RUSSIA'S HYBRID WARFARE – WHY NARRATIVES AND IDEATIONAL FACTORS PLAY A ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

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Abstract

The article's main objective is to discuss Russia's hybrid warfare in terms of both material and ideational factors. Therefore, a social-constructivist interpretation will show that an important part of Russia's "hybrid warfare" revolves around ideational factors and discourse constructions. In other words, alongside cyber, kinetic, information, malware operations, backed up by auxiliary troops (which in this approach represent material facts), a narrative meant to explain Russia's rationale played an equally important role (and these were ideational facts). The first part will briefly present the origins and features of hybrid warfare. The second part will tackle Russia's hybrid warfare as a response to asymmetry at the global level. The last part will stress a different form of "hybridity" in Russia's recent action, which entails both material facts (the blended strategies employed in eastern Ukraine) and ideational facts (the Russian narrative of events and the meanings assigned to Russian actions).

Keywords: Hybrid warfare; Russia; Eastern Ukraine; Constructivism; Narratives; Ideational factors.

Hybrid warfare: origins, definition, core features

The last three decades witnessed a vivid discussion on the transformation of warfare. Different approaches were adamant to prove the asymmetric nature of future war, the simultaneous use of conventional and unconventional means, and the moving away from the

traditional battlefield or military sector to the societal sector and dense urban centres. The most recent concept which stirred up both controversy and adherence is *hybrid warfare*.

The concept *hybrid warfare* emerged during the first decade of the 21st century when several scholars were focusing on "the blending and blurring character of future conflicts" (Hoffman, 2007, p. 31). It was initially perceived as merely one label among others (Berdal, 2011, pp. 109-110), such as *new wars* (Kaldor, 2001; Kaldor, Vashee, 2001; Münkler, 2005; Duffield, 2001), *compound warfare* (Huber, 2004), *small wars* (Merom, 2003), *asymmetric wars* (Arreguín-Toft, 2005; Arreguín-Toft, 2012), *fourth generation warfare* (Lind; Nightengale; Schmitt; Sutton; Wilson, 1989; Hammes, 2005), all committed to in-depth analyses on the novel features of post-conventional belligerence at the end of the 20th century. The non-linear form of warfare had been observed by American strategists already during the Cold War period. The term *low intensity conflicts* had been coined in order to capture the neither full-blown war, nor peace dynamic, but also the employment of "political, economic, informational, and military instruments."[22] But, as emphasized by Michael Evans,

> "for most of the Cold War the Western understanding of war was based on generic intellectual categories of 'conventional' (high-intensity) and 'unconventional' (low-intensity) conflict. Most in the field of strategic studies thought in terms of separate worlds of conventional interstate (or high-intensity) and unconventional intrastate (or low-intensity) military activity. Unfortunately, the spectrum of conflict that is emerging in the early twenty-first century is distinguished by merged categories, multidimensionality, and unprecedented interaction." (Evans, 2003, p. 139)

The term *hybrid warfare* has been used over the last ten years in reference to non-state actors waging (sometimes successful) wars against militarily superior state adversaries, but also as illustrative term for Russia's strategies in eastern Ukraine. The term was used for

[22] U.S. Army, "Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict", in *Field Manual 100-20*, Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990.

the first time in 2002 in a master's thesis by William J. Nemeth (Neag, 2016, p. 16). In his *Future war and Chechnya: a case for hybrid warfare*, Nemeth used this concept in order to analyze how "increasing dislocation brought about by globalization enhances the drive toward ethnic or tribal affinity", hence determining "devolving societies" to reorganize their military forces and conduct in warfare. Additionally, Nemeth claimed that "hybrid warfare will become increasingly prevalent" and that the "Chechen insurgency [is] a model for hybrid warfare" (Nemeth, 2002). It was in 2007 that Franck Hofmann tackled hybrid threats as those that are simultaneous, fused and subordinated to one command unit. Focusing on "multi-modal activities" which are "operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects", Hoffman argued that "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" (Hoffman, 2007, p. 29). The underpinning postulate is that "hybrid wars blend the lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervour of irregular warfare" (Hoffman, 2007, p. 28).

