘hybrid war’ is, to the Russians, actually two parallel but separate phenomena: the use of political means to prepare the battlefield before direct military action, and the pure use of political methods to bring about desired changes in policy in other states. One is true ‘hybrid war,’ the other perhaps best considered as political war.¹³¹

His statement indicates a military notion of *gibridnaya voina* and a parallel model that one could call a political notion of *gibridnaya voina*. Recalling this thesis’s definition of hybrid warfare, its critical distinction is the use and leverage of violence. Hence, the focus here is on the military notion, acknowledging that Russia’s actions, especially after the term re-emerged in light of the annexation of Crimea, are “better captured by hybrid, rather than political or new.”¹³²

¹²⁹ Michael Kofman, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts,” War on the Rocks, November 3, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>; Monaghan, “The ‘War’ in Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare,’” 2016, 68.

¹³⁰ Fridman, Russian “Hybrid Warfare,” 140; Galeotti, Russian Political War, 71.

¹³¹ Galeotti, Hybrid War Or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right, 7.

¹³² Hoffman, “On Not-So-New Warfare.”

A. GERASIMOV'S VIEW OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The very “rules of war” have changed. 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 nonmilitary measures—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population.¹³³

Many Western experts have relied heavily on the article published by the chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov in the Russian newspaper *Voennopromyshlennyi kur'er* (Military Industrial Courier) in 2013 and have referred to it after the Russian action in 2014 as an indication of a new doctrinal Russian approach. Indeed, it reveals that the Russians certainly believe that the nature of war is changing and, as Gerasimov points out, changing in a way that non-military means may be used more widely and more powerfully than traditional weapons. He also alludes to the important role of special forces and the blurring of lines between war and peace. To this end, his article is an important source for understanding Russian thinking. He acknowledges that present and future conflicts make greater use of politically led or non-military means rather than military means.¹³⁴

These thoughts reflect the judgment of most experts in the Western hemisphere who attempt to understand Russian action in Ukraine, labeling it as the new Russian hybrid warfare. Concurrently, Gerasimov's article was seen as heralding the emergence of a new form and framework of Russian warfare. In particular, the author's emphasis on non-military means and methods were seen as a blueprint of change in Russian military thinking and doctrine. This is problematic because, as Charles K. Bartels points out:

No matter what reason the article was published, it is important to keep in mind that Gerasimov is simply explaining his view of the operational

¹³³ Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight - New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations,” *Military Review*, 2016, https://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art008.pdf.

¹³⁴ Gerasimov, 24.

environment and the nature of future war, and not proposing a new Russian way of warfare or military doctrine.¹³⁵

The article is an attempt to frame a conceptual response based on how Western powers have transformed warfare. Gerasimov refers to social-political movements, such as color revolutions or the Arab spring, and concludes that the West pioneered new indirect approaches to warfare, leveraging all elements of government, such as political subversion, propaganda, and economic measures. Hence, from this perspective the article is a response to developments outside Russia, where for instance revolutions topple or shake friendly regimes. It is the perceived evolution of war fighting, conducted and evolved by others, in particular Western militaries, revealed through these events.¹³⁶

This narrative of evolutionary warfighting is not unique. It is rather a common Russian perception when discussing the history and evolution of the Western use of non-military means and methods against Russia. Leading Russian military academics, such as Sergey Chekinov and Sergey Bogdanov, argue that the non-military Western offensive did not come to an end after the Cold War; rather, it evolved and has entered a new stage by the employment of elements of the ‘color revolutions.’¹³⁷

This narrative is also reflected by the Kremlin notion and fear of *gibridnaya voina*, and Russia as a target of this Western hybrid aggression. In this sense, Russians are emphatic that Russian ‘hybrid warfare’ is a myth and a Western concept that is currently waged against Russia. Even further, the Western discourse to describe Russian actions as hybrid war and the semantic similarities to the Russian perception of Western *gibridnaya voina* leveraged on Russia have been effectively used by Russian politicians to mobilize public opinion against the new/old enemy, the West:¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Charles K. Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” *Military Review* 96, no. 1 (2016): 31.

¹³⁶ Kofman, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts”; Monaghan, “The ‘War’ in Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare,’” 68.

¹³⁷ Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” 34; Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare,”* 133.

¹³⁸ Galeotti, *Russian Political War*, 1; Monaghan, “The ‘War’ in Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare,’” 68.

We live in an extraordinary situation, Gibrinaya voyna against us is coming, it has already begun ... It presents a colossal danger, and we have no right to relax.¹³⁹

B. RUSSIA'S VIEW OF *GIBRIDNAYA VOINA*

In this section, a closer examination of Gerasimov's article aligned with an analysis of the thoughts of other Russian military thinkers reveals that the article is not a blueprint for a new Russian approach to warfare without kinetic, military means. Instead, the importance of military methods and actions is strongly emphasized within the Russian military discourse as a means to meet new challenges and is distinct from the use of non-military means exclusively.¹⁴⁰

Russian military discourse is strongly linked to two retired Russian officers, Chekino and Bogdanov. Their joint publications have a vital influence on the Russian military establishment in general, and in particular on the views of Gerasimov. They have made a number of important contributions, such as emphasizing the strong conceptual division between new-generation war, in which non-military methods are an adjunct intended to prepare the ground for subsequent military actions, and *gibrinaya voyna*, in which non-military means and methods are used for stand-alone, non-kinetic political confrontation.¹⁴¹

The second notion of *gibrinaya voyna*, as well articulated by Chekinov and Bogdanov and labeled within the Russian military discourse as 'hybrid war,' reveals the Russian concept of hybrid warfare in which the West is engaged, as a non-military subversive offensive against Russia. Thus, at first it has to be acknowledged that the

¹³⁹ Speech of Gennady Zyuganov during a meeting of President Putin with the leaders of the Russian parliamentary group in Moscow, July 14, 2016, quoted in Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare,"* 151.

¹⁴⁰ Fridman, 141; Galeotti, *Russian Political War*, 27; Julian Cooper, *Russia's State Armament Programme to 2020: A Quantitative Assessment of Implementation 2011-2015*, FOI Report, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.3859.3685>.

¹⁴¹ Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare,"* 127–28; 135–36; Timothy Thomas, "Russia's Military Strategy and Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric—and Putin-Led," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 454, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2015.1061819>.

Russian military thought does not consider *gibridnaya voyna* as war, but rather as a Western concept.

This concept differs from the term used within Hoffman's theory of hybrid war, as well as from the definition used within this thesis. The Russian concept of *gibridnaya voyna* emphasizes an alternative concept, a different approach using non-military means as an alternative to kinetic options within a "more abstract battlefield, in which actors fight to erode their adversaries' socio-cultural division and protect their own."¹⁴² Its underlining theory is to destroy the political cohesion through non-military means. In this regard, it bears a greater resemblance to Kennan's definition of 'political war' than hybrid war: "Political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives."¹⁴³

C. RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE AND THE LEVERAGE OF VIOLENCE

The previous section described how the term hybrid warfare used in this thesis differs from the Russian notion of *gibridnaya voyna*, which is defined as a non-violent type of policy making. In contrast, the leverage of violence is a distinctive part of the hybrid warfare as it is defined in this thesis. This section examines more closely the Russian perception of how wars unfold that discloses a military notion in which non-military means are essential to prepare the battlefield. This preparatory phase is the Hybrid Warfare phase aligned with the term used within the thesis.

Chekinov's and Bogdanov's considerations are often seen as the reference that most closely describes how the Russians consider a modern full-scale conflict developing. They wrote:

In a new generation war, a leading role will be taken by the information–psychological struggle, directed to achieve superiority in the sphere of command and control, as well as suppress the morale of the military personnel and the population of the adversary. In the (contemporary)

¹⁴² Mark Galeotti, "(Mis)Understanding Russia's Two 'Hybrid Wars,'" *Eurozine*, October 28, 2018, <https://www.eurozine.com/misunderstanding-russias-two-hybrid-wars/>; Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare,"* 140.

¹⁴³ Kennan, *The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare.*

environment of the information-technological revolution, this information-psychological struggle will create the required preconditions to victory.¹⁴⁴

Accordingly, the authors emphasized non-military methods, in particular information and psychological operations. They reiterated and clarified in later articles the importance of the starting point of new generation wars. This starting point is, according to them, the effective utilization of the information domain. It encompasses the broad use of mass media and various computer networks (i.e., blogs, social media sites), aligned with new information techniques and offensive cyber measures.¹⁴⁵ Thus, information superiority over the adversary needs to be assured throughout the whole course of war. This is the type of war or operations that the West often considers as Russian hybrid war. It often neglects the Russian view of the supporting role of non-military means in a pre-conflict stage, which intends to create favorable conditions for the employment of violent means, meaning kinetic military force.¹⁴⁶ Chekinov and Bogdanov support this argument by dividing new-generation war into two main phases. At first:

A special information operation, a radio-electronic information, an air space information; the systematic action of the air force; (and) fire operations (based on the precise weapons from different platforms, long-range artillery systems and weapons based on new physical principles) targeting the enemy in all directions covering the full depth of its territory.¹⁴⁷

Afterward there is the concluding phase consisting of:

Special operations conducted by reconnaissance units to locate enemy surviving units ... contactless fire operations based on the newest effective means of destruction and intended to finalize the destruction of the resisting military formations, airborne operations that localize the

¹⁴⁴ Sergey G. Chekinov and Sergey A. Bogdanov quoted in Mark Galeotti, "Russia's Hybrid War as a Byproduct of a Hybrid State," *War on the Rocks*, 2016, 43, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/12/russias-hybrid-war-as-a-byproduct-of-a-hybrid-state/>.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas, "Russian Forecasts of Future War," 89; Alexander Lanoszka, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 188, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12509>.

¹⁴⁶ Fridman, Russian "Hybrid Warfare," 140–41; Galeotti, Russian Political War, 43–44.

¹⁴⁷ Chekinov and Bogdanov, "The Nature and Content of a New-Generation War," 22.

resistance pockets; and the operations of land forces that cleanse the territory.¹⁴⁸

The concluding phase clearly indicates the importance of conventional forces and falls outside the Hybrid Warfare phase on the continuum of conflict scale. On the other hand, it indicates that military means are not excluded; they are just not predominant within a pre-phase of war. It highlights the hybrid nature of warfare, which encompasses the use of armed forces, supported by indirect non-military actions intended to support and shape the battlefield in order to reduce the military time commitment and number of casualties.¹⁴⁹

Hence, Gerasimov repeats in his famous article the idea expressed by Chekinov and Bogdanov that non-military means play an important role in a contemporary conflict, but on the other hand, he advocates that investments in armed forces and especially in new, modern technologies are essential to prepare for future conflicts. The military application of artificial intelligence, automatization of military equipment, mass-use of high-precision weapons aligned with the cyber and electronic warfare capabilities characterizes the future development of new military technologies. This evolution and investment in military means is already in full swing in Russia.¹⁵⁰

Russian hybrid warfare, as the pre-phase incorporated in the concept of New Generation War, as well as hybrid warfare itself, is not a new vision of strategy making, despite its name. Deception and propaganda, subversion and deniable auxiliary forces, and the mixing of non-military and military means and methods have been tools of statecraft for a long time.¹⁵¹ What is new is how these concepts are adapted and how

¹⁴⁸ Chekinov and Bogdanov, 23.

¹⁴⁹ Chekinov and Bogdanov, 19–20.

¹⁵⁰ Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight - New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations,” 26–27; Monaghan, “The ‘War’ in Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare,’” 72–73.

¹⁵¹ Galeotti, *Russian Political War*, 103–4; Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare,”* 161–62; George Katkov, “German Foreign Office Documents on Financial Support to the Bolsheviks in 1917,” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, 32, no. 2 (April 1956): 181–88.

Russia develops and uses its diverse pool of hybrid forces to operate effectively within the 21st century environment.

At first the evolution of Russia's military capabilities focused on conventional forces as a central part of the forces pool. Since the Russo-Georgia War in 2008, military reforms have been underway to modernize the armed forces by 2020, including the acquisition of 2,000 tanks and 2,000 self-propelled and tracked guns.¹⁵² The annual exercises focus on large-scale exercises conducted as major warfighting operations with large formations to prepare for future anticipated conflicts. The exercise in 2018 called "Vostok-2018" (East-2018) was the biggest in Russian history, which officially involved 300,000 troops as well as Chinese soldiers, reflecting Russia's focus on large-scale conflicts anticipated to happen in the future and its intent to build and maintain operational effectiveness.¹⁵³

These exercises indicate also the Russian focus on readiness of its forces. It is aligned with the central concern within the Russian military, as well as in Gerasimov's article, about the speed and lack of notice with which conflict and war erupt. Thus, Russian conventional forces and the evolution of these forces are essential to Russian military thinking. They are an integral part of that country's hybrid warfare and used in several ways, such as the demonstration of Russia's willingness to use its force, as a major influence campaign or highly visible exercises to distract from other events.¹⁵⁴

In addition, Russian Special Forces have become a central element within Russian hybrid war since the military reform launched in 2009. Russia has expanded and restructured its Special Forces, especially the strength of the *spetsnaz* as well as the build-up of the Special Operations Forces Command (*Komandovanie sil spetsial'nalnykh*

¹⁵² Cooper, Russia's State Armament Programme to 2020, 91–94.

¹⁵³ Dave Johnson, "VOSTOK 2018: Ten years of Russian strategic exercises and warfare preparation," NATO Review, 2018, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2018/Also-in-2018/vostok-2018-ten-years-of-russian-strategic-exercises-and-warfare-preparation-military-exercises/EN/index.htm>; "Russia Prepares for Biggest War Games in Its History," France 24, September 10, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180910-russia-prepares-biggest-war-games-its-history>.

¹⁵⁴ Monaghan, "The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare,'" 71–72; Galeotti, *Russian Political War*, 72–73.

operatsii, or KSSO), upon the initiative of the General Staff in 2012.¹⁵⁵ These special forces are especially tasked with foreign interventions, sabotage, and counterterrorism, and are therefore flexible and extremely versatile, especially within Russian hybrid warfare. They can operate covertly, denying and disrupting enemy capabilities or quickly seizing key objectives. Unlike the *spetsnaz*, whose primary mission remains to support conventional military offensive operations, KSSO acts more independently.¹⁵⁶

Furthermore, Russia's use of its intelligence agencies within hybrid war and its emphasis on active measures operating on a permanent wartime footing is pivotal. These agencies have a central and privileged position within the strategic decision-making cycles. They are mainly divided into three entities, the Federal Security Service (FSB), a domestic security agency, which has expanded into offensive and defensive cybersecurity; the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR); and the military intelligence agency or GRU (technically known as the GU). The GRU incorporates a large number of Special Forces under the Command, known as GRU *spetsnaz*.¹⁵⁷ Regarding active operations, the intelligence agencies perform, as Galeotti points out, three key roles: providing pretexts, creating preconditions, and acting as paralyzers. These operations are executed in great variety, such as mobilizing, scouting and training of irregular forces, carrying out assassinations and cyber-attacks, or seeking to persuade corrupt politicians to benefit Russia.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ KSST units are closely comparable to Western units, such as U.S. Army Delta Force, CA Joint Task Force 2 or UK SAS (Mark Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right* (London: Mayak Intelligence, 2016), 54.)

¹⁵⁶ Stefan Hedlund, "Russia's Special Forces Are Gaining Prominence and Clout," Geopolitical Intelligence Services, 2019, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/the-future-of-russias-special-operations-forces,defense,2813.html>; Christopher Marsh, *Developments in Russian Special Operations - Russia's Spetsnaz, SOF and Special Operations Forces Command* (Ottawa, Ontario: CANSOFCOM Education & Research Centre, 2017), 6–11, http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2017/mdn-dnd/D4-10-21-2017-eng.pdf; Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 54–55.

¹⁵⁷ Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces* (Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016), 280–84; Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas." *U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute*, (Summer 2016), 14–16; Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 64–68.

¹⁵⁸ Galeotti, *Russian Political War*, 90–91.

Beside the regular military forces, Russia utilizes multiple other entities that contribute to its pool of forces. An additional range of Russian military capacity is the use of mercenary soldiers, such as the Wagner group or *Vostok Battalion*, which dates back to the GRU and may be marshalled by the GRU and FSB or used by the Russian Government, where the deniability of official units is necessary.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, Russia uses a variety of deniable irregular and auxiliary forces ranging from Russian volunteers, such as the Cossacks in Eastern Ukraine, to criminal groups and autonomous local militias.¹⁶⁰

Analyzing the Russian perspective, it is evident that there is no Russian doctrine that indicates a changing approach toward non-military means. Thus, the Western view that Russia has adopted a new approach to warfare, focusing primarily on the use of non-military means, is mistaken. It inherently differs from the Russian perception of *gibridnaya voina* (using solely non-military means) and new generation war. The Russian perception does not exclude the use of conventional forces within an asymmetric, hybrid scenario; in fact, use of conventional forces is crucial and an integral part of their approach to hybrid warfare. Russian military thinking and capabilities are evolving, and Russia has made great improvements regarding readiness and mobilization of its forces.

The Russian perspective of new generation warfare anticipates a full-scale conflict, incorporating a preemptory preliminary stage of hybrid war. This preliminary stage might not always lead to a full-scale war, however, if the objectives are quickly and bloodlessly achieved within the preliminary stage. Nevertheless, this perspective reveals that the military notion of hybrid war always includes the consideration of leveraging violence and that Russia relies on these lethal means, while employing non-military means within this approach as a preparatory measure to precede and accompany military means. Thus,

¹⁵⁹ Alec Luhn, "Volunteers or Paid Fighters? The Vostok Battalion Looms Large in War with Kiev," *The Guardian*, June 6, 2014, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/06/the-vostok-battalion-shaping-the-eastern-ukraine-conflict>; Laurence Peter, "Who Are Russia's Shadowy Mercenaries Fighting in Syria?," *BBC News*, February 23, 2018, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43167697>.

¹⁶⁰ Galeotti, *Russian Political War*, 81–85; Mark Galeotti, *The Vory: Russia's Super Mafia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 236–39.

within the Russian concept of hybrid warfare non-military means, including political and diplomatic pressure or disruption of diplomatic ties, are measures within a warfare scenario. Hence, the Russian view differs from that of the West, which consigns non-military means for use as a way to avoid war.¹⁶¹

Neither the sole use of non-military means to undermine and subvert the adversary, nor the mix of military and non-military means is a new concept that poses an unprecedented threat. The true danger lies in the Russian ability to quickly adjust to new social, political, technological, and information environments and to exploit vulnerabilities in those environments through the use of a complex combination of a distinctive hybrid pool of forces, of which the psychological and information component is an important part. The Russian perspective is in this sense not tied to a predefined concept or anticipated conflict scenario. Russia can adapt and use its pool of forces, aligned with other available instruments of statecraft, according to the unique aspects of a particular conflict, recognizing as Gerasimov notes, that “each war is a unique case, demanding the establishment of a particular logic and not the application of some template.”¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” 34.

¹⁶² Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight - New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations,” 29.

IV. CASE STUDY I: RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE IN CRIMEA

Dear friends, we have gathered here today in connection with an issue that is of vital, historic significance to all of us. A referendum was held in Crimea on March 16 in full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms. It is also obvious that there is no legitimate executive authority in Ukraine now, nobody to talk to.¹⁶³

The annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2014 undoubtedly marked a pivotal point in the relations between Russia and the West. It was a carefully conducted strategic whole-of-government campaign, executed and supported through all levels of statecraft, as noted in the preceding excerpt from an address by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin. Since that time, the term hybrid warfare has been reintroduced and remains a continuous source of concern related Russian policy.¹⁶⁴

The Crimean case study shows that Russia effectively utilized hybrid warfare to maximize its power, responding to a combination of opportunity- and threat-related considerations, exploiting a unique historical and cultural relationship between Ukraine and Russia, in which Crimea has its specific strategic and historically related role.

Accordingly, this chapter examines Russia's action within the variables' framework, based on a solid historical basis. This section analyzes first the historical context, paying special attention to Crimea. This in-depth historical analysis reveals the cultural, political, diplomatic, economic, and military strategic motivations related to the annexation of Crimea. Next, this chapter utilizes the independent variables Threat and Opportunities, revealing that Russia's strategic rationale to intervene was largely opportunity-driven, while threat-related considerations supported this decision. This is followed by an analysis of Russia's implementation of hybrid warfare based on the

¹⁶³ Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

¹⁶⁴ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Are We Prepared for 'Hybrid Warfare'?" *The Diplomat*, February 13, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/02/are-we-prepared-for-hybrid-warfare/>; Peter Zwack, "Russia's Contradictory Relationship with the West," *PRISM | National Defense University* 6, no. 2 (2016): 153.

intervening variable and key deductions, showing that Russia used a diverse pool of forces, supported by an interrelated information and denial and deception strategy, and leveraged violence to successfully take over Crimea.

A. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: UKRAINE AND CRIMEA PRIOR TO ANNEXATION

Assessing the historical relationship between Ukraine and Russia, as well as the events that led up to the annexation, it is possible to discern how Russia was able to accomplish its strategic objective of seizing control of Crimea. This background is needed to further analyze Russia's actions within the variables framework, because the variables are closely aligned and take advantage of the specific historical relationship.

1. The Importance of Ukraine

Ukraine, as the second largest country in Europe, differs from other Soviet successor states and is of importance for various reasons, which ensures its crucial role in the future of Europe, as well as in the foreign policy of the United States. Its size and its population make Ukraine comparable to the strongest Western European nations. Its current population is the fifth largest in Europe, while its territory is the largest (including Crimea) at 232,046 square miles. Its size equals that of Poland, Hungary, the former Czechoslovakia, and Austria combined. Its population is highly educated, fully literate, and technologically advanced.¹⁶⁵ Even though its industry deteriorated after decades of communism, under which it had been the agricultural and industrial center within the Soviet Union, excellent preconditions for its economic growth still exist. Ukraine inherited one-third of the Soviet defense industry, emerging after the Cold War as the second largest military in Europe. Its military degraded during the transition from communism to democracy for several reasons, such as lack of upkeep and corruption, to the point that by 2014 it hardly qualified as cohesive armed forces. Regardless, the

¹⁶⁵ "Ukraine - Location, Size, and Extent," 2010, <https://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Europe/Ukraine-LOCATION-SIZE-AND-EXTENT.html#ixzz5ryrvd2LL>; Alexander J. Motyl, *Dilemmas of Independence: Ukraine after Totalitarianism* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993), 1–3.

military-industrial complex of Ukraine is still well developed and the most advanced sector of the state's economy.¹⁶⁶

Ukraine, due to its size, population, economic growth potential, and well-developed military-industrial complex is a keystone of Eastern Europe. Furthermore, it is in a strategically important position at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, divided by the two centrifugal forces, at one side Russia representing the East and at the other side NATO and the European Union (EU) representing the West, as depicted in Figure 6. Thus, its geostrategic importance should not be underestimated. A geopolitical shift to Russia could have substantial consequences and would likely change the dynamics of Western Europe and the balance of power.



Figure 6. Map of Ukraine¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Bohdan Harasymiw, *Post-Communist Ukraine* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2002), 403–7; Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov, eds., *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine* (Minneapolis, MN: East View Press, 2014), 55; “Ukraine Defense Industry,” Global Security, 2014, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ukraine/industry.htm>.

¹⁶⁷ “Ukraine Map,” InfoPlease, accessed June 27, 2019, <https://www.infoplease.com/atlas/europe/ukraine-map>.

2. Historical Background: Russia and Ukraine

Despite all the salient differences between Russia and Ukraine, their unique cultural and historical relationship reveals strong ties, which go back hundreds of years to the proto-Ukrainian state of Kyvian (Kievan) Rus, the medieval East Slavic State based in the capital of present-day Ukraine. The area ruled by the Rus covered western and central Ukraine, most of present Belarus, and western Russia. Up to this day, both nations consider the Rus as their founding myth and medieval forebear.¹⁶⁸ Despite the shared history, conflict between the two countries and a continuous struggle between independence and reunification were common over decades.

The modern state of Ukraine was a product of World War I and the dissolution of the empires that had ruled it. Ukraine declared independence in January 1918 through the parliamentary body, the Central Rada, aiming to secure a peace treaty with Hohenzollern Germany and Habsburg Austria and ensure protection against invading Bolsheviks.¹⁶⁹ Finally, via the peace treaty of Brest-Livostk in March 1918, Ukraine was able to gain its independence from Russia. The so-called Ukraine People's Republic (UNR) envisioned the establishment of a Ukrainian state, close to modern Ukraine's borders, excluding Crimea and Western Galicia, and claimed to represent the Ukrainian people despite the absence of an elected government or shared Ukrainian identity.¹⁷⁰ Yet disturbances continued until the Bolsheviks were finally forced out through the help of German and Austrian military alliances. The armistice signed between the Allies of World War I and Germany in November 1918 included the complete withdrawal of German and Austrian forces from Ukraine and marked a renewed vulnerability of Ukraine.¹⁷¹ In 1921 Russia reintegrated Ukraine, following the Bolshevik victory in the Russian-Civil War and the Soviet consolidation of power. Despite the short life of the independence movements,

¹⁶⁸ Serhii Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (Cambridge, UK ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–3; Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 19.

¹⁶⁹ Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 206–8.

¹⁷⁰ Wilson, *The Ukrainians*, 121–25.

¹⁷¹ Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 209–12.

they were not forgotten by Soviet leaders.¹⁷² Stalin enforced the collectivization of agriculture in the 1930s, which resulted in intentional famine, starving millions of Ukrainians to death during the 1932–1933 *Holodomar*; it successfully quashed any peasant resistance and ensured that no independent Ukraine movement would rise again.¹⁷³ This was reinforced by the shift of the capital to Kiev to create a new bastion of Soviet proletariat in the middle of Ukraine.¹⁷⁴

World War II and post-World War II Soviet policies fueled the widening of an already existing rift in the population. The Ukrainian lands of the former Russian empire were heavily ‘Russified,’ with the mass resettlement of ethnic Russians, especially within Eastern Ukraine, supported by religious division and ties.¹⁷⁵ In contrast, especially after the annexation of western Ukrainian territories by the invading Nazi Army, there were no significant resettlements of Russians to those areas. Ukraine nationalists initially welcomed and fought alongside the Nazis against the Soviets, before they ultimately turned against the Nazis. They continued to resist Soviet occupation and the implementation of communism until the area was heavily policed and infiltrated by the *Komitet Gusudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* (KGB), followed by mass deportations of Ukrainians. Even though resurgent nationalism was prevented, no mass Russification occurred within these areas.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Orlando Figes, “Is There One Ukraine?,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2013-12-16/there-one-ukraine>.

¹⁷³ Paul R. Magocsi, ed., *A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 2., rev. expanded ed. (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 557–64; Eve Conant, “Ethnic Russians: Pretext for Putin’s Ukraine Invasion?,” *National Geographic*, May 2014, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/05/140502-russia-putin-ukraine-geography-crimea-language/>.

¹⁷⁴ Wilson, *The Ukrainians*, 147.

¹⁷⁵ The Russian Orthodox Church, which subsumed the Kievan Patriarchate during the Soviet Era, served largely to blur distinctions between Ukrainians and Russians and supported, as Ukrainian nationalists are still claiming, the “Russifying” of the Eastern Ukrainians, while Uniate Catholicism has served as the main supportive religious element for Ukrainian national identity in western Ukraine (Motyl, *Dilemmas of Independence*, 8–9.)

¹⁷⁶ Wilson, *The Ukrainians*, 149–50; Myroslav Yurkevich, “Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, 1993, <http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CO%5CR%5COrganizationofUkrainianNationalists.htm>.

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked Ukraine's break from the Soviet Union, culminating in a referendum for independence in December 1991, resulting in a 90 percent affirmative vote. It was recognized by the President of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Russian SFSR) Boris Yeltsin.¹⁷⁷ It ended his vision of independence as "each republic having sovereignty, but we would all remain together," which was not envisioned by Ukraine and other Soviet successor states.¹⁷⁸

As the post-Soviet Ukrainian political structure formed, Ukrainian independence came abruptly and unexpectedly and had enormous consequences as it had to "cope with the Herculean task of transforming a colony into an independent state and creating everything that totalitarianism had destroyed."¹⁷⁹ Hence, the achieved Ukrainian independence cannot be seen as proof of an established new Ukrainian national consciousness, neglecting the complex influences to which Ukrainians were subject throughout the Soviet period. The ethno-linguistic and religious divisions persist in Ukraine up to this day. Presidential elections after the declaration of independence proved to be a stark representation of a still existing internal East/West, pro-Russian versus Pro-European, internal divide within Ukraine.¹⁸⁰

Especially one peninsula in the Black Sea, Crimea, has become the center of international attention after Russia annexed it. It became a key aspect of Ukrainian-Russian foreign relations after Ukraine achieved independence in 1991. Crimea has been historically contested, ethno-linguistically divided, and strategically important for centuries.

3. Crimea

The Crimean Peninsula is the historical homeland of the Crimean Tatars, rulers of the peninsula from the 13th century until the Russian annexation of 1783. Until the early

¹⁷⁷ Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia's Revolution from above, 1985-2000: Reform, Transition, and Revolution in the Fall of the Soviet Communist Regime* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 482.

¹⁷⁸ Yeltsin quoted in Wilson, *The Ukrainians*, 170; Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 321.

¹⁷⁹ Motyl, *Dilemmas of Independence*, 50.

¹⁸⁰ Motyl, 50; Wilson, *The Ukrainians*, 151; Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 331–36.

20th century the Tatar portion of the population was reduced by emigration to Turkey and by immigration of Slavic settlers, although they were still considered the titular nationality of the Crimean Autonomous Republic of the Russian Federation until World War II. In 1944, however, the entire population was deported to Central Asia for allegedly cooperating with the Germans, and Crimea's autonomous status was abolished, reduced to the level of an ordinary region.¹⁸¹ Unlike similar ethnic resettlements in other Soviet oblasts and despite continuous efforts to repatriate, the Tatars were not permitted to return to their homeland after Stalin's death. Instead, most of the newly arriving migrants to Ukraine would be Russians. It was not until 1989 that the Tatars were able to return. Meanwhile, their houses and lands had long been occupied by Russian and Ukrainian settlers, and remains a source of bitterness to the Tatars today, while on the other hand, common hostility to the Tatars is still a strong force uniting the Russians and Ukrainians of Crimea. Tatars are by now tiny in both numbers and political significance, but Crimea is still a symbol of their national identity and the historical homeland.¹⁸²

Considering the strategic position of the peninsula as a warm water port with access to the Mediterranean, for Russians Crimea was, in the words of historian Andrew Wilson, the "jewel in the crown of empire and a site of military glory—or at least glorious defeat."¹⁸³ In addition, Crimea had become the Soviets' popular vacation destination, and the military presence of the Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol additionally contributed to Crimea becoming a retirement location for high-ranking, mostly Russian military personnel.¹⁸⁴

To mark the 300th anniversary of the Treaty of Pereiaslev, the peninsula was transferred, justified as a gift to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Although there is little documentation about the impetus of the transfer, it was regarded as an

¹⁸¹ Wilson, *The Ukrainians*, 151; Motyl, *Dilemmas of Independence*, 10–11; Brian Glyn Williams, *The Crimean Tatars: From Soviet Genocide to Putin's Conquest* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 87.

