

# Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare”

## And What Can Be Done About it

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*Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare” and What Can be Done About It*

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**A**s used today in reference to Russia, “hybrid warfare” refers to Moscow’s use of a broad range of subversive instruments, many of which are nonmilitary, to further Russian national interests. Moscow seeks to use hybrid warfare to ensure compliance on a number of specific policy questions; to divide and weaken NATO; to subvert pro-Western governments; to create pretexts for war; to annex territory; and to ensure access to European markets on its own terms.

Experts use the term “hybrid warfare” in different ways. Several related terms are now in use, including “gray zone strategies,” “competition short of conflict,” “active measures,” and “new generation warfare.” Despite subtle differences, all these terms point to the same thing: Russia is using multiple instruments of power and influence, with an emphasis on nonmilitary tools, to pursue its national interests outside its borders—often at the expense of U.S. interests and those of U.S. allies.

Russia’s use of hybrid strategies has grown markedly in recent years. This growth is a key dimension in the overall increase in Russian military capabilities and the Kremlin’s antagonistic attitude toward the West. Russian resources for hybrid warfare are not infinite, of course, and Russia faces many of the same difficulties any other country does in coordinating a multipronged foreign policy. Its hybrid tactics will also not be effective everywhere. Nevertheless, the United States and its allies need a clear understanding of the threat and strategy to effectively counter Russian hybrid strategies before critical U.S. interests are damaged in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author’s alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

<sup>2</sup> The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

<sup>3</sup> Olga Oliker, Christopher S. Chivvis, Keith Crane, Olesya Tkacheva, and Scott Boston, *Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-144-A 2015.

This testimony explains the key characteristics and uses of Russian hybrid warfare, the major tools involved, and the countries currently targeted. It then gives a brief sketch of the history of Russian hybrid warfare and outlines basic elements for a strategy to counter it.

## Key Characteristics of Russian Hybrid Warfare

Russian hybrid warfare has at least three main characteristics.

**It economizes the use of force.** Recognizing Russia would stand little chance of winning a protracted conventional conflict with NATO, Moscow seeks instead to pursue its interests without overt use of military power if possible. Russia may still use its conventional and even nuclear threats as part of a hybrid strategy, but in general it prefers to minimize the actual employment of traditional military force. The use of cyber tools is an excellent example of one way in which Russia economizes on the use of force.

**It is persistent.** Hybrid war breaks down the traditional binary delineation between war and peace. The reality of hybrid war is ever-changing intensity of conflict. Hybrid war strategies are always underway, although at certain moments they may become more acute and intense or cross over into conventional combat operations.

**It is population-centric.** Russian military experts have watched as the United States and its allies fought in the Balkans, the Middle East, and elsewhere over the course of the last quarter-century. They seized upon the importance of an approach that seeks to influence the population of target countries through information operations, proxy groups, and other influence operations. Russia uses hybrid warfare to work within existing political and social frameworks to further Russian objectives.

## Typical Objectives of Russian Hybrid Warfare

As practiced today, Russian hybrid warfare can have at least three objectives.

1. **Capturing territory without resorting to overt or conventional military force.** This was the objective of Russia's successful annexation of Crimea in 2014, the move that launched the debate over Russian "hybrid strategies." The annexation of Crimea relied heavily on the now-infamous "little green men"—primarily Russian special forces operating through a newly created Russian special operations command. The use of these elite troops, in conjunction with an information warfare campaign and the deployment of loyal Russian proxies, created circumstances that laid the groundwork for a bloodless conventional takeover of Crimea. Russia used some similar tactics ahead of its 2008 invasion of Georgia. The resulting "frozen conflicts" in Ukraine and Georgia have hampered these countries' efforts towards integration with Western Europe. In a much-referenced 2013 article on modern warfare, Russian Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov argued that nonmilitary means are used four times more often in modern conflicts than conventional military measures.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations," *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier*, February 26, 2013.