The war fought by Israel against Lebanon-based Hezbollah in 2006 was the one that triggered preoccupation for the capacity of a non-state actor, such as Hezbollah, to pose a serious threat to the conventional Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) not because it merely employed irregular strategies, but because its strength combined military force with "political, social, diplomatic, and informational components that provide[d] bedrock support for its military organization" (Glenn, 2009, p. 3). At the time, several works focused on Hezbollah's war against Israel as emblematic case-study for hybrid warfare waged by non-state actors (Huovinen, 2011; Glenn, 2009; Hoffman, 2007; McCulloh, 2013).

Referring to the nature and dynamic of "hybrid threats", Russell W. Glenn advanced two illustrative definitions:

> "Hybrid threat (1): Any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a tailored mix of conventional, irregular, terrorism and criminal means or activities in the operational battlespace. Rather than

> a single entity, a hybrid threat or challenger may be comprised of a combination of state and non-state actors.
>
> Hybrid threat (2): An adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs some combination of (1) political, military, economic, social, and information means, and (2) conventional, irregular, catastrophic, terrorism, and disruptive/criminal warfare methods. It may include a combination of state and non-state actors" (Glenn, 2009, p. 2).

Hoffman uses the "multi-modal" underlying nature in hybrid warfare in order to distinguish it from previous guerrilla tactics or from compound warfare whose aim was to pose a persistent threat by protracting the conflict. In such a scenario, the militarily, technologically and numerically weaker side aimed at avoiding direct confrontations with the opponent and decisive battles were not strategically envisioned. "Hybrid opponents", Hoffman argues, "seek victory by the fusion of irregular tactics and the most lethal means available in order to attack and attain their political objectives. The disruptive component of Hybrid Wars does not come from high-end or revolutionary technology, but from criminality" (Hoffman, 2007, p. 29). The traditional intellectual categorizations seem obsolete, since they are based on separation between regular and irregular warfare, which becomes transcended by "a fusion of war forms". According to Hoffman,

> "Instead of separate challengers with fundamentally different approaches (conventional, irregular or terrorist), we can expect to face competitors who will employ *all* forms of war and tactics, perhaps simultaneously. Criminal activity may also be considered part of this problem as well, as it either further destabilizes local government or abets the insurgent or irregular warrior by providing resources, or by undermining the host state and its legitimacy" (Hoffman, 2007, p. 7)

Hybrid wars, therefore, neither supplant conventional warfare, nor do they confine future threats to mere sub-state or trans-state irregular actors. They represent the blending of various forms of tactics and strategies, the simultaneous military and cyber attacks, the instantaneity of targeting and inflicting harm, all facilitated by globalization and

developments in technology and information. At the same time, hybrid wars will retain basic and brutal forms of violence, trying to instil terror and human costs, while exploiting virtual dimensions of warfare. Hybrid wars basically combine cyber, kinetic, media, terrorist, and military (regular and irregular) command structures. They blend malware and hacking with conventional military decision-making.

Mike Evans described such evolution as follows:

> "During the 1990s, the bipolar world that had for so long conditioned military conflict was swiftly replaced by a new globalised security environment characterised by weapons proliferation, internal wars, failed states, ethnopolitical violence, the rise of terrorism and a 24-hour electronic media [...] Armed conflict also began to reflect a bewildering mixture of modes—conventional and unconventional activity merged—while many combatants simultaneously employed modern Kalashnikov assault rifles, pre-modern machetes and post-modern cellular phones in their operations" (Evans, 2007, p. 6)

In an astute analysis, Sascha-Dominik Bachmann and Håkan Gunneriusson tackle the role the internet and social media as "enhancer and force multiplier" in terrorist activities and emphasize the "readiness, availability and affordability of using new technologies for setting up effective" systems of "command and control" (Bachmann, Gunneriusson, 2015, p. 83).