¹⁸² Motyl, *Dilemmas of Independence*, 11; Anatol Lieven, *Ukraine & Russia: A Fraternal Rivalry* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999), 106–10.

¹⁸³ Wilson, *The Ukrainians*, 151.

¹⁸⁴ Williams, *The Crimean Tatars*, 116.

internal administrative affair, without consultation of the local population. The embedded legal implications were considered by most Russians as immaterial. Crimea was rather placed in Ukraine, according to Russian logic, for economic reasons and to help build Ukrainian loyalty to the Union, but it was not of Ukraine.¹⁸⁵ Despite the province's formal Ukrainian status, the population distribution differed and is unique up to this day. Crimea is the only area of Ukraine with an absolute majority of Russians. State-encouraged emigration and immigration under both the tsars and Soviet rule changed the population distribution, which has remained relatively constant up to this day. Therefore, after the transfer of the peninsula, Russians comprised two-thirds of the population and Ukrainians one-fourth.¹⁸⁶

Thus, after Ukraine became independent in 1991 the entire Crimean Peninsula was included within Ukraine's internationally recognized borders. Nevertheless, the population within Crimea was not entirely prepared to embrace this Ukrainian identity and seemed split and confused about their destiny. In 1991, in response to the question "Are you for the restoration of the Crimean ASSR as a subject of the USSR and a party of the Union treaty?" over 93 percent of those who voted responded positively. Nevertheless, ten months later 54 percent voted in favor of Ukrainian independence, which obviously suggests satisfaction among the society of direct rule from Kiev.¹⁸⁷ Yet, there was upheaval on the peninsula, notably when Ukrainian was deemed as the official language. In 1992, Crimea declared itself independent, and the Crimean city of Sevastopol declared itself a Russian federal city in 1994. Despite the condemnation of Sevastopol's declaration by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Crimean separatist politicians alike regarding the separation of the city from the peninsula, Kiev gave Crimea significant autonomy. Nevertheless, Russian politicians were rather opposed to Yeltsin's stance and

¹⁸⁵ David R. Marples and David F. Duke, "Ukraine, Russia, and the Question of Crimea," *Nationalities Papers* 23, no. 2 (June 1995): 272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905999508408377>; Wilson, *The Ukrainians*, 150–51; Lieven, *Ukraine & Russia*, 111.

¹⁸⁶ Motyl, *Dilemmas of Independence*, 10–11; Lieven, *Ukraine & Russia*, 111.

¹⁸⁷ Marples and Duke, "Ukraine, Russia, and the Question of Crimea," 272–73.

his decision.¹⁸⁸ The return of deported people, with the largest group being Crimean Tatars, complicated the issue and sharply divided the people along ethno-linguistic lines, resulting in frequent clashes between returning pro-Ukrainian minorities and pro-Russian entities, emphasizing the profound divisions of its citizens, which ultimately compromised Ukraine's safety and made it vulnerable to internal and external forces.¹⁸⁹

Despite national identity preferences and ethno-linguistic divisions, Russia is able to project power in and around the Black Sea via the use of the city of Sevastopol. Therefore, the disposition and division of the Black Sea Fleet remained the most contentious subject between Ukraine and Russia and seemed to cause almost an armed conflict until an agreement was reached in 1997.¹⁹⁰ During that year a Russia-Ukraine basic treaty and accompanying agreement on the division of the fleet and its bases guaranteeing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both countries, known as the Black Sea Accords, was signed by Russia and Ukraine. According to the accords, the two states would split the fleet roughly in half, but Russia was also allowed to buy back some of Ukraine's part in exchange for gas debt forgiveness. Additionally, it was agreed that Russia would lease naval ports in and around Sevastopol for 20 years at a rent of around \$100 million a year. This seemed a reasonable compromise, shorter than the Russian proposal for 40 years and longer than the Ukrainian demand for five to seven years, though the rent was higher than the Russian's were willing to pay.¹⁹¹ The rental agreement was extended in 2004 by the Ukrainian President Yanukovich "for another 25 years, in return for a 30% discount on gas imports worth up to \$40 billion."¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ The Russian Parliament almost unanimously declared Sevastopol a Russian city one year earlier. (Gwendolyn Sasse, "The Crimean Issue," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 1996): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523279608415302>.)

¹⁸⁹ Sasse, 92–93; Lieven, *Ukraine & Russia*, 113–14; Williams, *The Crimean Tatars*, 156–57.

¹⁹⁰ Silvio Nate, "Black Sea, 'Cold Sea': The Geopolitical Crossroad to Civilizations," in *Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine*, by N. Iancu, A. Fortuna, and C. Barna (IOS Press, 2016), 251–58; Lieven, *Ukraine & Russia*, 126–28.

¹⁹¹ Motyl, *Dilemmas of Independence*, 111–13; Alexander Cooley and Volodymyr Dubovyk, "Will Sevastopol Survive? The Triangular Politics of Russia's Naval Base in Crimea," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 47 (2008): 2.

¹⁹² Luke Harding, "Ukraine Extends Lease for Russia's Black Sea Fleet," *The Guardian*, April 21, 2010, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/21/ukraine-black-sea-fleet-russia>.

Even though the Black Sea Fleet only comprises some 40 aging vessels, Sevastopol is still of strategic importance in terms of providing Russia with significant operational capability within this area. It has become even more important since Russia was forced to stop using the naval base in Tatar, Syria. Thus, Russia is in the process of upgrading the fleet and Sevastopol serves as headquarters to Russia's newly constituted Mediterranean Task Force.¹⁹³ Furthermore, for Russians it is not only a strategic naval base, but a part of Russia and strongly linked to history and of enormous emotional significance, as described by the historian Anatol Lieven:

A Russian city built by Russians, inhabited by Russians, defended by Russians. Twice defended, twice lost, twice regained—one of their great heroic episodes.¹⁹⁴

4. Way to Annexation

Crimea's important strategic role was an ongoing issue and fueled continuous tensions in Ukraine-Russian relations. Finally, this discord stepped from the political level into the realm of hybrid warfare and the use of military forces, culminating in the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This Russian military intervention and subsequent annexation are tied to events in Kiev and the prolonged historically rooted crisis of identity within Ukraine, as to whether its future and prosperity lies with Russia or the West.

The presidential election in 2004 portrayed these dichotomous orientations through the two opposing candidates: Viktor Yushenko, a pro-European reformer from the western and predominantly Ukrainian-speaking part of the country and Viktor Yanukovich, a pro-Russian from the eastern part. Russia played a significant role in influencing the election through funding, political advisors, and media support and even a visit by President Putin one week prior to the election. Beside this support, no candidate achieved majority in the first round. Consequently, even though non-partisan exit polls showed Yushenko ahead in the second round, Yanukovich won by a margin of 2.5

¹⁹³ Nate, "Black Sea, 'Cold Sea': The Geopolitical Crossroad to Civilizations," 251–52.

¹⁹⁴ Lieven, *Ukraine & Russia*, 128.

percent.¹⁹⁵ Election monitoring by the OSCE condemned the voting process, claiming that it failed to meet standards for democratic elections, resulting in mass protests against the fraudulent election. The so-called Orange Revolution, related to the clothing and banners of many protestors, depicting the orange color of Yushenko's "Our Ukraine" party, ultimately forced the parliament to declare the election results invalid. As a result, under heavy international monitoring new elections were held and Yushenko won by 52 percent of the vote, with a marked regional division and an elected president who advocated closer ties to Europe.¹⁹⁶

Yushenko's time in office was characterized by disappointment and dispute between Russia and Ukraine. Shortly after, the election disputes about the price of energy supplied by Russia and outstanding Ukrainian debts began.¹⁹⁷ Relations were further strained in 2008 at the NATO Bucharest Summit, due to Georgian and Ukrainian aspirations to join NATO and Russia's strong objection to the two countries' eventual membership. Russia's opposition caused consternation among some NATO members, and after opposition from Germany and France, only vague promises regarding future membership were made, without offering a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to either Ukraine or Georgia.¹⁹⁸ A month later, the brief war between Russia and Georgia, ostensibly justified by the need to protect Russian citizens in specific Georgian provinces, helped underscore the decision's importance and degraded the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, as the latter was a strong ally of Georgia. During the conflict, Yushenko raised concerns about the staging of the Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol, which

¹⁹⁵ Ploky, *The Gates of Europe*, 334; Adrian Karatnycky, "Ukraine's Orange Revolution," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2005): 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20034274>.

¹⁹⁶ Karatnycky, "Ukraine's Orange Revolution," 11–15; OSCE, "Second Round of Ukrainian Election Failed to Address Election Irregularities and Lacked Transparency," November 22, 2004, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/56979>.

¹⁹⁷ Yuliya Tymoshenko, "Containing Russia," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 3 (2007): 29–31.

¹⁹⁸ Adam Taylor, "That Time Ukraine Tried to Join NATO — and NATO Said No," *Washington Post*, September 4, 2014, sec. WorldViews, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/04/that-time-ukraine-tried-to-join-nato-and-nato-said-no/>; NATO, "Bucharest Summit Declaration," March 4, 2008, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm.

supported the war and threatened that Ukraine would refuse the return of the ships to the naval bases.¹⁹⁹

Ongoing disputes over natural gas with Russia resulted in repeatedly raised prices and cut-off supplies, as well as political clashes with Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who adopted a more Russian-friendly approach to resolve some of the disputes, a position that dampened the popularity of Yushchenko's presidency.²⁰⁰ Thus, when he ran for re-election in 2010, he lost against his old-opponent and Russia's preferred man Yanukovich, who had learned from his mistakes in 2004. Hence, the election was won under democratically sound procedures overseen by the OSCE, and lacking overt Russian interference.²⁰¹ After being elected, Yanukovich was able to effectively block Ukraine's movement toward NATO membership in 2010 and signed within two months of his inauguration the Kharkiv agreement, which, instead of expiring in 2017, extended Russia's lease on its naval base in Sevastopol. Consequently, his victory was seen in Russia as a triumph over the West and as Moscow's success in installing a pro-Russian and compliant leader in the Ukraine.²⁰²

Nevertheless, Yanukovich's indecision about whether to sign an EU Association Agreement, after initially supporting it, was his undoing. The signing, scheduled for the November 28, 2013, drew heavy resistance from Russia. As a result, Yanukovich withdrew from negotiations with the EU. Rejecting the EU agreement became the impetus for the revolution of dignity, also known as the Euromaidan.²⁰³ After starting off with

¹⁹⁹ Cooley and Dubovyk, "Will Sevastopol Survive?," 6.

²⁰⁰ Miriam Elder, "Orange Sunset as Ukraine Poll Heralds Turn to Russia," *The Observer*, January 10, 2010, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jan/10/ukraine-election-turn-to-russia>.

²⁰¹ Alexander J. Motyl, "Ukrainian Blues: Yanukovich's Rise, Democracy's Fall," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2010): 35–38.

²⁰² "Europe: Viktor for the Blue Camp; Ukraine's Presidential Election," *The Economist*; London, February 13, 2010, 53; "Kharkiv Sellout," *KyivPost*, April 22, 2010, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/editorial/kharkiv-sellout-64760.html>.

²⁰³ Lionel Beehner et al., "Analyzing the Russian Way of War: Evidence from the 2008 Conflict with Georgia," *Modern War Institute at Westpoint*, March 2018, 70–71, <https://mwi.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Analyzing-the-Russian-Way-of-War.pdf>; John Biersack and Shannon O'Lear, "The Geopolitics of Russia's Annexation of Crimea: Narratives, Identity, Silences, and Energy," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 55, no. 3 (May 4, 2014): 248, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2014.985241>.

small protests, the movement quickly gained momentum, and eventually resulted in 100 deaths from clashes between pro-government forces and protesters. Despite this dramatic shift, government forces were not able to quell the uprising, protests continued, and a new parliament was formed, which voted to impeach the president. Like Putin, Yanukovich condemned the actions as a “coup”; soon after, he fled the country only to appear days later in Russia.²⁰⁴ As a result, Putin refused to acknowledge any prior agreements with Ukraine, including the Budapest Memorandum signed in 1994, in which Russia agreed to “not to threaten or use force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine.”²⁰⁵ One week later, Russia dispatched so-called “little green men,” soldiers in plain green uniforms wearing no insignia, appearing throughout Crimea surrounding military installations.²⁰⁶ Shortly after the parliament was seized by these “little green men” a referendum was held, which did not offer a choice to maintain the status quo. It presented two options, either to vote for reunification with Russia or to restore the 1992 Crimean constitution, meaning increased autonomy as part of Ukraine.²⁰⁷ The referendum, deemed by observers as rigged and declared invalid by the majority of the members of the United Nations, ratified the decision to break away from Ukraine and become part of Russia.²⁰⁸ Consequently, on March 18, 2014, a treaty was signed in the Kremlin by President Putin and representatives from Sevastopol and Crimea for the

²⁰⁴ Gabriel Gatehouse, “The Untold Story of the Maidan Massacre,” BBC, December 2, 2015, [//www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-31359021](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-31359021); Zwack, “Russia’s Contradictory Relationship with the West,” 152.xx

²⁰⁵ Ron Synovitz, “Explainer: The Budapest Memorandum and Its Relevance to Crimea,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, April 28, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-explainer-budapest-memorandum/25280502.html>; Roy Allison, “Russian ‘Deniable’ Intervention in Ukraine: How and Why Russia Broke the Rules,” *International Affairs* 90, no. 6 (2014): 1259, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12170>.

²⁰⁶ Beehner et al., “Analyzing the Russian Way of War.”

²⁰⁷ Noah Sneider, “2 Choices in Crimea Referendum, but Neither Is ‘No,’” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/15/world/europe/crimea-vote-does-not-offer-choice-of-status-quo.html>.

²⁰⁸ Anna Reid, *Borderland: A Journey through the History of Ukraine* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Pr, 2000), 258–76; United Nations Meeting Coverage and Press Releases, “General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling upon States Not to Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region” (New York, NY: United Nations, March 27, 2014), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>.

accession of Sevastopol and the Republic of Crimea into the Russian Federation. On that occasion, Putin spoke:

Crimea is our common historical legacy and a very important factor in regional stability. And this strategic territory should be part of a strong and stable sovereignty, which today can only be Russian. ... Residents of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, the whole of Russia admired your courage, dignity and bravery. It was you who decided Crimea's future. We were closer than ever over these days, supporting each other.²⁰⁹

B. INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: THREAT AND OPPORTUNITY

The previous section analyzed the unique relationship between Ukraine and Russia, while paying specific attention to the Crimean Peninsula to understand the circumstances that ultimately led to the annexation of Crimea. The next section uses the two independent variables threat and opportunity, derived from the key considerations of offensive realism to further analyze the case. These variables, as Figure 2 and the key findings of the analysis of offensive realism have pointed out, have distinct characteristics.

The analysis reveals that, at first glance, Russia's action to shift the balance of power seems threat-related, aimed to secure the status quo. A closer look at opportunity-related considerations, however, reveals that Russia more likely acted to gain profit—internally and geopolitically—within smaller states, in this case the peninsula of Crimea, while threat-related considerations shaped the narrative to deny this intention.

1. Threat-Related Considerations

The previous section has pointed out that Russia's considerations to annex Crimea must be seen in context of the unique Russian-Ukrainian interrelationship and the strong divisions between East and West Ukraine, while Crimea is in a sense the nucleus of pro-Russian followers. Within this respect, Ukraine and especially Crimea are deeply embedded and intertwined in Russia's history, with key events, such as the founding of Russia within medieval Kievan Rus or the two great sieges of Sevastopol, the "hero city"

²⁰⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Agreement on the Accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation Signed," Address by President of the Russian Federation, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20604>.

that shaped Russian historic perception. Thus, Russia's national identity and cultural egoism, which considers Ukraine as 'Little Russia' and an integral part of Russia itself, cannot be neglected. This long relationship, as Henry Kissinger points out, is often neglected and misunderstood within Western thinking. He provides a classic realist's perspective by arguing that the policymakers of the West and Russia are to blame for the Ukraine crisis: "Putin is a serious strategist—on the premises of Russian history. Understanding U.S. values and psychology are not his strong suits. Nor has understanding Russian history and psychology been a strong point of U.S. policymakers."²¹⁰

The key finding of the offensive realism analysis would indicate that the driving force of Russia's annexation of Crimea was an attempt to maximize Russia's power in pursuit of self-interest to expand Russia's influence in the region.²¹¹ Self-interest in this sense is therefore the desire to fulfill national identity goals, deeply rooted in Russian history. Putin himself echoed this chauvinistic perception in his speech following the annexation of Crimea by pointing out that it corrected the "historical injustice" done to Russia by Crimea being "plundered" from her.²¹²

Mearsheimer rejects this assertion that the Crimean crisis is a reflection of "Russian aggression," fostered by the desire to revitalize the Soviet empire. Instead, he argues that the European allies and the United States share most of the responsibility for Russia's actions in Crimea and that ultimately three incidents stirred Russian action: the NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and the West's support for the pro-democracy movements in Ukraine that began with the Orange Revolution in 2004.²¹³ Further analyzing these three incidents will help to consider whether this claim needs to be extended in order to assess Russia's motive stirring its action.

²¹⁰ Henry A. Kissinger, "Henry Kissinger: To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End," *Washington Post*, March 5, 2014, sec. Opinions, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html.

²¹¹ Tandilashvili, "Classical Realist and Norm-Based Constructivist Analysis of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Annexation of Crimea," 1–2; Maitra, "Realism in Russian Foreign Policy:," 126–27.

²¹² Putin, "Agreement on the Accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation Signed."

²¹³ Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," 1.

Since 1994 Ukraine has openly stated its intention to join the EU and NATO, and it signed the Distinctive Partnership Charter in 1997. Even though Russia expressed its reservations about Ukraine's aspiration, it was not perceived as a threat, because no formal application for membership was filed. Beside this, Russia itself had similar aspirations to join the EU in the future.²¹⁴ The NATO campaign in Yugoslavia in 1999 raised concern in Russia about its status and the increased importance of Ukraine. The ensuing NATO eastward expansion that started the same year fostered these concerns and was perceived as a danger towards Russian isolation from the West and a challenge to Russia's global status. Nevertheless, with regard to Ukraine, Russia accomplished preserving its regional influence and secured Ukraine's neutrality. It was therefore relatively unthreatened by its neighbor.²¹⁵

Russia's threat perception related to Ukraine and other states within the region changed significantly with the Orange Revolution 2004; it was seen as an organized plot of the West to separate Ukraine from Russia, including the threat perception that it would spill over to Moscow.²¹⁶ Shortly after, Ukraine began its intensive dialogue with NATO in 2005, followed by its official application for membership, which was opposed by Germany and France at the Bucharest Summit in 2008. The application was seen by Russia as a direct threat, which Russia aimed to diminish. The Russian invasion into Georgia in 2008, as well as Russia's application for NATO membership, proved its willingness to protect its interests and served as a warning that Russia would defend its interest in its sphere of influence militarily, if the West would further encroach into the post-Soviet space.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Helena Yakovlev-Golani, "Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in the Slavic Triangle," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 53, no. 2/4 (2011): 390; Enis H. Rexhepi, "Ukraine's Geopolitical Position: Between East and West," *SEEU Review* 12, no. 1 (June 1, 2017): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1515/seeur-2017-0007>.

²¹⁵ Yakovlev-Golani, "Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in the Slavic Triangle," 389.

²¹⁶ Mykola Siruk Shevtsova Lilia, "Orange Revolution and Putin's Overturn," Carnegie Moscow Center, 2013, <https://carnegie.ru/2013/02/21/orange-revolution-and-putin-s-overturn-pub-51063>. See also

²¹⁷ Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," 3; Luke Harding, Ian Traynor, and Helen Womack, "A Dirty Little War," *The Observer*, August 16, 2008, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/17/georgia.russia>.

Relations with the EU and Ukraine were based on the Agreement of the Partnership and Cooperation (PCA), which entered into force in 1998. It was enhanced in 2007 with the Association Agreement (AA), as the successor of the PCA, paving the way to negotiations about further partnership. At the 15th Ukraine-EU Summit in 2011 a common understanding on the text of the AA was reached and the Deep Area and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) was ratified in 2012.²¹⁸

Mearsheimer claims that the EU expansion is therefore, from a Russian perspective, a stalking horse for NATO expansion. Similarly, Kissinger argues that the European Union and its “bureaucratic dilatoriness and subordination of the strategic element to domestic politics in negotiating Ukraine’s relationship to Europe contributed to turning a negotiation into crisis.”²¹⁹ These events and Yanukovich’s refusal in 2014 to sign the AA between the EU and Ukraine, which caused one of the deepest political crises in Ukraine, support this claim. Thus, Russia considered the expansion of competing military and political entities in proximity to its borders as a threat to Russian security interests. In addition, Ukraine’s geopolitical importance, especially regarding Crimea and its Black Sea Fleet, made it unthinkable to lose it to a rival power. It was therefore seen as a strategic threat and as an attempt to expand into post-Soviet space in line with the historical perception of aggressive Western behavior trying to diminish Russian influence. This forced a dilemma on Russia: conceding that Ukraine was part of the NATO sphere or intervening to prevent it. It opted for the latter.²²⁰

Thus, considering the key findings of the offensive realism analysis, the previously mentioned definition of self-interest has to be expanded, loosely aligned with Mearsheimer’s and Kissinger’s arguments. Self-interest in this sense is based on the uncertainty of other actors and the anarchic international system in which Russia’s narrative can be summarized under the classical realist notion to pursue and increase

²¹⁸ Rexhepi, “Ukraine’s Geopolitical Position,” 101.

²¹⁹ Kissinger, “Henry Kissinger.”

²²⁰ Richard Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, 4th ed., Fully rev. and updated (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 100.

security.²²¹ In this context, Russia's actions deter others from thinking they can go against Russia or Russia's sphere of influence. These activities are a counteraction to diminish Western influence to contain the Russian core strategic territory Crimea, by increasing its reassertion as a great power on the international scene.²²² Putin himself emphasized and fostered this narrative that the invasion intended to increase Russia's security, in light of the possible NATO expansion: "It meant that NATO's navy would be right there in this city of Russia's military glory [i.e., Sevastopol], and that this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia."²²³

As a result, two threat-related approaches are vivid. First, the public resentments expressed through different channels that NATO's eastern expansion and its geographical proximity to Russia was considered as a threat, resulted in the warning that a crossing would trigger consequences. The warnings were followed by the formation and influencing of "alliances," especially proxy groups within the pro-Russian eastern part of Ukraine and by the mobilization of additional Russian resources as part of an "internal balancing."²²⁴ Thus, Russia used "balancing" as one threat-related strategy.

The second threat-related strategy is linked to the "little green men," who referred to themselves as "Crimean-self-defense forces." They seized control over key military buildings and strategic facilities, as well as surrounded military buildings to prevent Ukrainian soldiers from leaving. The unclear affiliation of these troops created ambiguity and played to Russian advantage. The international community was unable to respond effectively, giving Russia enough plausible deniability and to disguise what was

²²¹ Charles Ziegler, "Conceptualizing Sovereignty in Russian Foreign Policy: Realist and Constructivist Perspectives," *International Politics* 49 (July 1, 2012): 412, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2012.7>.

²²² Ankit Panda, "Russia in Crimea: When States Act Out of Insecurity," *The Diplomat*, 2014, 2, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/03/russia-in-crimea-when-states-act-out-of-insecurity/>; Tandilashvili, "Classical Realist and Norm-Based Constructivist Analysis of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Annexation of Crimea," 10–11; Ziegler, "Conceptualizing Sovereignty in Russian Foreign Policy," 414–15.

²²³ Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 99–100; Connor Sweeney, "Russia Names NATO Expansion as National Threat," *Reuters*, February 5, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-defence-doctrine-idUSTRE6144LA20100205>.

²²⁴ The pool of forces is as Figure 4 depicts part of the analysis of Russian hybrid warfare and therefore is linked to the stated "external" and "internal" balancing, which will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

happening, a clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.²²⁵ In retrospect, the ICC came to the conclusion: “The information available suggests that the situation within the territory of Crimea and Sevastopol amounts to an international armed conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation.”²²⁶ Thus, loosely aligned with Clausewitz’s definition, Russian action can be seen as an act of violence aiming to compel the opponent to fulfill Russia’s will, and as a form of war. Modern definitions define war much the same as armed conflict between political units, and disregard the narrow characteristic of the 19th century, in which war had to be formally declared.²²⁷ Hence, Russia used military force and violence incorporated in its main strategy of gaining power, defined as the threat-related strategy “war.”

2. Opportunity-Related Considerations

At first glance it seems obvious that Russia acted as Mearsheimer stated, not surprisingly, because the “West had been moving into Russia’s backyard and threatening its core strategic interests.”²²⁸ But, the argument tends to fall into the trap of overemphasizing the single variable of altering the status quo, which was caused by Western expansion into Eastern Europe, based on a generic threat-response scenario. In this respect Putin’s intervention in Crimea was a logical step toward restoring the balance of power that had been distorted by aggressive Western actions.

Although the previous analysis reveals that Russia was responding to threats, an impartial consideration of the case is crucial. Thus, within the following section, opportunity-related strategies are considered. In particular, a closer look at Russia’s

²²⁵ Joe Pappalardo, “Now NATO Says Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’ Could Start a Real War,” *Popular Mechanics*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/a22140482/nato-russia-hybrid-warfare-start-a-war/>; Ines Gillich, “Illegally Evading Attribution? Russia’s Use of Unmarked Troops in Crimea and International Humanitarian Law,” *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 48 (2014): 1192–93.

²²⁶ ICC, “Report on Preliminary Examination Activities 2016” (The Hague, Netherlands, November 14, 2016).

²²⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 1-2; Joseph Frankel, “War,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/war>.

²²⁸ Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” 1–2.

decision-making process and its rationale reveals that opportunity-related strategies and considerations strongly influenced the Russian decision to annex Crimea.

According to articles 80 (3) and 86 (a) of the Russian constitution, the Russian president has the authority to “determine the guidelines of the internal and foreign policies of the State and govern the foreign policy of the Russian Federation.”²²⁹ Hence, it is often assumed that Putin is the only decision maker of the Russian state, neglecting the strong influence on Russia’s foreign policy by numerous interest groups.

After the founding of the Russian Federation, the first President Boris Yeltsin was strongly influenced by a neo-democrat fraction led by his foreign minister, advocating a pro-Western approach. This influence shifted toward a national patriotic approach around 1995. Ukraine was seen by both influential groups as a kind of a regional opponent, while their stance on dealing with Ukraine differed from attaching all Crimea to the Federation toward any confrontation with Ukraine.²³⁰ In addition, Russian energy cooperation with Gazprom and LUKoil and their geopolitical orientation played an influential role in Russian foreign policy starting from 1996. The foreign policy aimed for steady relations to secure transit infrastructure and oil refineries.²³¹

In President Putin’s period, the influence and character of the interest groups has changed. His policy against business tycoons, called oligarchs, and the re-centralization of the power of the presidency by specific appointments to create a loyal support group, termed by Putin as the power vertical, provided him, in comparison to his predecessor, with the advantage of public support and state’s backing. Several competing factions surround the president, aiming to influence his decisions. Among the most powerful of

²²⁹ “The Constitution of the Russian Federation,” 1993, <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.htm>.

²³⁰ Allen C. Lynch, “The Realism of Russia’s Foreign Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 1 (2001): 9; Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, 43–44.

²³¹ Yakovlev-Golani, “Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in the Slavic Triangle,” 393.

these factions are the *siloviki*, derived from the phrase *silovye struktury* (force structure).²³²

A significant number of Putin's appointees are associates and acquaintances from his two backgrounds—St. Petersburg and the intelligence apparatus, including many of the *siloviki*, who replaced the mainly “bureaucrat oligarchs” of the Yeltsin era.²³³ They control important government agencies beside the force structure—law enforcement, intelligence service, and armed forces—and the Energy Agency, which gives them important power in several areas of policy and influencing policy outcomes. Consequently, companies exporting energy resources, raw materials, and arms, that had little influence under Yeltsin, strengthened their position under Putin by linking and aligning the interests of their businesses with the state's foreign policy and the *siloviki* policy preferences. Especially the relation with the Ukraine and Russian enterprises was considered as a priority, advocating in particular close cooperation within the military-industrial complex. Furthermore, Ukraine's heavy reliance on Russian gas was a strong Russian bargaining chip. Thus, the Orange Revolution and Yanukovich's loss, sponsored by Gazprom and personally supported by Putin, caused an emotional rather than a rational Russian reaction. The strategy of exerting constant economic pressure, translated into several disputes over Russian energy prices, was an opportunity to punish the dissident Ukrainian leadership.²³⁴

The core values of the *siloviki* include a highly centralized state, resting on the bedrock of a strong security and defense structure. In addition, as economic nationalists, the *siloviki's* values include exploiting the wealth of the nation's natural resources, including the vast offshore oil and gas resources in the Black Sea and endorsing the

²³² Andrew Monaghan, “The Vertikal: Power and Authority in Russia,” *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2012): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01053.x>; Liliia Shevtsova and Arch ; Tait, *Russia Lost in Transition: The Yeltsin and Putin Legacies* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007), 107.

²³³ Brian D. Taylor, *State Building in Putin's Russia: Policing and Coercion after Communism* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 60–64.