2. **Creating a pretext for overt, conventional military action.** Russia's annexation of Crimea generated concerns that the Kremlin might seek to use a hybrid strategy to create a pretext for military action elsewhere, such as in the Baltic states. Russia might seek to foment discord between the minority Russian population in a country like Estonia, creating a narrative that portrays the Estonian government as repressive and then exploiting this narrative to justify a Russian military intervention on behalf of the Russian minority. Such an operation would likely be accompanied by cyber operations aimed at inflaming tensions or complicating national and NATO responses. It would almost certainly be accompanied by efforts to influence broader European and world opinion in ways that favored Russia's intervention. On the ground, it would involve the use of Russian secret agents and proxies.
3. **Using hybrid measures to influence the politics and policies of countries in the West and elsewhere.** This objective is currently the most pressing challenge for Western governments, including the United States. Here, the Kremlin does not seek to use hybrid strategies as a substitute for military action or as a precursor for war. Instead, it seeks to ensure that political outcomes in targeted countries serve Russia's national interests. Most vulnerable are countries with weak legal and anticorruption measures or where key domestic groups share Russia's interests or worldview. However, even strong countries, such as the United States and Germany, are far from immune.

## Russia's Hybrid Warfare Toolkit

Moscow has many mechanisms and levers for hybrid war.

**Information operations.** Russia has become notably more effective in its use of strategic communications to shape political narratives in many countries. Outlets such as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik News* are among the most well known vectors for this strategy, but Russia also uses targeted television programming; funds European think tanks to promote its views; and employs large numbers of Internet trolls, bots, and fake news farms. The result is high volume and multichannel.<sup>5</sup> The objective of these information operations is primarily to muddy the waters and cast doubt upon objective truths. Needless to say, these media outlets do not share established Western journalistic practices regarding factual evidence and truth. They aim to shape the political discussion in ways that will benefit the Kremlin.

**Cyber.** The Kremlin now has access to a growing cadre of cyber warriors that allows it to hack into Western information systems to collect valuable information. The information is then used to influence elections and other political outcomes outside Russia's borders. This was the strategy Russia appears to have attempted during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Beyond stealing secrets, Russia could deploy more advanced cyber tools to directly manipulate or otherwise affect the information systems on which Western political processes rely. There is no evidence that Russia possesses such capabilities today, but if Western defenses are not strengthened, it may develop them.

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<sup>5</sup> Chris Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-198-OSD, 2016.

**Proxies.** Russia also uses a range of proxies to further its interests. Proxies are often groups that have broad sympathy with Russia's objectives. One of the Kremlin's typical proxies is the Night Wolves, a biker club and ultranationalist, anti-American gang, whose leader is a personal friend of President Putin. The exact role of the Night Wolves is uncertain, although it can be used to intimidate populations and may facilitate a range of hybrid activities behind the scenes. Russia also seeks to exploit European protest movements. For example, it backed anti-European Union (EU) groups in a 2016 referendum on trade with Ukraine in the Netherlands.<sup>6</sup> It is also suspected of supporting the anti-shale gas and other protest movements in Bulgaria that have complicated Bulgaria's efforts to reduce its dependence on Russian energy sources.<sup>7</sup>

**Economic influence.** Russia uses both direct and indirect economic influence to affect European politics. Moscow used energy as a tool of foreign policy when it shut off the natural gas supplies to Ukraine in the dead of the winter in 2006 and 2009 in an overt effort to coerce Ukraine into agreement on the price of its gas. The indirect influence Moscow has built in Europe, however, may be even more important. Taking advantage of the vast network of natural gas pipelines built in Soviet times, the Russian state-owned gas giant Gazprom and its subsidiaries wield influence over the politics and economics of many European countries. Russia has also offered large-scale investment to build energy pipelines and other infrastructure in countries that are dependent on Russian energy supplies as a means of growing its influence—often through murky back-room deals. Many other Russian investments are legal, but their use to further Russian national interests is problematic, and the results can damage free markets and democratic institutions.

