

Hybrid Threats-Possible Consequences in Societal Contexts

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Abstract: Hybrid threats have become a persistent term in the 21st century geopolitical architecture, acquiring new values as innovative unconventional means come to be used by both state and non-state actors in contemporary conflicts, with a view to obtaining strategic advantages, yet with devastating consequences at individual level. While the armed conflict effects have long been studied, the war metamorphosis with hybrid threats innuendos bring new challenges in assessing societal consequences, even more so, as they are increasingly identified in apparently peaceful times. A multifaced perspective on the threat outcome reveals multiple latent consequences, such as physical, material, psychological and emotional ones. Fear, one of the dominant human emotions, is the first to be triggered when any threat is present, regardless of its occurrence probability or possible effects. Fear becomes a strong drive for individuals' future actions, sometimes prompting an offensive or defensive reaction previously embedded in the main actor's behavior. In this context, the present paper aims to identify, analyze and understand the Russian-Ukrainian conflict consequences on the European states' neighboring population, looking at the reactions and decisions triggered by fear. Using observation as a research method but also the case study method, we identified a series of similarities and differences in these countries' reaction to solving situations, migration- generated crises, Russian disinformation and propaganda and Ukraine or other European state oriented cyber-attack. The main goal for this approach is to highlight the hybrid threats emotional consequences in conflicts that are more than psychological. Moreover, this is a preliminary step in a PhD research thesis with a view to provide states with solutions for resilience policies, to ensure their citizens' survival and well-being.

Keywords: Hybrid Threat, Russia, Psychological Warfare, Disinformation, Cyber-Attacks

1. Introduction

The hybrid term appeared as a necessity to define another kind of war, one that includes all that we previously knew about war and peace, but also the development of technology. Although there is not a widely accepted definition, scholars, policy makers and practitioners use the term to describe a combination of military actions and non-conventional tactics, using proxy or non-state actors in order to achieve their goals. Frank Hoffman put together some possible terms to describe the 21st kind of war, such as Fourth Generation Warfare, Compound Wars, Unrestricted Warfare, and, of course Hybrid Wars, which he described as "blending the lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervor of irregular warfare." (Hoffman, 2007).

At the same time, the European Parliament and the Council (2016) presents hybrid threats as a combination of classic and unconventional measures used in order to achieve some goal without declaring it a war, stating once again the combination of methods and forces. This fact is supported by Arsalan Bilal, too. He suggests that "hybrid warfare entails an interplay or fusion of conventional as well as unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion. These instruments or tools are blended in a synchronized manner to exploit the vulnerabilities of an antagonist and achieve synergistic effects." (Bilal, 2021).

While the methods are considered to be old, what might count as new are the tools used. These new instruments, supported by the technological progress bear consequences on a deeper level than the conventional ones which impacted the physical and the material.

In addition, if we take a deeper look into the succession of events that took place, one notices that the conflict seems to be driven on multiple levels, military, political, economic or psychological. For the clarity of work, we will only focus on the psychological one which consists of propaganda, disinformation and other tools to deceive and manipulate through false information presented as true. This could also lead to fear, insecurity, polarization of the society, mistrust for the public institutions or the democratic process. In contrast to a classic war, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict did not begin with the first missile triggered, but with disinformation, propaganda and cyber-attacks. (The Spectator, 2022).

Physical harm is presented to us every day by mass-media tracking down the number of buildings, facilities, deaths and injuries. At the same time, little is said about the psychological damage, the traumas that people live every day. Regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war, one talk about the conflict's emotional consequences emphasizing the fear shared among people.

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, there are 7,5 million refugees who have fled Ukraine since February 24th and almost 7 million people who have been displaced around Ukraine (Yayboke, et al., 2022). Thus, migration is one of the fear-triggered actions taken by the Ukrainians in this ongoing conflict, but it could also be seen as a threat to neighboring states' national security. For instance, Romania is not a very welcoming country for refugees and immigrants, according to a INSCOP study concerning the refugees from Syria. Moreover, the data shows that the percentage of people who disagree with the immigrants coming into Romania increased with almost 20% during a few months, from September 2015 to March 2016, (INSCOP, 2016) in the context of the refugee crisis that EU was facing at the time and soon after the terrorist attack in Brussels.