²³⁴ Ian Bremmer and Samuel Charap, “The Siloviki in Putin's Russia: Who They Are and What They Want,” *The Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 87, <https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2006-07.30.1.83>; Yakovlev-Golani, “Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in the Slavic Triangle,” 393–95.

nationalistic, xenophobic views of the Russian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, they strongly promote and seek to restore Russia's greatness on the international stage through reintegration of former Soviet states as much as possible and by maintaining a strong army and advanced military capabilities.²³⁵

Therefore the internal dynamics in Russian politics and specific interest groups play a significant role in Russia's decision-making process and have contributed to the Russian decision to intervene in Ukraine, and ultimately to annex Crimea.²³⁶ The core values of the *siloviki* depict the mythologizing of the past and include, to some degree, the overall Russian perception, which has strongly influenced Russian politics. Russian national identity has long been tied up in its geography—including land, as Crimea was considered to be an inseparable part of Russia. Thus, the loss of the Empire in 1991, seen by Ukrainians as liberating, was viewed by the Russians as humiliating; a desire to restore its historical “great power” status affected Russian foreign policy choices, especially regarding Ukraine and Crimea.²³⁷ In comparison to Yeltsin, whose foreign policy was strongly influenced by interest groups, Putin's influence over inter-state relations is paramount. He successfully manages to recruit powerful interest groups under his control, as the muscle of Russia's foreign policy, while he remains the ultimate spine.²³⁸

During the first year of his presidency, as well as during his years as prime minister, despite somewhat harsh rhetoric toward the West, Putin continued to pursue cooperation and integration with the West, including closer relations. His return to the Russian presidency in 2012 triggered domestic discontent and protests in Russia. During

²³⁵ Frank Umbach, “The energy dimensions of Russia's annexation of Crimea,” *NATO Review*, 2015, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2014/NATO-Energy-security-running-on-empty/Ukraine-energy-independence-gas-dependence-on-Russia/EN/index.htm>; Bremmer and Charap, “The Siloviki in Putin's Russia,” 86–88.

²³⁶ Michael McFaul, “Faulty Powers: Who Started the Ukraine Crisis? Moscow's Choice,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6 (2014): 170.

²³⁷ Susan Richards, “Crimea in Context,” July 17, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2014-03-16/crimea-context>; Matthias Schepp, “Russia's Soul: What Crimea Says about Putin's Future,” *Spiegel Online*, August 13, 2014, sec. International, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/a-visit-to-crimea-in-search-of-the-beginnings-of-a-putin-legacy-a-985536.html>.

²³⁸ Yakovlev-Golani, “Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in the Slavic Triangle,” 395.

the country's financial downturn, Putin's popularity and approval rating dropped to 40 percent, compared to 70 percent during Russia's oil-fueled years.²³⁹ In order to mobilize the electoral base and sustain his legitimacy and the support of his interest groups, he reinforced and fostered the growing view of the West and the United States as enemies, threatening Russia and undermining Russia's great power status, which implies Russia's assumption of particular rights in its sphere of influence. Thus, the events in Ukraine and the acquisition of Crimea were an opportunity to correct the historic mistake, to take revenge for Western humiliation, and to restore national pride. Putin framed these events as an act of salvation and struggle between Russia and the West. It was based on his perception of the past in line with the views of his affiliates, contributing to the quality of relations between the interest groups and boosting his reputation within Russia, resulting in an increase in his approval rating to over 80 percent after the annexation.²⁴⁰

Thus, considered in light of opportunity-related strategies, Russia's invasion and its narrative to assure the status quo, which was about to change through Western aggression, can be seen as framing and an attempt to hide the underlying intention. In fact, Russia's actions were motivated by the opportunity of gaining profit—internally and geopolitically—within smaller states and, in this case, the peninsula of Crimea. Thus, loosely in line with Schweller, it can be argued that Russia acted in the spectrum of limited, up to an unlimited, gains revisionist jackal, humiliated and oppressed by the status quo, choosing a risk -accepting aggression strategy for easy gains, as depicted in Figure 03. Thus, the annexation can be seen as a rational decision that achieved an ideological and strategic victory: “The occupation of Crimea was a grand and glorious little war that raised Putin's popularity with hyper nationalists in Russia, cost no lives, and transpired

²³⁹ Miriam Elder, “Putin's Presidency Bid Stirs Discontent,” *The Guardian*, September 25, 2011, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/25/putin-presidency-bid-russia>; McFaul, “Faulty Powers,” 169–70.

²⁴⁰ McFaul, “Faulty Powers,” 170; Karolina Chorvath, “As Ukraine's Presidential Election Approaches, the Kremlin Is All the More Comfortable in Crimea,” Public Radio International, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-03-18/ukraines-presidential-election-approaches-kremlin-all-more-comfortable-crimea>; Leonid Ragozin, “Annexation of Crimea: A Masterclass in Political Manipulation,” accessed July 17, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/annexation-crimea-masterclass-political-manipulation-190315174459207.html>; Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses* (RAND Corporation, 2017), 87, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1577>.

quickly and relatively inexpensively.”²⁴¹ Furthermore, Russia’s perception of Ukraine and Crimea and its disregard for Ukraine’s moral objections over the intervention and annexation represent the theoretical thinking of classical realists, which can be traced back to Thucydides: An inferior, weak state cannot maintain its independence, because it is not strong enough to deter a foe from invading.²⁴²

C. INTERVENING VARIABLE: HYBRID WARFARE

Based on the conclusions drawn from the independent variables Threat and Opportunities, summarized in Figure 7, this section implements the intervening variable, Hybrid Warfare. It applies the key deductions of hybrid warfare in line with the conflating relationship of its variables, as depicted in Figure 4. Thus, this section first analyzes Russia’s overlapping use of the information domain and denial and deception, within and outside the battlespace, to enable and support the use of violence. This is followed by a detailed assessment of Russia’s ‘pool of forces’ and the combination of regular and irregular tactics within the battlespace to show that Russia used these assets to leverage its use of violence to achieve its aim of taking over Crimea.

1. Information Domain

One of the most important elements of Russian hybrid war is its effective use of the information domain or, as some would call it, information warfare waged with and embedded in covert and overt military and non-military, conventional and non-conventional methods. The Russian information campaign was an integrated part of Russian hybrid warfare in Crimea and Ukraine.

Russian media coverage and its use to manipulate Ukraine and Crimea intensified after the Euromaidan protests began in November 2013, aiming in particular at the Russian public at home and Crimean and Eastern Ukrainian residents. A central plot throughout the whole Ukrainian crisis was the continuous anti-Western narrative, which

²⁴¹ Alexander J. Motyl, “Is Putin Rational?,” March 18, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-18/putin-rational>.

²⁴² Korab-Karpowicz, “Political Realism in International Relations,” 2.

varied in its characteristics, while certain threats reoccurred. Thus, the persistent attribution of malicious intentions of the West, in particular the United States, NATO, and the EU, to conspire against Russia aimed to support the historical narrative that ethnic Russians are endangered by external and internal enemies. This narrative repeated the continuous Kremlin litany of Western perfidies.²⁴³

Hence, the use of the information domain played upon the fears of ethnic Russians in Ukraine, as well as aimed to secure the support of the domestic public by uniting them around the Russian leadership for protection. It therefore shaped in an early phase the narrative that Russian counteraction would be purely defensive and justified, intended solely to repel malicious adversaries and protect Russian-speaking residents in other states.²⁴⁴

When it became clear that the Euromaidan protests would continue and when Yanukovich's government collapsed in early 2014, Russian rhetoric on the events in Ukraine became more severe, supported by other means, such as cyber-attacks, to shape the battlefield. Russia intensified its exaggeration of marginal neo-Nazi groups and references to fascism, giving the impressions that Ukraine was radicalized and ruled by "fascist usurpers" and supported by a fascist protest movement.²⁴⁵ Russian information campaigns also intensified an emphasis on chaos and anarchy, linking it to inappropriate use of violence by the protesters and anti-Russian activists. Thus, Russian television channels were required by the Kremlin to broadcast images depicting a high degree of violence. In addition, cyber-attacks contributed to this campaign. For instance, electronic

²⁴³ Galeotti, Hybrid War Or Gibrinaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right, 36–27; Michael Kofman et al., Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (RAND Corporation, 2017), 12, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1498>.

²⁴⁴ Daniela-Elena Mitu, "Information and Hybrid Warfare: Intelligence Challenges, Intelligent," in *Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine*, ed. Nicolae Iancu, Mihaela Teodor, and Cristian Barna, vol. 128 (Amsterdam ; Washington, DC: IOS Press, 2016), 60; Przemysław Furgacz, "Russian Information War in Ukrainian Conflict," in *Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine*, ed. Nicolae Iancu et al., vol. 128 (Amsterdam ; Washington, DC: IOS Press, 2016), 207.

²⁴⁵ Kofman et al., Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, 13.

billboards in Kiev were hacked to display images of civilian casualties tied to Ukrainian officials and anti-Russian activists, who were then identified as war criminals.²⁴⁶

In addition, cyber-attacks, mainly targeting opposition sites, started in December 2013 and advanced to include attacks on government and civilian networks. These attacks were organized by pro-Russian proxy hacktivist groups with links to the Russian government, called Cyber Berkut. The actions ranged from disrupting internet and telephone networks within Ukraine to foreign disruptions, such as targeting NATO websites aimed to isolate, disrupt, and de-legitimatize Kiev.²⁴⁷ Hence, the use of the information domain during this phase was aimed, on the one hand, at Russian society, insisting that the uprising against the government would ultimately drift into chaos and should be avoided. On the other hand, it also intended to foster support from and mobilize the domestic populace and Russian ethnics in Ukraine, as the Russian victory over Fascism was the biggest achievement in Russian history, and supported the narrative that Russia has to protect the Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine from being ruled by fascism.²⁴⁸

Shortly prior to the annexation, the information machine was shaping a narrative aimed to prepare the population for war. This narrative depicted the likelihood of the escalation of hostilities, proclaiming that NATO had designs on Crimea, aligned with an illegitimate government in Ukraine. These messages were bolstered by a multitude of programs focusing on inspiring documentaries about the hero city of Sevastopol.²⁴⁹ The messages emphasized that Russians were under immediate ultra-nationalist threat in Crimea and were calling for Russia to protect them.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁶ Brandon Valeriano, Benjamin M. Jensen, and Ryan C. Maness, *Cyber Coercion: The Evolving Character of Cyber Power and Strategy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 138–39; Mitu, “Information and Hybrid Warfare,” 60–61.

²⁴⁷ Valeriano, Jensen, and Maness, *Cyber Coercion*, 137–38.

²⁴⁸ Furgacz, “Russian Information War in Ukrainian Conflict,” 209–11.

²⁴⁹ Zwack, “Russia’s Contradictory Relationship with the West,” 153; Furgacz, “Russian Information War in Ukrainian Conflict,” 211.

²⁵⁰ Mitu, “Information and Hybrid Warfare,” 61; Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia’s Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, 13–14.

During the operation to seize Crimea, Russian Special Forces played a significant role. As one of their early key objectives, they seized the main internet exchange point in Crimea and targeted the telecommunication cables linking the peninsula with the mainland. Thus, through the use of physical force and control of the strategic information structure, Russia gained control over the information environment in Crimea. This was supported by the shutdown of Ukrainian television channels shortly after, leaving access to Russian channels only.²⁵¹

While the seizure of Crimea was ongoing, the information campaign shifted toward the official Russian campaign of public denial of Russian involvement and a corresponding assault of disinformation to create uncertainty and doubt about the nature of the seizure to support the physical covert takeover.²⁵²

Thus, with regard to the annexation of Crimea, it can be stated that Russia used the information domain prior to, during, and after the annexation in different ways to enable, shape, support, and justify Russia's leverage of violence on the battlefield and achieve its aim.

2. Denial and Deception

The analysis of the information domain has shown the inherent embeddedness of denial and deception in Russian hybrid warfare, as it supported the continuous main theme that Russian troops were not involved in Crimea. These actions in Crimea can be traced back to Russia's use of a military deception doctrine called *Maskirovka*, which evolved from a conventional military approach into an effective instrument to influence the

²⁵¹ Galeotti, Hybrid War Or Gibrinaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right, 56; Marsh, Developments in Russian Special Operations - Russia's Spetsnaz, SOF and Special Operations Forces Command, 15.

²⁵² Kofman et al., Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, 15.

outcome of engagements in Crimea to Russia's advantage.²⁵³ Through all phases of the operation, Russia practiced deception from the tactical to the strategic level, and was able to deceive not only the Crimean population and the leadership in Kiev, but also the West.

Russia conducted *Maskirovka* at the tactical level, through the employment of what the Crimeans called "little green men," or as the Russian's named them, "local, self-defense forces."²⁵⁴ These masked soldiers in green uniforms that bore no insignias, carrying equipment and weapons used within the Russian Federation, were successful in taking the initiative, seizing key government buildings and critical infrastructure, and blocking military bases. In addition, they were able to make the population believe that they were indigenous non-hostile police forces. Thus, they strongly supported efforts to achieve illegal geographical gains in peacetime.

On the operational level these nondescript forces seizing Crimea delayed a Ukrainian response. Although it recognized that these were Russian forces, the Ukrainian government was not able to agree on a unified response and therefore ordered Ukrainian forces not to fire or provoke for fear of escalation, and to avoid further Russian involvement. Remembering the war between Russia and Georgia, the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine were afraid that a provocative Ukrainian response would be used as an excuse for legitimate Russian invasion.²⁵⁵

Simultaneously, the highest echelon of power, the President of Russia himself, disguised Russia's presence and concealed its goals by publicly denying its participation. Right after concealed Russian forces and their proxies began to seize official buildings

²⁵³ David M. Glantz, "The Red Mask: The Nature and Legacy of Soviet Military Deception in the Second World War," *Intelligence and National Security* 2, no. 3 (July 1987): 175–259, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684528708431907>; Josh Elliot, "Theatricality and Deception: How Russia Uses 'Maskirovka' to Shake the World - National | Globalnews.ca," June 9, 2018, <https://globalnews.ca/news/4260938/russia-strategy-maskirovka-military-politics-putin/>; Joel B. Vowell, "Maskirovka: From Russia, with Deception," 2016, http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/10/31/maskirovka_from_russia_with_deception_110282.html.

²⁵⁴ Biersack and O'Lear, "The Geopolitics of Russia's Annexation of Crimea," 249–50.

²⁵⁵ Biersack and O'Lear, 250; Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, 23.

and military bases, Moscow unleashed a wave of disinformation underpinned by an outright denial by President Putin himself. This was enabled by the Western perception that Russia would support political negotiations toward a political settlement and then de-escalate rather than annex Crimea.²⁵⁶

In addition, Russia conducted false flag operations to hide its affiliation and discredit the target, Ukraine. These operations were aligned with the principles of *Maskirovka* and closely coordinated with Russia's information campaign, picked up and broadcasted through Russian media outlets and social networks.²⁵⁷ Thus, for example, to discredit the U.S. and Ukrainian governments, Russia released information claiming that the U.S. Army attaché was coordinating in close cooperation with the Ukrainian Army false flag attacks that they designed to look like Russian Special Forces. At the same time, however, Russian Special Forces were simulating indigenous Ukrainian partisan forces to lend further credibility to Russian disinformation operations and to incite social unrest.²⁵⁸ These operations aimed to use deceptive measures aligned with an anti-Western narrative, which was based on deep historical perspectives and prejudices.²⁵⁹

Regarding the Crimean case, it can be stated that these acts of denial and deception, executed through all levels of command and supported by continuous disinformation and distraction, were consistent with the concept of *Maskirovka*, and conducted as a whole-of government strategy. Nevertheless, the core elements, used in the early years of *Maskirovka*, have remained the same: the distraction of the adversary,

²⁵⁶ "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," President of Russia, April 17, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>; Shaun Walker, "Putin Admits Russian Military Presence in Ukraine for First Time," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2015, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/17/vladimir-putin-admits-russian-military-presence-ukraine>; Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, 24.

²⁵⁷ These types of operations are, as the name indicates, a type of covert operation, with the aim to make it seem as if they were carried out under another nation's flag (Valeriano, Jensen, and Maness, *Cyber Coercion*, 139.)

²⁵⁸ Valeriano, Jensen, and Maness, 139–40; Ash, "How Russia Outfoxes Its Enemies."

²⁵⁹ See further explanation in the previous section, "Information Domain," as well as within the history section (Chapter III, Section 2).

the concealment of the true intent, and the spread of disinformation to sow confusion and delay any response.²⁶⁰

3. Leveraging Violence—Pool of Forces

The previous considerations regarding Russia’s hybrid warfare in Crimea have focused on its use of the information domain and deception and denial, mainly through non-kinetic means as an enabling and shaping function to leverage the use of violence. The next essential consideration related to hybrid warfare is the deployment and potential use of lethal force. In accordance with the understanding of violence within this thesis as the use of physical violence through the application of force to lethal effect, this section examines whether Russia was willing and capable of employing various levels of violence through its own means or external entities within the battlespace.

The Russian force pool consisted of conventional armed forces, special forces, and irregular assets such as proxy groups and auxiliary forces. Although some details about the units employed are unclear, the basic structure contributing to Russian hybrid warfare is known.²⁶¹

Russian troop deployments in the Black Sea region and large-scale security and military exercises conducted by the Russian fleet and other regional forces took place for more than a year prior to annexation of Crimea, attributed as precautionary measures for the Sochi Olympics.²⁶² Hence, a snap inspection by President Putin involving 150,000 troops from parts of the Western and Central Military District shortly after the Sochi Games was also not considered unusual, due to the frequency of these large-scale exercises since 2013. In addition, Putin’s former deputy Prime Minister, a former KGB officer and one of his principle advisors, Vladislav Surkov, appeared in Simferopol to

²⁶⁰ Ash, “How Russia Outfoxes Its Enemies,” 1–2; Jill Dougherty, “Everyone Lies: The Ukraine Conflict and Russia’s Media Transformation,” *Harvard Kennedy School*, January 6, 2014, 4–8; Roberts, *Maskirovka 2.0: Hybrid Threat, Hybrid Response*, 2–6.

²⁶¹ Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibrinaya Voyna? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 58.

²⁶² Special Operations Command Army U. S., “*Little Green Men*”: *A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013–2014* (U.S. Army Special Operations Command, 2016), 40.

advocate for a bridge across the Kerch Strait to link Crimea with the Russian mainland. This project was meant to serve as a cover for the arrival of Russians and equipment to Crimea. Thus, in combination with the ongoing exercises, which had already desensitized observers to a potential danger, Russia successfully concealed troop movements to staging areas in close proximity to Crimea and to the existing Russian military base of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol.²⁶³ The first perceptible sign that Russia had decided to use force in order to change the political power on the peninsula was on February the 24, as conventional units from the 810th Naval Infantry arrived in armored vehicles in the city of Sevastopol, after the city council installed a Russian citizen as a mayor. This was a clear violation of the rules governing basing arrangements in Crimea.²⁶⁴

Beside conventional forces, Special Forces (SF) and Special Operations Forces (SOF) played the decisive role during the Russian occupation of Crimea. Thus, it is no surprise that in 2015 President Putin announced the 27th of February, the date on which Crimea “officially joined” the ‘Motherland,’ as Special Operations Forces Day.²⁶⁵

First and foremost among these forces are the *spetsnaz* (Special Designation), who trace their heritage back to the *ravedchiki* (reconnaissance scouts).²⁶⁶ They expanded in light of the Sochi Olympics up to a strength of approximately 17,000 and are found

²⁶³ Alissa de Carbonnel, “Russia Military Exercises 2013: Large-Scale, Surprise Drills In Black Sea Region Announced,” Huffington Post, March 28, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/russia-military-exercises-2013_n_2970184; John Simpson, “Russia’s Crimea Plan Detailed, Secret and Successful,” BBC News, March 19, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26644082>; Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia’s Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, 8.

²⁶⁴ Howard Amos, “Ukraine: Sevastopol Installs pro-Russian Mayor as Separatism Fears Grow,” *The Guardian*, February 25, 2014, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/25/ukraine-sevastopol-installs-pro-russian-mayor>.

²⁶⁵ Howard Amos, “Vladimir Putin Announces Official Holiday to Mark Crimea Operation - Telegraph,” February 27, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11439362/Vladimir-Putin-announces-official-holiday-to-mark-Crimea-operation.html>.

²⁶⁶ Spetsnaz are especially trained for large scale operations and is considered best as expeditionary light infantry, comparable to the US 75th Rangers or UK’s 16th Air Assault Element. (Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 54.)

throughout the military, intelligence, and security service. In addition, entities under the command of KSSO, considered as Russian's premier SOF units, were involved.²⁶⁷

The association of Special Forces in Crimea began most likely around February 22, while *spetsnaz* units, as well as Airborne Forces (*Vozdushno-desantnye voyska Rossii*, or VDV), left their bases and were airlifted close to the strait between Russia and Crimea. Prior to this, Airborne *spetsnaz* and most likely GRU *spetsnaz* units were covertly moved to Sevastopol. KSSO personnel arrived in Sevastopol on February 25, and subsequently took over the Crimean government and seized key infrastructure, such as the telephone and internet networks, to assure Russian advantage within the information domain. In addition, members of the naval *spetsnaz*, primarily from the 431st Independent Special Purpose Naval Reconnaissance Point, based out of Sevastopol, as well as other *spetsnaz* units were able to quickly seize buildings and strategic infrastructure, such as the headquarters of the Ukrainian Navy in Sevastopol and Belbek Air Base.²⁶⁸ Air support followed, enabling Russia to neutralize Ukrainian armor and operate at night and by airlift of additional VDV units into Crimea after seizing Simferopol airport.

Shortly after reinforcement, mainly conventional units, arrived by heavy landing ships, tasked across the peninsula to encircle or take over bases and military facilities, followed by a conventional force build-up. Finally, Russian forces seized all military bases, infrastructure, and equipment, forcing Ukraine to lose effective command and control over its units on the peninsula within one week into the operation.²⁶⁹

Beside the aforementioned Russian forces, the integration of irregular tactics and assets is one key element of Russian hybrid warfare. The interaction and blurred lines between Russian forces and Russia's support and use of irregular auxiliary forces and

²⁶⁷ Marsh, *Developments in Russian Special Operations - Russia's Spetsnaz, SOF and Special Operations Forces Command*, 11–12; Army, "Little Green Men," 43.

²⁶⁸ Marsh, *Developments in Russian Special Operations - Russia's Spetsnaz, SOF and Special Operations Forces Command*, 21–22; David Ignatius, "David Ignatius: Russia's Military Delivers a Striking Lesson in Crimea," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2014, sec. Opinions, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-russias-military-delivers-a-striking-lesson-in-crimea/2014/03/18/c1273044-aed7-11e3-9627-c65021d6d572_story.html.

²⁶⁹ Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, 8–11.

volunteers can be seen throughout the crisis. In particular, GRU units, such as GRU *spetsnaz*, are qualified to be tasked to train, mobilize, support, and lead irregular forces and have therefore contributed heavily to the seizure of Crimea. The secret staging of personnel within the peninsula provided *spetsnaz*, as well the FSB, the opportunity to identify, mobilize, link up, and coordinate with local separatists and auxiliary groups, as well as to conduct reconnaissance, by constantly monitoring Ukrainian forces and intercepting their communications.²⁷⁰

Russia's irregular proxy force was compromised of a variety of groups. According to Mark Galeotti, these groups fall broadly into the categories Volunteers and Mercenaries, Deniable Instruments, and Warlords.²⁷¹ The first group within Crimea consisted mainly of Cossacks, a traditional paramilitary formation, who have been used as deniable government assets since well before the Putin era. Under Putin though there has been a particular alliance formed, acknowledging their pivotal role as irregular forces in hybrid war.²⁷² During the operation in Crimea they were used to defend Sevastopol and blockade Ukrainian troops. The Cossacks were among the first 'separatists fighters' mobilized to assist the Russian Special Forces in the occupation of the Crimean parliament and other public buildings, reinforcing the appearance that it was a local rebellion against Kyiv, while concurrently supporting the denial of Russian official interaction.²⁷³ In addition, the Night Wolves motorcycle club, a proxy group of Russian nationalists founded in 1989 and of rather questionable military value, arrived in Crimea and were mainly utilized as a political propaganda tool, claiming that they wanted to assist the

²⁷⁰ Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibrinaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 57.

²⁷¹ Galeotti, 59.

²⁷² Iulian Chifu, "Hybrid Warfare after a Long Term Informational War," in *Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine*, ed. Niculae Iancu et al., NATO Science for Peace and Security Series. Sub-Series E, Human and Societal Dynamics, vol. 128 (Amsterdam ; Washington, DC: IOS Press, 2016), 37–38; Sergey Sukhankin, "Russia to Use Irregular Forces Against 'Hybrid Threats': The Case of Kaliningrad," Jamestown, July 24, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-to-use-irregular-forces-against-hybrid-threats-the-case-of-kaliningrad/>.

²⁷³ Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood*, 32–34; Army, "Little Green Men," 44.

people in Crimea in their struggle against the ‘fascists’ in Kiev.²⁷⁴ It can be seen in line with additional Russian support of other protest groups, such as the “Stop Euromaidan” movement in Crimea, as enabling and supporting functions. Even though these proxy groups and protesters were not able to mobilize large numbers of people to attend their rallies, the groups did serve Russia’s overall information campaign as triggers for the Russian media to magnify and increase pro-Russian sentiment.²⁷⁵

Deniable irregular instruments are, according to Galeotti, independent, deniable, but essentially state-controlled entities, marshalled by the FSB or the GSU.²⁷⁶ Thus, for instance, the Cossacks can be considered as deniable instruments, under the direct or indirect control of Russia. Within Crimea the Chetnik Guards, an irregular paramilitary unit of Serbia, also operated in close coordination with Russian and Cossack forces and can be considered as deniable instruments.²⁷⁷

Finally, Russia used local militias and organized crime enforcers as Russian proxies. In Crimea a pro-Russian politician named Sergei Aksyonov, with strong links to criminal groups, formed a pro-Russian militia numbering several thousands. Mainly recruited from organized crime groups, these new militia members were tasked during the seizure of Crimea to guard government buildings and to project lethal power. Shortly after the Parliament was seized by KSSO an “emergency session” of the parliament was held and Russian nationalist Aksyonov, claiming that all security forces were under his command, and was chosen as the new Prime Minister of Crimea.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁴ Alexander Marquardt, “‘Night Wolves’ Join Pro-Russian Side in Southern Ukraine,” ABC News, April 28, 2014, <https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2014/02/night-wolves-join-pro-russian-side-in-southern-ukraine/>; Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 59–60.

²⁷⁵ Allison Quinn, “Why Moscow’s Anti-Maidan Protesters Are Putting on Elaborate Pretence | World News | The Guardian,” April 26, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/26/russia-anti-maidan-protest-moscow>.

²⁷⁶ Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 60.

²⁷⁷ Army, “Little Green Men,” 44.

²⁷⁸ Simon Shuster, “Putin’s Man in Crimea Sergei Aksyonov Is Ukraine’s Worst Nightmare | Time,” October 3, 2014, <https://time.com/19097/putin-crimea-russia-ukraine-aksyonov/>; Army, “Little Green Men,” 22.

In addition, some of the previously mentioned irregular auxiliary groups also consisted of Russo-Ukrainian security professionals, such as former members of the Ukrainian Riot Police (*Berkut*). This unit was dissolved after the Euromaidan, already trained and equipped by Russian GSU units and later absorbed in the ranks of the Crimean separatist forces to provide additional manpower to the core of the Russian forces, blurring the lines between regular and irregular tactics and entities.²⁷⁹

The seizure of Crimea was conducted practically without any bloodshed, annexed by Russia without any direct Russian casualties. Only six associated deaths were reported. This was mainly because Russian forces faced no resistance, because the Ukrainian military was ordered not to fire or provoke the Russian forces to avoid escalation and further Russian involvement.²⁸⁰ This fact, however, is not an accurate representation of Russia's leverage of violence and hybridity.

The seizure of Crimea was not a non-violent uprising of the populace. It was a well-orchestrated integration of irregular fighters, conventional capabilities, regular Russian units, special forces, and proxy groups using a suite of overt and covert actions. In particular, the use of troops without insignia was an integral component of this action, allowing the Russian government to deny its complicity during the initial phase of seizing key infrastructure and strategic objectives, supported by local militia and irregular forces. It aimed to blur the lines to a conventional warfare scenario, creating enough confusion to allow for the consolidation of Russian control over the region. Hence, Russia resorted to hybrid warfare to ensure disguise, deniability, and surprise using key military elements, reinforced by mainly irregular forces at low costs.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ Maksim Bugriy, "The Crimean Operation: Russian Force and Tactics," Jamestown, January 4, 2014, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-crimean-operation-russian-force-and-tactics/>; Tara Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri, "Annexation and Hybrid Warfare in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine," July 25, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/06/25/annexation-and-hybrid-warfare-in-crimea-and-eastern-ukraine/>.

²⁸⁰ Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, 11; Biersack and O'Leary, "The Geopolitics of Russia's Annexation of Crimea," 250.

²⁸¹ These auxiliary entities fit the doctrinal definition of irregular forces: Individuals or groups who are not members of the regular armed forces, police, or other internal security forces. (United States Department of Defense, "Irregular Forces Definition," U.S. DoD, 2019, https://www.militaryfactory.com/dictionary/military-terms-defined.asp?term_id=2819.)

Power, perception, and willingness to use lethal force were also integral parts of the operation. Especially SOF and SF played key roles within this deceptive use of power. Although clearly bearing different equipment in comparison to local irregulars, they were particularly used within the decisive phase of the operation. On the one hand, their appearance showed their ability to use lethal violence effectively. On the other hand, they were distinguished by their ability to act professionally in tense situations, where a single instance of use of deadly force could have quickly turned into a large-scale violent situation. Thus, while the West referred to them as “little green men,” the Russians referred to them as “polite people.”²⁸² Consequently, Russia used its pool of hybrid forces—its elite units and irregular forces—sequentially. While the decisive key objectives were seized by KSST and *spetsnaz* units, these units were also able to disappear and integrate with associated proxy groups shortly after, who consolidated the gains. This combination of forces substantiated the Russian narrative that the actions in Crimea were solely conducted by a Crimean self-defense effort, after which Crimea declared independence from Ukraine and requested incorporation into the Russian Federation on March 1.²⁸³

Based on the analysis, Russia was clearly able and willing to use violence. Nevertheless, the favorable numbers of Russians within Crimea, Ukraine’s non-resistance, and especially the specific use and mobilization of Russia’s hybrid assets contributed to an almost non-violent seizure of Crimea. Still, in the wake of the annexation, reports of human rights violations have been abundant. Thus, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, arrests, and torture are still carried out to exert control and to prohibit dissent on the peninsula, and to ensure the status of Crimea as favorable to Russia.²⁸⁴

²⁸² Galeotti, *Hybrid War Or Gibrinaya Voina? Getting Russia’s Non-Linear Military Challenge Right*, 53.