**Clandestine measures.** Russia also has the ability to use traditional espionage as part of its hybrid methods, bribing, extorting, and otherwise attempting to influence vulnerable political figures to further its interests. As part of its broader military modernization program, Russia has invested in strengthening its special operations forces. These forces have a range of roles, but one of their most dramatic has been in infiltrating other countries and directing hybrid warfare efforts there. Russian military intelligence, for example, is believed to have instigated a 2016 plot to overthrow the pro-NATO government of Montenegro. Russian special forces were crucial in seizing Crimea and supporting separatists in the Donbass, and they are likely operating in several NATO-allied countries.

**Political influence.** Of course, Russian leaders also use traditional diplomacy to support their preferred political parties and candidates, offering high-level visits in Moscow and otherwise attempting to champion their claims, while deriding the positions of political leaders more critical of Moscow.

Behind these levers lies the implicit threat of Russian conventional and, in the extreme, nuclear force. A discussion of Russia's full military capabilities is unwarranted in this testimony, but it is important to recognize that these higher-end military capabilities are the backdrop against which hybrid warfare is carried out.

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Applebaum, "The Dutch Just Showed the World How Russia Influences Western European Elections," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Kerin Hope, "Bulgarians See Russian Hand in Anti-Shale Protests," *Financial Times*, November 30, 2014.

## Today's Targets

Russian hybrid warfare targets a number of different countries in Europe and Eurasia. I will not detail them all here, but a few key examples deserve attention. The newest focus of Russian efforts appears to be on the Balkans and West European elections, but hybrid activities in the Baltic states, Central Europe, Ukraine, and elsewhere persist.

### *Upcoming European Elections*

The greatest immediate concern is the potential for Russian meddling in several key elections that will take place in Europe in 2017. Russian efforts to meddle in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, combined with known Russian efforts to hack into the computers of Germany's lower parliament in 2015, have piqued concern that Russia may be seeking to undermine pro-American and especially pro-EU parties in Germany, France, and Italy.

The most important of these elections is the German election scheduled for the fall, where German Chancellor Angela Merkel faces a tough re-election battle. Merkel has taken a hard line with Moscow over Ukraine and been a lynchpin of efforts to sustain European sanctions on Russia. The chancellor's uncompromising stance on the European migration crisis has hurt her popularity and made some parts of German society more receptive to Russia's anti-EU, anti-immigration views. In early 2016, Russian news media and Russia's top political leadership alleged that a 13-year-old Russian girl had been gang-raped by a band of Muslim immigrants in Germany. The story turned out to be a fabrication, but it complicated Merkel's effort to maintain a pro-immigrant stance in the face of a major influx of migrants from overseas. Similar opportunities for Russia to inflame tensions could arise in 2017. Merkel's ouster in favor of a more pro-Moscow Social Democratic party would be a boon for the Kremlin. Even better from Moscow's view would be a coalition that includes either the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* party or the far left, *Die Linke*, which is the remnant of the East German Communist party.

In France, the far-right National Front, which espouses a political outlook akin to Putin's own, has received financial support from Russian banks. The center-right presidential candidate François Fillon has also taken a very pro-Moscow stance. Currently, both candidates are running behind the center-left Emmanuel Macron, but concern that Russia may seek opportunities to turn the tide against him persist.

Concern about potential Russian hybrid strategies in the United Kingdom have meanwhile intensified rapidly, as exemplified by Foreign Minister Boris Johnson's recent outbursts against Putin's "dirty tricks."<sup>8</sup> Many experts believe that there was a Russian hand in shaping the 2016 British vote to leave the European Union. Italy may also hold elections early in 2018, and there are suspicions that Italy was targeted by a Russian influence operation aimed at unseating its moderate government in December 2016.