The terms "hybrid warfare" and "hybrid threats" seem to have been gradually incorporated in institutional lexicons. In 2014, the Statement of NATO summit in Wales described hybrid warfare threats as "wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures [which] are employed in a highly integrated design."[23] In a 2011 report, NATO referred to hybrid threats as "an umbrella term, encompassing a wide variety of existing adverse circumstances and actions, such as terrorism, migration, piracy, corruption,

[23] Wales Summit Declaration, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, Press Release (2014) 120, Issued on 05 Sep. 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm, accessed December 2016

ethnic conflict etc" (Bachmann, Gunneriusson, 2015, p. 79). The European Commission adopted a Joint Framework "to counter hybrid threats and foster the resilience of the EU and partner countries while increasing cooperation with NATO on countering hybrid threats." As expressed by Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "the security environment has changed dramatically. We have seen the rise of hybrid threats on EU's borders."[24]

On the other hand, like many other conceptualizations on warfare, the concept *hybrid war* spurred both analyses applied to state or non-state behaviour in international relations and controversy or corroborated dismissal in the academic and military field. Mark Galeotti emphasized *non-linear warfare*, a terminology meant to supplant "hybrid warfare", since the latter is merely "a term that was designed to discuss how insurgents fight modern armies" (Galeotti, interview in *Small Wars Journal*, 2015; Galeotti, 2015).

Referring to non-state terrorist actors, such as Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, ISIS, Bachmann and Gunneriusson stressed the increasing capacity of non-state actors to replicate the command and control structures of conventional military and observed that recent "developments have changed the traditional view of asymmetric warfare, where an AK-47 and the insurgent's morale were traditionally the only and often most important factors in achieving victory". The two scholars argued that "hybrid threats as such are not new threats; what is new is the recognition that such multi-modal threats command a 'holistic' approach, which combines traditional and non-traditional responses by state and NSAs [non-state actors] as well" (Bachmann, Gunneriusson, 2015, p. 86).

Hybrid warfare and Russia's response to asymmetry at the global level

A considerable amount of recent literature links hybrid warfare with Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine and the subsequent annexation of Crimea. Most articles focus on Russia's

[24] European Commission - Press release, *Security: EU strengthens response to hybrid threats*, Brussels, 6 April 2016,http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-1227_en.htm , accessed December 2016

combined strategies and tactics, ranging from subversion, cyber-attacks, media manipulation, the presence of "little green men", staged military exercises, criminal disorder, agitation and fifth columns. Valuable and detailed analyses describe the entire set of tools employed by Russia in eastern Ukraine (Lanozska, 2016; Pomerantsev, Weiss, 2014). Some scholars focus on cyber warfare or information warfare as major shifts in Russia's strategies (Bachmann, Gunneriusson, 2015; Giles, 2016) while others are rather preoccupied with the asymmetric nature of Russia's operations (Thornton, 2016). Other approaches focus on the difficulty of conceptually coining Russia's strategy as hybrid war, terming them "gray-zone wars" (Echevarria, 2016) or a form of "compound 'indirect' approach" (Scheipers, 2016). Bachmann and Gunneriusson focused on the somehow "undefined nature of the conflict" stressing the quandary over defining Russia's actions in Crimea as "war or civil unrest, interstate aggression or intrastate conflict". The two scholars captured the core "hybrid approach", as Russia "actually deni[ed] the existing of a state of war but defin[ed] military action in a holistic way with armed as well as unarmed civilians, supported by regular combat elements, doing the actual military manoeuvre acting" (Bachmann, Gunneriusson, 2015, pp. 88-89).

As already mentioned, Russia's recourse to information warfare and cyber attacks are considered crucial in transforming the modes of waging war against Ukraine. Keir Giles focused on the way in which information technologies and social media were employed as both tools for disinformation, amounting to "hacking of the news" according to some (Tikhonova, 2015), and for the media construction of Russia's version of events (Giles, 2016, p. 40). What Keir Giles dubs the "next phase of Russian information warfare" basically centres on employment of "Pro-Russian trolls – online profiles controlled by humans - and bots, those controlled by automated processes" (Giles, 2016, p. 40). A complex and systematic process has been developed, which tends to supplant the conventional deployment of troops, with "Russia amassing abilities on social media, ready to be deployed when needed" (Giles, 2016, p. 43). This led other scholars to assess Russia's actions in terms of capacity "to hybridize not only its actual warfare, but also its informational warfare" (Pomerantsev, Weiss, 2014, p. 5). The core interplay of cyber, kinetic, information, malware