²⁸³ Biersack and O’Lear, “The Geopolitics of Russia’s Annexation of Crimea,” 250–51.

²⁸⁴ NATO, “Statement by the North Atlantic Council on Crimea,” NATO, March 18, 2019, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_164656.htm.

D. KEY FINDINGS—VARIABLES FRAMEWORK

1. Independent Variables: Threat and Opportunities

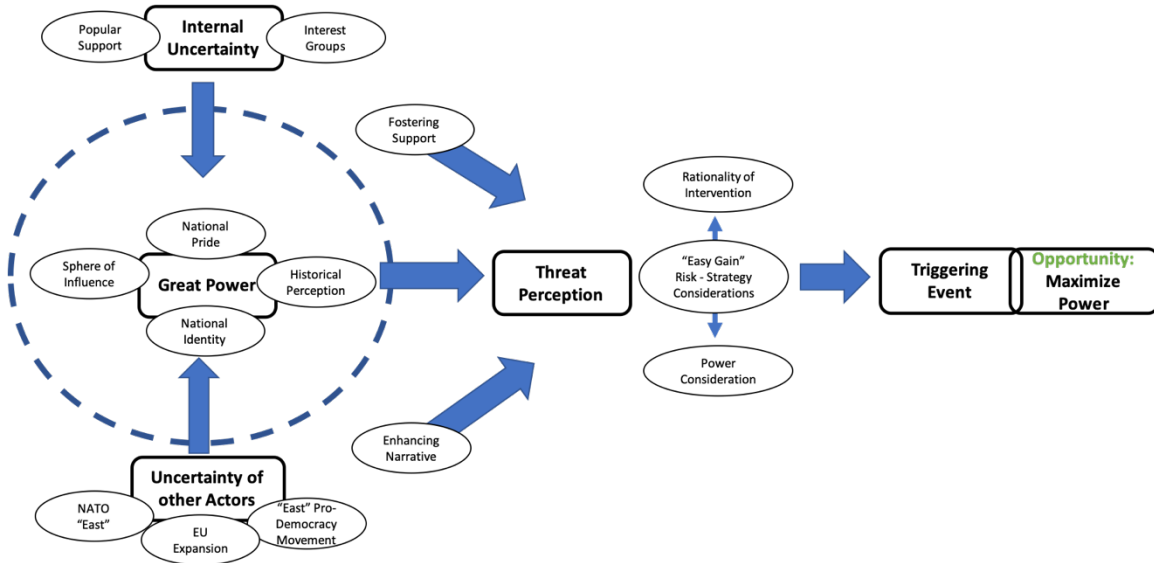


Figure 7. Independent Variables Assumption: Crimea

The analysis of Russia's action based on the independent variables threat and opportunities derives from the key considerations of offensive realism. The analysis revealed that Russia's view of its great power status drives, as a pivotal point, foreign policy decisions. This view is strongly influenced by elements of Russian strategic culture, which shapes Russia's "rational" decisions and solutions toward a specific problem set. Hence, Russia's historical perspective of its geopolitical posture as a vast power, which implies and justifies particular rights within its legitimate sphere of influence and contributes to the perception of Russian national identity and national pride.

These elements of Russia's great power status are influenced by internal and external uncertainty. Internal uncertainty in this case is represented by the existence of influential interest groups deeply rooted in Russian politics and the interrelationship between foreign policy decisions and the importance of popular support and trust in the decision maker to assure his legitimacy and power. External uncertainty derives from the

actors within the sphere of influence and competing entities, in this case Ukraine and the West.

This perception of great power status and the internal and external influencing factors contribute to the perception of threat and possible vulnerability, which heavily influences Russian foreign policy decisions. Hence, Russia perceives and reiterates external adversaries as threats that aim to undermine its great power status. Furthermore, this view fosters and supports internal national cohesion, while external actors' decisions confirm and enhance this narrative. These threat perceptions can be diverse, as the case depicts, such as domestic upheaval possibly supported by foreign entities like NATO, or persistent concerns, such as the continuous competition between the Western and Russian views of life.

This persistent Russian threat perception, as the case reveals, is the starting point to consider which strategy Russia chooses, either threat-related or opportunity-related. Within the Crimean case it is assessed that the threat perception is used as a supporting and framing element of an opportunity-related strategy, to hide Russia's underlying intention.

Russia chose an opportunity-related strategy in Crimea, because it was assessed as an "easy gain" based on power considerations regarding the adversary and the risk of possible retaliation, which was considered as low. This Russian assessment derives from the knowledge that Ukraine is not a member of NATO and is not militarily capable to respond. In addition, Russia assessed that the likelihood of immediate armed international support was low, based on the international community's inability to react militarily, as long as Russia's actions remained under the threshold of an armed conflict. On the other hand, Russian decision makers, in particular Putin, assessed that the likelihood of internal support in Russia and Crimea was high, due to the historical interdependency and the strong Russian division within Crimea. He also assessed it as an opportunity to lift his reputation.

A Triggering Event, the violent protests during the Euromaidan, aligned with protests covertly fueled by Russia against the 'Kiev fascists' in Crimea, which further

shaped and enhanced the threat narrative and Russia’s obligation to protect and secure Russian interests and the pro-Russian population in Crimea. In addition, this triggering event and the Euromaidan created a situation of turmoil, focusing on the capital Kiev, catalyzing the decision to launch the intervention and to shift the balance of power in Russia’s favor to finally maximize its power and influence in Crimea.

Thus, the analysis finds that Russia’s decision to intervene in Crimea reflects both threat- and opportunity-related strategies. The perception of a great power, strongly supported by the threat-related narrative that external powers will interfere in domestic affairs in Russia’s backyard, and motivated by the opportunity of easy gains internally and geographically had influenced Russia’s decision. Russia engaged in a conflict with Ukraine for the purpose of taking over Crimea to increase Russia’s power and expand its influence in the region.

2. Intervening Variable: Hybrid Warfare

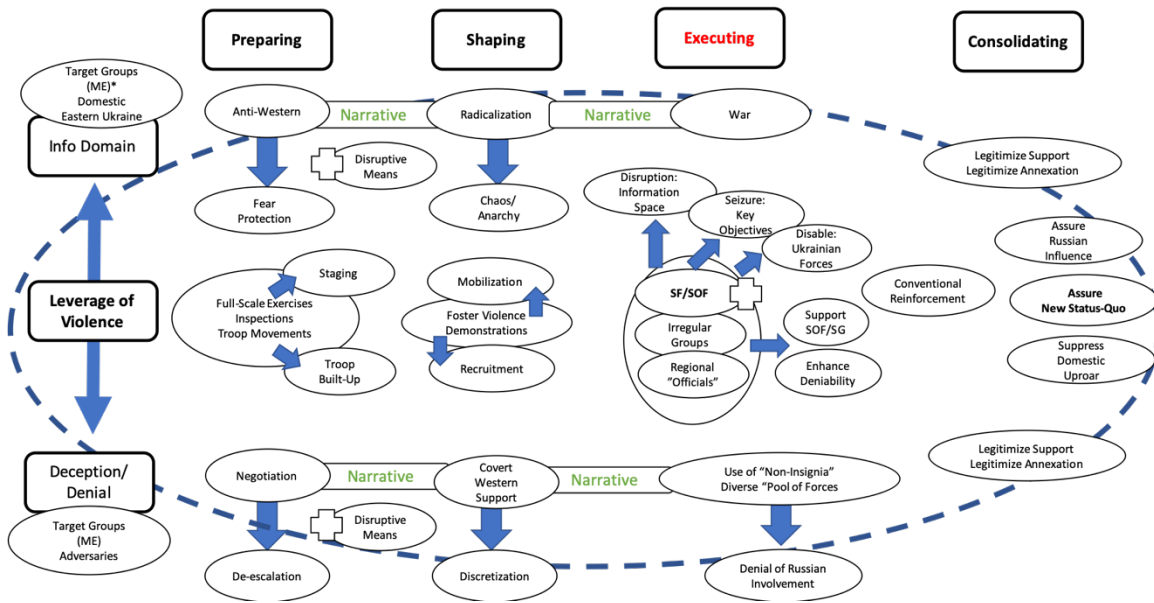


Figure 8. Intervening Variables Assumption: Crimea

The key findings from the analysis of the intervening variable Hybrid Warfare have proven the theoretically derived conflating relationship and Russia’s application of

it within a specific case, Crimea, depicted in different stages in and outside the battlespace. The stages labeled Preparing and Shaping are represented by activities up to the Euromaidan demonstrations; the Executing phase focuses on the events of the intervention up to the annexation, and the final stage, labeled as Consolidation, after the official accession of Sevastopol and the Republic of Crimea into the Russian Federation.

The first phase is strongly influenced by the use of the information domain and the overlapping use of denial and deception, directed at both the domestic Russian population as well as on the Ukraine and Western governments and official entities, such as NATO or the EU. Within this phase the plot is based on continuous anti-Western narratives, aligned with persistent false attribution of malicious Western activities, aiming to support the perception of fear and need for protection against external enemies. Meanwhile Russian emphasis on political solutions and de-escalation in Ukraine aimed to distract the enemy. Hence, the constant build up of forces in staging areas near the Ukrainian border or covered troop movements in existing bases in Crimea were not considered by Western observers or Ukrainian officials as a threat. The true purpose of these movements largely went undetected because they were conducted frequently and attributed as precautionary measures for the Sochi Olympics. In addition, they shifted the focus toward the Ukrainian border, away from the battlespace of Crimea.

Within the second phase, when the Euromaidan protests continued up until the point when Yanukovch's government collapsed, Russian rhetoric became more strident, fostering the impression of a radicalized Ukraine descending into chaos and supported by Western entities. In addition, Russia used disruptive means such as cyber-attacks and false flag operations to isolate and de-legitimize Kiev and to shape the battlefield by degrading Ukraine's ability to respond.

Within the battlefield, Russia took advantage of the overall chaos and anarchy to foster resentment against the 'fascists' in Kiev and to merge into the population, using GRU and FSB personnel in particular to carry this out. They identified and coordinated support for the invasion, encouraged the uproar, and monitored and disrupted Ukrainian forces. Concurrently, they mobilized active opposition forces. Thus, besides non-kinetic

factors, domestic and imported irregular forces aided by external supporters began to act, fueling the demonstrations within Crimea.

The third phase is characterized by the commencement of explicit military action, conducted by deniable entities, blurring the lines between regular and irregular forces. At first, Russia's most elite units assured in a phase of vulnerability in manpower the seizure of key objectives and the disruption of Ukraine's command and control structure. While real military was tasked with securing the peninsula, irregular groups, as well as quasi-regular Ukrainian forces, were utilized to support SOF and SF at low costs to consolidate the military gains and to assure no uproar by visible lethality. Conventional Russian forces were employed shortly after they were officially requested by the new Crimean Prime Minister Aksyonov. This phase was aligned with a well-orchestrated deception and information strategy, reiterating the plausible deniability of Russian involvement. Consequently, it contributed to the effective use of the diverse pool of forces, delaying any Ukrainian or Western response.

The last phase consolidated the new status of Crimea and ensured Russian influence through the implementation of a pro-Russian prime minister of Crimea, the suppression of opposing forces, and support from a strong Russian force posture in Crimea.

Thus, the hybrid composition of armed personnel preceded, enabled, and followed by an overlapping use of the information domain and denial and deception strategies contributed to the Russian success in Crimea. It provided an effective measure of deniability for Russia, which was supported by a previously shaped environment within and outside the battlefield favorable to Russian politics and enhanced at all levels of Russian statecraft. Hence, the effective use of the intervening variable, Hybrid Warfare, contributed to the outcome, the dependent variable, Russia's maximization of power and extension of influence.

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V. CASE STUDY II: RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE IN MONTENEGRO

In advance of their 2016 election, the country of Montenegro was suddenly in the news, after the government announced that an attempted coup, aiming to kill Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, was prevented. Shortly after, Montenegro, as well as the international community, accused Russia as the main instigator of the coup. As the case study reveals, it is one of the most recent examples of Russia carrying out hybrid warfare against pro-Western authorities.²⁸⁵

The Montenegrin case study depicts how Russia was able and willing to use the full toolkit of hybrid warfare after Russia's perception of Montenegro changed from neutral ally to challenging actor pressing for NATO membership. Hence, in terms of the independent variables, Russia responded to this threat with opportunity-related bandwagon strategies in the use of lethal force as part of a threat-related buck-passing strategy that aimed to finally replace the pro-Western government with pro-Russian representatives. By taking into consideration that Montenegro is not in the core sphere of Russian interest and influence, a closer look at the intervening variable Hybrid Warfare reveals that Russia assigned particular importance to passing the burden of executing the coup to external entities to minimize the risk of involvement, in favor of Russian denial and deception.

Accordingly, this chapter defines Russia's action within the variables framework, based on a solid historical basis, paying special attention to the unique relationship among Russia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The chapter also examines the historically related fragile divisions between Russophiles and Russophobes in Montenegro, which are vivid up until today. Next, this chapter utilizes the independent variables Threat and Opportunities to determine whether Russia's strategic rationale to intervene was threat-related driven after Montenegro shifted its neutral stance between Russia and NATO, tipping it toward the

²⁸⁵ Warsaw Institute, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the Western Balkans," March 26, 2019, 3, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russias-hybrid-warfare-western-balkans/>.

latter. Finally, based on the intervening variable, the chapter offers an analysis of Russia's implementation of hybrid warfare, showing that Russia relied heavily on a diverse pool of forces, enabled and trained by the GRU operating out of Serbia. The attempted state coup was supported by an open pro-opposition information campaign and a denial and deception strategy, in which the use of violence to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO was a significant part.

A. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The tiny Balkan nation of Montenegro became NATO's newest member state in 2017 and is moving toward EU membership (anticipated by 2025). As the smallest republic of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), Montenegro is probably one of the least recognized Balkan nations by the West.²⁸⁶ Reasons for this include its size (slightly smaller than Connecticut) and a small population of about 620,000 people.²⁸⁷ In addition, Montenegro is often perceived as being an integral part of the Serbian ethnic and national framework and not as an independent country. Nevertheless, Montenegro, which has decided to resist a resurgent Russia, gained importance as a new NATO member, providing regional stability and promoting Western values.

Montenegro's modern history is characterized by significant change in statehood when it finally attained independence from Serbia in 2006 and by a deteriorating relationship with Russia, especially since 2013.²⁸⁸ Russia's incentives to interfere in Montenegrin internal affairs through an attempted coup d'état have to be seen within a broader socio-cultural political context. At first glance, the unique relationship among

²⁸⁶ Ivana Gardasevic, "Russia and Montenegro: How and Why a Centuries Old Relationship Ruptured.," *Connections (18121098)* 17, no. 1 (2018): 71–72.

²⁸⁷ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), "Europe: Montenegro — The World Factbook," 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mj.html>.

²⁸⁸ Bohdana Dimitrovová and František Šístek, "National Minorities in Montenegro after the Break-up of Yugoslavia," in *Montenegro in Transition: Problems of Identity and Statehood*, ed. Florian Bieber, 1. Aufl, SEER Paperback (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2003), 11; Kenneth Morrison, "Change, Continuity and Crisis. Montenegro's Political Trajectory (1988-2016)," *Südost Europa; Regensburg* 66, no. 2 (2018): 153, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2018-0014>.

Russia, Serbia, and Montenegro reflects Russia's continuous interest in gaining influence in the Balkans through economic ties and via Orthodox religious traditions enabled through the Serbian Orthodox Church and strong Serbian-Montenegrin commonalities. In addition, a closer examination of Montenegro's most significant political developments within the last two decades reveals a fragile division between the leading pro-Western party and its opposition, while the latter is supported and influenced by Russia. In particular, closer examination shows that Montenegro's continuous aspiration to join NATO and its decision to side with the EU sanctions after the Russian annexation of Crimea degraded Montenegro's relationship with Russia and prompted Russia to change its rhetoric and behavior, interfering in Montenegro to favor Russian interests and pursue power within the Balkans.

1. Historical Interrelationship between Montenegro and Russia

Russia shares a long history of cultural, religious, and political relations with Montenegro. Special ties exist between their common Orthodox faith and Slavic roots, as well as the historical alliance forged during recurrent wars against the Ottomans.²⁸⁹

The year 1796 marked the advent of Montenegro's close relationship with Russia.²⁹⁰ After decisive victories over the Ottoman forces in 1796, Montenegro gained territory and Old Montenegro, an area free of Ottoman incursion, was unified with the *Brda* (Mountains).²⁹¹ Peter I Petrović, the most notable military and spiritual leader of the Petrović-Njegoš dynasty that ruled Montenegro from 1697–1918, successfully managed to consolidate these gains. He brought Montenegro's tribes together under a single authority and created a new form of state organization, by introducing the first written law in the same year.²⁹² Following the victories, Russia chose unilaterally to

²⁸⁹ Gardasevic, "Russia and Montenegro," 63–64.

²⁹⁰ Kenneth Morrison, *Montenegro: A Modern History* (London ; New York : New York: I.B. Tauris ; Distributed in the United States and Canada exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 21.

²⁹¹ Elizabeth Roberts, *Realm of the Black Mountain: A History of Montenegro* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2007), 167–78.

²⁹² Milan Grba, "Montenegro in 19th-Century Maps and History Books - European Studies Blog," 2018, <https://blogs.bl.uk/european/2018/04/montenegro-in-19th-century-maps-and-history-books-.html>.

recognize Montenegro as a *de facto* independent state, and Montenegro and the Petrović dynasty became the focal point of Russia's attention.²⁹³

The ensuing decades were characterized by a deteriorating relationship and wars against the Turks, who refused to recognize Montenegro's shift toward secular rule. A border was officially established in 1852 between Montenegro and Turkey—a significant step toward independence—and Montenegro became a secular principality under the patronage of the Russian Empire, to which it owed loyalty.²⁹⁴

The subsequent years under Prince Nikola I Petrović, who ascended the throne in 1860, saw conflicts and a changing Montenegro in territorial size and ethnic composition.²⁹⁵ Montenegro declared war on Turkey in 1876, after forging an alliance with Serbia, which soon culminated in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, during which Russian forces saved the Montenegrins from inevitable defeat and facilitated further Montenegrin territorial gains.²⁹⁶

Finally, at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, Montenegro gained independence and was able to consolidate its gained territories, including vital entry to the Adriatic Sea.²⁹⁷ Montenegro also intensified its ties to Russia, while Serbia became more oriented toward the competing great power Austria-Hungary. Immediately after its recognition, Montenegro began to expand. The power of the Ottoman Empire weakened in the Balkans, and Montenegro was able to exploit the emerging power vacuum, doubling in size between 1878 and 1880 alone.²⁹⁸ Due to the territorial expansion, Montenegro was

²⁹³ Morrison, *Montenegro*, 18–21.

²⁹⁴ Ivana Gardasevic, "Russia and Montenegro: How and Why a Centuries Old Relationship Ruptured.," *Connections (18121098)* 17, no. 1 (2018): 64; Siniša Malešević and Gordana Uzelac, "A Nation-state without the Nation? The Trajectories of Nation-formation in Montenegro .," *Nations and Nationalism* 13, no. 4 (2007): 702.

²⁹⁵ Morrison, *Montenegro*, 27.

²⁹⁶ Grba, "Montenegro in 19th-Century Maps and History Books - European Studies Blog"; Srdja Pavlovic, *Balkan Anschluss: The Annexation of Montenegro and the Creation of the Common South Slavic State*, Central European Studies (West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press, 2008), 33.

²⁹⁷ Malešević and Uzelac, "A Nation-state without the Nation? The Trajectories of Nation-formation in Montenegro .," 700.

²⁹⁸ Morrison, *Montenegro*, 28.

no longer restricted to the area of *Brda* and Old Montenegro. The new territories contained many Serbian and Albanian tribes, the influences of which eroded core traditional ‘Old Montenegrin’ identity.²⁹⁹ Nikola, based on the state-building success and the expansion of Montenegro, sought to extend his power beyond the environs of Montenegro, portraying himself as the natural leader of the Serb nation and advocating a strong unification of the Serb people and Pan-Slavism generally. Russia strongly supported Nikola, stressing his role in the process of South Slav unification and considering Montenegro as the Piedmont of Serbdom, and therefore facilitated Montenegro’s diplomatic leverage and geopolitical strength.³⁰⁰

Nonetheless, the Russian Balkan policy shifted after a new dynasty (the Karadjordjevićs) came to the throne in 1903 and Serbia emerged as a large and strong independent state.³⁰¹ Serbia consolidated itself as the strategic partner of choice for Russia and became loyal followers and exponents of the Russian policy, which sided with Belgrade and advocated the absorption of Montenegro by Serbia.³⁰²

This historical analysis reveals Russia’s intense interest in the Balkans as an area of influence in the competition among the great powers, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Russia’s role as supporter of South Slavs within the region served the purpose of minimizing the influence of any rival power. In addition, Russia’s switching sides between the Montenegrin and Serbian dynasties created animosity and rivalry between them.³⁰³ In doing so, Russia was able to control the political happenings toward a unification of the Southern Slavs in the Balkans. From 1796, the Montenegro’s politics toward the Ottoman Empire were intertwined with and strongly influenced by Montenegrin political and military relations with the Russian Empire. Thus, aligned with a shared religious history as members of the Orthodox family, Montenegro could depend

²⁹⁹ Morrison, 29–30.

³⁰⁰ Pavlovic, *Balkan Anschluss*, 97; Morrison, *Montenegro*, 31.

³⁰¹ The Royal Palace, “History of the Dynasty,” *Royal Family of Serbia* (blog), 2019, <http://www.royalfamily.org/dynasty/history-of-the-dynasty/>.

³⁰² Pavlovic, *Balkan Anschluss*, 98.

³⁰³ Pavlovic, 97.

on Russian backing during the constant conflicts against the Turks, and Russia supported the Montenegrin claim as undisputed leader of the South Slav orbit. This claim diminished as the political dynamics shifted toward a strong Serbian state, in which Montenegro was more and more seen as a simple branch of the Serbian royal family. Serbia became the chief agent in the Balkans and exponent of the Russian policy.³⁰⁴

2. Historical Interrelationship between Montenegro and Serbia

Serbs and Montenegrins have strong historical and cultural ties, and, in many respects, their religious and cultural traditions overlap. The majority of Montenegrins belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church and claim Serbian as their mother tongue.³⁰⁵

And yet, complex demographic patterns and differences which developed early in their history still exist and have paved the political debate between unification with Serbia and independence of Montenegro.³⁰⁶ Thus, these issues are rooted in the two competing national traditions among Montenegrins, *srpsvo* (Serbness) and *crnogorstvo* (Montenegriness).³⁰⁷

The formation of a unified South Slav state, named Yugoslavia (officially named Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes until 1929) marked the vanishing of an independent Montenegro from the political map for decades. The term Montenegrin as an identity vanished from the public discourse after this unification, as all inhabitants within the new Yugoslav census were defined as Serbs and incorporated into the Serbian national corpus.³⁰⁸ The unification remains a controversial issue and was recast in favor of the

³⁰⁴ Pavlovic, 97–98; Morrison, *Montenegro*, 34.

³⁰⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Serbia and Montenegro (Includes Kosovo),” U.S. Department of State, 2005, //2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2005/51578.htm.

³⁰⁶ These differences were already visible after Old Montenegro unified with *Brda*. The inhabitants of *Brda* looked to Belgrade and Serbia, as opposed to Montenegro and Cetinji, the capital, for spiritual and political leadership. Thus, the only common source of collective solidarity with the Old Montenegrins remained the religious tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy. (Dimitrovová and Šístek, “National Minorities in Montenegro after the Break-up of Yugoslavia,” 161.)

³⁰⁷ Ivo Banač, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*, 3. print (Ithaca [u.a]: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), 274–75; Morrison, *Montenegro*, 1.

³⁰⁸ Kenneth Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro* (London Oxford New York New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2018), 4; Morrison, *Montenegro*, 39–40, 46.

political parties in the lead-up to the independence referendum almost a century later, in 2006.³⁰⁹

Yet, the divisions remained during World War II, and the Montenegrin Federalist Party (CFS) and the emergent Communist Party of Yugoslavia became the natural homes of the opponents of independence.³¹⁰ The supporters of Montenegrin independence joined the partisans, while the people advocating a unified country supported the Serbian national forces, the Chetniks, who were defeated in 1945. After their defeat, the newly established socialist state SFRY introduced, under its President Josip Broz Tito, the policy of *Bratsvo I Jedvinsto* (Brotherhood and Unity) among all Yugoslav nations.³¹¹

SFRY was constituted in 1945 as a federation of six republics, of which Montenegro was one, based on the principle of nationality under centralized party control.³¹² The recognition of a separate Montenegrin republic, containing only two percent of the population, was a compromise to close the gap between the divisions, while Montenegrins were considered as Serbs belonging to the wider Serbian nations.³¹³

During the first years of the SFRY, Tito's relationship with Stalin worsened; in 1947, the Soviet Union and Stalin became enemies of the Yugoslav regime overnight. Montenegro was in particular affected by the Tito-Stalin split. Support for Stalin and Russia was especially strong in Montenegro, where their historical connections and tradition of Pan-Slavic brotherhood with their fellow Slavs and protectors, the Russians,

³⁰⁹ The Assembly for Independence purposely took place in Podgorica in order to shift power away from Cetinje, the center of Montenegrin identity and often characterized by contemporary Montenegrin nationalists as an instrument of forced assimilation and not as a voluntarily decision. Hence, the events facilitated the independence movement and the consolidation of the idea of Montenegro as an independent nation and state.(Morrison, *Montenegro*, 47; Banač, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, 284.)

³¹⁰ Morrison, *Montenegro*, 46–47.

³¹¹ Šerbo Rastoder, "A Short Review of the History of Montenegro," in *Montenegro in Transition: Problems of Identity and Statehood*, ed. Florian Bieber, 1. Aufl (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verl.-Ges, 2003), 136.

³¹² Banač, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, 286–87.

³¹³ Malešević and Uzelac, "A Nation-state without the Nation? The Trajectories of Nation-formation in Montenegro," 701.

were promoted.³¹⁴ Tito reacted quickly and thousands of individuals were arrested and imprisoned, including many important communist leaders who supported the partisans during World War II.³¹⁵

In the following years of the crisis Montenegro remained passive and was broadly committed to the concept of Yugoslavism. The country benefited heavily from funding and changed rapidly from a rural, agrarian, illiterate structure into a moderately developed, urbanized society with nearly full literacy throughout the country.³¹⁶ In addition, during the communist rule cultural and educational institutions were established in Montenegro, such as the first college or university. Thus, Montenegro played a significant role in establishing the SFRY, favored being part of it, and felt it was their state.³¹⁷

The economic crisis of the 1980s severely impacted Montenegro as one of the poorest Yugoslavian countries, and almost paralyzed the Montenegrin economy. Unemployment rose to 24 percent and the communist leadership was forced to declare the republic bankrupt in 1987.³¹⁸ Dissatisfaction with the existing leadership led to a rise in nationalist sentiments, especially vivid in Serbia, induced by Slobodan Milosevic, who rose to power within the same year using the oppression of Serbs and Montenegrins in Kosovo as his pretext to re-concentrate power in Belgrade and to mobilize Serbs in Yugoslavia.³¹⁹ The demoralized Montenegrin leadership was not able to deal with the rising nationalist sentiment and was ultimately replaced by a younger Milosevic-supported elite, led by the troika of the Montenegrin League of Communists (SKCG) Momir Bulatovic, Svetozar Marovic, and Milo Djukanovic.³²⁰ The party changed its name to the

³¹⁴ Rastoder, "A Short Review of the History of Montenegro," 136.

³¹⁵ Banač, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, 290.

³¹⁶ Malešević and Uzelac, "A Nation-state without the Nation? The Trajectories of Nation-formation in Montenegro," 703.

³¹⁷ Rastoder, "A Short Review of the History of Montenegro," 136.

³¹⁸ Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution, 1995), 33.

³¹⁹ Morrison, *Montenegro*, 78–79.

³²⁰ Morrison, "Change, Continuity and Crisis. Montenegro's Political Trajectory (1988-2016)," 155.

Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), a largely cosmetic change, and Djukanovic became Europe's youngest prime minister in 1991 at the age of 28.³²¹

The new, young, and politically inexperienced leadership who came to power through the so-called anti-bureaucratic revolution were pliable and loyal to Belgrade and Milosevic, and able to shift general social discontent into Serbophile ethno-nationalism by emphasizing shared cultural and religious roots with Serbia. The party supported a Serbian nationalist agenda and its rhetoric became xenophobic, leading into Montenegrin military action framed as defensive war against resurgent fascism.³²² In particular Montenegrin military action in Dubrovnik, Croatia, was increasingly damaging for Montenegro and condemned by the international community, which imposed sanctions.³²³ Thus, at the Hague Conference organized by the European Committee (EC) in 1991, Montenegro agreed to sign the so-called Carrington Plan, which envisioned the break-up of the SFRY into loose independent states; however, Montenegro first insisted the plan be amended to stipulate that if two or more republics wanted to stay in the federation, a Yugoslavia could remain extant. As a result, Montenegro entered into a new federal state with Serbia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY).³²⁴

While there was consensus and unity between the ruling elites in Serbia and Montenegro throughout the following years of United Nation (UN) sanctions, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina changed the relationship, especially after the DPS split in 1997 into pro- and contra- Milosevic factions.³²⁵ The split quickly pitted Serbs against Montenegrins, creating a clash between two competing nationalisms. Serbia's increasing isolation, its war with NATO over Kosovo, and its unwillingness to reform under Milosevic enhanced Montenegro's relationship with Europe and the international

³²¹ Roberts, *Realm of the Black Mountain*, 432.

³²² Morrison, "Change, Continuity and Crisis. Montenegro's Political Trajectory (1988-2016)," 43-47.

³²³ Florian Bieber, "Montenegrin Politics since the Disintegration of Yugoslavia," in *Montenegro in Transition: Problems of Identity and Statehood*, ed. Florian Bieber, 1. Aufl (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsges, 2003), 17.

³²⁴ Morrison, "Change, Continuity and Crisis. Montenegro's Political Trajectory (1988-2016)," 156-57.