As a specific feature of hybrid war, by targeting the vulnerabilities in any ways and with any means, the Russia seems to follow the rules in a tridimensional approach, targeting the critical infrastructure with missiles, the technologies with cyber-attacks and the civil population with disinformation and propaganda, all at the same time.

2. The Russian-Ukrainian hybrid conflict

The hybrid character of war is a not-so-new matter. Almost every component pre-existed, but the synchronized usage of new methods and means in a highly technological world is what gives the war even a more unpredictable nature and what challenges us the most. The novelty of hybrid war seems to be the same in Giannopoulos' (2021) and Galeotti's (2016) views as well.

One issue could be to determine whether the concept of hybrid war appeared to define the Russian type of war or it came to define the contemporary conflict characteristics and was later attributed to Russia's type of war. According to Fridman (2018), the concept was created to better define the contemporary conflicts but has reached to be like an exchange coin of intimidation and disinformation between Russian and the West on all levels of the society. In Russians approach, however, the term *gibridnaya voyna*, the translation for *hybrid war*, is used to define the threats and actions taken by the West against the Russia and doesn't explain the Russian strategy of war. Furthermore, we learn that the understanding of the concept *hybrid war/gibridnaya voyna* has different values in the West and Russian approaches, while they seem to be accusing each other of carrying out a hybrid war.

Even though the terms *hybrid war* and *gibridnaya voyna* seem different, we identified some key similarities between the two:

- The use of conventional and unconventional tactics combined
- The vulnerabilities' exploitation on multiple levels: societal, political, economic
- The blurring of the state boundaries
- The asymmetry of the forces

Starting with the Russian actions taken in Crimea in 2014, which in the Western approach, qualify as hybrid war, the Russians intensified the use of hybrid methods against other states. For example, the actions taken in the Western Balkans, especially after the annexation of Crimea fall into three areas, which, in Solik et al. view are: "political and economic influence, information space and proxy organizations" (Solik, et al., 2022), and qualify as hybrid threats. Another example, presented by Kragh and Asberg (2017) shows how Russia uses military threats, forgeries, disinformation and agents of influence in order to influence the public opinion in Sweden. The psychological warfare carried out by Russia ever since 2014 was analyzed by Veeble (2016), too, who focused his research on the Estonian case. Furthermore, we may not forget about all the cyber-attacks attributed to hacking groups which we believe to be founded by the Russian Government. A short presentation and comparison between three important attacks against Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, was made by Mihai (2022). Russia continued its cyber attacks in Ukraine for the whole period, but there was an increase in their frequency and intensity as the day of the invasion approached. According to a Microsoft Report regarding the cyber component of the conflict in Ukraine, "The Russian invasion relies in part on a cyber-strategy that includes at least three distinct and sometimes coordinated efforts—destructive cyberattacks within Ukraine, network penetration and espionage outside Ukraine, and cyber influence operations targeting people around the world." (Smith, 2022) Russia is adapting the way it uses cyber-attacks depending on the immediate strategic objective. It uses destructive cyber-attacks in Ukraine to loosen their critical information infrastructure and cyber influence operations to spread disinformation and propaganda, which have been for decades part of their foreign policy. (Kragh & Asberg, 2017)

There are lots of examples when Russia has used different technics or platforms for disinformation or propaganda. For example, the use of repetitive words or phrases, a known feature of Russian disinformation, used by outlets funded by the government, have the potential of making a message more interesting and trustworthy, for instance - *Nazi* or *fascist*. There are almost 500 examples of the use of the words *Nazi* or *fascist* referring to Ukraine (EU vs DISINFO, 2022). Furthermore, Treyger et al. state that “the fullest display of Russian information warfare—with, almost certainly, the greatest impact—took place in Ukraine, where Russia integrated information and kinetic operations, using disinformation and propaganda both as strategic tools to shape political outcomes and as operational tools to undermine military morale” (Treyger, et al., 2022, p. 58), which illustrates that the coordinated effort of the Russia implicates along with military forces, information technology experts, but also state-funded outlets to achieve their goals. The ongoing war includes all we previously knew about the Russian type of information warfare.

