Nothing New in Hybrid Warfare: The Estonian Experience and Recommendations for NATO

by Merle Maigre

Introduction
Russia's actions in Ukraine have reshaped the European security debate. Far more attention is being paid to different types of warfare, to the role and credibility of international organizations including NATO, and to the resilience of frontline states. Understanding Moscow's military thinking of “hybrid warfare” helps to interpret the Kremlin's plans and policy regarding Ukraine and provides a useful framework within which to think about the current European security architecture more generally.

What is “hybrid warfare?” How is it being initiated and how can it be stopped? Or, as the 51st Munich Security Conference puts it, “Who is ready for hybrid warfare?” What countermeasures can be taken at national level? What tools can NATO use against hybrid warfare? These issues are important when considering both how to maintain a sharp edge in this area at the national and multinational levels, and how to strengthen security along NATO’s eastern border.

This brief describes current and historic thinking about hybrid warfare, arguing that hybrid tactics are not as new as it often may seem. Based on Estonia's example, this brief outlines some counter-action activities that can be initiated at the national level. Finally, it suggests action NATO could take against the hybrid threat during the time between the summits in Wales and Warsaw in 2014 and 2016.
The concept of “hybrid warfare” goes back far beyond a decade, with military history including numerous examples of a combination of regular and irregular forms of warfare. The ancient Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu celebrated war as the art of cunning. In the 1920s, the Soviet military developed a concept of “masked warfare” (maskirovka), which included various active and passive measures designed to deceive the enemy and influence the opinion-making process in the West. The notorious Soviet intelligence official Pavel Sudoplatov, who served in the KGB for over 50 years, recalled how the Soviet intelligence’s secretive Administration for Special Tasks was responsible for kidnapping, assassination, sabotage, and guerrilla warfare, and how it set up networks during World War II in the United States and Western Europe.3 The Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979 began with hybrid tactics when 700 Soviet troops dressed in Afghan uniforms seized key military and administrative buildings in Kabul.

In its 2012 annual review, the Estonian Kaitsepolitsei (KaPo or Security Police, officially known as the Estonian Internal Security Service in English) provides the following explanation about the current hybrid tactics used by Russian special services, and compares it to KGB-style operations: “[Russian soft power operation] activities are aimed at changing another country’s target group’s (such as state authorities, voters, or the media) decisions, behavior, and attitudes . . . This includes diplomacy, information, military power, economic influence, covert operations by special services as well as any other means of gaining influence including offering money . . . These new concepts and wordings are nothing more than attempts to hide and legitimate Russia’s traditional, KGB-style influence operations.”4

Hybrid tactics were employed by the Soviets in an attempt to overthrow the government of independent Estonia on December 1, 1924. Back then, assault groups organized by the Soviet intelligence officers, together with underground Estonian communists, attempted to seize power and to subsequently invite regular troops of the Red Army to enter Estonia “for help.” It is known that Soviet naval vessels were ready to attack Tallinn from the sea. A few days before the attempted coup d’état, Soviet conscripts were called in for a training exercise near the Estonian border.5 The aim was to establish communist power in Estonia and soon after to incorporate the country into the Soviet Union. The plan was to occupy Tallinn’s strategic locations, government institutions, military facilities, and communications networks. Subsequently, through cooperation with local Communists, Estonia was to “voluntarily” become part of the Soviet Union. The attempted coup was initially successful, but then, the Estonian government declared a state of emergency. The expected support from the local communist workers did not materialize, and the revolt was crushed the same day.6 This failed coup in Estonia was a part of a series of attempts to overthrow European governments, including the government of Bulgaria (September 1923), and Germany (October 1923).7

More recently, the term “hybrid warfare” as used extensively by the Russian media stems from two distinctive articles, one by Putin’s advisor Vladislav Surkov and the other by Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valeriy Gerasimov.8 Surkov, in a piece published in March 2014, coined the term “non-linear” warfare, marking a “new” trend in Russian military operations. The main takeaway is that while it was common in the “primitive” wars of the 19th and 20th centuries for just two states to fight, the world had now entered a situation of all against all in the non-linear war.9