operations in eastern Ukraine represent "a case-study in the potential for cyber-electromagnetic activities", according to the head of the U.S. Army's Cyber Center of Excellence: "It's not just cyber, it's not just electronic warfare, it's not just intelligence, but it's really effective integration of all these capabilities with kinetic measures to actually create the effect that their commanders [want] to achieve" (quoted in Giles, 2016, pp. 44-45).

Russia's strategies in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea are considered hybrid challenges for the 21st century, since they heavily rely on what Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss have called " 'the weaponization of information, culture and money', vital parts of the Kremlin's concept of 'non-linear' war" (Pomerantsev, Weiss, 2014, p. 4). Alongside with covert and small military operations, Russia concentrated on the news channel *Russia Today* (later rebranded *RT*) which is a wire service that includes "multilingual rolling news, a wire service and radio channels" and "has an estimated budget of over $300 million". The latter is a key item in what Pomerantsev and Weiss called "the Kremlin tool kit", meant to achieve the following goals: to shatter communications by conveying mixed messages, constructing a Russian-made version of reality, and "paralyzing journalism with threat of libel", and to "demoralize the enemy" via "disinformation campaigns" (Pomerantsev, Weiss, 2014, p. 6 and pp. 14-16). Russia's strategy of exploiting some of the core elements of Western liberal democracies, such as free speech and legal concepts such as *jus ad bellum*, is considered a pivotal attribute of the new information war (Bachmann, Gunneriusson, 2015; Pomerantsev, Weiss, 2014).

Other approaches focusing on the "hybrid" aspects of Russia's strategies in eastern Ukraine reject the intertwining elements of hybrid warfare and the beginning of a new form of Russian belligerence. Some cautiously argue that hybrid warfare is not synonymous to a "quasi-theory of Russian foreign policy" (Renz, Smith, 2016) while others analyze hybrid tactics as "neither new, nor Russian" (Popescu, 2015). Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith argued that there is "a dangerous misuse of the term 'war'" in Western recent literature stemming from overemphasis on combined use of information and psychological operations, which "were important factors leading to Russian military victory and were more important than the use of actual military force [...]." The authors remind us that Russia accomplished its goals

only because "these efforts were backed up by special forces, auxiliary fighters and the implicit threat of more military force to come" (Renz, Smith, p. 11). Consequently, treating Russia's annexation of Crimea and "hybrid warfare" as twin developments creates a western-made "model of Russian 'hybrid warfare' reverse-engineered from the approach pursued in Crimea" (Renz, Smith, p. 11). Andrew Monaghan also showed that analyses on Russia's hybrid warfare should entail "understanding the implications of the much deeper and wider Russian state mobilization", since the risk is to obscure or overlook the role of conventional force in Russian military thinking (Monaghan, 2016, p. 72).

In a different argument-built approach, Alexander Lanoszka discusses "hybrid warfare as a strategy rather than a new form of war" (Lanoszka, p. 178). The author shows that hybrid warfare is not necessarily a model for the future of warfare and does not indicate Russia's mixed strategies "born out of weakness" or determined by global asymmetries. Instead, Russia's hybrid strategies were used to "advance political goals on the battlefield by applying military force subversively" (Lanoszka, p. 178). But such strategies are effective only when directed against a weaker neighbour (such as Ukraine or the post-Soviet space in general) and only when some endogenous elements or situational factors facilitate their success. Lanoszka argues that certain key attributes of the former Soviet region foment the use of hybrid strategies: ethnic heterogeneity, latent historic grievances, weakness in civil society, and regional complexity. Such regional peculiarities are relevant, rendering the former Soviet republics vulnerable (even though it is not "equally effective across all parts of the former Soviet space"), since "hybrid warfare exploits nationalist identities, thereby blurring responsibility and even gaining political support among foreign audiences" (Lanoszka, p. 176 and pp. 181-189). Other scholars also focused on the "permissive environment" in eastern Ukraine which provided the opportunity for "Soviet-inherited practices" (Beznosiuk, 2016; Charap, 2016, p. 54).