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict seems to be neither conventional, nor new. As Mark Galeotti argued about Russia’s specific characteristics in carrying on a war, “Russia’s current style of war reflects reforms dating back to 2008 and policy discussions going back much further than that. What really has changed is the context in which old methods are being applied” (Galeotti, 2016), so, we could say that there is a pattern in Russia’s operating style. While there are some similarities with the annexation of Crimea, the Russian invasion in Ukraine seems to have not gone as planned. “A variety of data indicate that the aggressor was counting on a blitzkrieg” (Kasianov, 2022), as it happened in Crimea, but that’s not how it happened now. Quite the opposite, it got extended, inflicting more and more harm to Ukraine and Ukrainians.

While we support the controversial meaning and we don’t agree with the novelty of hybrid wars, we find that the continuous existence of hybrid threats, in war and peace could generate long term consequences in different aspects of the society. Starting with the cognitive and emotional one (information warfare) and continuing with the economic or political aspects (cyber-attacks) which can very much determine the well-being of a state and its citizens.

3. The Russian-Ukrainian psychological dimension of the conflict

The psychological aspect of the war or the so-called *psychological warfare* is as old as the war itself. There is nothing new in the fact that commanders always try to strengthen the morale of their soldiers and demoralize the opponents. Although this is an ancient concept there are lots of new tools and innovative means used in order to obtain strategic advantages.

The common element between psychological and information warfare is that the use of information technology in this context is to disrupt, degrade, or destroy an adversary’s ability to use information systems and networks, while with the psychological one, the psychological tactics are called upon to influence the behavior of an adversary or target population. If there seems to be no similarity between the two, they both involve the use of communication and information to influence individuals or groups and are frequently combined or used together in order to obtain strategic advantages. Furthermore, considering the tools used, sometimes information technology, the information warfare primary tool, is used in order to spread propaganda and disinformation. Such an example is largely explained by Pantserev (2020), who considers that the evolution of information technologies, especially those with an artificial intelligence component could lead to serious implications and even to a “global psychological warfare” due to its capacity of replicating human characteristics and using them in malicious actions.

Other voices may say that the outcome of carrying either an information warfare or a psychological one may be the same and the same can be said about the purpose. For example, Treyger et al. state that “Russian information warfare threatens to undermine the integrity of democratic processes, erode the belief in factual truths, and cause concrete harm with well-timed or sophisticated disinformation” (Treyger, et al., 2022), considering disinformation as a tool used in informational warfare. In addition, Guess and Lyons support this statement, too. They consider that “the terms *misinformation*, *disinformation*, and *propaganda* are sometimes used interchangeably, with shifting and overlapping definitions. All three concern false or misleading messages spread under the guise of informative content, whether in the form of elite communication, online messages, advertising, or published articles” (Guess & Lyons, 2020). There is also a distinction between the three notions in terms of purpose and intentions. Misinformation involves spreading false information without the intention of misleading or deceiving the recipient while disinformation is all about the intention of sharing false information in a matter that determines the reader or listener to believe. Last, but not least, propaganda involves

a mixture of true and false information with the primary focus on generating the desired belief or actions in accordance with the issuer's agenda.

There is a distinction to be made related to the psychological perspective, between psychological war and psychological operations, the two terms describe quite different types of actions, and to avoid confusion we need to mention the following: the first concept applies in times of war or crisis and focuses on propaganda or disinformation in order to influence or manipulate, while psychological operations (PSYOPS) are used as a support of military operations, at peace.

In the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, since there is a very long history of tensions, propaganda and disinformation are largely used. To begin with, President Putin presented himself and Russia as liberators when they decided to attack Ukraine with military and non-military tools, arguing that he had no other choice to defend Russia and its citizens. Moreover, in 2014 "Russia was obliged to protect the inhabitants of Crimea and Sevastopol", for "self-defense" (The Spectator, 2022). This is a classic example of how Russia justifies its actions using propaganda. This is not the first time when Putin used this kind of strong brotherhood allegations with the Ukrainian people to justify the offensive actions taken against Ukraine (Pynnöniemi & Rácz, 2016).