³²⁵ Bieber, "Montenegrin Politics since the Disintegration of Yugoslavia," 30-31.

community, which encouraged dissent against Milosevic and offered assistance in consolidating international security.³²⁶

An independent-minded Montenegro was essential for the international community to put pressure on Milosevic until the fall of the regime in 2000. Yet, the EU made clear that it did not foresee an independent country of Montenegro.³²⁷ As a result, the Belgrade Agreement signed in 2002 between Montenegro and Serbia created a joint state, without solidifying Montenegro's status for another three years.³²⁸ Thus, the Serb-Montenegrin animosity intensified, culminating in an independence referendum in 2006. A narrow majority of 55 percent voted for independence, which was shortly after officially declared and internationally acknowledged.³²⁹

The historical analysis of the relationship between Montenegro and Serbia reveals a strong cultural and historical linkage, which is still vivid up until today. On the other hand, the analysis shows a long history of continuous politically and often territorially based division among Montenegrins between the national traditions of *srpsvo* (Serbness) and *crnogorstvo* (Montenegrinness).³³⁰ The communist state of Montenegro, embedded within the SFRY, provided institutional structures and organizational mechanisms that helped to circumvent these historical cleavages. During this period, they were integrated and balanced within a broader Yugoslav identity. The collapse of the Yugoslav state and the reiterating of nationalism marked the beginning of a continuous alienation between Serbia and Montenegro and the resurgence of the inner-Montenegrin divide over relations with Serbia, based on the two historically related national traditions. This rift culminated by splitting the DPS and ushered in a period of political re-orientation toward the West and an independent state of Montenegro. Nevertheless, the result of the independence vote

³²⁶ Malešević and Uzelac, "A Nation-state without the Nation? The Trajectories of Nation-formation in Montenegro," 706.

³²⁷ Morrison, Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro, 106.

³²⁸ Morrison, "Change, Continuity and Crisis. Montenegro's Political Trajectory (1988-2016)," 159.

³²⁹ Malešević and Uzelac, "A Nation-state without the Nation? The Trajectories of Nation-formation in Montenegro," 707–8.

³³⁰ Morrison, *Montenegro*, 1.

revealed a divided body, which has fostered a continuously tense and fragmented political landscape, often supported by external influences and entities. The attempted coup is the latest result of this struggle for power.

3. Russia-Serbia Relationship

The previous sections have revealed the intertwined relationships among Russia, Serbia, and Montenegro. Even today, the relationship between Russia and Serbia is of particular importance for Russia. Serbia is Russia's closest ally, and has adopted the role of Russia's junior partner, enabling Russia to have an outpost of influence within the Western Balkans. Thus, Serbia's president's policy cultivates security and economic ties with Russia. At the same time, the two countries' political and military alliance is growing stronger. Joint military exercises are held every year, and in 2016, Russia made its biggest arms donation, which included MiG-29 aircraft and T 72 tanks, to Serbia.³³¹

Even though Serbia officially applied for EU membership in 2009, it is rather unlikely that it will join the EU.³³² Its policy position differs from that of the EU, especially with regard to Russia. Serbia refused to join in sanctions against Russia following the Ukraine crisis, and Serbia is the Balkan country where citizens stand in greatest opposition to EU accession. Furthermore, unlike other Western Balkan Partners, Serbia does not aspire to join NATO.³³³ Hence, Serbia considers Russia as its strongest ally and assigns utmost importance to remaining a reliable partner for the Russian Federation.³³⁴ Furthermore, Serbia's dependency on Russia is reflected in Russia's heavy investment in strategic sectors of the Serbian economy. Russia is Serbia's single most

³³¹ Janusz Bugajski, "Russia Exploits Serbia," CEPA, 2018, <https://www.cepa.org/russia-exploits-serbia>; Léo-Paul Jacob, "Keys to Understanding Russia's Relationship with Serbia," NAOC, accessed August 7, 2019, <http://natoassociation.ca/keys-to-understanding-russias-relationship-with-serbia/>.

³³² European Commission, "Serbia," Text, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, December 6, 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia_en.

³³³ NATO, "Relations with Serbia," NATO, 2019, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50100.htm.

³³⁴ NATO; Daniel McLaughlin, "Russia and Serbia Hail Ties amid Strained Relations with West," The Irish Times, 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/russia-and-serbia-hail-ties-amid-strained-relations-with-west-1.3761914>; European Commission, "Serbia."

important supplier of natural resources—80 percent of Serbia’s demands are met by Russia.³³⁵

The strong relationship with Russia rests not only on shared Slavic roots, but also the common Orthodox faith. The Serbian Orthodox Church has traditionally strong ties to the Russian Orthodox Church. As the largest denomination in Montenegro, the Serbian Orthodox Church is highly influential. Its leader in Montenegro, Bishop Amfilohije Radovic, is a strong opponent of the government, criticizing its pro-Western approach.³³⁶ Furthermore, conflicts are ongoing between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. The tension emanates from disputes regarding church property and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church’s claims to be the sole legitimate representative of the Orthodox faith in Montenegro.³³⁷

In addition, the strong relationship between Serbia and Russia today is centered on the question of Kosovo’s independence. Serbia considers its former province as Serbian territory and relations between the two are continuously tense.³³⁸ Russia itself was strongly opposed to Kosovo’s independence and saw it as indirectly threatening the integrity of Russia itself. Thus, Moscow’s continued opposition to Kosovo’s 2008 declaration of independence supports the persistent Serbian perception that Serbia’s interest is best served by maintaining strong relationships with Russia, despite Serbia’s proclaimed ambition to join the EU.³³⁹

Hence, the refusal to impose Western-led sanctions on Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, its deepening economic and military ties to Russia, and the fact that

³³⁵ Heather A. Conley et al., *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* (Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 2016), 58.

³³⁶ Gardasevic, “Russia and Montenegro,” 66–67.

³³⁷ Morrison, Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro, 150.

³³⁸ Martin Russel, “Serbia-Kosovo Relations,” 2019.

³³⁹ Bugajski, “Russia Exploits Serbia”; Dusan Stojanovic, “Russia, Serbia Blame NATO for Kosovo Tensions,” AP NEWS, May 29, 2019, <https://apnews.com/132fd2e9cfc34bce90513f51aa51ec06>.

Serbia is the only Balkan state that is not a member of, or does not aspire to join NATO, reveal Serbia's unique position as a Russian outpost within the Balkans.³⁴⁰

4. Post-Independence Relations with Russia and Serbia—Road to the State Coup

The results of the independence referendum in 2006 illustrated the degree of polarization among the Montenegrin citizens. Much of the antagonism between the ruling party of the pro-Montenegrin DPS and its opponents, the This animosity culminated in violent clashes and an attempted coup d'état. As a result, in a political trial opposition politicians were accused of being involved in the coup, supported by their strong relationships with one another and with external entities, in particular Russia.³⁴¹ These events, as the analysis reveals are closely aligned with Montenegro's ambition and path toward EU and NATO membership.

Thus, a closer look at Montenegro's post-independence relationship with Russia and Serbia, embedded within the context of Montenegro's path to EU and NATO membership, is crucial to understand the dynamics underpinning the coup. Over time, relationships with Russia, as well as Serbia, have changed based on Montenegro's foreign policy and a clear pro-Western stance, especially after the decision to pursue membership in NATO. This stance evolved from a cordial, strong relationship to the Montenegrin government's current suspicious view of Russia as its nemesis, accused of the attempting the coup that aimed to kill the prime minister Djukanovic and to take over state buildings.³⁴²

After regaining independence in 2006, Montenegro made notable progress toward achieving its top foreign policy objective, membership in the European Union and NATO,

³⁴⁰ McLaughlin, "Russia and Serbia Hail Ties amid Strained Relations with West"; NATO, "Relations with Serbia."

³⁴¹ Morrison, "Change, Continuity and Crisis. Montenegro's Political Trajectory (1988-2016)," 154–55.

³⁴² Boris Vukicevic, "Foreign Relations of Post-Independence Montenegro: A Change of Direction," *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review* 36, no. 1 (December 20, 2017): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1515/lfpr-2017-0003>.

to achieve its core stated objective: Euro-Atlantic integration.³⁴³ It needs to be noted, though, that this pro-Western approach began as early as 1997 after Djukanovic won the presidential elections. During this time the push for EU membership became official policy of his government. Soon after gaining independence, Montenegro began negotiations and applied officially for membership in 2008. In 2009, the EC decided that citizens of Montenegro could travel to the Schengen zone countries without a visa, a psychologically important step, bringing the country closer to Europe after a phase of international isolation.³⁴⁴ A year later, the EC gave Montenegro candidate status and negotiation talks, which opened in 2012, are ongoing. It is envisioned that Montenegro might join the European Union by 2025.³⁴⁵

Although NATO and the European Union are two different entities, only four members of NATO, besides the United States and Canada, who obviously cannot become members, are not members of the European Union. Accordingly, NATO states that its enlargement aims are to “build a Europe whole and free, united in peace, democracy and common values by promoting stability and cooperation.”³⁴⁶ All former socialist countries that are part of both organizations became members of NATO first. Hence the DPS, despite opposition within Montenegro, has maintained its position that NATO membership is crucial for its foreign policy. Thus, Montenegro joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 2006, was granted Membership Action Plan (MAP) status in 2009 and joined NATO as 29th ally in 2017, marking NATO’s first enlargement since 2009.³⁴⁷ With a population of about 620,000, and a military of just under 2,000 people, Montenegro has significantly contributed forces to the conflict in

³⁴³ Vukicevic, 111; Gardasevic, “Russia and Montenegro,” 65.

³⁴⁴ BBC, “Montenegro Gets Boost for EU Bid,” 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7045814.stm>.

³⁴⁵ Stone, “Serbia and Montenegro Could Join EU by 2025, European Commission Says.”

³⁴⁶ NATO, “Enlargement,” NATO, 2019, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49212.htm.

³⁴⁷ NATO, “Montenegro Joins NATO as 29th Ally,” NATO, 2017, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_144647.htm; NATO, “Relations with Montenegro,” NATO, accessed August 19, 2019, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49736.htm.

Afghanistan since 2010.³⁴⁸ In addition, Montenegro is strategically important for NATO. It is positioned along the Adriatic coastline. Hence, because of Montenegro's membership in NATO, the organization controls the entire coast of the Adriatic, except for a 20-kilometer stretch of land held by Bosnia-Herzegovina.³⁴⁹

The independence movement itself in 2006 had no negative effects on Montenegro's relationship with Russia; instead, it fostered and intensified the relationship.³⁵⁰ Russia was among the first countries to recognize the independence, and established strong economic ties to Montenegro. These ties were particularly emphasized by huge investments in tourism and real estate sectors, supported by a signed visa-free travel agreement for their citizens and facilitating trade between the two countries. Russians have invested heavily in beachside real estate, helping Montenegro to earn the nickname Moscow-on-the Sea and receive more foreign investment per capita, at the peak in 2008, than any other country on the continent. In 2015, investments from Russia amounted to one-third of all foreign investments.³⁵¹ In addition, forged by partnerships and friendships between Montenegro's leading politicians and Russian oligarchs, shortly prior to independence, a majority of shares in the KAP aluminum factory and bauxite mines were privatized.³⁵² The shares were sold to the Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska, who has close ties to Vladimir Putin. KAP accounted for 51 percent of Montenegro's exports and 15 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) by the time of its sale in

³⁴⁸ Amanda Macias Higgins Tucker, "Trump Says Defending Tiny NATO Ally Montenegro Could Result in World War III," CNBC, July 18, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/18/trump-defending-nato-ally-montenegro-could-result-in-world-war-3.html>.

³⁴⁹ Amanda Macias Higgins Tucker, "Trump Says Defending Tiny NATO Ally Montenegro Could Result in World War III," CNBC, July 18, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/18/trump-defending-nato-ally-montenegro-could-result-in-world-war-3.html>.

³⁵⁰ Dimitar Bechev, *The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro: Is Russia's Balkans Footprint Expanding?* (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018), 6.

³⁵¹ Dusica Tomovic, "Montenegro Seeks to Lure More Russian Tourists," *Balkan Insight* (blog), March 16, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/16/montenegro-eyes-more-russian-tourists-in-2018-03-15-2018/>; Roman Mamchits, "Russian Investors to Loose Montenegro," *Investforesight* (blog), 2018, <https://investforesight.com/russian-investors-to-loose-montenegro/>.

³⁵² Gardasevic, "Russia and Montenegro," 65–66.

2005.³⁵³ In exchange, Deripaska supported Djukanovic's independence referendum, by hiring the political operative Paul Manafort for the campaign in Montenegro.³⁵⁴

These close economic ties remained while Montenegro made efforts to join the EU. It has to be pointed out that Russia, even though it had expressed concerns, did not oppose the EU enlargement in the region by cutting its ties to Montenegro. Russia also did not voice any objections after Montenegro submitted a formal application to join NATO in 2008. Further, Russia remained neutral throughout the internal regional dispute between Montenegro and Serbia until their final separation in the early 2000. Thus, Montenegro succeeded initially in fostering positive ties with both Russia and the West.³⁵⁵

The situation changed, however, in 2013 and relations between Russia and Montenegro gradually suffered. The rift was driven both by Montenegro's continuous trajectory to become a NATO member and government support of EU sanctions against Russia in 2014. These two topics generated sharp criticism and a change in Russian rhetoric. At first, in 2013 the Russian ambassador in Serbia, Alexander Cepurin, likened the Montenegrin ambition to join NATO to a "monkey chasing a banana."³⁵⁶ After the conflict in Ukraine and Montenegro's decision to side with freezing the assets belonging to Russian-affiliated individuals and implementing visa bans, the attitudes of Russian policymakers and diplomats became openly aggressive, stating that Montenegro should avoid offending Russia.³⁵⁷ In addition the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called

³⁵³ Mamchits, "Russian Investors to Loose Montenegro."

³⁵⁴ Dusica Tomovic, "Trump Campaign Chief 'Worked for Montenegrin Independence,'" *Balkan Insight* (blog), 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/04/12/trump-campaign-chief-worked-for-montenegrin-independence-04-11-2017/>.

³⁵⁵ Bechev, *The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro*, 6–7.

³⁵⁶ Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro*, 157–58.

³⁵⁷ Dimitar Bechev, "Russia Sanctions: Balkan Countries React," *South East Europe at LSE* (blog), 2014, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsee/2014/07/31/russia-sanctions-balkan-countries-react/>; Gardasevic, "Russia and Montenegro," 68.

NATO's enlargement in former Yugoslavia "a mistake, even a provocation" against Russia.³⁵⁸

Beside this, the KAP deal, which connected the Montenegrin political elite to the Kremlin oligarchs, was finally made public, which resulted in a scandal and an international arbitration. KAP went bankrupt in July 2013 and Deripaska became a bitter critic of Djukanovic, whom he had formerly supported. Even though Deripaska still remains an investor within the real estate market, the remaining Russian-owned companies in Montenegro are small-scale and their political impact is negligible in comparison to KAP.³⁵⁹

In comparison to Russia, relationships between Montenegro and Serbia were tensed during and after the time of the independence movement and were reflected in Montenegro through the previously mentioned political parties, either pro-Montenegrin or pro-Serb. The tension was fostered by the Serbian nationalist Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica (2004–2008), who stirred up the conflict.³⁶⁰ Especially, after Montenegro recognized Kosovo's independence, the relationship between the two countries was at a low point, culminating in a forced removal of the Montenegrin ambassador from Belgrade. These tensions have abated to the extent that politicians in both countries have stated that relations, except during the Yugoslav era, have never been better.³⁶¹ Their close economic ties have also contributed to the enhanced relationship. Serbia remains the most important trade partner of Montenegro and Serbian tourists contribute to Montenegro's economy, as either the highest or second highest (behind Russia) number

³⁵⁸ Daria Sito-Sucic, "NATO's Planned Balkan Expansion a 'Provocation': Russia's Lavrov," *Reuters*, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-balkans-russia-idUSKCN0HO11W20140929>.

³⁵⁹ Bechev, *The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro*, 7–8.

³⁶⁰ Vukicevic, "Foreign Relations of Post-Independence Montenegro," 213.

³⁶¹ Public Relations Service of the Government of Montenegro, "PM Marković: Relations between Montenegro and Serbia Are Best in Last Twenty Years; PM Vučić: Montenegro in NATO Is No Threat to Serbia," 2017, <http://www.gov.me/en/News/168985/PM-Markovic-Relations-between-Montenegro-and-Serbia-are-best-in-last-twenty-years-PM-Vucic-Montenegro-in-NATO-is-no-threat-to-Se.html>; "Relations between Serbia and Montenegro at the highest level in the past 10 years," 2017, <https://www.telegraf.rs/english/2903494-relations-between-serbia-and-montenegro-at-the-highest-level-in-the-past-10-years-vucic-talked-with-brajovic-photo>.

of foreign tourists in Montenegro.³⁶² The close cooperation and influence of Serbia in Montenegro is especially articulated through the Montenegro's pro-Serb SNP, one of the two leading political parties, and the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is the largest denomination in Montenegro.³⁶³

The analysis of the post-independence relations of Montenegro with Russia and with Serbia reveals long-standing and diverse influences on the tiny Balkan country. These influences are rooted on its shared history, as well as cultural, religious, political and economic interrelations, which have created strong Montenegrin ties to Russia and Serbia.

Russia has established close ties to Montenegro via several means. The Orthodox Church in Montenegro, especially the Serbian Orthodox Church, is closely aligned with Russia and its political agenda, and acts as a strong advocate and influencer. Even though the relationships between Montenegro and Serbia are assessed as good and solid, Serbia still acts as a Russian outpost. Hence, anti-West/pro-Russian narratives find a fertile ground in Serbia and enable that country to create pro-Kremlin support networks, able to penetrate Montenegro on behalf of Russia. In addition, the opposition in Montenegro itself is strongly interconnected and supported by Russia and Serbia and acts as a strong advocate of the Russian narrative, as the coup reveals.

Furthermore, Serbia and Russia are strongly influential within Montenegro's economy. Montenegro is highly reliant on tourism, which represents 11 percent of its GDP.³⁶⁴ And, Serbia and Russia, as mentioned previously, account for a majority of Montenegro's tourism and invest heavily in its related real estate sector.³⁶⁵ As the largest foreign investor in Montenegro, Russia can exert a strong influence in the Montenegrin

³⁶² Vukicevic, "Foreign Relations of Post-Independence Montenegro," 123–24.

³⁶³ Gardasevic, "Russia and Montenegro," 66–67.

³⁶⁴ Oliver Smith, "Revealed: The Countries That Rely Most on Your Money," *The Telegraph*, February 5, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/Mapped-The-countries-that-rely-most-on-your-money/>.

³⁶⁵ Marta Szpala, "Montenegro Seeks Alternatives to Cooperation with Russia || Central European Financial Observer," 2017, <https://financialobserver.eu/cse-and-cis/montenegro/montenegro-seeks-alternatives-to-cooperation-with-russia/>.

economic and social spheres. Even so, that influence is curbed somewhat by Montenegro's unique position outside the Russian pipeline transmission network. Thus, unlike many other countries in the region, it is not dependent on supplies of Russian energy resources.

Although its relationship with Serbia has improved after the independence referendum, Montenegro's ties with Russia have declined. The continuation of Russia's influence and intention to meddle in Montenegro's domestic politics via diverse means aimed to prevent the expansion of NATO and ultimately reached its peak with the attempted state coup.

5. State Coup

The attempted state coup took place in 2016. This section aims to briefly set the stage and then provides a detailed analysis of the coup.

Prior to Montenegro's opening of accession negotiations with the EU in 2012, a new coalition of center-right parties comprising several SNP officials, such as Bulatovic, established the Democratic Front (DF), which became the main opposition in the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections.³⁶⁶ Before the elections, several scandals related to individual enrichment schemes and electoral fraud by DPS members eroded support for the DPS. Despite their early success, the DF split after internal disagreement over the organization's direction and became more radical. They chose to boycott the parliament prior to the election in 2016 and established a tent city in front of it, supported by continuous anti-government protests.³⁶⁷ After the tent city was removed violently, the movement gained momentum. One week after the removal, on October 24, 2015, a 5,000-person rally against the government ended in a showdown with the police. The showdown occurred after DP officials issued an ultimatum demanding the government to resign within one hour, and the deadline passed without the desired result.³⁶⁸ The violent turn

³⁶⁶ Morrison, Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro, 151–52.

³⁶⁷ Morrison, "Change, Continuity and Crisis. Montenegro's Political Trajectory (1988-2016)," 169.

³⁶⁸ Petar Komnec, "Thousands Protest against Montenegro's Government," *Reuters*, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-protests-idUSKCN0SC0SR20151018>.

gave the government the opportunity to push back, framing the protests as a Serbian and Russian proxy-supported effort to counter Montenegro's path to NATO membership. Indeed, the DF made strategic mistakes. They missed the chance to shift their focus back to legislative change, electoral fraud, and corruption, which were popular target of criticism among all opposing parties. Instead, the DF leaders resorted to anti-Western rhetoric and Serbian nationalism.

After Montenegro received a formal invitation to join NATO, the DF focused their strategy, encouraged by Russia, on campaigning for a referendum on NATO membership.³⁶⁹ DF and anti-NATO protests and demands from other opposition parties to create a transitional government continued, which led to an agreement in April 2016 to give five ministries to the opposition to foster greater confidence in the upcoming election, which was scheduled for October 2016. Shortly after the agreement, Montenegro signed the accession protocol with NATO, entering the final stage in advance of full membership.³⁷⁰ The following pre-election campaigns were as expected and heavily contested from the outset. As the election drew closer, the exchange of accusations intensified, and one day prior to the election, the Montenegrin government officials revealed details of an attempted state coup aimed to overthrow the government by assassinating Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic; the coup was to be executed on election day, and resulted in 20 arrests.³⁷¹ In 2019, 14 of those arrested were found guilty by the court. Two Russian GRU officers who were accused of organizing the coup were tried in absentia and given the longest jail terms; two opposition leaders face five years in jail, and ten others were found guilty, including a retired commander of an elite Serbian police force.³⁷² The prosecutor accused the Kremlin of supporting the coup. Russia strongly has

³⁶⁹ Bechev, *The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro*, 9–10.

³⁷⁰ Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro*, 159–61.

³⁷¹ Bechev, *The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro*, 10; Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro*, 163.

³⁷² Valerie Hopkins, "Indictment Tells Murky Montenegrin Coup Tale," *Politico Magazine*, May 23, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/montenegro-nato-milo-djukanovic-murky-coup-plot/>; "Montenegro Jails 'Russian Coup Plot' Leaders," *BBC News*, May 9, 2019, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48212435>.

denied any involvement in the coup. The international community appears convinced, however, that there was a Russian-orchestrated plot to overthrow Montenegro's government, as the title of an article by the late U.S. Congressman John Mc Cain prominently declares: "Russia Threat Is Dead Serious. Montenegro Coup and Murder Plot Proves It."³⁷³

The details of the coup itself are analyzed more closely with the variable framework, allowing us to assess how different strategies within offensive realism have fostered Russian policy decisions. This analysis illustrates how Russia tried to utilize the intervening variable Hybrid Warfare to achieve its aim of preventing Montenegro from joining NATO, enabled by the installation of a pro-Russian government.

B. INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: THREAT AND OPPORTUNITY

The historical analysis revealed that Montenegro's relationships with Russia and Serbia are based on strong cultural and religious ties but are impacted by strong divisions within Montenegro's political landscape between the pro-Western Montenegrin and pro-Serbia/Russia factions. The next section utilizes the two independent variables Threat and Opportunity and the related possible strategies to further analyze the political factors and objectives driving Russia to influence a small country such as Montenegro.

The analyses reveal that even though Montenegro is considered important in Russian policy, it is not a core area of Russia's sphere of interest and influence. Hence, Russian's influence in Montenegro has mainly been assured through religious ties, support for particular political parties, economic investment in vulnerable sectors, and via the influence of its strong ally Serbia, aimed to guarantee that Montenegro stays militarily neutral. The key decision of the Montenegrin government to support the EU sanctions on Russia and to pursue NATO membership changed Russia's perception of Montenegro as being neutral. Russia's ensuing actions were driven by key considerations of offensive realism, in which power competition is the driving force of the primary actor within the

³⁷³ John McCain, "McCain Flashback: Russia Threat Is Dead Serious. Montenegro Coup and Murder Plot Proves It," USA TODAY, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/06/29/russian-hacks-john-mccain-column/436354001/>.

anarchic system. Hence, Russia's endeavor to impede Montenegro's bid to join the Alliance reveals its hostile view of NATO as a threat and challenging competing actor within a geopolitically important sphere of interest. As a result, Russia chose a more loosely aligned, low cost, and lower risk threat-related buck-passing strategy to indirectly check NATO from gaining power. Russia did so by destabilizing Montenegro and warned its closest ally Serbia to stay neutral. As the analysis reveals Russia considered a domino-effect bandwagoning strategy as an opportunity to shift Montenegro government's policy toward a more pro-Russian orientation. Nevertheless, as Montenegro is not in Russia's core sphere of influence, it is assessed that Russia instead considered a change of government entirely, but not as the to-be-achieved objective. Hence the support by additional Russian assets was limited in favor of denial of Russian involvement through the indirect support of external entities.

1. Threat-Related Considerations

Russian leaders have constantly reiterated the country's sphere of influence and strategic zones of interest, especially with respect to the countries of the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).³⁷⁴ These countries are often considered in Russia as the near abroad, indicating that Russia has particular rights within these regions. For instance, in the aftermath of the Georgian War in 2008 Russian President Dmitry Medvedev made clear that the government has the obligation to defend Russian citizens abroad in the country's "sphere of influence."³⁷⁵ These countries are of particular importance for Russia, as articulated in a policy of maintaining close links and seeking the most direct influence and control.³⁷⁶ Thus, any interference within the near abroad is considered as a challenge and threat to Russia's core sphere of interest and influence.

Montenegro was not part of the CIS and is therefore not within Russia's immediate region. Nevertheless, within Russian foreign policy the Balkans are recognized as an

³⁷⁴ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Spheres of Interest, Not Influence," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (October 2009): 4,10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600903231089>.

³⁷⁵ Trenin, 3–5.

³⁷⁶ Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 9–12, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1826>.

important area of interest and influence. This recognition is reflected in the current Russian foreign policy, which emphasizes the reconstruction of Russia's past and its imagined destiny and desire to reinforce Slavic identity under Russian patronage.³⁷⁷ Hence, Russian influence outside the near abroad within Montenegro is based on a traditional "Pan-Slavism" idea of influence, incorporating the transcendent need to unite ethnic people but with a less desired interest as within the core Russian sphere of influence..³⁷⁸ Russia is able to use diverse avenues of influence to resuscitate pan-Slavism, such as through the Serbian Orthodox Church and ethnic Serbs themselves, who represent close to 30 percent of Montenegro's population, or via the support of the pro-Russian opposition.³⁷⁹ In addition, Russia is strengthening its influence through economic ties to Montenegro. As the previous section revealed, foreign direct investment (FDI) penetration is noteworthy particularly in real estate and the tourism sector, which is most vulnerable to Russian influence.³⁸⁰

Montenegro's stated objective to become a member of the EU existed even before the country gained independence. After it gained independence, this objective became the top priority of Montenegro's foreign policy. Negotiations with the EU on the Security Associate Agreement (SAA) started shortly after, and it was signed in 2007.³⁸¹ The government's pursuit of membership in the EU did not diminish Russian influence in Montenegro. Ties to Russia rather intensified. As Russia's closest ally, Serbia also applied

³⁷⁷ Kari Roberts, "Understanding Putin: The Politics of Identity and Geopolitics in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse," *International Journal* 72, no. 1 (2017): 34;39.

³⁷⁸ Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, 9–11; Heather A Conley and Matthew Melino, "Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro," *CSIS (Center for Strategies & International Studies)*, 2019, 2, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro>.

³⁷⁹ MONSTAT (Statistical Office of Montenegro), "Census 2011 Data - Population by Age and Ethnicity," 2011, <https://www.monstat.org/eng/page.php?id=393&pageid=57>.

³⁸⁰ CSID (Center for the Study of Democracy), "Policy Brief No. 73: Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in Montenegro," 2018, 6, <https://csd.bg/publications/publication/policy-brief-no-73-assessing-russias-economic-footprint-in-montenegro/>; Enza Roberta Petrillo, "Russian Foreign Policy towards the Balkans: Which Perspective?," *ISPI Analysis* 169 (2013): 4–6.

³⁸¹ Vukicevic, "Foreign Relations of Post-Independence Montenegro," 117.

for EU membership in 2009 while simultaneously intensifying its relationship with Russia.³⁸²

Russia also did not perceive Montenegro's step toward international recognition and its decision to advance its relations with the West as a threat. Reflecting the key findings from the offensive realism analysis, Montenegro was a negligible actor based on its lack of power, and meager military and economic resources, but it was still considered a Russian ally and labeled as 'little Russia' due to its strong economic ties to that country.³⁸³ Hence, pro-European sentiments, which were also visible in Serbia, were not incompatible with strong pro-Russian sentiments and did not degrade Montenegro's relationship with Russia.³⁸⁴ Furthermore, at the time of the referendum, Montenegro did not even have a consensus on the creation of armed forces and the SSA did not foresee any aspects of defense-related integration.³⁸⁵ Thus, Russia still had significant influence over Montenegro and was not opposed to EU enlargement in the region because Montenegro's admission would not result in significant benefits for the union simply because of the country's small size and lack of economic resources.

Montenegro's long-stated goal of European integration evolved to the goal of Euro-Atlantic integration after its separation from Serbia, incorporating the aim of becoming a full member within the EU and NATO.³⁸⁶ This step was necessary because EU accession was unlikely without prior admission into NATO: "Consequently, the aspiration of European integration prompted Montenegro to create armed forces and engage in accession negotiations with NATO."³⁸⁷ The necessity to join an intergovernmental military alliance was therefore based on the reciprocal relationship of

³⁸² European Commission, "European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations - Serbia," Text, December 6, 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia_en.

³⁸³ Warsaw Institute, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the Western Balkans," 13.

³⁸⁴ Conley et al., *The Kremlin Playbook*, 60.

³⁸⁵ Danijela Dudley, "The Price of European Integration," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 2017): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10474552-4325903>.

³⁸⁶ Vukicevic, "Foreign Relations of Post-Independence Montenegro," 115.