Referring to Russia's actions in 2014, "hybrid threats" and "hybrid challenges" are often emphasized in a post-conventional international security framework. Some analysts believe this development poses a real threat to Europe, but most importantly to the Baltic states (Hunter, Pernik, 2015; Kudors, 2015). Others have been keen to formulate US policies

or contemplate NATO's strategic planning in order to counteract or avert such future threats, whether posed by state or non-state actors (Abbott, 2016; Fleming, 2011). And yet, others warn that inadequate attention leads to "a misguided attempt to group everything Moscow does under one rubric" (Kofman, Rojansky, 2015, p. 6). As such, Kofman and Rojansky argued, hybrid warfare becomes a "catchall phrase" which poorly describes Russian foreign policy and hastily foresees the duplication of similar scenarios, like the ones in Crimea and Donbas, elsewhere (Kofman, Rojansky, 2015, p. 7).

The most convincing criticism focuses on the speedy identification of a pre-planned new form of warfare which Russia has been designing over the last years and which had already been described by Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, in 2013. According to this critique, some Western accounts suggested that the Russian operations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine marked the beginning of a new form of "hybrid warfare" and, hence, they hastily and wrongly equated it to a so-called "Gerasimov doctrine" (Charap, 2016, p. 53; Monaghan, 2016, pp. 65-66; Bartles, 2016). Andrew Monaghan showed that Russian "commentators use the term *gibridnaya voina*, a direct transliteration of hybrid warfare, when they assert that the notion of Russian hybrid warfare is a myth" (Monaghan, 2016, pp. 67-68). The purpose of this critique is to show that the Western identification of a Russian theorizing of such strategies is inaccurate, because, as emphasized by Samuel Charap, "Gerasimov is actually describing what he sees as the new US way of war, not Russian doctrine" (Charap, 2016, p. 53).

The question we tackle here is: Against whom is Russia waging this type of hybrid war? In order to fully understand whether Russia's strategies and combined tactics in eastern Ukraine amount to a novel and distinct category, labelled by many as "Russia's hybrid war", we should first consider the goals of Putin's Russia. This would also enable us to problematize whether Russia acted out of a weaker position, and in this sense we witnessed a form of asymmetric warfare, or out of a stronger position against a vulnerable neighbour, and in this sense we witnessed the manifestation of regional hubris. In our interpretation, involvement in former Soviet republics (by stirring up local pro-Russian feelings and destabilizing post-Soviet states), whether this was the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia,

Transnistria or, more recently, the case of eastern Ukraine, are episodes of a larger perspective. Putin's ultimate goal is not just to weaken former Soviet republics, but rather to react to global asymmetries. As such, Russia needs to preserve its status of great power and to counteract not only a militarily stronger coalition of adversaries, but a Western ascendancy and a form of advancement of discursive persuasive power. The latter is geared towards an international order wherein the United States and the European Union play the key roles. What Putin ultimately wants for Russia is to be on equal footing with other major players of international politics. As underlined by Dmitry Trenin, "Russia's ultimate interest is a status of a major world power, on par with the USA and China" (Renz; Smith, 2016, p. 16). Therefore, part of Russia's hybrid warfare is propaganda and the construction of a Russian version of events. This represents a discourse construction meant to reverse uneven global conditions and the impaired status of post-Soviet Russia. This is precisely why Putin resorts to a narrative meant to rationalize and justify Russia's actions. It has often been mentioned that Putin referred to the demise of the Soviet Union as a great tragedy (Lanoszka, 2016, p. 187). Consequently, Russia should strive, according to the rationale, to regain its great power status and reverse post-Soviet international order characterized by the dominance of US and Western Europe.