6 Ibid, pp 6-7.
In his February 2013 article, Gerasimov described how armed conflicts have adopted new military methods, or “new generation warfare,” whereby military action is started by groups of troops during peacetime without war being officially declared and where non-contact clashes occur between highly maneuverable interspecific fighting groups with the overall goal of defeating the enemy’s military and economic power by short-term precise strikes aimed at strategic military and civilian infrastructure.10

The original term used in Gerasimov’s article is also “non-linear” warfare. Gerasimov makes references to Russian thinking on the future of warfare as well as to efforts to bolster military science and the domestic defense industry. A dominant theme in his discourse is the interest in both network-centric and non-linear warfare, ideas prevalent in the Russian Armed Forces reform launched in 2008 and the subsequent military modernization to be completed by 2020.11

The Russian military’s thinking of hybrid warfare has, in its entirety, been put in practice in Ukraine over the past year. A combination of regular and irregular forces, economic sanctions, energy blockades, political destabilization, information warfare, financial pressure, and cyber-attacks have all been employed in Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Exerting influence over local population groups or Russian-speakers in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine has been used to undermine their support for the central government and to promote divisions within Ukraine. Russia's deployment all these elements in near perfect coordination has been impressive.

Russia's actions have ranged from the use of “polite people” — Putin's euphemism used for a new special forces mix in Crimea — to high-profile “humanitarian convoys” and threats of full-scale invasion by combined-arms units in the Donbas region, mixed with an intensive information campaign to destabilize Ukraine and combat the West’s narrative of the conflict. Professional soldiers in uniforms without insignia were deployed in March in Crimea and in April in the Donbas area, while Russian special forces coordinated with indigenous separatists and seized administrative buildings. Annexation of Crimea seemed to mark a transition in the use of special forces (spetsnaz) to a more clearly defined combat-based rather than reconnaissance-based role.12 It also seemed to rehearse Russia's evolving rapid reaction force.

Just as in Estonia in 1924, the actual use of Russian troops within Ukraine amounted to a relatively small force, compared to the high-readiness combined-arms units stationed close to the border. Massing conventional armed forces on the border was intended to impose political pressure, intimidate, and complicate decision-making in the state under attack. Additionally, “snap” exercises were conducted in the border area.

As it was suggested in a recent study by the NATO Defense College, “Snap exercises or snap inspections, formerly used during the Soviet period, were reintroduced in 2013 and have been carried out eight times since then.”13 While having little effect in terms of actual improvement in military capacity, they have given the Kremlin an opportunity to demonstrate its force and prepare a military intervention in its neighborhood, wherever and whenever needed. For example, in April, Russia conducted a snap inspection in the Central Military District, which involved more than 65,000 troops, 177 planes, 56 helicopters, and 5,500 vehicles and armored vehicles. The military units were ready for deployment within 72 hours.14 As Heather Conley and Caroline Rohloff claim in their study about challenges in the Nordic-Baltic region after Crimea, “Altogether, in the snap exercises conducted in March and April 2014, over 150,000 forces in the Western and Southern Military Districts were mobilized. For comparison, NATO’s first

11 Roger McDermott, “Myth and Reality.”
12 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p 3.
collective defense exercise in Central and Eastern Europe in 2013, *Steadfast Jazz*, consisted of 6,000 NATO troops."^{15}

Estonia's own more recent experience with a conflict of a hybrid nature occurred when the Estonian government decided to relocate the Bronze Soldier statue from central Tallinn to a military cemetery outside the city in April 2007. This was followed by riots in Tallinn, a siege of the Estonian Embassy in Moscow by pro-Kremlin Nashi youth organization demonstrators, strong economic measures imposed by Russia against Estonia, waves of cyber-attacks against the Estonian government and banking systems, and a fiery official Russian response."^{16}

Russia's actions in and around Ukraine have reinforced the notion that the security environment in Europe is becoming increasingly unpredictable. The purpose of Russia's hybrid attacks is to pressure, influence, and destabilize another country without necessarily conducting territorial grabs. None of these components is new to Europe, but Europe's vulnerability to them is acute. It is the combination and orchestration of different actions that achieves a surprise effect and creates ambiguity, making an adequate reaction difficult, especially for multinational organizations that operate on the principle of consensus.