³⁸⁷ Dudley, "The Price of European Integration," 30.

the EU and NATO and not because of a security threat posed to Montenegro. In fact, it was even stated in Montenegro's Strategic Overview of Defense in 2013 that Montenegro did not face any direct security risks or threats.³⁸⁸

On the other hand, Russia perceived NATO's enlargement as a threat, countering from the start of NATO's eastward enlargement in 1999: "the Russian strategy ... is to undermine NATO effectiveness, hav [ing] NATO as weak as possible because we are not part of it."³⁸⁹ Nevertheless, Montenegro's government was able to create a political balance between NATO and Russia. Thus, Russia did not perceive Montenegro's path toward NATO initially as a threat.³⁹⁰ Its contribution to the alliance as the smallest former Yugoslav country, with a military force of fewer than 2,000 uniformed personnel and a defense budget of under €45 million, would have negligible impact. Thus, a membership was considered unlikely, and Russia's influence over Montenegro could remain secure.³⁹¹ In addition, the lack of public support for NATO among Montenegrins was the main impediment to formal invitations and accession.³⁹²

In terms of the offensive realist perspective, the threat perception of Montenegro as a neutral unimportant actor changed after Djukanovic made the key decision to openly challenge Russia by joining the opposing actor within the anarchic system.³⁹³ Montenegro joined the EU sanctions against Russia and condemned the annexation in Crimea. In addition, Djukanovic changed Montenegro's stance regarding Russia, asking NATO to expand further east in response to the Ukraine crisis.³⁹⁴ Hence, several critiques see the

³⁸⁸ Dudley, 31.

³⁸⁹ Michael R. Gordon, "Russia Remains Uneasy Over NATO's Expansion," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1999, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/14/world/russia-remains-uneasy-over-nato-s-expansion.html>.

³⁹⁰ Srdjan Jankovic, "As NATO Membership Gets Closer, Montenegro Feels The Heat From Russia," 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-nato-russia-pressure/25419459.html>.

³⁹¹ Dudley, "The Price of European Integration," 22.

³⁹² Dudley, 24.

³⁹³ Warsaw Institute, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the Western Balkans," 13.

³⁹⁴ Maxim Samorukov, "The Montenegro Gambit: NATO, Russia, and the Balkans," Carnegie Moscow Center, September 12, 2015, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/62232>.

invitation to Montenegro as a test case of NATO's Open Door policy, directly responding to the Russian annexation of Crimea.³⁹⁵ Hence, Russia's increased political pressure and shift to an aggressive tone after Montenegro joined the EU sanctions is not surprising. Nonetheless, it is surprising that Russia considered, besides soft elements of influence through economic penetration or harsh diplomacy, the use of lethal force to prevent the small country from joining NATO.³⁹⁶ Russia considered the use of lethal force because of Montenegro's geopolitical importance, which ultimately supports and adjusts the distribution of power in favor of the opposing primary actor, NATO.

Montenegro's military value to the Alliance or for posing a threat to Russia is marginal, but its geographic position presents very important political and strategic benefits for NATO, as well as for Russia. Montenegro possesses two essential ports, Bar and Kotor, located on its 293-km-long Adriatic coastline.³⁹⁷ Despite the coast's popularity as a tourist location, these harbors serve as naval bases, which are among the largest in the Adriatic Sea, and they played crucial roles during the period of the SFRY. Prior to Montenegro's membership within NATO, these harbors were open for potential exploitation and utilization by external actors such as Russia. The only Russian naval base outside of Russian territory is Tartus; located in Syria, this base ensures Russia's military presence in the Mediterranean.³⁹⁸ Russia has leased the facility since 1971, when Russian naval deployments started, and increased in 2012. In 2017, Russia expanded its footprint and started establishing a permanent base there, signing an agreement that allows Russia to keep 11 warships at Tartus.³⁹⁹ Nevertheless, due to the continuation of the crisis in

³⁹⁵ Robert E. Hunter, "NATO Enlargement? The Case of Montenegro," 2015, <http://www.europeaninstitute.org/index.php/ei-blog/251-european-affairs/ea-april-2015/2023-nato-enlargement-the-case-of-montenegro>.

³⁹⁶ Gardasevic, "Russia and Montenegro," 73.

³⁹⁷ Alan Crosby, "Montenegro: Key NATO Ally Or Adriatic Afterthought?," May 25, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-nato-key-ally-or-adriatic-afterthought/28508845.html>.

³⁹⁸ Tim Hume and Lindsay Isaac, "Russia Plans Permanent Navy Base in Syria," CNN, October 10, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/10/middleeast/russia-navy-base-tartus-syria/index.html>.

³⁹⁹ Polina Ivanova, "Russia Establishing Permanent Presence at Its Syrian Bases: RIA," *Reuters*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-bases-idUSKBN1EK0HD>.

Syria, Russia started early to look for possible alternatives and continuously reduced its presence. Thus, Russia approached Egypt in 2013 to establish a naval base, but the project failed.⁴⁰⁰ This left Montenegro as a plausible option, especially considering its close links to Russia. Consequently, the Russian government lobbied hard in 2013 for naval access to these Adriatic naval ports, for refueling and restocking of its naval ships, and began to request the use of the Bar in exchange for increased investment in Montenegro.⁴⁰¹ The Montenegrin government refused the offer, slowly turning its back on Russia and pursuing its path to NATO membership.⁴⁰² Nevertheless, it revealed Montenegro's vulnerability to Russia and a threat perceived by NATO that Russia was trying to extend its power by possessing this strategically important location. Furthermore, it might have fostered NATO's foreign policy and influenced NATO's decision to formally invite Montenegro to assume full membership. Russia perceived this formal invitation as an attempt to loosen its geopolitical grip within the Adriatic Sea. In response, Moscow extended its countermeasures to disturb and destabilize Montenegro in order to prevent that country from assuming NATO membership. Ultimately, ensured by Montenegro's membership, NATO controls the last stretch of Mediterranean coastline between Gibraltar and Syria.⁴⁰³

As a result, Russia has chosen a threat-related approach to foreign policy that can be described as a kind of buck-passing strategy that aims to check NATO from gaining power in a country geo-strategically important for both primary actors within the anarchic system, Russia and NATO. Montenegro was perceived as a threat because it chose to give up its military neutral status in favor of the competing important actor, NATO. This perceived threat was enhanced by the formal invitation, which ultimately prevented Russia from using Montenegro as a military base. Hence, NATO was able to adjust the

⁴⁰⁰ Tio Staff, "Russia Eyes Egypt's Ports in Bid to Boost Military Presence," 2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/russia-seeks-a-naval-presence-in-egypts-ports/>.

⁴⁰¹ Alec Luhn, "Montenegro Finds Itself at Heart of Tensions with Russia as It Joins Nato," *The Guardian*, May 25, 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/25/montenegro-tensions-russia-joins-nato-member>.

⁴⁰² Hopkins, "Indictment Tells Murky Montenegrin Coup Tale."

⁴⁰³ Crosby, "Montenegro: Key NATO Ally Or Adriatic Afterthought?"; Luhn, "Montenegro Finds Itself at Heart of Tensions with Russia as It Joins Nato."

distribution of power in its favor. Nevertheless, Montenegro was not in the core sphere of Russian influence. As a result, Russia passed the burden of deterring and destabilizing Montenegro to externally supported entities and chose a less risky, low-cost, buck passing threat-related strategy, with the opportunity to opt out and to deny its involvement.

2. Opportunity-Related Considerations

As the previous section revealed, the prerequisite for Montenegro joining the EU was the pursuit of membership in NATO. By choosing this path, Montenegro abandoned its neutral position between Russia and NATO, resulting in a decline in the Russian-Montenegrin relationships that culminated in an attempted state coup, instigated by Russia. This path toward NATO posed a clear threat to Russia. Nevertheless, it offered opportunities as well for Russia to take advantage of Montenegro's main vulnerability, the assurance of public support for NATO membership. Montenegro's population has consistently supported the country's ambition to join the EU, but the support for NATO membership has been much weaker. In fact, the public resistance to the government's approach to NATO has always been unmistakable, even though most people understand the intertwined relationship between NATO and EU membership.⁴⁰⁴

Hence, the Atlantic Council stated in 2012: "Though the country has satisfied much of the criteria for NATO membership, public opinion disapproves of the accession path."⁴⁰⁵ Similarly, the historical analysis revealed the strong division within the population regarding the independence referendum. In fact, 45 percent of the population voted in favor of a continued union with Serbia, signaling that Serbia and Russia were the preferred allies for almost half of the population.⁴⁰⁶ This public resistance did not decline subsequently. After the country joined the MAP process in 2009 polls conducted revealed that only 35.4 percent of the population supported the country's NATO bid. The

⁴⁰⁴ Dudley, "The Price of European Integration," 25.

⁴⁰⁵ Atlantic Council, "NATO and Montenegro: ATA Brief on Relations between NATO and Montenegro" (2013).

⁴⁰⁶ Dudley, "The Price of European Integration," 26.

level of opposition grew even higher over time, with 43 percent of the population stating in 2012 that it would vote against a referendum to join the Alliance.⁴⁰⁷

Even though the government faced public resistance it pursued the goal of Euro-Atlantic integration and launched an information campaign, which had modest effects.⁴⁰⁸ During the NATO summit in September 2014 it was stated that by the end of 2015 NATO would assess whether it would invite Montenegro to join the Alliance. The campaign to shape public support in favor of NATO membership showed positive effects as well, in declining opposing numbers.⁴⁰⁹

The strong division within Montenegro and rejection to join NATO was a vulnerability, which was shaped in Russia's favor to degrade the likelihood of membership and pursue a neutral military foreign policy in Montenegro. In doing so Russia exploited several opportunities of influencing a pro-Russian, anti-NATO trajectory. Russia used its historical ties and exerted religious and cultural influence through the Orthodox Church. Hence, Russia stepped up the influence of the church, as Montenegro's membership in NATO was advancing in 2016. The Russian Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, expressed public concern over Montenegro's NATO accession.⁴¹⁰ Shortly after, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, which wields great influence in Montenegro, echoed the Russian claims for greater scrutiny over the decision and demanded a public referendum on NATO membership.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁷ CEDEM (Center for Democracy and Human Rights), "Political Public Opinion" (Podgorica, January 7, 2012), 3, <http://www.cedem.me/en/pretraga?searchword=public%20opinion%202012&searchphrase=all>.

⁴⁰⁸ CEDEM (Center for Democracy and Human Rights), "Attitudes on NATO Integration in Montenegro" (Podgorica, 2013), 3, <https://www.cedem.me/en/component/jdownloads/send/32-opinion-polls/1177-citizen-attitudes-on-nato-integration-2013>.

⁴⁰⁹ CEDEM (Center for Democracy and Human Rights), "Citizen's Attitude on NATO Integrations," 2015, <https://www.cedem.me/en/component/jdownloads/send/33-political-public-opinion/1699-citizens-attitudes-on-nato-integrations-july-2015>.

⁴¹⁰ CSID (Center for the Study of Democracy), "Policy Brief No. 73," 13.

⁴¹¹ Dusica Tomovic, "Serbian Church Urges Montenegro NATO Referendum," *Balkan Insight* (blog), January 5, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/05/serbian-church-urges-montenegro-to-hold-referendum-on-nato-01-04-2016/>.

In addition, these opportunities to shape public opinion in Montenegro were supported by the Kremlin and via several means in Russia itself. In fact, during the same week that the Orthodox Church express concern, President Putin signed an updated security paper, elaborating on the threat of NATO's further expansion. This was followed by aggressive statements from the Kremlin, describing Montenegrin membership as confrontational step and a "prelude to the new Cold War."⁴¹² Furthermore, the official government daily newspaper *Rossiskaya Gazeta* claimed that NATO accession would demand an aggressive Montenegrin course against Russia.⁴¹³

In addition, Russian officials, tried to target vulnerable sectors of economy, especially the tourism sector, linking it to the decision to join NATO. The strategy was accelerated by a media campaign depicting Montenegro as dangerous for Russian citizens, linking it to an increased crime rate and filthy beaches, and discouraging its citizens from spending vacations in Montenegro.⁴¹⁴ In doing so, Russia took the opportunity to target one major strategic sector of the Montenegrin economy to enhance resentments toward membership in NATO.

Besides the openly stated Russian condemnation of Montenegro's step toward NATO, Russia was and is keen on exploiting opportunities to foster and foment the small state's internal divisions by backing and supporting in particular the DF. As a result, the DF encouraged and supported by Russia shifted their focus prior to the election toward an anti-NATO standpoint, echoing and campaigning for a referendum on NATO membership.⁴¹⁵ The close ties between Russian officials and Montenegrin anti-NATO opposition leaders were obvious throughout several meetings on the issue of NATO accession. In addition, the DF front's main parties, the right-wing New-Serbian Democracy and the Democratic People's Party of Montenegro, signed an agreement in

⁴¹² Conley and Melino, "Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro," 2; Tomovic, "Serbian Church Urges Montenegro NATO Referendum."

⁴¹³ Adnan Prekic, "Montenegro under Russian Pressure Due to NATO Membership," *Independent Balkan News Agency* (blog), April 24, 2014, <https://balkaneu.com/montenegro-russian-pressure-due-nato-membership/>.

⁴¹⁴ Conley and Melino, "Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro," 7.

⁴¹⁵ Bechev, *The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro*, 7.

June 2016 with Putin's United Russia to cooperate politically and promote Russian messages in the Balkans.⁴¹⁶ Thus, even though evidence is lacking, it is not inconceivable that the DF have received financial support from Russia and guidance on its campaign in the Russian interest. This is particularly likely in the support of the New Serbian Democracy, whose agenda has referred to its Slavic heritage and which is widely represented within the Montenegrin parliament. Its efforts are aimed especially at ethnic Serbs, who represent close to 30 percent of the population.⁴¹⁷ Thus, Russia supported and funded aggressively the DF and other anti-NATO parties to raise the political temperature of this dispute ahead of the key 2016 elections and in particular to diminish public support for NATO membership.

Nevertheless, the government achieved in 2016 its goal and was able to ensure that support for the alliance surpassed opposition for the first time with 37.1 and 36.4 percent of the population opposing toward NATO, respectively.⁴¹⁸ Hence, potentially assuming that the goal of the country's ambition to join NATO would eventually prevail, Russia supported a plan to derail Montenegro's accession while overthrowing the government through the strongest opposition party, and Serbian far-rights activists, plotted by Russian GRU officials.⁴¹⁹ This plan, as discussed in detail within the following section, aimed to utilize an opposition rally in front of the parliament building to create chaos, kidnap and assassinate the Prime Minister, and install a pro-Russian government.⁴²⁰ Thus, Russia ultimately saw the final opportunity to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO by using hard power, executed through proxy entities and guided by Russian military intelligence.

⁴¹⁶ Warsaw Institute, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the Western Balkans," 14.

⁴¹⁷ Conley and Melino, "Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro," 3.

⁴¹⁸ CEDEM (Center for Democracy and Human Rights), "Political Public Opinion of Montenegro," 2016, <http://www.cedem.me/component/jdownloads/send/33-political-public-opinion/1819-political-public-opinion-june-2016>.

⁴¹⁹ Bechev, The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro, 10.

⁴²⁰ Warsaw Institute, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the Western Balkans," 15.

Additionally, supporting the threat-related approach the analysis of opportunity-related strategies reveals that Russia considered a domino-effect bandwagoning strategy to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO. This bandwagoning strategy was two-fold. At first Russia deployed a range of traditional soft-power instruments, including support for political parties and through high-level political and religious statements and visits, including a media campaign to apply economic pressure that would ensure a low level of public support for NATO accession. This strategy targeted an essential element, as the Alliance requires public support for accession in the candidate country before formally inviting and admitting new members.⁴²¹ Within the last stage, assessing that the public support would be sufficient for an official admission, so Russia used the opposing party and additional external entities to overthrow the government and jump on the bandwagon of a new anti-NATO government to prevent NATO accession. This opportunity to overthrow the government was supported indirectly by Russia in the form of GRU guidance. Hence, as Montenegro is not in Russia's core sphere of influence, the coup was not directly supported by Russian military capabilities and was therefore assessed as a possible last-resort opportunity to prevent Montenegro from achieving NATO membership, but not as the ultimate to-be achieved objective.

C. INTERVENING VARIABLE: HYBRID WARFARE

This section applies the intervening variable, Hybrid Warfare to the Montenegro case study and the attempted coup, in particular. Even though the coup itself was not executed, a closer analysis of the key deduction of hybrid warfare in line with its conflating relationship of its variables reveals that Russia tried to carry out hybrid warfare. In doing so, Russia used the territory of its close ally Serbia as a kind of Forward Operating Base for GRU personnel to orchestrate the operation and enable external entities to conduct the coup in order to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO.

⁴²¹ Dudley, "The Price of European Integration," 24.

1. Information Domain

The previous section has already pointed out Russia's exploitation of significant historical, cultural, and religious commonalities with Montenegro. These connections were actively propagated by Russian officials, the Orthodox Church, and through Russian-financed and assured supporters within Montenegro, in particular the opposition parties. Russia increasingly weaponized the use of the information domain as Montenegro pursued NATO membership. In general, it can be stated that the Russian media developed a twofold approach. On the one hand, Russia depicted Montenegro as politically unstable to the international public and, on the other hand, targeted Montenegro's public by portraying the official government as a corrupt puppet of the United States and NATO, and unworthy of the Montenegrins' support.⁴²²

An analysis of the events leading up to election day reveals that the information domain and Russian media outlets in particular were rife with disinformation, and cyber activities were aggressively waged and embedded within the planning of the government overthrow as an integral part of carrying out hybrid warfare, culminating in form of the alleged state coup.⁴²³

Russia has established media outlets, fake news portals, and pro-Russian tabloids to impact and shape public perception and opinion through misinformation, and these tools were aggressively utilized during the election period in Montenegro.⁴²⁴ The Serbian language service *Sputnik Srbija*, established in 2015 and based in Belgrade, is a news website and radio broadcasting company that targets the ethnic Serb population not only in Serbia, but also in Montenegro. Russia effectively utilized these mainstream Serbian-

⁴²² Vesko Garčević, "Russian Interference in European Elections - Russia and Montenegro," The U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2017), 2–3, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sfr-vgarcevic-062817b.pdf>.

⁴²³ Garčević, 3.

⁴²⁴ John Cappello, "Russian Information Operations in the Western Balkans | RealClearDefense," February 1, 2017, http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/02/02/russian_information_operations_in_the_western_balkans_110732.html.

language outlets to shape its political narrative.⁴²⁵ While these outlets primarily promote shared ethnic and cultural ties, during the final lead up to the election there was clearly a shift toward Montenegro and the dissemination of a pro-Kremlin anti-NATO narrative. These outlets increasingly portrayed a strong anti-NATO movement within Montenegro while discrediting an aggressive anti-opposition government in a disintegrating security environment, accompanied by travel warnings to Russian tourists.⁴²⁶ In addition to these Russian-based media outlets, pro-Russian local media in Montenegro was well represented in this campaign and promulgated the Russian narrative.⁴²⁷ The information delivered by these outlets focused in particular on the rise in continuing well-organized protests, which started in 2015, and consisted of several oppositional and Serbian minority parties; the protests were unusual in scale and duration and were particularly media- and tech savvy.⁴²⁸ These protests challenged the government, strongly opposing NATO membership, and fueled clashes with the government, thus shaping the picture of turmoil.

Furthermore, on the day of the election there was an increase in and spread of disinformation, especially via the use of social media platforms such as Viber and Whats App and fake news portals.⁴²⁹ Russia used different channels to manipulate the public and cast doubt on the outcome of the election. Similarly, the campaign exaggerated the division within the population and the situation within Montenegro via the spread of multichannel information to distract and to shape the narrative for the state coup itself.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁵ Paul Stronski and Annie Himes “Russia’s Game in the Balkans,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 2, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235>.

⁴²⁶ Conley and Melino, “Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro,” 4.

⁴²⁷ Dusica Tomovic, “Pro-Russian Montenegrins Publish New Anti-Western Media,” *Balkan Insight* (blog), October 18, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/10/18/pro-russian-montenegrins-publish-new-anti-western-media-10-17-2017/>.

⁴²⁸ Quentin Buckholz et al., “Checkmating Russia’s Assertiveness in Eastern Europe” (RAND Corporation, May 5, 2017), 21–22, https://sipa.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/migrated/documents/RAND%20Corp%20Capstone%20Final%20Report_FOR%20PUBLICATION.pdf.

⁴²⁹ Michael Carpenter, “‘Fighting in the ‘Grey Zone’: Lessons from Russian Influence Operations in Ukraine,’” Senate Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities (2017), 5, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Carpenter_03-29-17.pdf.

⁴³⁰ Chivvis, Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare,” 3.

The attacks on the day of the election in Montenegro were covered via different media channels that aimed to spread misinformation. Montenegro, not having effective cyber defense capacities to counter cyber-attacks in 2016, were easily exploited and targeted by Russian affiliated hackers, especially during the foiled coup.⁴³¹ Consequently, Montenegro asked Britain for technical help after suffering an increased number of cyber-attacks targeting the Montenegrin government and state websites in the wake of the alleged coup.⁴³² The cyber-attacks and cyber espionage increased as Montenegro proceeded on its way toward NATO membership, and these attacks have been an integrated tool of Russia's influence and information strategy. The number of attacks increased from 22 in 2013 to over 400 in 2017.⁴³³ In particular on the day of the foiled coup, Montenegro suffered a wave of large-scale attacks. These attacks were manifold. They targeted state webpages and network infrastructure in addition to the websites of pro-NATO and pro-EU political parties. Moreover, they targeted the webpages of election monitors. The attacks, especially intermittent distributed denial-of service (DDoS) attacks, proved to be successful.⁴³⁴ Thus, on the day of the election, several state institution websites were inaccessible as were the webpages of pro-governmental parties. Furthermore, the attacks brought down the webpage of the Center of the Democratic Transition, the entity watching over the election.⁴³⁵ Prior to election day, hackers launched a spear-phishing campaign aimed specifically at civil servants; the campaign delivered infected documents pertaining to a NATO secretary meeting and a visit by a

⁴³¹ "Montenegro to Join NATO Cyber-Defence Centre," *Balkan Insight* (blog), July 23, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/23/montenegro-to-beef-up-cyber-defence-by-joining-nato-center-07-20-2018/>.

⁴³² Ben Farmer, "Montenegro Asks for British Help after Cyber Attacks in Wake of 'Russian-Backed Coup Plot,'" *The Telegraph*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/28/montenegro-asks-british-help-cyber-attacks-wake-russian-backed/>.

⁴³³ Oscar Jonsson, "The Next Front: The Western Balkans," in *Hacks, Leaks and Disruptions: Russian Cyber Strategies*, ed. N. Popescu and S. Secieru, Chaillot Papers 148 (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2018).

⁴³⁴ John Leyde, "Kremlin Hackers' New Target: Montenegro," June 6, 2017, https://www.theregister.co.uk/2017/06/06/russian_hackers_target_montenegro/.

⁴³⁵ Garčević, *Russian Interference in European Elections - Russia and Montenegro*, 11.

European army unit to Montenegro.⁴³⁶ The Montenegrin public administration ministry also mentioned an increase in the hackings of banks and private companies prior to the election. Montenegro has claimed that the attacks were launched by hackers linked to Russia, the same group that interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.⁴³⁷ This group, known as Fancy Bear or APT 28 (Advanced Persistent Threat 28), is an adversary group closely mirroring the strategic interests of the Russian government and is most likely affiliated with and directed by the GRU.⁴³⁸ After the coup was foiled, cyber-attacks continued up to the ratification of the membership agreement with NATO, and Montenegro faced another wave of attacks in February 2017.⁴³⁹ Thus, Montenegro remains at great risk of future cyber-attacks. After the coup was foiled, the information campaign quickly shifted to denial of any Russian involvement. Accordingly, the new narrative claimed the coup was supported by the leaders of the DF and media outlets; the strategy was to frame the official Montenegrin narrative as ‘fake news’ and aimed to discredit the opposition.⁴⁴⁰

Thus, analyzing the events prior to, during, and after the attempted state coup, we can see that Russia used the information domain in several ways. Media outlets aimed to shape and influence the public opinion about Montenegro’s path to NATO membership, which is in itself not unique. Especially notable was the increase of disinformation regarding non-violent anti-government protests, and the simultaneous portrayal of a rise in governmental chaos during the election. This change in media content seems to be a

⁴³⁶ Jonsson, “The Next Front: The Western Balkans,” 87; Eduard Kovacs, “Russian Hackers Target Montenegro as Country Joins NATO,” July 7, 2017, <https://www.securityweek.com/russian-hackers-target-montenegro-country-joins-nato>.

⁴³⁷ Dusica Tomovic, “Montenegro on Alert Over Rise in Cyber Attacks,” *Balkan Insight* (blog), January 10, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/01/10/montenegro-on-alert-over-cyber-attacks-01-09-2017/>.

⁴³⁸ “Who Is Fancy Bear (APT28) ?,” February 12, 2019, <https://www.crowdstrike.com/blog/who-is-fancy-bear/>.

⁴³⁹ Petar Komnec, “Montenegro Ratifies NATO Membership Accord,” *Reuters*, April 28, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-nato-idUSKBN17U25O>; Farmer, “Montenegro Asks for British Help after Cyber Attacks in Wake of ‘Russian-Backed Coup Plot.’”

⁴⁴⁰ Christo Grozev, “Balkan Gambit: Part 2. The Montenegro Zugzwang,” *bellingcat*, March 25, 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/25/balkan-gambit-part-2-montenegro-zugzwang/>.

prelude to the attempted coup; it seems to spread a narrative designed to justify the violent overthrow of the government. In addition, the extensive barrage via cyber-attacks during the election, especially via a GRU-related hacker group, seems to be an integral part of the coup, meant to ensure that the government would be unable to respond and react via information channels. Hence, it gained an advantage within the information domain enabling the spread of misinformation in favor of the Russian narrative.

2. Denial and Deception

Using denial and deception techniques as part of hybrid warfare, Russia avoided having to physically take part in the attempted coup. Hence, following the narrative of plausible deniability, Russia has categorically denied any involvement and reiterated that they had no connection to any attempt to replace the government and destabilize Montenegro.⁴⁴¹ In particular, after the attempted coup Russia was echoed by the DF, and its leaders condemned the Montenegrin narrative, which accused Russia of backing the coup and the DF party of being part of its execution phase.⁴⁴² The denial was supported by Russian media outlets, creating the plausible counter message that the government of Montenegro itself fabricated the coup to secure the election victory for Djukanovic and preserve his political power.⁴⁴³

A closer look at Russia's use of denial and deception reveals that Russia's cyber-attacks and its pool of forces, in particular, contribute to an aura of doubt and provide Russia a mask of deniability should an operation, such as the foiled state coup, fail.⁴⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Russia's involvement within Montenegro is unique due to its explicit and open support of the DF during the election and their anti-NATO accession campaign.

⁴⁴¹ "Montenegro Coup d'etat and Russian Denial," *Maidan of Foreign Affairs*, September 11, 2016, <https://www.mfaua.org/en/publications/montenegro-coup-detat-and-russian-denial>.

⁴⁴² Stevo Vasiljevic, "Russians, Opposition Figures Sentenced over Role in 2016 Montenegro...," *Reuters*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-court-idUSKCN1SF144>.

⁴⁴³ Grozev, "Balkan Gambit."

⁴⁴⁴ Stronski and Himes, "Russia's Game in the Balkans," 8.

The DF campaign of was intense, aggressive, very costly, and backed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, numerous NGOs in Montenegro and Serbia, and politically aligned parties, aiming to form a new pro-NATO government.⁴⁴⁵ The shift of the DF to the streets, mobilizing protests in the Montenegrin capital of Podgorica, was also openly supported by Russia.⁴⁴⁶ Even prior to the attempted coup, Russia did not deny its support for the opposition, which aimed to overthrow a democratically elected government. This open support was mainly through Russian political officials, media outlets, or meetings with Montenegrin opposition leaders. On the other hand, Russia fueled the campaign by having denied funding through a network of Serb nationalists with ties to Russia.⁴⁴⁷ Hence, Russia's approach prior to the election and the failed coup and its involvement in those events is unique, especially compared to the first case and the Euromaidan Protests, during which Russia denied any involvement.⁴⁴⁸ Russia did not deny its support for the DF demands, which ensured that the DF's political campaign was closely aligned with Russian interests.⁴⁴⁹ On the other hand, the Russians insisted that they had no role in its financing, supporting the plausible deniability that Russia leveraged already in an early phase opportunity to offensively destabilize Montenegro.⁴⁵⁰

Additionally, the intensive use of cyber-attacks facilitated by non-state and private actors have compounded the avenues for deception and have increased Russia's scale of involvement while simultaneously denying it.⁴⁵¹ Russia uses a variety of actors, independent nationalistic hackers, subsidized or formally employed hacktivists, and highly sophisticated Advanced Persistent Check groups with the aim to spread its

⁴⁴⁵ Garčević, "Russian Interference in European Elections - Russia and Montenegro," 2.

⁴⁴⁶ Morrison, "Change, Continuity and Crisis. Montenegro's Political Trajectory (1988-2016)," 169; Reuf Bajrović, Vesko Garčević, and Richard Kraemer, *Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro* (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018), 9.

⁴⁴⁷ Morrison, "Change, Continuity and Crisis. Montenegro's Political Trajectory (1988-2016)," 170.

⁴⁴⁸ Garčević, "Russian Interference in European Elections - Russia and Montenegro," 4.

⁴⁴⁹ Warsaw Institute, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the Western Balkans," 14.

⁴⁵⁰ Buckholz et al., "Checkmating Russia's Assertiveness in Eastern Europe," 21.

⁴⁵¹ Buckholz et al., 62.

activities across a wide range of actors.⁴⁵² Thus through the use of this pool of deniable actors, Russia was able to target and deny opponents' counter action, spread disinformation, and direct attention away from the original intent. In short, these cyber-attacks shaped and enabled the physical attempt to overthrow the government of Montenegro. At last, as elaborated in the next section, deniability and deception were implemented by the vast pool of forces, which were responsible for the attempted coup.

3. Leveraging Violence—Pool of Forces

The coup itself, announced by Montenegrin officials and local media, sounded at first too bizarre to be reported on seriously. It was only reported internationally and considered as true when Serbia arrested two Russian citizens in possession of Montenegrin special police uniforms, a huge amount of cash, and encrypted telecom equipment.⁴⁵³ Two days later Russia's Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev traveled to Belgrade, and as Serbia's media stated, apologized for "unsanctioned rogue operations," an assertion denied by Russia.⁴⁵⁴ Nevertheless, several days later, two Russian citizens had been repatriated to Russia from Serbia.