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<sup>8</sup> Kate McCann, "Boris Johnson Claims Russia Was Behind Plot to Assassinate Prime Minister of Montenegro as He Warns of Putin's 'Dirty Tricks,'" *The Telegraph*, March 12, 2017.

The outcome of the Dutch elections last week may be one bright spot. The rise of the far-right Dutch Party for Freedom, led by Geert Wilders, created yet another opportunity for Moscow to make inroads. Luckily, the Party of Freedom did not win, but it did gain seats.

### *The Balkans*

Another concern is the Balkans. Over the course of the last year, the western Balkans have emerged as a key target of Russian hybrid strategies within Europe. Simmering discontent in the Balkans over economic stagnation, lack of progress to EU membership, persistent ethnic tensions, and Russian cultural links have made the subregion a ripe target for Russian hybrid strategies.

Russia has been seeking, for example, to establish a base in Serbia that could be used for covert operations across the Balkans under the guise of a “Humanitarian Center.”<sup>9</sup> As noted already, Russia is widely alleged to have orchestrated the attempted coup against a pro-NATO government in Montenegro in October 2016.<sup>10</sup> Russia has also stoked separatist tensions, backing the controversial leader of the semiautonomous *Republika Srpska*, Milorad Dodik, and supporting Serb separatism in northern Kosovo. In 2016, Croatia, a NATO member, was also wracked by scandal when it was revealed that a former deputy prime minister had received campaign funding from Russian sources. In 2012, the Bulgarian government cancelled a license for Chevron to explore its shale gas reserves under pressure from Russian-backed protestors. Business networks with Russian financial backing have also played a prominent role in shaping government policy in Sofia and across the region.

### *Central Europe and the Baltic States*

Kremlin influence in Central Europe, especially with U.S. allies such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, is grounded in historical links to the Soviet empire. Russian influence in these countries is often derived from Russia’s key role in the energy sectors of these countries, but Moscow has also used other means to influence the region’s policies. In 2015 and 2016, the strain of the European migration crisis opened the door to even deeper Russian involvement in the region, as anti-EU and anti-immigrant sentiment rose.

Political parties with strong pro-Moscow sympathies, such as the Hungarian nationalist party *Fidez*, have introduced legislation designed to facilitate Russian investment in their national economies. Suspicion is widespread of foul play in Russia’s win of the 12.5-billion-euro deal to build the Paks-2 nuclear plant in Hungary, largely on account of the nontransparent way in which the decision was made. Rumors have meanwhile swirled about warm ties between the Czech Republic’s President Zeman and Moscow, especially after Russia’s largest private oil company, Lukoil, paid a 1.4-million-euro fine to keep one of Zeman’s top advisers out of prison in late 2016.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Dusan Stojanovic, “Inside Russian ‘Spy Base’ in the Balkans,” *Associated Press*, October 6, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Higgins, “Finger Pointed at Russians in Alleged Coup Plot in Montenegro,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Neil McFarquhar, “How Russians Pay to Play in Other Countries,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2016.



Moscow also has significant influence in the Baltic states. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have historical links to Russia that are even closer than those of U.S. allies in Central Europe. These countries were part of the Soviet Union, whereas their Central European counterparts were separate countries bound to Moscow via the Warsaw Pact.<sup>12</sup>

Russia provides funds to pro-Russian groups throughout the Baltics via its “Compatriots Policy.” Latvia and Estonia are both home to sizeable Russian minority populations, some (although not all) of which are easily influenced by Moscow. A key example is the Harmony Party in Latvia. The Harmony Party is supported by Latvia’s ethnic Russian minority, has established a formal partnership with Putin’s United Russia Party, and advocates a softer approach to Russia on issues such as the Ukraine sanctions. In Estonia, Russian minorities are concentrated in areas such as the town of Narva, which lies along the northeastern border with Russia. These minorities are accordingly potential targets for Kremlin covert activities and, in a worst-case (and also least likely) scenario, efforts to create a pretext for military intervention in the Baltic states.<sup>13</sup>

Notably, there has been some progress in raising awareness of the threat in the Baltic states, perhaps because these states are on the front lines. Baltic governments, as well as the governments of the Nordic countries, are increasingly engaged in strengthening their defenses and resilience against hybrid strategies.