As the senior analyst at the European Union Institute for Security Studies, Nicu Popescu maintains, hybrid war is dangerous because “it is easy and cheap to launch for external aggressors, but costly in various ways for the defenders."^{17}

Hybrid warfare, or the “non-linear warfare” as outlined by Gerasimov, is but one of many of the Kremlin's *modus operandi*. It is not new, nor is it a unique strategy to the Russian military. Other methods may include the threat of using nuclear weapons, deployment of massive amounts of conventional heavy weapons, and creating frozen conflicts as means of pressure. Moscow's strategic aims, military doctrine, and capabilities all present a wider threat to the security in Euroatlantic area. This requires decisive counter-action and a clear division of roles between a country under attack, frontline states and other allies, NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations.

**Counter-Action by Estonia**

It has been well known in Estonia for years that Russia possesses various hybrid capabilities; it is also now clear that Russia has the political will to use them. What are the possible implications of these hybrid warfare trends for the national defense planners and policy professionals in the Baltic region? Above all, it is important to recognize that national governments have the primary role to deter and defend against traditional and hybrid threats, as well as to cooperate and coordinate both bilaterally and with international organizations such as NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations. Drawing from Estonia's experience, quick implementation of a number of counter-action activities against hybrid warfare would benefit a national-level defense.

**Improving Early Warning Systems and Situational Awareness**

Estonia needs to be able to see clearly what is happening, in both literal and figurative terms. The earlier there are indications about the adversary's objectives, the better. Major questions here are at what level of detail would the Estonian authorities be looking? How can Allies support each other with intelligence sharing? How does data get analyzed? And do intelligence reports play an important role in strategic decision-making?

**Strengthening National Defense Capabilities**

The Estonian armed forces should continue to develop defense capabilities in order to be able to quickly react in

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times of crisis and to count on substantial firepower. Only interoperable and sustainable forces, which are equipped, trained, and have proper command and control systems in place, can make a difference. In order to increase readiness, national units need regular training. This training should feature a range of complex contingencies and engage the military and civil authorities, as well as the private sector. Such exercises should be designed to test command and control systems and evaluate whether relevant infrastructure is adequate. Exercises are also the best and most realistic way to train local staff, which will be critical for the effective use of host nation support facilities, such as airfields, ports, and depots. Exercises increase situational awareness and improve civil-military cooperation and interoperability.

**Increasing NATO’s Presence**
A sustained multinational presence of Allied forces reinforces the capacity of national forces. National forces should be engaged in regular exercises with regional Allies and partners. A number of these steps are already being carried out as part of the NATO Wales Summit main deliverable, the Readiness Action Plan that aims to address a spectrum of contingencies, from hybrid attacks to rapid mobilization. Estonia, together with Latvia and Lithuania, need to update their Host Nation Support (HNS) arrangements in the Baltic States to facilitate a rapid Allied response to any unforeseen and quickly unfolding events.

**Redefining Resources**
Estonia should make sure that all national defense plans are matched with adequate resources. In fact, the current 2 percent of GDP dedicated to defense might even be too little because the requirements to secure the country against hybrid threats do not squarely fit under the official NATO definition of defense spending. In the preliminary phase of a hybrid crisis, security services, police force, and the border guard play a crucial role. Where necessary, the Defense Forces and the volunteer National Guard (Kaitseliit) should be prepared to offer support. All of these security and defense structures should be adequately financed. So far, Allies’ individual defense spending on internal security has no internationally agreed benchmark. This merits reconsideration in light of hybrid warfare.

**Testing Decision-Making Procedures**
National strategic political and military decision-making mechanisms must work without interruption in times of crisis. The transition from peacetime to a crisis to wartime must ensure continuity of leadership. As a crisis deepens, the responsibility of every government agency should change as little as possible in order to avoid complex and risky transitions. National authorities have to act prudently and, when necessary, not hesitate to raise the military alert level. In order to practice decision-making during quickly changing modalities, command staff exercises with realistic threat scenarios should be regularly conducted and engage political, military and intelligence leaders.

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**Increasing Resilience Against Malicious Propaganda**
Estonia needs to improve its resilience against malicious propaganda while maintaining its media freedom. Of course, stopping all disinformation at all times is impossible. As Russia’s strategic objectives are not uniform, there is no universal prescription to counter its actions. The best way to deal with this challenge is to offer more neutral information and better analysis at the national level. This also requires more transparent and trustworthy politicians and independent opinion leaders who would be able to explain the policy changes and motives to the wider public, including the Russian-speaking parts of the society. Additionally, as experts on Russia’s weaponization of information, Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, suggest in their recent study, “public information campaigns about how disinformation works are needed to foster more critical thought towards the messages that are being ‘buzzed’ at the public.”