According to Bachmann and Gunneriusson, hybrid warfare entails, *inter alia*, the use of media as "force multiplier" which represents a fundamental tool for both non-state actors, such as radical Islamists, and for state actors, as the Crimean case revealed. Even though the use of media is the common denominator, there is a huge difference to be noted. Non-state actors like "Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab try to translate tactical success into terror, while in the Crimean and Ukrainian examples, Russia tried the opposite while denying being an active agent. In the former case, *jus ad bellum* is ignored; in the latter, it is evaded" (Bachmann, Gunneriusson, 2015, p. 90). Building on this insightful observation, we shall emphasize the way in which Putin's Russia tried to not openly reject the rules of war in international law, but to elude and alter them.

The dynamic indicating neither full-blown war nor merely irregular warfare in eastern Ukraine was not intended to overtly defy international law, but to escape its provisions and find loopholes by using the lexicon of Western liberal democracies.

In this sense, Russia's "hybrid war" is a reaction to a stronger opponent (the West, represented by two important actors, the US and EU), whose weaknesses and vulnerabilities are identified and targeted. Hence, Russia's combined tactics reveal a very improved form of asymmetric warfare. As Pomerantsev has put it, "feeling itself relatively weak, the Kremlin has systematically learnt to use the principles of liberal democracies against them" (Pomerantsev, Weiss, 2014, p. 4)

Russia's tactics and modes of warfare could be best described in terms of the combination of covert small military operations with criminal disorder and hijacking social media, the blending of special forces, intelligence, malware, and local militias, but most importantly, in ideational terms, in terms of systematic and integrated attempts to reverse realities. In what follows, we shall try to show how Putin's Russia resorted to a construction of international reality in which international law and norms are not rejected as Western-made, but reinterpreted and amended in a Russian-made rhetoric.

Russia's hybrid warfare – corollary of the distribution of both capabilities and ideas

This section will analyze Putin's speeches referring to events in Ukraine and will identify systematic attempts to counteract a Western discourse by creating another version of events. Building on conventional constructivist claims (*id est.* the works of Alexander Wendt) we shall try to show that an important part of Russia's "hybrid warfare" revolves around ideational factors and discourse constructions. In other words, alongside cyber, kinetic, information, malware operations, backed up by special forces and auxiliary troops (which in this approach represent material facts), a narrative meant to explain Russia's rationale played an equally important role (and these were ideational facts).

The basic claims in Alexander Wendt's constructivist theorizing refer to the character of international life which is determined "by the beliefs and expectations that states have about each other and these are constituted largely by social rather than material structures" (Wendt, 1999, p. 20). Such assertion does not suggest that material power and state interests are unimportant, but rather that they are incomplete, since "their meaning and effects depend on the social structure of the system" (Wendt, 1999, p. 20). Building on this understanding, we argue that Putin's decisions pertaining to intervention in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea are embedded in an international *material and ideational* structure. The material facts of international systems and the distribution of capabilities have always been considered decisive (and exclusive) factors for assessing state behavior in Realist and Neorealist accounts. In this section, though, we treat Russia's recent foreign policy decisions as corollary of a distribution of both capabilities (material facts) and ideas. A Realist interpretation of events would focus solely on Russia's decision to use threat and military power against the territorial integrity of a weaker neighbour, hence validating the states' strength in military terms and the weakness of norms, rules and international law. If we consider Russia's actions in terms of offensive realist behaviour, which would downplay international law and norms, then the following question is raised: why did Putin try so hard to narrate Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine in terms of "people's right to determine their future"? Why did Putin try to shape a line of arguments built on essentials of international law and importance of the United Nations? Why did he invoke the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo and presented it as similar to the intervention in eastern Ukraine? According to Vladimir Putin,

> "if I do decide to use the Armed Forces, this will be a legitimate decision in full compliance with both general norms of international law [...] and with our commitments, which in this case coincide with our interests to protect the people with whom we have close

> historical, cultural and economic ties. Protecting these people is in our national interests. This is a humanitarian mission."[25]