### *Ukraine and Other Areas*

Russia’s efforts to make inroads in the Balkans and influence European politics more broadly have not put an end to Russian operations in Ukraine, where its operations first ignited debate over the subject of hybrid war. Russia continues to support separatists in the eastern Donbas region with its special operations forces and pursues a campaign that involves media, cyber, and economic pressure against the U.S.-backed government in Kiev.

## Russian Hybrid Strategies Are Not New. . .

Russia’s use of hybrid strategies is not new. During the Soviet era, Moscow frequently made use of subversive “active measures” to gain influence and shape the political landscape in Europe. For example, Soviets funded “euro-communist” political parties, encouraged antinuclear protest movements, and sought to manipulate the European media. The Kremlin conducted these activities in conjunction with efforts to steal state secrets and buy influence through traditional forms of espionage. Soviet special forces also trained for activities similar to those of Russian special forces in hybrid warfare today.

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, these activities naturally declined. Moscow lacked both the resources and the interest in pursuing them. It lacked the resources because of its dire economic state. It lacked the interest because, in the 1990s at least,

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<sup>12</sup> Although never recognized as such by the U.S. Congress.

<sup>13</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee, Stephanie Pezard, Andrew Radin, Nathan Chandler, Keith Crane, and Thomas S. Szayna, *Russia and the West After the Ukrainian Crisis*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1305-A, 2017.

Russia appeared to be on a trajectory for greater cooperation and integration with Europe. Even at the turn of the century, in the early years of Putin's presidency, hope that Russia and the West would get along persisted.

Beginning with the so-called color revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004, however, Russia's relations with the West began deteriorating. Meanwhile, thanks to foreign investment and strong oil prices, Russia regained resources that it lacked in the 1990s and invested them in its military and security services.

### . . . But Are Updated for the Twenty-First Century

The hybrid war tactics that Russia uses today, however, are not identical to those used during the Cold War. Even if Russia used information operations back then, the volume and ambition of Russian information campaigns today are far greater and facilitated by the existence of the Internet, cable news, and especially social media. The use of cyber operations is also new, as is Russia's more extensive use of economic levers to influence foreign governments. Because Russia and the world are much more closely interlinked than during the Cold War, it is easier for Russia to penetrate Western societies. Russia's use of these tactics also appears to be less ideological than during the Cold War, when the Kremlin held a hidebound Marxist worldview. Russia's outlook today is less bound to any ideology, and Moscow may be shrewder as a result.

## Developing Strategies to Counter Hybrid Warfare

Meeting the challenge posed by Russian hybrid warfare will take time and effort. It must also be developed in conjunction with efforts to strengthen conventional deterrence. An effective strategy to defend U.S. interests against hybrid Russian strategies will include, at a minimum, the following.

**Strong coordination and cooperation within the U.S. interagency.** Russian hybrid warfare plays out in areas that are the purview of the U.S. State Department, the Defense Department, the Treasury Department, and the intelligence community. The Defense Department has an important role, but cannot counter Russian hybrid war strategies alone. Developing and implementing an effective strategy calls not only for effective coordination of response but also consensus about the threat and its meaning to U.S. national security. The White House may also wish to consider establishing regular interagency meetings led by the National Security Council staff—for example, at the policy coordination committee level—to develop and implement a coordinated national strategy and potentially a National Security Presidential Directive.<sup>14</sup>