Currently, both Latvia and Estonia are developing Russian-language media outlets to counter persistent Kremlin disinformation campaigns targeting Russian-speakers — the Estonian channel could come on air as early as September.

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2015. A recent public opinion poll by the Estonian Institute of Human Rights found that 38 percent of ethnic Russians in Estonia would believe Russian state media in case of conflicting reports between it and Estonian media, 33 percent would believe information from both sides, and 6 percent would side with Estonian media accounts. People’s level of trust toward Russian state media channels decreased as their income increased, with the lowest trust among entrepreneurs. A total of 66 percent of respondents said they would give an Estonian public broadcasting Russian-language television channel a chance. Interest in the new Russian-language news channel was higher among the more educated groups.

As Juhan Kivirähk, a leading Estonian sociologist and an expert on integration, reminds us, the population arrives at its views on a large share of issues pertaining to political processes based on information from trusted information sources and spokespersons. Thus, public opinion depends to a significant degree on the current discussions taking place in a given society as well as on events that have taken place.

**Strengthening Social Cohesion and Liberal Democracy**

It is critical not to jeopardize liberal democratic values in the fight against Russian hybrid threats. The best way to counter Russian diversion is to build stronger social cohesion, make sure that market democracy works, that human rights and the rule of law are respected, and that governance, make sure that market democracy works, that human rights and the rule of law are respected, and that government and business stay clear of corruption.

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In November 2014, the registered population of Estonia was 1.35 million. Out of that number, 85,891 (6.5 percent) were persons with “undetermined” citizenship and 92,490 (8.1 percent) are citizens of the Russian Federation. The total number of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia is 332,816 (approximately 24.6 percent of total population).

As Kivirähk has said, “the aim of Russia’s efforts to consolidate the Russian-speaking population in Estonia is not to make them a part of Estonian society, but rather to push them outside of society and to lead them into confrontation with it.” Russia will most likely enhance its interactions with the ethnic Russian communities in Estonia (and Latvia) so as to weaken the governance and institutional structures of these two countries. Local tensions and local militias encourage the Russian minorities to voice their dissatisfaction with the local political leadership. Indeed, Russian non-governmental organizations, media outlets, and language initiatives have received substantial funding from Moscow, especially since 2010.

Still, on average, 60 percent of the Russian-speaking population say that they feel moderately or well integrated into Estonian society; only 10 percent feel they are not integrated at all. The majority of Russian-speakers feel that Estonia is their homeland. In June 2014, the Estonian Parliament passed an amendment making applying for citizenship easier for young people who, despite not having a residence permit, have resided in Estonia permanently. It is useful to keep in mind that the guarantee of Estonian

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23 The Citizenship Act (of 1992) declared that only the descendants of the citizens of the pre-World War II Estonian republic would be recognized as citizens of the new country and would automatically receive new Estonian passports. All Soviet-era immigrants were required to go through the naturalization process in order to obtain citizenship. Even today, a certain percentage of the people in Estonia, the majority of them Russian speakers who were born in Estonia to Soviet-era immigrants, have not acquired the citizenship of any country and thus remain stateless or have “undetermined citizenship.”


27 Corley and Rohloff, “Challenges to the Nordic-Baltic Region after Crimea as seen from Washington.”


security does not lie in a conservative citizenship policy, but rather with a cohesive state in which people have a sense of shared identity and solidarity.

To foster stronger social cohesion, Estonia needs to maintain its focus on supporting regional development, as the feeling of economic insecurity is connected with a reduced loyalty to the central government. A low level of economic development reinforces vulnerability to corruption and increases the potential of Russian influence. The small minority of Russian speakers with low income remains exposed to a targeted campaign by Moscow to manufacture or exploit grievances in order to divide the society. An effective and pragmatic policy to promote regional development should be considered a matter of national security.30

It is noteworthy that shortly after the annexation of Crimea, a group of Russian-speaking activists and public figures in Estonia started a petition titled “Memorandum 14” in support of Estonian sovereignty by strongly condemning interference in Estonian domestic matters. According to their statement, the majority of local Russians wish to resolve issues in Estonia within the constitutional framework, and condemn separatist statements made in the name of the local Russian-speaking population. They claimed that the majority of local Russians wish to live in a democratic Estonia and need no “protection” from outside forces.31