At the same time, some arguments brought by President Putin could have been accurate, as Jānis Bērziņš stated, too, "Since for Russia, Ukraine is supposed to be a close ally or, at best, neutral, [...] the involvement of the United States and the European Union in Ukrainian internal affairs (are seen) to be a direct confrontation to its regional interests" (Bērziņš, 2014). This of course does not justify the hybrid actions led by Russia against Ukraine, neither the military operations, nor the cyber-attacks or the disinformation and propaganda, but the military support from the West is confirmed and received by Ukraine since February, 2022. Even though there are no other states fighting on the battlefield against Russia, and the military support consists only in military equipment, money and training for both authorities and military personnel, President Zelenski asked foreigners to join them and there was created a website – Fight for Ukraine, for that matter.

During this period of time, from February till now, there were lots of press released from Russia's President using the state-founded and state-directed media such Russia Today or Sputnik as tools of spreading propaganda and disinformation. As a result of his actions for destabilization of Ukraine, the European Council decided to forbid the broadcasting or other related actions in any ways for a number of Russian funded outlets (European Council, 2022). Furthermore, according to the Global Engagement Center, there are five main pillars that Russian disinformation and propaganda system rely on:

- Official Government Communications;
- State-Funded Global Messaging;
- The Cultivation Of Proxy Sources;
- The Weaponization Of Social Media;
- Cyber-Enabled Disinformation (Global Engagement Center, 2022)

An example of how Russian official government communications could impact the lives of either Russians or Ukrainians, but also people from neighboring states could be Putin's announcement of force enrolling for young men in Russian Army on September, 21st. That generated fear among Russians as a large number of men left the country, leading especially through Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Israel and United Arab Emirates, while others seek for legal advice to avoid enlisting or are simply hiding (Faulconbridge & Liffey, 2022).

Another official government communication with great impact was Russian leader's speech on May, 9th at a military parade in Moscow's Red Square. Using disinformation and propaganda, President Putin tries to justify his actions, and also increase the level of support from both the Russians and other states. In addition, Fusiek stated that "by using humiliation narratives and evoking patriotic images, Putin exacerbates a sense of victimhood and historical right in the Russian audience that emphasizes the state's isolationism and historic role to fight against the "Nazified" West and Ukraine" (Fusiek, 2022) proving once again the amount of propaganda and disinformation in President Putin's discourse, which can lead to confusion, false perception on the facts and anxiety.

4. Emotional and long-term consequences

War is a devastating event that can have economic, political, social or psychological consequences for both the combatants and the non-combatants, but nowadays, the hybrid war seems to generate less deaths related to war and an increase in the number of people who suffer from mental health disorder, as a consequence of war

(Rozanov, et al., 2018). The Russian-Ukrainian conflict makes no exception in terms of psychological damage caused to the Ukrainians, but also to people from neighboring states.

The psychological consequences of war have been studied over the past years with foreseeable results. It looks like, even after many years, the post-traumatic stress disorder or anxiety are still affecting the respondents as showed by Priebe et al. (2012) in their study about long-term mental health consequences of war conducted eight years after the war in former Yugoslavia. At the same time, during a conflict, people may have different kind of emotional reactions, such as flashbacks, nightmares and avoidance behaviors. Additionally, individuals may experience depression, anxiety and other emotional disturbances. More recent studies, conducted on the changes in mental health among Ukrainian due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict show that there was an increase anxiety, depression, loneliness and hazardous drinking (Hyland, et al., 2022), (Shevlin, et al., 2022).

The first emotion triggered when an event of such magnitude as a war happens is fear. From a psychological point of view, the behavioral responses to fear are what they call the Fight-Flight-Freeze System (Donahue, 2020), where fight is the aggressive body's response to a threat, flight represents the urge to leave from the threat and freeze, the impossibility to move or to react in any way. Of course, this are the body's primarily reactions but we believe that it could be extended to Ukrainians' actions due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as we witnessed some enlisting in the Army and fighting against the Russians, some leaving the country through mostly European countries and some others doing nothing, hiding in the shelters provided by the state and praying for their lives.