**Appropriate resource allocation to the collection and analysis of intelligence in the European theater.** For over two decades, Europe's security has largely been uncontested. But European insecurity is now growing rapidly as a result of Russian threats and the threat posed by terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The United States must ensure that it has the resources necessary to meet that threat in Europe. Tracking and gaining advance warning

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<sup>14</sup> See Charles P. Ries, *Improving Decisionmaking in a Turbulent World*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-192-RC, 2016.

of Russian hybrid activities is vitally important, but it imposes a toll on intelligence collection and analysis capabilities. The United States must also continue to develop close intelligence sharing relationships with key allies—both to obtain information about Russian activities and to share it when it serves U.S. interests. To combat hybrid strategies, intelligence agencies must be as closely linked with law enforcement as possible.

**Support for transparency and anticorruption efforts.** Tolerance of corruption greatly facilitates Russian influence strategies. Some countries in Europe—for example, many states in the Balkans—suffer from weak anticorruption legal frameworks and limited political will for change. In other countries, political will may be strong, but individual privacy concerns can limit the remit of transparency laws. In these areas, the EU is an important partner for both the United States and for NATO. The United States should support European anticorruption efforts wholeheartedly, with appropriate funding for related State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development programs.

**Support for internal security reform and defense institution building in targeted states such as the Balkans and Ukraine.** Although some Balkan militaries already meet NATO standards of professionalization, others need additional support. Institution-building in these countries needs to be focused on weakening any lingering ties with Russian security services. In addition, strengthening capabilities in such countries, as well as in the Baltic states, will enable greater detection and resistance to covert Russian operations. In general, U.S. assistance targeted at strengthening the rule of law will complicate Moscow’s hybrid efforts.<sup>15</sup>

**Strategies to push back against Russian influence operations.** More work needs to be done in this difficult area, but initial research suggests that it may be better to focus on discrediting sources such as *Russia Today* and generally raising awareness of misinformation rather than attempting to fight each and every story on a tit-for-tat basis. Civil society must also be encouraged to play a larger role in combatting Russian disinformation. Increasing the flow of positive information will also help. In extreme cases, such as wartime, it may be necessary to temporarily close off access to Russian media outlets.<sup>16</sup>

**Effective use of U.S. special operations forces in the U.S. European Command area of operations.** U.S. special operations forces have an important role to play in combating Russian hybrid strategies in Europe. Both the mission and operating environment in Europe, however, is different from that in countries like Iraq and Syria. This requires some adaptation. For example, one challenge is ensuring that U.S. diplomats are attuned to the needs of U.S. special operations forces conducting training and other activities in the region. Conversely, U.S. forces must also be fully aware of the delicate nature of some U.S. diplomatic activities underway in these same countries. The United States must also operate in support of individual European countries’ plans, filling their gaps and bolstering their programs.

**Support for European efforts to combat Russian hybrid warfare.** The United States, after all, is not the first line of defense against most forms of Russian hybrid warfare in Europe.

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1577-PAF, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Paul and Matthews, 2016.

Instead, the first line of defense is the EU and European countries themselves. The United States can support specific efforts, such as Finland’s Hybrid War Center of Excellence, Latvia’s Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, and Estonia’s Cyber Center of Excellence, while encouraging other best practices, such as closer public-private partnerships in Europe, to strengthen Europe’s own defenses against cyber attacks.

## Not Going Away

Russian hybrid strategies pose a clear challenge to U.S. national interests in NATO unity, a prosperous EU, and a strong liberal democratic system in Europe. In the most extreme case, hybrid strategies could be used for outright aggression against NATO territory.

Of course, Russia does not have endless resources for hybrid warfare, so it will be important not to overexaggerate the threat. It is also helpful to remember that Russia uses hybrid strategies as a means of pursuing what it believes to be its national interests—and views many U.S. and NATO activities as hybrid strategies directed against it.

Nevertheless, the growing challenge posed by Russian hybrid threats is real and not going away. The United States must recognize this fact and remain wary of Russian efforts to influence allied politics—and our own.