FROZEN CONFLICTS AS A TOOL OF THE RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

George-Alin Oprea[1] ⓘD
Rareș-Gabriel Bercaru[2] ⓘD

Abstract: *Since the collapse of the USSR, the Russian Federation has been seeking to maintain its influence in the so-called "Near Abroad" by employing a wide range of tactics and instruments collectively known as the tools of hybrid warfare. In certain situations, the process of achieving this interest has led to the emergence of frozen conflicts in the territory of some states that belonged to the Soviet Union. An interesting question arises as to whether frozen conflicts are a tool of this hybrid philosophy or not. This paper aims to demonstrate that frozen conflicts represent hybrid warfare tactics that allows the Russian Federation to keep these states in its sphere of influence with negative consequences not only for their security, but also for European security. In order to do that, the theoretical research focused on the understanding of the concepts of "hybrid warfare" and "frozen conflicts" will be carried out followed by an empirical analysis based on the connection between these two concepts with reference to the conflicts in the European Post-Soviet area.*

Introduction

The disintegration of the Soviet Union transformed the Russian Federation into an actor that has proven to be a real threat to the specific order of the rules-based international system. Despite the Cold War period being considered formally

---

[1] George-Alin Oprea, Junior Researcher, Institute for Political Studies of Defense and Military History, Constantin Mille 6 St. Bucharest, 0040726776706, alin_alin0812@yahoo.com
[2] Rareș-Gabriel Bercaru, Junior Researcher, Institute for Political Studies of Defense and Military History, Constantin Mille 6 St. Bucharest, 0040746431008, bercaru_rares@yahoo.com
\# The authors have equally contributed to this paper.

over, it is becoming increasingly evident that the "roots" of this "frozen conflict" have not been eradicated. The position adopted by Russia, based on its actions throughout the 21st century, demonstrates a fierce desire for reaffirmation, integration among states capable of influencing the international system, and a revisionist state (policy) willing to pursue its interests by any means, even renouncing rationality. Thus, Russia, practicing a policy of force based on spheres of influence, seeks to regain lost prestige at a time when the West, represented by the US (the main bastion of democracy), appears to be reaching the apex of its history in terms of international influence.

In this context, the tension that spills over and influences the entire international community becomes both attractive to study and challenging to manage.

Regarding the tactics used by Russia to achieve its established political interests, it is not surprising that researchers have become interested in studying the concept of "hybrid warfare". From 2014 to 2019, around 221 articles using this concept were published only in the central Russian press (Pynnöniemi & Jokela, 2020), not to mention the greater number of works published in the West. This high interest should not be unexpected. Although a disputed concept, hybrid warfare can offer an explanation of Russia's behavior and actions on the international stage. However, there are many inherent challenges in conducting an analysis focused on the study of the term "hybrid warfare". One challenge has been, is, and will be to clearly identify the specific components underlying this approach.

Despite attempts to clearly distinguish the component instruments, studies have failed to highlight whether the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space can play a role in the Russian strategy for achieving its objectives. Our paper aims to explore whether manipulating the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space could represent an instrument of "hybrid warfare". This issue equates to the main research question of this paper. Starting from the hypothesis that Russia pursues a policy of force in which the post-Soviet space is a part of its sphere of influence, we intend to demonstrate how the favored status of a third party in the conflicts of Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia can influence not only the fate of these conflicts, but also help Russia consolidate its power within its sphere of influence and achieve its strategic objectives in the distance conflict waged with the West. To achieve this, we propose, first of all, to provide a context that highlights the peculiarities of the post-Soviet space. Next, we will terminologically analyze the concepts of "hybrid warfare" and "frozen conflict", and subsequently attempt to demonstrate how the two approaches can be interconnected. Finally, we will practically and comparatively analyze the conflicts in the post-Soviet space.

While Russian foreign policy and the concepts explored in this paper have received considerable attention from other scholars, less emphasis has been placed on examining frozen conflicts from the perspective of hybrid warfare, which is the focal point of our study. Firstly, we focus on a topical subject, "hybrid warfare", aiming to contribute with our perspective and understanding of this phenomenon. Secondly, alongside this subject, we introduce the issue of "frozen conflicts", a

delicate topic on the agenda of entities concerned with ensuring peace and international security. Thirdly, we consider this endeavor important as it offers a starting point for future approaches to understanding the main concepts with which we operate and for individuals eager to delve into the particular phenomenon we will study. On the other hand, we believe our effort could help establish certain aspects regarding both the resolution of the analyzed frozen conflicts and the prevention of threats arising from the hybrid approach "as a whole".