The Russian-Ukrainian war outbreak, coming right after almost 2 years of Covid-19 pandemic, had an overwhelming impact on the health care system, which, besides the actual work of providing care, had lots of their facilities directly attacked and, on the Ukrainians' mental health, which had already been affected by the ongoing pandemic (Chaaya, et al., 2022). The Ukrainians basic needs were threatened, such as safety, shelter, electricity or communication. The communication disturbances that occurred due to a cyber-attack against Viasat's KA-SAT network were attributed to the Russia's funded hacking groups (Viasat, 2022). In this context, one of the Ukrainians' reactions was leaving the war area. Some of them, more than 7 million left the country, while almost the same number of people were internally displaced. (Yayboke, et al., 2022)

At the same time, while the consequences for those directly affected by the war were long studied, little is said about the people from neighboring states or even living further apart from the war. The immediate access to information allows us to be in touch with any event that happens anywhere on the globe. The atrocities that continue to happen in Ukraine, indispensable in any news report and from any social media platform impact the lives of millions. The fact that something like that could happen in our era is perceived by some as totally unpredictable, unjustified, horrific and frightful. Moreover, even Russians faces the consequences of the sanctions applied to their own country. Among the consequences one mentions: the reduction on medical supplies, the financial difficulties, the interdiction to participate in certain events, to which the almost unanimous foreign opinion that any Russian civilian can be held responsible for Russia's actions is added. It is likely that all of these cause serious mental health challenges to the Russian population (Volunteer FDIP, 2023).

The psychological trauma was the first consequence felt, people started fearing for their lives and their loved ones, war proximity being an important factor that they considered, especially if we talk about the Republic of Moldova's population, Romania or Poland. For example, people in Romania considered to update their travel documents, to exchange their money into euro or to put gas into their cars in order to be prepared to flee if the war area extended (Hațegan, 2022).

The next consequence that emerged was the wave of refugees coming from Ukraine. According to the UN Refugee Agency (2023), there are 1.5 million refugees who have registered for support in Poland, over 100000 in Romania, almost 500000 in Czech Republic, and there are a few other countries where refugees arrived and seek for help. These waves of refugees laid tremendous financial and social pressure on the countries receiving them, in incipient stages. However, studies show that the refugees could be an opportunity for the host country's economy (Taylor, et al., 2016) as a long term desiderate. On one hand, the state, along with the large number of volunteers, seem to have contributed positively by helping Ukrainian refugees with social assistance, shelter, food, water, medical supplies and health care (The Romanian Government, 2022), but, on the other, being so involved and emotionally close to the Ukrainian refugees, it is possible that the volunteers have faced difficulties with their mental health, too, such as burnout and secondary traumatic stress, as they were exposed to the traumatic experiences of the refugees (Roberts, et al., 2021).

5. Conclusions

Wars have always been destructive and the damage created, either material or psychological, has been difficult or even impossible to manage or repair. The hybrid wars make no exception as they are a combination of classic military actions and non-linear operations, the asymmetric character creating even more difficulties in identifying all the actors involved or the tools used. There is more uncertainty and unpredictability than in a classic war which generate greater issues in dealing with the emotional and psychological consequences.

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict seems to qualify as a hybrid war as there were all kind of hybrid threats materializing during the last year in the war area and beyond. Before the outbreak of the war and continuing after, Russia used tools like disinformation, propaganda, cyber-attacks in order to influence and manipulate the public opinion into giving them their full support and making them believe that its actions are justifiable. And for a short period of time it worked, at least for the Russian population as a study conducted on the Russian populations shows that over 80% support the decision of attacking Ukraine (Yuri Levada Analytical Center, 2022).

The use of psychological methods and tools, such as disinformation or propaganda have the potential of creating a state of panic, insecurity, and various types of mental health disorders, such as anxiety or depression. All these consequences we found out to emerge in the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid conflict.

This paper identified the possible emotional consequences of the ongoing war in Ukraine, emphasizing the mental health issues identified in the Ukrainian population due to exposure to traumatic events, but also in neighboring states' population which was not, in any way, sheltered from the events happening at their states' borders, especially due to the rapid spread of information in the online environment.

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