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Recommendations for NATO
The NATO Wales Summit in September 2014 set a clear course by reinforcing collective defense as a response to the new security environment as identified by updated NATO threat assessments. This included, first and foremost, the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), comprising long-term measures necessary to respond to the changed security environment in Europe. It is now important to translate these decisions into concrete actions ahead of the next NATO Summit in 2016 in Warsaw. How can the RAP address the challenges posed by hybrid warfare? How can, if at all, NATO respond to the undeclared wars below the threshold of traditional collective defense?

Increasing NATO’s Early Warning and Situational Awareness
Given the increasing practice of Russian “snap exercises,” NATO needs to increase its situational awareness. Allies and willing partners should continue to work on improving geographical expertise, updating threat assessments, and facilitating closer intelligence cooperation. The aforementioned assessments must also consider Russia’s political, economic, and societal influence that may limit independent action and threaten governmental stability.

Cooperation Between Special Operations Forces
Another measure that could prove useful is the growing cooperation among Allied special operations forces (SOF), reflected in the establishment of the NATO Special Operations Headquarters.32 Intelligence sharing, training, and education among NATO SOF has the capacity to provide the Supreme Allied Commander of Europe with a range of discrete capabilities across the crisis-conflict spectrum, including special intelligence and engagement with civil authorities.

Building a Political Rapid Reaction in NATO
Maintaining NATO as a forum for discussing principal international security policy developments is crucial. Critical to NATO’s ability to address any of today’s threats is the ability to rapidly react to emerging contingencies. What changes need to be made to the political and military decision-making processes to ensure the required rapid response capability? As a priority, NATO should — to the extent possible — define potential elements of hybrid warfare in order to enable Allies to react quickly when practical needs arise. In the event of a crisis, political unity

30 Recently, the registered number of unemployed has continued to decline in Estonia. At the end of July 2014, the unemployment rate was 4.2 percent of the labor force. With 8 percent, the eastern region of Ida-Viru has one of the highest unemployment rates.
of NATO facilitates rapid reaction. Moreover, clear political indicators and metrics would be useful as a mechanism through which to indicate to the North Atlantic Council that a response is necessary. NATO should study and discuss a menu of plausibly effective “hedging” actions — that is, steps that strike a balance between constructive responses on one hand, and undue escalation on the other. There also needs to be a balance between efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

**Beefing Up Strategic Communications**

The accreditation of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Latvia is an important step forward, and the momentum should be maintained. NATO Headquarters needs to continue to reinvigorate its own public diplomacy skills and, where possible, cooperate closely and share best practices with the EU.

**Crisis Management Exercises**

NATO should conduct crisis management exercises, testing the resilience of its civil-military crisis management mechanisms against hybrid warfare. Experience has shown that Russia’s snap exercises have taken place faster than the normal NATO crisis response process. Ambassadors and NATO’s top officials must also take staff exercises more seriously and not delegate them to lower level officials.

**Conclusion**

The hybrid warfare discussion is not new. The Baltic States have been talking about and warning against Russia’s soft coercion measures and a “shadow war” for years. As Jonathan Eyal of the Royal United Services Institute wrote in the *Financial Times*, “We spent 20 years telling the Eastern Europeans that they were paranoid, living in the past, that they should treat Russia as a normal country. Now it turns out they were right.”

This situation is not new for NATO either. Discussions on emerging security challenges, including cyber defense and energy security, have been on the Alliance’s agenda for years. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath represented the first hybrid conflict the Atlantic Alliance entered in. Extensive debates on emerging security challenges were held throughout 2009 and 2010 during the process of drafting NATO’s 2010 Strategic Concept. The Alliance should build its current discussions and thinking upon this basis.

Hybrid warfare has its military as well as political side. There needs to be a clear definition of roles between what NATO can do and what the frontline states should do themselves. While it is true that national governments have the primary role in deterring and defending against hybrid threats, NATO also has a role to play. The security of Estonia and the other Baltic States is effectively assured by the combined effects of national and collective defense preparations and capabilities, as well as the stability of Allied governments’ commitment to collective defense.