The allegations and the revealed plan strikingly illustrate the use of hard power as a tool of Russian hybrid warfare. The day before the election, Montenegrin police arrested 20 Serbian citizens, who allegedly were the core personnel of the coup, which was orchestrated by GRU personnel stationed in Serbia.⁴⁵⁵ The plan itself was straightforward. The conspirators disguised as Montenegrin police were to infiltrate Montenegro's parliament on election night. Meanwhile, a DF-led uproar declaring victory

⁴⁵² Fire Eye, *APT28: A Window into Russia's Cyber Espionage Operations* (Milpitas, CA: FireEye, 2014).

⁴⁵³ Grozev, "Balkan Gambit."

⁴⁵⁴ Julian Borger and Andrew MacDowall in Belgrade and Shaun Walker in Moscow, "Serbia Deports Russians Suspected of Plotting Montenegro Coup," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2016, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/11/serbia-deports-russians-suspected-of-plotting-montenegro-coup>.

⁴⁵⁵ Conley and Melino, "Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro," 3; CSID (Center for the Study of Democracy), "Policy Brief No. 73," 2–3.

would trigger supporters protesting in front of the building to storm it.⁴⁵⁶ In response the dressed-up conspirators would initiate a false-flag police attack on the protestors and assassinate the prime minister. As a result, the DF would blame the government for killing innocents and would install a DF-led government during the ensuing state of emergency.⁴⁵⁷ Thus, the government would ultimately be overthrown by an anti-NATO, pro-Russia opposition alliance, which in turn would prevent the country's accession to NATO.

A closer look at the entities and individuals involved reveals that the attempted coup needed high-level backing.⁴⁵⁸ Hence, it was not a purely private initiative, but a compelling example of Russian hybrid warfare using a pool of diverse forces. Furthermore, the operation was constructed so as to mask the identity of the actual masterminds and funders of the plot and to implicate the nationalists, if the effort failed.

Hence, from the outset Russian officials and oligarchs were involved in the coup and ensured the approval from the Kremlin itself. The Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who has ties to far-right elements in Russian society and the Orthodox Church, has actively contributed to Russian hybrid warfare and played an initiating and supporting role in the Montenegrin coup.⁴⁵⁹ He has been very active in economic procurement and political networking in Montenegro, and as some authors argue, originated the idea of the attempted coup in Montenegro. His charity foundation, with a budget of over \$40 million, is the largest Orthodox charity.⁴⁶⁰ This charity appears to be the key conduit for Russian outreach to the Orthodox and Nationalist factions, ensuring financial and personnel

⁴⁵⁶ Warsaw Institute, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the Western Balkans," 9.

⁴⁵⁷ Stronski and Himes, "Russia's Game in the Balkans," 13.

⁴⁵⁸ Ben Farmer, "Russia Plotted to Overthrow Montenegro's Government by Assassinating Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic Last Year, According to Senior Whitehall Sources," *The Telegraph*, February 18, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/18/russias-deadly-plot-overthrow-montenegros-government-assassinating/>.

⁴⁵⁹ Stronski and Himes, "Russia's Game in the Balkans," 9–10.

⁴⁶⁰ Courtney Weaver, "Konstantin Malofeev, Marshall Capital Partners," *Financial Times*, September 8, 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/569e533e-051c-11e3-9e71-00144feab7de>.

support for the coup itself.⁴⁶¹ In addition, Malofeev has also supported the DF in Montenegro itself, hosting for instance Montenegrin MP Strahinja Bulajic in Russia, who later organized anti-NATO protests in Montenegro and further supported the DF. As another example, Malofeev-owned TV stations have given airtime to DF leaders who were later sentenced to prison for five years for their involvement in the coup.⁴⁶² In addition, he used the Orthodox Church in Montenegro as a cover to foster his influence and to contribute to the Russian information campaign. Hence, the Montenegrin archbishop Amfolohije negotiated a deal to sell Malofeev a Montenegrin TV station that has become one of the most vocal anti-NATO, pro-Russian media outlets within Montenegro.⁴⁶³ Malofeev is also the president of the right-wing Christian think tank Katehon, whose supervisory board features a number of notable figures, such as Leonid Reshetnikov, a retired Lieutenant General of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, who has been the head of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) in Belgrade.⁴⁶⁴ This institute, which works for the Kremlin, has close links to pro-Russian groups and to Orthodox priests in the Balkans, and Reshetnikov has developed a vast network of relationships. It is reported that he has used his network to arrange anti-NATO protests in Montenegro and to prepare the ground for the coup attempt. He was abruptly dismissed by President Putin after news of the plot broke out.⁴⁶⁵ The high-level backing of the coup was most likely established via the Russian Security Council head Nikolai Patrushev. He is an FSB veteran close to Putin, and the council itself could be regarded as command and control nexus for the Russian hybrid active measure campaigns.⁴⁶⁶ The coup itself appears to have been actively overseen by Patrushev himself, who took it personally to

⁴⁶¹ Mark Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2017, 9, https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR228_-_CONTROLLING_CHAOS1.pdf.

⁴⁶² Grozev, "Balkan Gambit."

⁴⁶³ Grozev.

⁴⁶⁴ "About Us: Katehon Think Tank," 2019, <https://katehon.com/about-us>; Belgrade and Moscow, "Serbia Departs Russians Suspected of Plotting Montenegro Coup."

⁴⁶⁵ Warsaw Institute, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the Western Balkans," 10.

⁴⁶⁶ Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe," 10.

Putin to ensure high-level approval. It was Patrushev himself who eased the situation following the failed coup, by traveling to Belgrade to apologize.⁴⁶⁷ Thus, it can be assumed that on the strategic level Malofeev and Reshetnikov played key roles in initiating the planning of the coup and facilitated the planning by using their close networks, especially in Serbia. Their plans were officially approved and backed up by Patrushev, who ensured cross-agency coordination and involvement of GRU/FSB personnel within the core planning of the coup, which needed some kind of approval from above.⁴⁶⁸

On the operational level the coup was planned by two GRU-assigned officers, who were unmasked by the investigative sites Bellingcat and The Insider.⁴⁶⁹ The first GRU officer, Colonel Eduard Shishmakov, who was outed as a Russian spy in Poland in 2014, travelled under an alias (which is not permitted for civilians under Russian law) to Belgrade. At the same time the second GRU officer, Lieutenant Colonel (or Colonel) Vladimir Nikolaevich Moiseev, stayed at the same hotel in Belgrade.⁴⁷⁰ The two GRU officers were tried in absentia and convicted of attempted terrorism and creating a criminal organization, receiving 15 year and 12 year prison terms, respectively.⁴⁷¹ Their main task was to recruit personnel for the coup, to instruct and coordinate the Montenegrin plotters' activity, and to assist in the distribution of funds from out of Serbia.⁴⁷² The recruiting method of the GRU officers, consistent with Shishmakov's methods in Poland, was to focus on targets with a criminal background.⁴⁷³ Additional GRU personnel most likely sneaked into Montenegro on the night of October 15, to neutralize a Montenegrin Special

⁴⁶⁷ CSID (Center for the Study of Democracy), "Policy Brief No. 73," 3.

⁴⁶⁸ Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe," 10.

⁴⁶⁹ "Second GRU Officer Indicted in Montenegro Coup Unmasked," bellingcat, November 22, 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/11/22/second-gru-officer-indicted-montenegro-coup-unmasked/>.

⁴⁷⁰ Grozev, "Balkan Gambit"; "Second GRU Officer Indicted in Montenegro Coup Unmasked."

⁴⁷¹ Christina Maza, "Exclusive: Russian Military Spies Backed Attempt to Assassinate Leader of Montenegro, Report Says," March 7, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/exclusive-russian-military-spies-backed-attempt-assassinate-leader-montenegro-1007324>.

⁴⁷² Stronski and Himes, "Russia's Game in the Balkans," 13.

⁴⁷³ Grozev, "Balkan Gambit."

Forces camp and then assist the core group of plotters.⁴⁷⁴ The two GRU officers were extracted after Patrushev's presence in Serbia, likely via his transportation means. This action supports the claim that there was official Russian endorsement of the coup.

The core group itself was built of non-state actors, such as Serbian Night Wolves affiliates, paid mercenaries, and far-right radicals. Aleksandr Sindjelic, the co-founder of the paramilitary *Balkanska Kozacka Vojska* (Balkan Cossack Army—BKV), an affiliate of Russia's Night Wolves biker group, was the key liaison with the GRU operatives, who testified that he was recruited by the GRU officers and received communication means in addition to the payment to ensure the forwarding of instructions. In addition, he hired a former chief of the Serbia's Special Police, as well members of the BKV, and formed with him a criminal group for the coup itself.⁴⁷⁵ In doing so, they recruited other Serbian nationals such as Mirko Velimirovic, who testified that he was tasked to procure weapons from Kosovo and to rent a house in Podgorica, used as storage and safe house.⁴⁷⁶ In addition they recruited Serbian nationalists, preferably with combat experience, such as Nemanic Risitc, who had fought in Ukraine. Locally, Sindjelic was tasked to recruit approximately 300–500 volunteers.⁴⁷⁷

The planning of the coup reveals that Russia considered the use of violence in the attempted coup as an appropriate tool to achieve its foreign policy goals. These violent means were to be used to assassinate the Prime Minister Djukanovic in order to forcibly seize power. It would set the conditions for DF politicians, who acted jointly with the plotters, to give the operation a semblance of legality. In addition, it shows the specific role of the GRU, as the executive body, considering kinetic operations and hybrid active measures as an essential part of their tasks.

Furthermore, the closer look at the pool of forces involved in the planning of the coup reveals the interdependency between state entities, the intelligence apparatus,

⁴⁷⁴ Bajrović, Garčević, and Kraemer, *Hanging by a Thread*, 10.

⁴⁷⁵ Grozev, "Balkan Gambit."

⁴⁷⁶ Warsaw Institute, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the Western Balkans," 15.

⁴⁷⁷ Warsaw Institute, 11.

oligarchs with non-state actors, paid mercenaries, and far-right radical groups as part of the Russians’ hybrid warfare toolkit. The different levels of actors and their interdependencies and responsibilities were easily merged and ensured tasking on every level of command during the coup. In addition, by precisely delegating the explicit task of the coup to paid nationalists, specific attention was paid to providing Russia with a mask of deniability and allowed for blaming the coup on rogue independent actors.

D. KEY FINDINGS—VARIABLES FRAMEWORK

1. Independent Variables: Threat and Opportunities

Figure 9 depicts the analysis of Russia’s actions, taking into consideration offensive realism derived from threat- and opportunity-related strategies. The analysis reveals that Russia did not perceive Montenegro as a threat until it openly challenged Russia and changed its balanced political stance by joining the challenging actor NATO within the anarchic system.

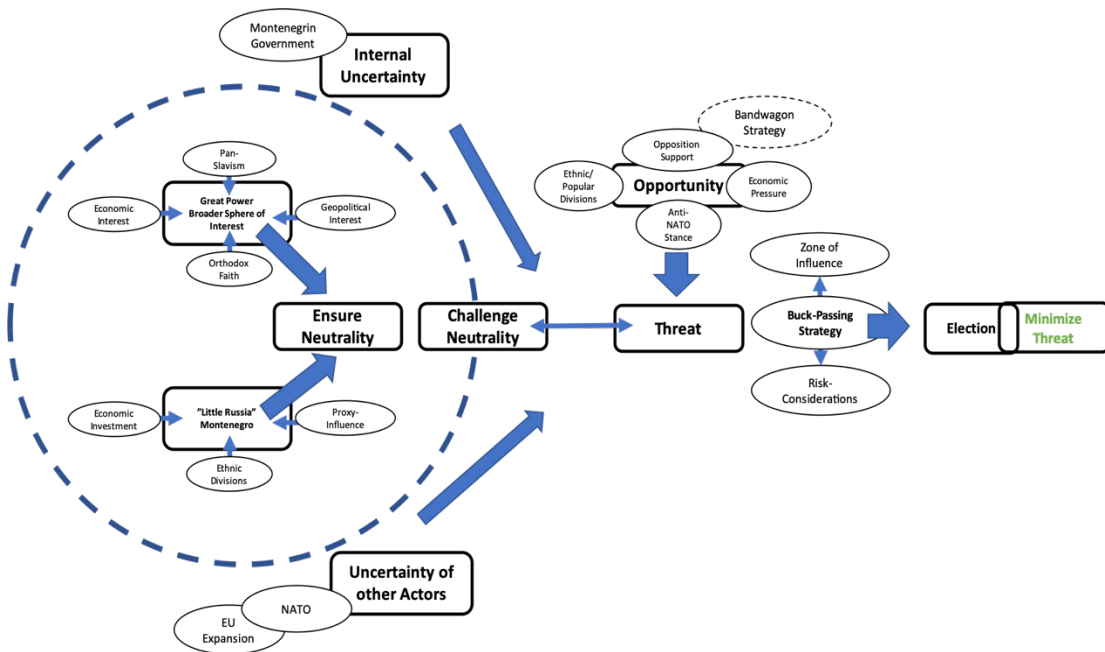


Figure 9. Independent Variables Assumptions: Montenegro

Montenegro, perceived by Russia as a country within its broader sphere of interest, is specially related to Russia due to its strong cultural and religious ties and is, in addition its popularity as an economically interesting tourist location, geopolitically important due to its access to the Adriatic Sea. Russia was assured influence within Montenegro through ties in Montenegro's vulnerable economic sectors, via the support of Russia's strong ally Serbia, and Russophile divisions within Montenegro. For that reason, Montenegro's progress toward membership in the EU and NATO was initially not a threat. Furthermore, Montenegro, as a negligible actor based on its lack of power, military, and economic resources, maintained neutrality and did not challenge its position within Russia's broader sphere of interest.

This perception changed after the Montenegrin government openly challenged Russia by pressing toward NATO accession. Perceived then as a threat, Russia exercised the opportunity-related bandwagon strategies to counter it. As divided factions within Montenegro rejected the idea of joining NATO, Russia exploited several opportunities and jumped on the bandwagon by openly supporting the opposition and fostering the anti-NATO stance within Montenegro.

NATO would gain strategic and political benefits through the geopolitical position of a possibly new member Montenegro. Hence, as it became more apparent that membership within NATO was likely, Russia considered the use of lethal force to prevent the opposing primary actor, NATO, from adjusting the distribution of power to its advantage. Nevertheless, Montenegro is not in the core sphere of Russian interest and influence. Accordingly, Russia passed the burden to deter and destabilize NATO within a buck-passing strategy to externally supported entities, thus minimizing its risk of involvement and ensuring that Russia was not actively engaged in Montenegro. If successfully executed, this strategy would have minimized the threat of a "non-compliant" Montenegro, via a state coup and a new pro-Russian, anti-NATO government.

2. Intervening Variable: Hybrid Warfare

The analysis of the coup d'état plot, focusing on the key findings related to the intervening variable Hybrid Warfare, reveals that Russia leveraged the use of violence to

achieve its aim, preventing Montenegro's accession to NATO. Even though it was uncovered shortly before its execution, the attempted coup is a compelling example of how Russia leverages violence to wage hybrid warfare within a country that is not in the core sphere of Russian influence. It uncovers the transition from soft power to hard power, enabled by a pool of deniable proxies.

The preparing and shaping phases focus on the time frame prior to the election, while the executing phase (dotted line in Figure 10) reflects the planning considerations, which were not executed because the attempt was thwarted by Montenegro's police. The final phase reveals Russia's exit and contingency measures after the coup was uncovered. The focus is within the battlespace Montenegro, but considerations within near proximity are incorporated.

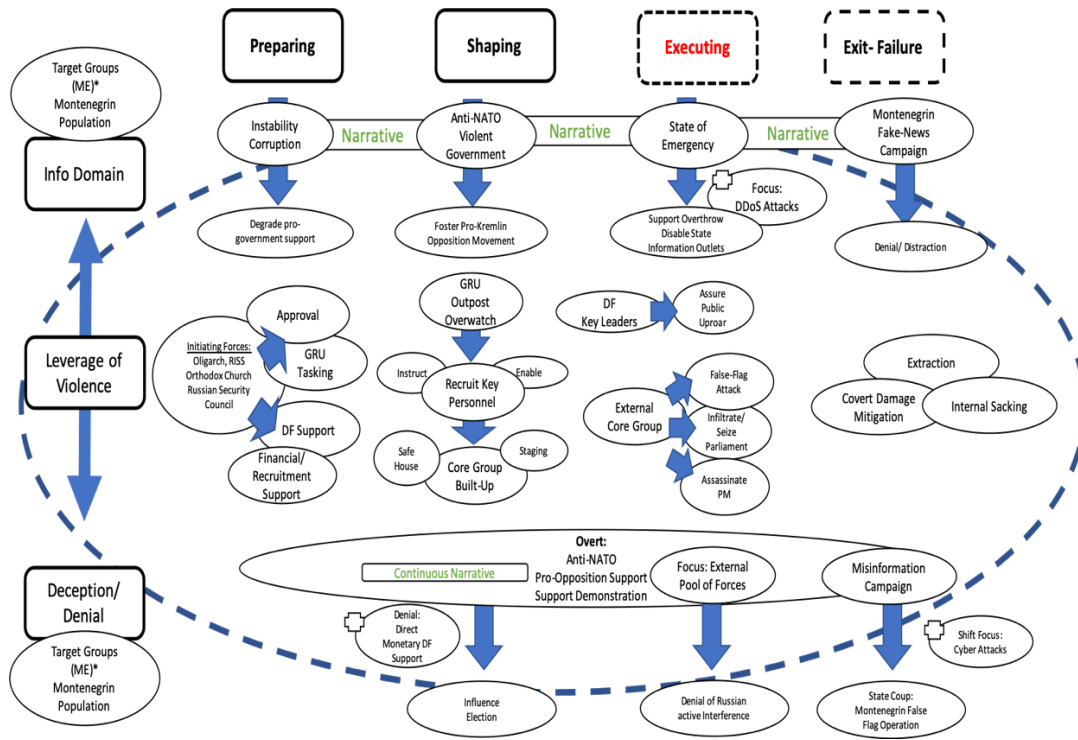


Figure 10. Intervening Variables Assumptions: Montenegro

The focus within the first phase lies on setting the preconditions for the precise conduct of the operation itself. It is initiated by pro-Russian private entities and passed on to the Russian Security Council for approval. It is ratified within the Kremlin, enabling official cross-interagency support especially among Russian intelligence entities. In addition, supporting measures for the pro-Russian political DF in Montenegro are applied to guarantee their complicity. Furthermore, this phase is strongly influenced by the use of the information domain, targeting the Montenegrin population to erode their support for the government. As part of the information campaign, Russian officials are to maintain their overt involvement and their support for the opposition forces, the DF, during all phases, while simultaneously Russia denies any financial support for these opposing forces.

Within the second phase, media outlets within Montenegro and Serbia shift their focus to the opposition's key anti-NATO narrative and their politics of the street. In addition, the information campaign fosters the storyline of a violent government trying to undercut peaceful demonstrations. This campaign is enhanced by aggressive Russian rhetoric against the government and its path to NATO accession. During this phase, GRU personnel set the conditions to switch to kinetic measures directed from Serbia, through the recruitment, funding, logistical support, and instruction of key personnel with criminal backgrounds. These key external individuals act as the primary liaison to the GRU, they are tasked to build up a core group and set the precondition by establishing a safe house in Montenegro and purchasing weapons.

The kinetic part of the third phase, even though not executed, was to be fulfilled by the pool of recruited forces, without direct Russian support within the battlespace. This external pool of forces was tasked to enhance the previously shaped narrative of a violent government, by conducting false-flag attacks on demonstrators. This was to occur after the forces had infiltrated the government and used the opportunity to assassinate the prime minister. DF key personnel, acting jointly with the plotters on election night, would ensure demonstrations and would be the beneficiaries of the coup by taking over the government and preventing Montenegro's NATO accession. This phase was supported by cyber-attacks, enabling the spread of disinformation and disabling effective official

countermeasures. By ensuring that Russian GRU/FSB or military personnel was not actively involved in the coup, it can be assessed that Russia viewed the coup as a high risk opportunity in which the opt-out denial option outweighed the all-in course of action. Hence, no additional Russian forces, besides limited GRU personnel, were staged in assembly areas within Montenegro.

Within the last stage, the information campaign shifted to denial of any Russian involvement by accusing Montenegrin officials of disseminating fake news and implementing false-flag operations to discredit the DF. In addition, Russia focused on the concealed extraction of Russian GRU personnel from Serbia, while concurrently mitigating the damage to its close ally through an official visit in Serbia and the removal of RISS key personal. Nevertheless, cyber-attacks during the final stage of Montenegro's accession to NATO continued, as did the constant anti-NATO narrative and Russia's support for the opposition within Montenegro.

VI. TOWARD A MODEL FOR ANTICIPATING RUSSIAN BEHAVIOR

The previous chapters analyzed two specific cases of Russian behavior, the annexation of Crimea and the attempted state coup in Montenegro, to explain how Russia tries to achieve its hybrid foreign policy goals. This policy is, according to the variables framework, defined as the dependent variable and analogous to power maximization in offensive realism.

The two independent variables, threats and opportunities, which derive from the key findings related to offensive realism, were utilized within the specific cases in order to reveal Russia's strategic considerations related to the dependent variable. These strategic considerations are closely linked to the intervening variable, which is defined as hybrid warfare. This thesis analyzed in particular how Russia synchronizes and leverages violence as an integral part of the intervening variable hybrid warfare to support its strategic objectives to achieve its hybrid foreign policy goals.

This chapter consolidates the key findings of the two case studies to explore their differences and commonalities. These findings can help to anticipate Russia's future actions to achieve its hybrid foreign policy goals, and are depicted in a model for anticipating Russian behavior.

A. INDEPENDENT VARIABLES—ANTICIPATED CONSIDERATIONS

The key findings related to the independent variables within the two cases reveal that Russia's strategic considerations are closely linked to offensive realism. Russian strategic thinking is based on the notion of being one of the primary actors within the anarchic system, defining and describing itself as a great power.⁴⁷⁸ This self-image compels Russia to control and influence certain areas it perceives as important. Russia's assessment of the importance of these areas is based on several considerations. First is the notion of specific regions it refers to as the "Near Abroad," a term originating in

⁴⁷⁸ Gurganus and Rumer, *Russia's Global Ambitions In Perspective*, 4.

Russia in the early 1990s that denotes the Russian Federation; it incorporates the CIS states and the Baltics.⁴⁷⁹ Within this traditional core sphere, Russia has particular interest in maintaining influence and is willing to ensure primacy using all means against other actors competing for power.⁴⁸⁰

In addition, Russia considers certain areas to be of privileged interest. This perception incorporates a broader sphere of Russian interest in “areas of a post-Soviet space, where the CIS has not been capable of aggregating states into a unifying framework under the command of Russia.”⁴⁸¹ The interest in these states can be manifold and the boundaries are not set, as the former President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev stated: “Russia, like other countries in the world, has regions where it has privileged interests. These are regions where countries with which we have friendly relations are located.”⁴⁸²

Furthermore, this perception of Russian influenced areas and legitimate Russian interest involves geopolitical considerations and is linked to Russia’s geographic location.⁴⁸³ Thus, bordering countries, such as Ukraine or Georgia, protect Russia from Asia and Europe and are of specific importance; this also includes countries with maritime and warm-water ports access, such as Crimea. Furthermore, certain regions, such as the Balkans, are geo-strategically located between the Black and the Mediterranean Seas and, in the case of Montenegro, have access to the Adriatic Sea and proximity to the Middle East.

Russia’s involvement is also linked to its varied economic interests and dependencies within these regions. Because the oil and gas businesses in Russia are crucial players in the global energy market, Russia is able to strengthen other countries’

⁴⁷⁹ “Russia-Ethnic Relations and Russia’s ‘near-Abroad,’” Encyclopedia Britannica, December 10, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia>.

⁴⁸⁰ Trenin, “Russia’s Spheres of Interest, Not Influence,” 4.

⁴⁸¹ Andrew E. Kraemer, “Russia Claims Its Sphere of Influence in the World,” August 31, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/01/world/europe/01russia.html>.

⁴⁸² Dmitry Medvedev, *Interview given by Dmitry Medvedev to Television Channels Channel One, Rossia, NTV* (Sochi: President of Russia, 2008), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/48301>.

⁴⁸³ Gurganus and Rumer, *Russia’s Global Ambitions In Perspective*, 7.

dependence on supplies of its energy resources. This is especially true within the former CIS states, which receive about 30 percent of Russian natural gas exports. Within this privileged area of Russian interest, there are a few states that do not rely on Russian energy resources, such as Montenegro or Crimea; thus, to achieve its foreign policy goals, Russia must exert other means of influence, such as economic leverage from its investment in Montenegro's vulnerable tourism and real estate sectors.⁴⁸⁴

Consequently, Russia's national interests have become central to its foreign policy.⁴⁸⁵ But as the case studies revealed, it involves more than just rational geostrategic or economic considerations. As an umbrella term, patriotism especially plays an important role, as prominently stated by Vladimir Putin:

I am convinced that the development of society is inconceivable without accord on the common goals. And these are not only material goals. Spiritual and moral values are no less important. The unity of Russia is ensured by traditional patriotism, cultural traditions, and our common historical memory. There is a growing interest for national history, our roots, everything that is near and dear to all of us in the arts, theatre and cinema.⁴⁸⁶

Within this broader perception, specific historically rooted concepts are significant to Russia's foreign policy contemplations. For instance, Pan-Slavism aspires to preserve cultural and spiritual unity among the Orthodox Slavic nations, while in Crimea the history of the Russian Empire imbues the feeling of belonging to Motherland Russia as ethnic Russians, permanently struggling for survival. Hence, the reshaping of cultural roots and the combination of several historical narratives shaped to the specific area of Russian influence play an important role in Russian political thinking and are able to

⁴⁸⁴ Jim Nichol, "Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests." CRS Report No. RL33407. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 31, 2014, <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA525495>.

⁴⁸⁵ Laenen, "Russia's 'Vital and Exclusive' National Interests in the Near Abroad," 24.

⁴⁸⁶ Vladimir Putin, *State of the Nation Address to the Federal Assembly: The State of Russia, a Way to an Effective State* (Moscow: Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del Rossiiskoi Federatsii (MID RF; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Information and Press Department), 2000).

aggregate and activate intense national sentiments in Russia and within Russophile areas.⁴⁸⁷

Furthermore, religion and the close coordination of policymakers with the Russian Orthodox Church to enshrine the Russian national identity support the Russian perception of itself as a great power. Within this sense, politics and religion are bound together, ensuring the narrative of the preservation of the Russian state as a guardian of the Orthodox faith.⁴⁸⁸ Within this storyline, the Orthodox Church embraces and mobilizes aspects of the Christian imperial ideology with Russia assuming a messianic role in the Orthodox faith in pursuit of Russia's foreign policy goals as a great power.⁴⁸⁹

These primary considerations driving Russia's foreign policy decisions are influenced by the uncertainty of other actors. These actors are on one hand domestic internal actors and interest groups, such as the oligarchs and the Russian populace and the uncertainty of their continuous support for the Russian government. A crucial driving factor and a common value among both Russian elites and Russian society is the importance of Russia's sovereignty as a great power, ensuring they will not submit to another's dominance or leadership.⁴⁹⁰ Hence, defending this sovereignty by political and military means, if others challenge it, aligns the view of the elite with public opinion. These means foster Putin's popularity and the population's confidence in him as a leader, and help to consolidate power domestically. In addition, the uncertainty of the popular perception of Russia within the target country is a driving factor. Hence, exploiting pro-Russian support and divisions within the target country is essential to leveraging Russia's strategic response.

⁴⁸⁷ Marlene Laruelle, "Putin's Regime and the Ideological Market: A Difficult Balancing Game," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 16, 2016, 1–2, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/16/putin-s-regime-and-ideological-market-difficult-balancing-game-pub-68250>.

⁴⁸⁸ Paul Coyer, "(Un)Holy Alliance: Vladimir Putin, The Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Exceptionalism," May 21, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulcoyer/2015/05/21/unholy-alliance-vladimir-putin-and-the-russian-orthodox-church/#78bf56ac27d5>.

⁴⁸⁹ Chrissy Stroop, "Putin Wants God (or at Least the Church) on His Side," October 10, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/10/putin-wants-god-or-at-least-the-church-on-his-side/>.

⁴⁹⁰ Dmitri Trenin, *It's Time to Rethink Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy* (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019), <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78990>.

On the other hand, external actors and challenging entities drive Russia's foreign policy decisions. The perception of uncertainty surrounding these actors can be manifold. As the cases reveal, Russian foreign policy decisions reflect the uncertainty of allied governments who challenge Russian influence. It also reflects the uncertainty of challenging actors, such as the European Union or NATO, within the anarchic system. Nevertheless, the Russian perception of these actors differs. In response to Crimea's annexation, the EU condemned Russia of clearly violating Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a result, the EU has implemented restrictive measures and has virtually suspended all cooperation with Russia. Nevertheless, the EU remains Russia's biggest market and is perceived as rather beneficial.⁴⁹¹ Hence, the EU and Russia recognize each other as key partners as well as strategic players combating regional and global challenges.⁴⁹² In addition, Russia still cooperates with European member states on a bilateral basis, indicating the Russian perception that the institutional EU is of less importance.

In comparison, NATO is perceived throughout the Russian narrative as the primary threatening actor, embodying one of the key characteristics of the independent variable, the possession of military capabilities. Hence, the NATO-Russian relationship has always been marked by suspicion and Russia views NATO as a persistent challenging threat as it embraces countries within Russia's influence zones. These considerations amend the primary considerations, as depicted in Figure 11, and set the baseline for the anticipated behavior model.

⁴⁹¹ James Sherr, "Russia and Europe's Evolving Relationship," *BBC News*, January 5, 2016, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35154633>.

⁴⁹² EEAS - European External Action Service, "The European Union and the Russian Federation," Text, EEAS - European External Action Service - European Commission, May 30, 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/35939/european-union-and-russian-federation_en.