Some might answer the questions raised above by showing that Putin simply tried to justify Russia's military actions in order to confer legitimacy and dissuade a military reaction from the West (which usually is expected in case of aggression against the territorial integrity of other states). But, he was doing more than simply trying to fend off criticism or military reaction. After all, Russia fought a war against Georgia in 2008 (and supported breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and there was no such drastic response from the international community. According to former Russian TV producer Peter Pomerantsev, Russia's decisions towards Ukraine amount to much more than information warfare operations. He argues that "the new Russia doesn't just deal with the petty disinformation, forgeries, lies, leaks, and cyber-sabotage usually associated with information warfare. It reinvents reality [...]" (Pomerantsev, 2014). A careful reading of Putin's statements reveals a re-description of events based on cautiousness towards international law, and not on defiance of rules. According to Putin,

> "[...] what do we hear from our colleagues in Western Europe and North America? They say we are violating norms of international law. [...] what exactly are we violating? [...] Russia's armed forces never entered Crimea; they were there already in line with an international agreement. True, we did enhance our forces there; however - this is something I would like everyone to hear and know - we did not exceed the personnel limit of our armed forces in Crimea, which is set at 25,000, because there was no need to do so."[26]

This constitutes more than justification, it represents an attempt to construct another reality and to shape a persuasive discourse construction (a competing version of events)

[25] *Vladimir Putin answered journalists' questions on the situation in Ukraine*, March 4, 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366, accessed December 2016.

[26] "Crimea crisis: Russian President Putin's speech annotated", *BBC News*, March 19, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26652058, accessed December 2016.

which is consistent with international law. In our interpretation, alongside all blended strategies employed by Russia (which reveal the strengths in material terms) an ideational force multiplier was also at work. The construction of reality and the Russian-made narrative about the nature of intervention in Ukraine indicate the role of ideas and meanings. In trying to "make sense of hybrid warfare" James Wither lucidly showed that, just "like IS, Russia used information operations to influence and shape public perception, a recognition that the latter has become the strategic centre of gravity in contemporary armed conflicts" (Wither, 2016, p. 77). Our constructivist interpretation stresses the role of perceptions, meanings, and shared beliefs which accompanied cyber, information and military means employed by Russia. The Russian hybrid strategy/warfare entailed military and information tools, but also meanings which Putin assigned to events in eastern Ukraine in an attempt to construct an international reality based on "Western double-standards" (in Putin's words). Such a narrative is meant to persuade audiences (and attract allies) and to gradually shape Russia's great power status in international politics. Relying exclusively on combined tactics (as those employed in Ukraine), Russia would be confronted with the status of outcast in international politics. But this is not Russia's ultimate goal. Rather than self-marginalizing from the Western world, Russia's main concern is to become an equal partner. Others have also emphasized Russia's complicated relation with Europe; for instance, Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith focused on one "important misperception" which is that "Russia wants to cut itself off from Europe" (Renz, Smith, 2016, p. 18). We argue that Putin's Russia resorted to a narrative, a re-description of events which aims at shaping the construction of international reality in which international law and norms are not rejected as Western-made, but reinterpreted and amended in a Russian-made rhetoric. Consequently, this is process wherein ideational facts and perceptions complete the military, cyber or technological strengths.

Putin's speeches try to constantly reiterate a form of legitimacy and compliance with international rules: "we proceed from the conviction that we always act legitimately. I have

personally always been an advocate of acting in compliance with international law"[27]; "people should have the right to determine their own future"[28]; "if we see such uncontrolled crime spreading to the eastern regions of the country, and if the people ask us for help [...] we retain the right to use all available means to protect those people. We believe this would be absolutely legitimate. This is our last resort."[29] He invokes NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and uses it as precedent setting: "the Crimean authorities referred to the well-known Kosovo precedent - a precedent our Western colleagues created with their own hands in a very similar situation, when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia, exactly what Crimea is doing now, was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country's central authorities."[30] Such discursive elements are not mere justifications, they are ideational factors geared towards shaping reality. Putin's narrative and efforts to confer legitimacy and to employ the key terms of international law represent a speech act.