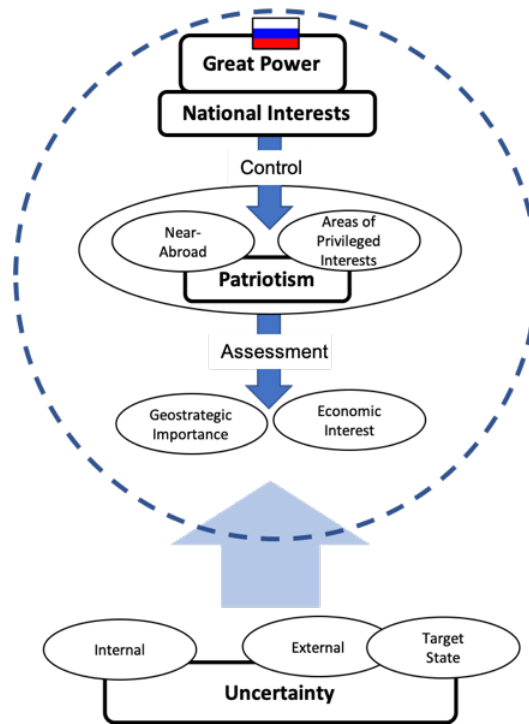


Figure 11. Independent Variables: Primary Considerations

B. INTERVENING VARIABLE—ANTICIPATED CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of the intervening variable Hybrid Warfare as it relates to the anticipated behavior model is based on the stages depicted within the case studies. Within the first stages, preparing and shaping, the exploitation of the target state and its diversion is key to apply and wage Russian hybrid warfare. These initial considerations scale and specify Russian activities and tailor them to the specific Russian hybrid warfare approach, ranging from a full-scale approach, as in the Crimean case, to scalable hybrid warfare involvement.

Common to both approaches within the first two phases is the strong influence of the information domain. Its use is essentially aimed to discredit the opposing actors, which are the target state and its institutions or challenging entities, specifically NATO. These actions build upon continuous persistent false attribution of malicious opposing activities and continuous anti-Western narratives. In doing so, these actions shape the underlining Russian plot of persistent erosion and collapsing security structure in the target state, which reaches its climax within the execution phase. Within this context, the exploitation

of specific audiences is important to foster and enhance a pro-Russian stance and garner support. Particularly, these actions and information measures are fitted to influence the pro-Russian population within the target state itself. If a full-scale involvement is envisioned and if the target state is in close proximity to Russia, information measures are also applied domestically to enhance support within Russia. This is important because Russian forces, though concealed, are involved within the battlefield itself. On the other hand, the involvement of Russian forces within a scalable involvement is limited and rather outside the battlespace. Instead, they are tasked to effectively enable external entities to act on behalf of Russia. Thus, the focus on domestic support is negligible.

The use of deception and denial within these phases differs also, depending on the scale of forces involved and the targeting actor itself. Common to both approaches is the necessity to deny any force build-up to prevent early detection of possible Russian hybrid hard power involvement. In order to do so, Russia distracts by shifting the attention away from displays of hard power with its use of soft power tools. Typically, Russia promulgates a false narrative that emphasizes political solutions and de-escalation measures. In addition, the Montenegrin case illustrated that these measures, for instance overt support of political opposition forces, can also be escalatory. Yet, Russia makes sure that this open support is limited to diplomatic or soft power tools to effectively distract from the build-up or recruitment of the forces pool. In addition, disruptive means, either as deception measures such as false-flag operations or cyber-attacks within the information domain, support the shaping of the battlefield and diminish the opposing actor's response. These considerations of the first two phases in light of the information domain and the use of denial and deception are merged within Figure 12.

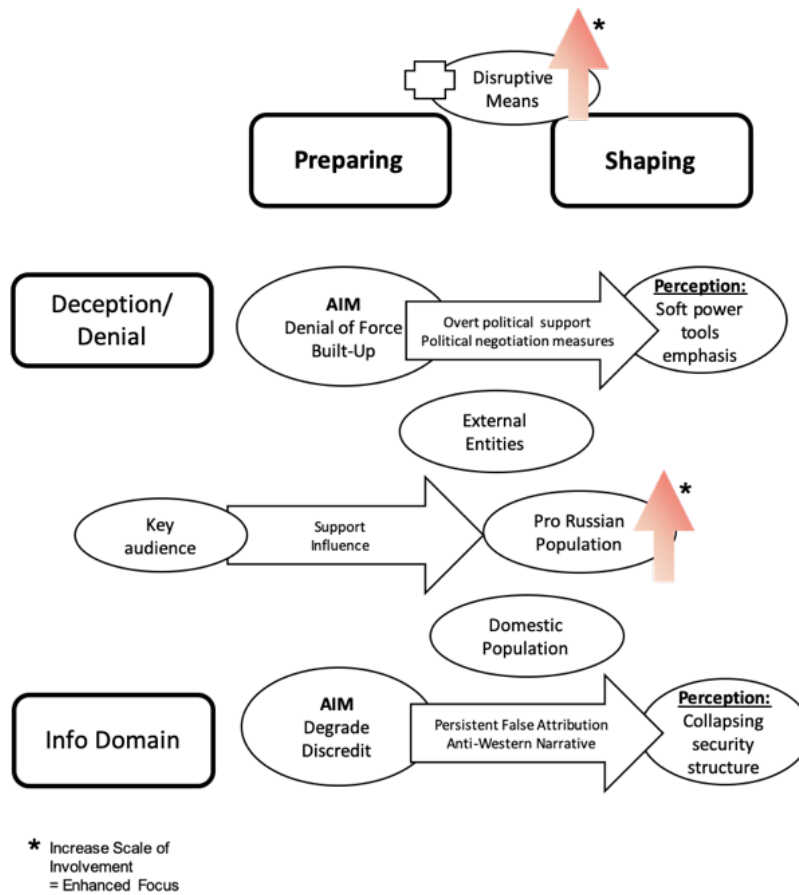


Figure 12. Intervening Variables: Initial Considerations—Deception/Denial and Information Domain

The pool of forces differs significantly within the two approaches, but the few similarities are vivid. The pool of forces used by the hybrid actor Russia consists of internal and external entities. These entities aim to mitigate the risk of official responsibility and support denial of Russian engagement, while concurrently extending Russia’s sphere of influence within the target state. The case studies reveal that specific internal entities are an integral part of Russian hybrid warfare, while the scale of their involvement differs depending on the importance of the target state for Russia. The contribution of external entities and selection of the external pool of forces reveal a similar pattern. Their contribution depends on the scale of Russian involvement weighed against

Russia's assessment of the target state's significance within the context of Russia's sphere of influence and strategic importance.

This assessment and the derived pool of forces is especially dependent on the level of internal forces' involvement and their ability to conceal their role within the target state itself. It defines the level of domestic support and official Russian engagement. Hence, as the case studies reveal, the initiative to launch a hybrid attack and to intervene within a specific state can be either bottom-up or top-down. Nevertheless, the approval authority, even though its engagement within the planning phase differs, is at last the Kremlin and the president himself, as the final focal point.

These two considerations, approval authority and selection of the pool of forces, are intertwined and specifically based on the scale of the operation itself and the potential risk. The higher the scale of involvement of Russian forces within the battlespace is, the higher the approval authority must be. Thus, the operation is usually initiated from the top, down. When this is the case, the focus within the preparing phases is to conceal a build-up and prepositioning of forces.

On the other hand, as the cases reveal, a less-scalable approach is continuously building-up and often bottom-down initiated. Hence, within the preparation phase, there is a transition to leveraging the approval authority and arranging a potential pool of forces for the operation. This leveraging is centered on the impact of the potential operation itself and the risk associated with it. Official Russian approval within this phase guarantees the embeddedness of internal Russian forces. It marks the transfer of authority from a bottom-down initiative to official Russian command and control of the operation itself.

Common to all approaches is the integral part of specific Russian entities. In particular, the GRU or FSB are an integral part of the operation, often including their SF Spetsnaz units. Their focus is hereby in particular the kinetic, active part, not the collection of intelligence or counter-intelligence measures. Furthermore, based on the scale of involvement and the importance of the operation, KSST as the tip-of-the-spear SOF unit, is the preferred first-responder military entity. They gain particular relevance as a small

scale, highly effective covert action tool within Russian hybrid warfare, ensuring a decisive initial action, as well as the target's difficulty to respond and deploy at high speed.⁴⁹³ In addition, based on the scale of the operation, this entity is reinforced by specialized units. Finally, conventional units can be part of the internal pool of forces, but only as second responder or follow-on forces. If these forces are deployed, the conflict shifts toward a full-scale warfare scenario, in which the concealment and denial of Russian involvement boosts the likelihood of a specific outcome with all means.

The focus shifts within the second phase toward the battlefield itself and the mobilization and recruitment of external entities. The pool of forces and entities as well as their specific roles within the hybrid warfare scenario is manifold, and ranges from promoting the narrative within the battlefield and contributing troops to engaging the kinetic entity on behalf of Russia. They can be part of a political organization, mercenaries, criminals, or local militias. Common to all approaches is the fostering and leveraging of popular support in support of pro-Russian forces to conceal Russian involvement via an internal uproar. Beside this is the specific use of military-affiliated irregular forces. These forces are either specially trained or monitored to act on behalf of Russia independently, or act as force multiplier to deny official Russian involvement. Finally, certain official external entities are mobilized and recruited, either political proxy forces within the target state or affiliated official entities, such as police forces or military units, which have the potential to defect within a fragile environment. Figure 13 depicts the aforementioned pool-of-forces considerations related to these two phases.

⁴⁹³ Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations Forces in the War in Ukraine - Crimea and Donbas," in *Russia and Hybrid Warfare-Going beyond the Label*, ed. Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith (Helsinki: Aleksanteri Institute, 2016), 27–28.

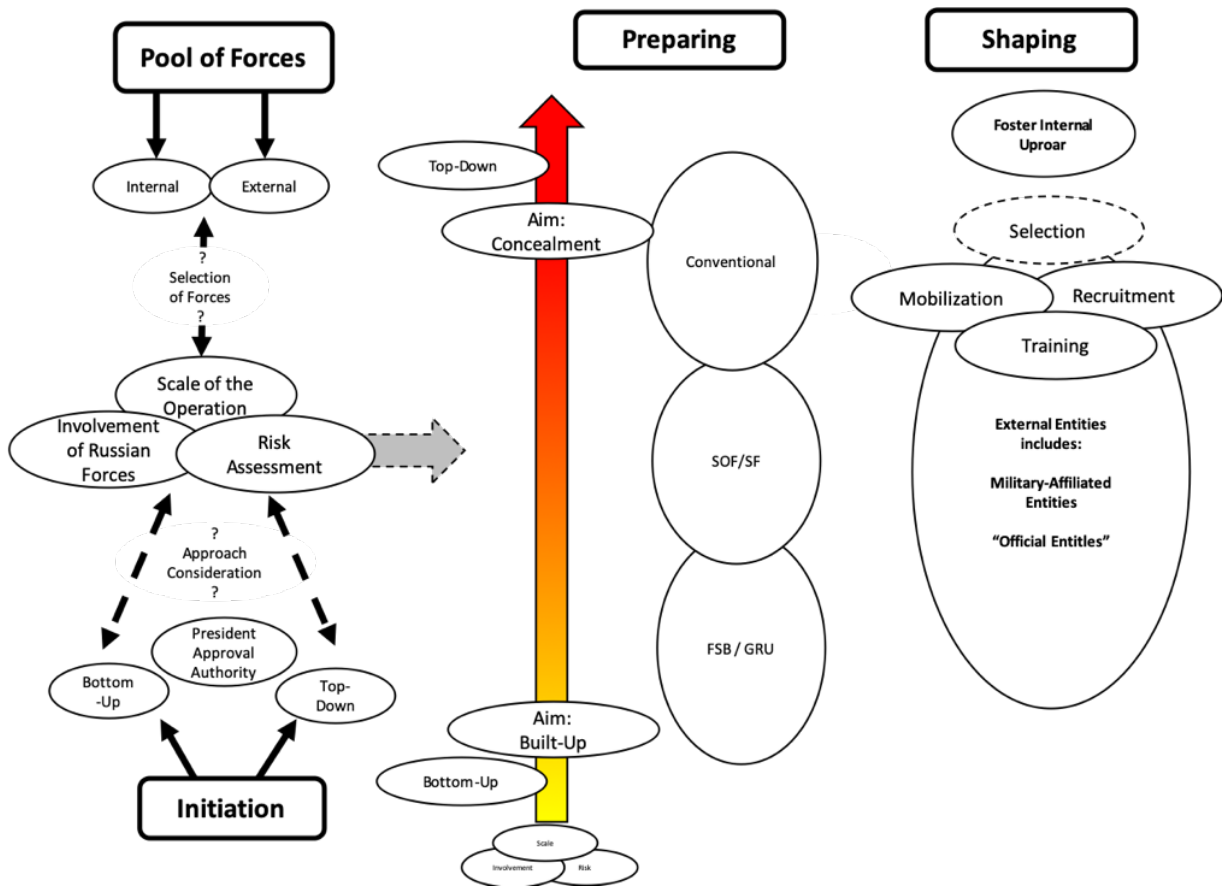


Figure 13. Intervening Variables: Initial Considerations—Pool of Forces

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VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Today, Russia ranks among the world's leading nations with a powerful foreign economic and defense potential ... We are not threatening anyone, not going to attack anyone or take away anything from anyone with the threat of weapons.⁴⁹⁴

A. REVIEW OF THE CASE STUDY FINDINGS

This statement made by President Vladimir Putin during his last State of the Union Speech in 2018 aligns with the key claims of the thesis: Russian foreign policy deliberations are based on distinct reflections of offensive realism, and Russian hybrid warfare is explicitly linked to achieving foreign policy goals. Based on these core considerations, this thesis has argued that the analysis of commonalities and differences of Russian behavior in the case studies of Crimea and Montenegro can help to anticipate Russia's future actions or possible patterns of behavior, as illustrated by the proposed model.

The analysis derives from a specific awareness of offensive realism. The core assumptions of offensive realism are applicable to the strategic thinking of Russia as a primary actor within the anarchic system, seeking to improve the balance of power and shape Russian decision making. Possessing offensive military capabilities is a necessary and essential part of Russian strategic considerations, enabling Russia to adjust the distribution of power to its own advantage. The perception of threat drives these strategies. Nevertheless, the explanation that Russian behavior and strategic considerations are primarily a response to the altering of the status quo through Western expansion and are, therefore, mainly threat related is simplistic and limited. Threat-related considerations do indeed drive Russia to pursue and increase its security, and these considerations also shape its narrative that denies opportunity-related strategic considerations and Russia's expectation of profiting from its influence over smaller, weaker states. Consequently, it is likely Russia chooses between or combines threat- and opportunity-related strategies to

⁴⁹⁴ Vladimir Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," President of Russia, January 3, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>.

achieve its foreign policy goals and to advantageously tilt the balance of power within its sphere of influence.

The scale of Russian hybrid warfare and its engagement differs from case to case, but the leverage of violence remains at its core and specifies a clear conceptual distinction in contrast to Western thinking, which incorporates the use of solely non-military means within its concept of hybrid warfare. Consequently, non-military means within Russian hybrid warfare support the use of the selected level of violence. These non-military means are inherently embedded as an overlapping function and as an enabling, shaping and supporting activity. The pool of diverse external and Russian forces remains the core of Russian hybrid warfare, adapted to operate effectively within the target state. Despite the scale of hybrid warfare, the Russian intelligence apparatus and its emphasis on active measures remains the pivotal part of the hybrid forces pool. Recapturing the underlining characterization of hybrid warfare, the foregoing case studies illustrated how Russian hybrid warfare meets these characteristics and aligned with offensive realism considerations.

B. CONCLUSION—ANTICIPATED BEHAVIOR MODEL

Russian behavior to achieve of its foreign policy follows certain patterns and thus can be anticipated.

First, certain Russian primary foreign policy considerations lead to the anticipated behavior model in relation to the independent variable:

- Russian foreign policy is based on the notion that Russia is a great power with legitimate interests in certain regions.
- Russia distinguishes its level of control and influence according to core region, the ‘Near Abroad,’ and regions of privileged Russian interest.
- Patriotism, encompassing historically important narratives, religious boundaries and ethnicity, besides geostrategic and economic considerations, drive Russian foreign policy decisions and the assessment of the importance of certain regions.

- Uncertainty about domestic, external, and regional actors influences the primary foreign policy considerations.
- The primary foreign policy considerations are consistent and serve as the foundation for the Russian choice between threat- or opportunity-related strategies toward a target state or region.
- NATO poses the primary threat and greatest external danger to Russia and drives the persistent underlining Russian perception that Russia is constantly threatened by others.⁴⁹⁵
- Russian foreign policy and its national interests derive directly from this threat perception but this perception differs in its concrete characteristics, based on specific reflections aligned with the primary considerations and the uncertainty of the actors involved.
- Russia's decision-making process identifies risks and opportunities associated with the target itself, its proximity to Russia, its strategic relevance, and the anticipated outcome, either to maximize its power or to minimize the threat by preventing competing actors from gaining supremacy.

Russia assigns specific importance to the diversity of the population and its alignment to Russia within the target state, aside from the support of the domestic Russian population toward a possible Russian commitment within this state. Thus, if Russia assesses internal support within the target state as high, risk of retaliation is considered as low. In addition, the target itself, its capabilities to respond, and its military capabilities in particular are important, as well as the effectiveness of the political institutions within the target state. Hence, if their effectiveness is assessed as low it presents Russia with opportunities to prevail by enhancing its support covertly and overtly to fuel tensions. Furthermore, anticipated Western action or inaction, as for example in Crimea, is

⁴⁹⁵ Maria Raquel Freire and Roger E. Kanet, *Russia and Its Near Neighbours* (New York, NY: Springer, 2012), 5–6.

leveraged by Russia. On the other hand, if the target is an affiliated member of NATO, Russia will most likely try to weaken trust, confidence, and stability within the target state, for instance via meddling in elections, and will therefore consider countermeasures primarily on the lower end of the continuum of conflict scale.⁴⁹⁶ Furthermore, the proximity of the target state to Russia itself is essential in considering whether to adopt a risk-averse or risk-tolerant approach. Hence, as the control of the CIS region is of high strategic importance, Russia is more likely to accept risks, particularly if NATO tries to expand its influence within this core region of Russian influence. In its privileged regions of influence, the risk acceptance of being actively involved is lower and, in particular, evaluated and balanced based on the anticipated outcome and the strategic relevance of the target state.

These strategic considerations shape Russia's threat- or opportunity-related engagement within the target state and reach their climax in a specific triggering event, which opens a specific window of opportunity to recalibrate the dynamics in Russia's favor. These considerations complement the consolidated thoughts about Russia's anticipated behavior in terms of the independent variables, as depicted in Figure 14:

⁴⁹⁶ Figure 1 depicts the continuum of conflict scale.

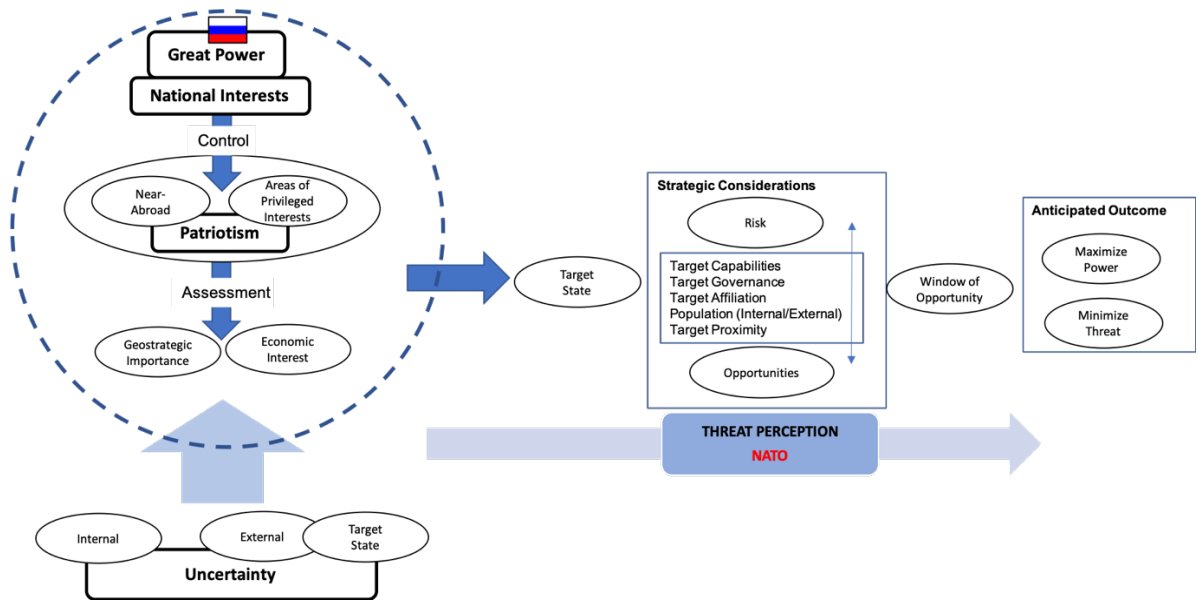


Figure 14. Independent Variables: Anticipated Behavior Model

These anticipated strategic thoughts drive Russia’s consideration of how and on what scale its hybrid warfare is waged until the execution phase. Following are the primary hybrid warfare considerations leading up to the execution phase:

- Primacy of the information domain to degrade and discredit opposing actors in order to shape the battlefield prior to execution and influence specific audiences, depending on the scale of the operation;
- Denial and deception to draw attention away from any type of force built-up or recruitment to prevent early detection;
- Primacy of distraction via covert and overt soft power tools;
- Initiation of bottom-up or top-down approach, dependent on the scale, involvement of Russian Forces, and the operational risk assessment, while the final approval remains with President Putin himself;
- Use of a pool of diverse internal and external forces, while involvement of the Russian intelligence apparatus remains independent of the scale of Russian hybrid warfare;

- Rise of the internal forces pool for whole-scale hybrid warfare commitment, while the primary Russian military entity remains the KSST, reinforced by other SF units and conventional forces;
- Use of a diverse and manifold external forces pool, while the inclusion of military-affiliated irregular forces and official external entities remains consistent.

Within the final execution phase, the decisive kinetic phase of the operation, the focus clearly shifts to the battlespace and the pool of forces engaged within it. The primary entities, either internal or external entities within this space, and their level of commitment in the battlespace differ significantly, depending on the importance of the operation.

If the anticipated outcome is crucial to achieve, the pool of forces will be built around Russian forces, minimizing the risk of failure. Within this scenario, the main effort remains within elite SOF units and intelligence entities. External forces, as a tool of a broader information campaign, are employed to reinforce or replace these entities as part of an intense Russian disinformation campaign to deny Russian involvement in the early phases.

The deniability of Russian forces is only important within the decisive phase of the execution. If the initial phase is successful, it is aligned with a Russian-initiated political change. This gives the employment of Russian conventional forces within the target state a legal cover as it enables the newly established Russian puppet government to officially request the aid of those forces.

On the other hand, risk-to-forces considerations gain importance if the relevance of the battlespace is considered secondary to the possibility of a high-risk mission failure. Hence, in favor of a possible opt-out option, external entities gain importance within the battlespace. These entities are tasked by Russian intelligence, preferably from outside the battlespace or at least with limited non-active presence within the target state. SOF and SF entities might be attached as a possible second responder depending on the execution of the operation itself.

Common to all primary entities within the battlespace is the importance of the operation's deniable character and the blend of the entities involved. In addition, the ability to use violent means in an organized manner remains the core task of these primary entities within the battlespace. Its use ensures and is designed to achieve surprise and to seize the initiative by targeting decisive vulnerabilities within the battlespace as a key element to achieve the anticipated outcome. A consistent integral part of the execution phase remains an aligning information campaign. This campaign varies throughout the operation and is embedded throughout all levels. Hence, at the tactical level cyber-attacks or the neutralization of key information infrastructure diminishes the opponent's response, while on the operational and strategic level a coercive information campaign simultaneously aims at exploiting social divisions within the target state. This combination on all levels undermines the target state's perceived legitimacy by shaping an eroding, chaotic, anarchic threat scenario, which serves as a prelude for the triggering event.

Within the last phase, reassessing the outcome of the operation itself, the narrative of deniability, supported by an ongoing information campaign, remains consistent. Hence, either measures to ensure an achieved status quo dominate, or if not successful, mitigation measures are considered. These considerations complement the first two phases by consolidating the thoughts about anticipated Russian behavior concerning the intervening variables within the kinetic phase, as depicted in Figure 15.

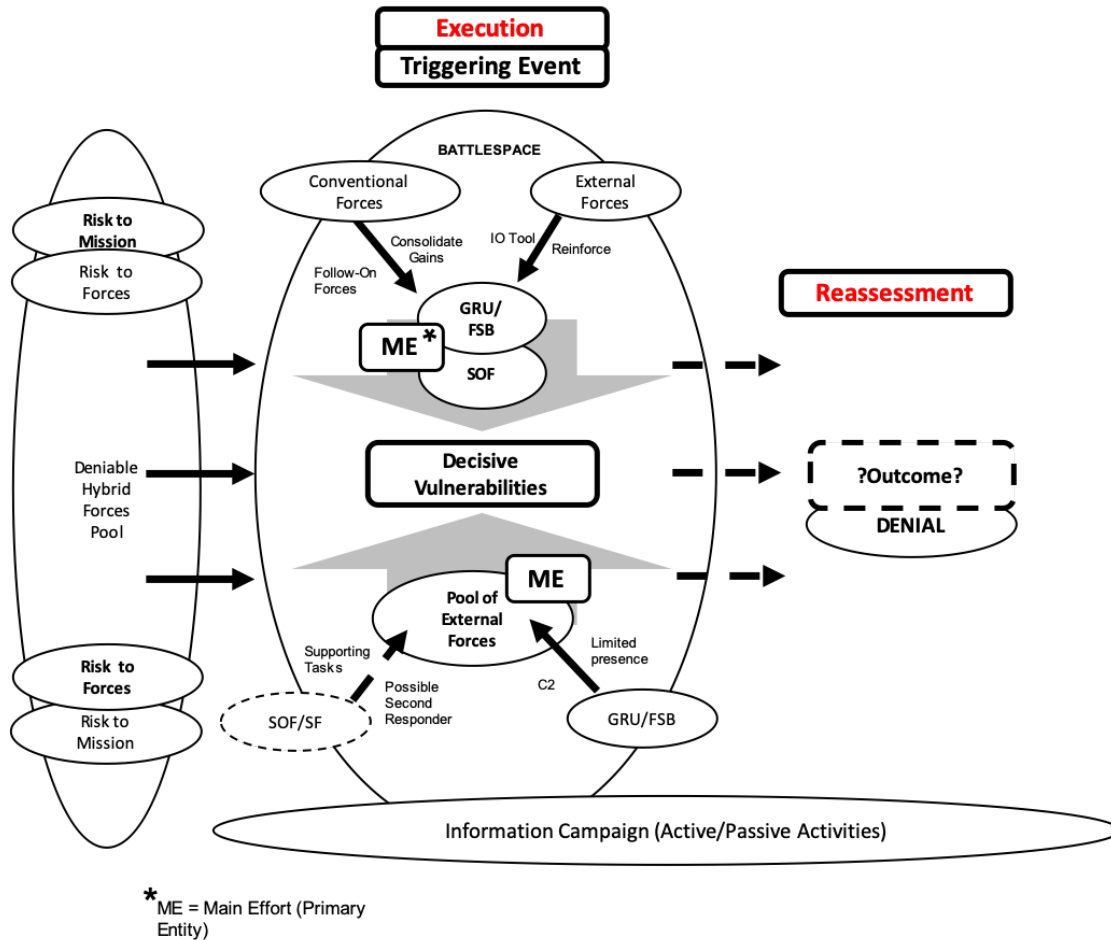


Figure 15. Intervening Variables: Anticipated Behavior Model

C. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The case studies findings, depicted in the anticipated behavior model, define possible Russian strategic and hybrid warfare considerations related to foreign policy aims. Based upon these findings and current Russia-related issues, the following areas of study could extend and utilize the findings to help detect, deter, and counter further Russian hybrid aggression effectively.

1. The findings related to anticipated Russian hybrid warfare reveal that intelligence agencies are continuously involved and that the leading military entities are Special Forces, while NATO remains Russia’s primary enemy and perceived threat. NATO SOF’s primary mission sets are

Military Action (MA), Special Reconnaissance (SR), and Direct Action (DA).⁴⁹⁷ It is questionable whether NATO SOF is able to cope with Russia's continuously advancing and evolving ability to gain power within a hybrid scenario. Hence, further studies should link the current mission set of NATO SOF to the anticipated behavior model to allocate countermeasures and identify gaps that are not addressed. The identification of these gaps will lead to a possible adaption of current NATO SOF activities to detect, deter, and counter Russia's anticipated hybrid threats more effectively and promptly.

2. The findings related to Russia's anticipated behavior reveal that offensive realism plays a crucial part in its foreign policy considerations based on the notion that Russia is a great power with legitimate interests in certain regions. These regions are considered as the "Near Abroad" or regions of privileged Russian interest. Within the last year Europe recorded an increase in possible Russian involvement in the killings or attempted killings of civilians related to Russia.⁴⁹⁸ Hence, further studies should elaborate on whether Russia extends its sphere of legitimate influence toward Europe and how threat- and opportunity-related offensive realism considerations are linked to this potential new approach. In addition, these cases should be further analyzed and war-gamed based on the anticipated hybrid warfare model in order to elaborate whether it fits within Russian hybrid warfare and whether new patterns are visible, extending the behavior model.
3. The core of Russian hybrid warfare remains the leverage of violence. Hence, the thesis does not incorporate the analysis of Russian influence through non-military means alone, such as happened in the U.S.

⁴⁹⁷ NATO, Allied Joint Doctrine (AJP) for Special Operations. AJP 3.5 (Brussels: NATO, 2013).

⁴⁹⁸ Katrin Bennhold and Andrew E. Kramer, "Berlin Murder Raises Suspicions of Russian Involvement," August 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/27/world/europe/berlin-murder-russia.html>.

election.⁴⁹⁹ Consequently, further studies should analyze the differences and commonalities related to the anticipated hybrid warfare model to extend the prediction of Russian behavior and define counter-measures against non-military Russian interference within target states.

⁴⁹⁹ Walter J. Hennigan, "Russia Is Already Trying to Undermine the 2018 Elections," *Time*, February 13, 2018, <https://time.com/5155810/russian-meddling-2018-elections/>.

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