One major conceptual pillar in Alexander Wend's social-constructivism is symbolic interactionism. The latter derived from George Herbert Mead's sociological framework according to which, throughout social interactions, individuals employ symbols and meanings and, based on them, define their own identity (the *self*) and understand certain situations in relation with the co-presence of others (Mead, 1934). Moreover, social interaction plays a major role in the development of the *self*. By extrapolating the role of meanings and symbols to state behaviour, we could examine how states tend to take on the perspective of the *generalized other* (in Mead's conceptualization) in international politics. Therefore, Russia's role in the international contemporary structure is best understood in terms of

[27] *Vladimir Putin answered journalists' questions on the situation in Ukraine*, March 4, 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366, accessed December 2016.

[28] *Ibidem.*

[29] *Ibidem.*

[30] "Crimea crisis: Russian President Putin's speech annotated", *BBC News*, March 19, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26652058, accessed December 2016. See also Bojana Barlovac, "Putin Says Kosovo Precedent Justifies Crimea Secession", *Balkan Insight*, March 18, 2014, http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/crimea-secession-just-like-kosovo-putin

meanings assigned by Putin to certain events, but also in terms of the construction of *self* in relation with *or* co-dependence on *others*. Russia can only be a great power when the others (and "by others" we refer to "the Generalized Other", as coined by Mead) acknowledge it and treat it as such. Moreover, Russia's great power status is dependent on the socially constructed recognition of such attributes in international politics. Great power status in this respect entails much more than regional hegemony. The ultimate goal is to push Russia's pre-eminence so as it can really act as key player in international politics (on equal footing with the US and the EU) and to persuade international audience of such status held by Russia at the beginning of the 21st century. The formulation of such claims by Putin or other Russian political figures is not enough. What is needed is the recognition of the international community (the "generalized other") in relation with which Putin is constructing a great power identity for Russia.

Several scholars focused on states' identities and decision-making as being contingent on "'a discourse of danger' in which state elites periodically invent or exaggerate threats to the body politic in order to produce and sustain an 'us' in distinction to 'them'" (Wendt, 1999, p. 275). This assertion is valid for any state and was applied to the United States in various works. Is Russia competing with the West or does it perceive an escalating confrontation in its relations with the West? As emphasized by James Wither, "many Russian commentators and analysts claim that Russia has been under sustained and effective information attack by the US since the 1980s" and hence, "from a Russian perspective, the seizure of Crimea and operations in eastern Ukraine are strategic defensive campaigns to counter US hybrid warfare against its national interests and values" (Wither, 2016, p. 80).

One might argue that Putin's Russia found itself in stark military and economic competition with the West. But we believe that this competition entails more than mere military, material factors and that it is grounded in a socially defined relation between *self* (Putin's Russia) and *others* (the international community at large, but most importantly US and EU). According to James Wither, "many of the statements emanating from Russia's government and media suggest that Russia perceives itself as at 'war' with Western democracy, culture and values" (Wither, 2016, p. 79). In this interpretation, the elements

which complete the material (military, economic, technological) form of competition are ideational. Not only physical security needs are at stake here, but also self-esteem needs. Putin's Russia is in a competition wherein the following pivotal point is equally and crucially important: whose "truths" are more persuasive in global politics? The Western discourse centred on post-Cold War international order, built on international law, the United Nations' system, the outlawing of aggression, state sovereignty, but also the promotion of human rights and democratic values throughout the world? Or Putin's reinterpretation of such international developments, built on what he dubbed "Western double-standards" or Western "hypocrisy"? As some of Putin's statements indicate, he is not formulating a worldview against international law or against the United Nations, but a reinterpretation of events. He tries to shape a competing "truth". Putin is waging a war against a dominant discourse. In this sense, discourse and ideational factors are at work, much more than tanks or price of gas.

Conclusion

In this article the aim was to tackle a different form of "hybridity" in Russia's recent actions. We tried to show that the hybrid aspects in Russia's warfare entail both material facts (the blended strategies employed in eastern Ukraine) and ideational facts (the Russian narrative of events and the meanings assigned to Russian actions). The latter are highly relevant in Putin's attempts to construct Russia's identity in relation or co-dependence with the *others*.

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