We are aware of the limitations of our study. In terms of the theoretical part, although not a defining element for the objective of our paper, specific components of the hybrid approach could have been highlighted more clearly, facilitating a more straightforward allocation of this "new" instrument we seek to present. Concerning the practical part, the presented theory has not been implemented on all existing frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The reason we have excluded Nagorno-Karabakh from our analysis and selected only Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria is the greater involvement of Moscow in the outbreak and perpetuation of these three conflicts, materialized by the Russian military presence since the early 1990s and its interest to influence the foreign policy of Georgia and Moldova, which unlike Armenia and Azerbaijan, aspire to become members of the EU (both Georgia and Moldova) and NATO (only Georgia). On the other hand, we do not exclude the possibility that Russia might employ other means of manipulating frozen conflicts that our paper might have overlooked. We have highlighted the most important aspects from our point of view.

Russia and its "Near Abroad"

As Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union was a multinational state, composed of 15 different republics. Another similarity rests in the territorial distribution of the largest and most influential ethnic group (Serbs/Russians). Even though ethnic Russians were the largest ethnic group only in the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic, they constituted a significant minority in almost all other union republics, with approximately 25 million Russians residing in non-Russian republics according to the 1989 Soviet census. With the Soviet Union on the brink of dissolution, they risked losing their dominant position given the fact that in a very short period of time they became ethnic minorities in new countries that were in the process of constructing national identities, based mostly on nationalistic policies (Rotaru, 2022). Nevertheless, the difference between the two multinational states was that during the existence of the Soviet Union a process of Russification took place, which implied not only a change in the demographic composition of non-Slavic republics, but also a cultural dominance over the other ethnic groups.

In these circumstances, the post-Soviet Russian government did not remain indifferent and formulated the so-called "Near Abroad" concept, which implied that the post-Soviet space is a zone of special interest for Russia and that Moscow has

to intervene to protect the rights of Russians or Russian language speakers wherever they are. However, this Russian approach also has to be understood through the lens of the realist political theory. James Coyle argues that instead of maximizing its power, Russia appears to achieve a relative increase in power by decreasing the relative power of the states surrounding it (Coyle, 2018).

That seemed also to be the case at the beginning of the 1990s, when the weakened Soviet Union and then Russia chose to first prevent the secession of constituent republics of the USSR, and, after the collapse being inevitable following the failed Putsch in August 1991, to impede the state-building process and development of the former Soviet republics and to keep them as weak as possible. In specific situations, an approach to achieve this goal was to provide backing to separatist movements or, at the very least, maintain a supportive stance towards them. This was evident in scenarios involving the secession of predominantly Russian-speaking Transnistria or the separatist aspirations of non-Russian ethnic minorities in Georgia. These minorities perceived Moscow as their protector against what they viewed as Georgia's efforts to marginalize them as the secondary citizens.

As the geopolitical space, the "Near Abroad" corresponds roughly to the boundaries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), composed of 12 of the 15 former Soviet republics and centered around Russia. This formula was at first a compromise between the 3 Slavic republics of the USSR (Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus), and a solution for Russia to exert control over the post-Soviet space, even after it lost control over it *de jure*. In the cases of Georgia and Moldova, conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria played an important role in their decision to join the CIS. Weakened by the wars with the separatist authorities and facing a civil war, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze accepted the accession of Georgia into the CIS, after it first refused to join it in 1991. On the other hand, Moldova joined the CIS for economic reasons and the need to secure Russian engagement towards the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. As a result, Russia, through its more or less direct involvement in the three wars, managed to keep Moldova and Georgia in its sphere of influence.

Unlike former Yugoslavia, where the international community paid a great deal of attention during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, the conflicts related to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the negotiations did not catch the same interest. This is because the West considered the stakes for European security to be far greater in the Balkans. Moreover, the United States was interested in cultivating good relations with the Soviet Union and, after 1991, with Russia. The consolidation of the Yeltsin administration was a guarantee for the US that Russia would not plunge into chaos (Oprea, 2022a, p. 38), an outcome which could have produced undesirable consequences since Russia was the inheritor of the overwhelmingly Soviet nuclear arsenal. Thus, it can be inferred that the West considered it wise not to get involved in the ex-Soviet regional affairs and to support the policies of Russia in relation to the former Soviet countries, including what concerns Moscow's management of frozen conflicts. Undeterred by any other major actor, Russia imposed itself as a mediator in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia and has

since controlled the negotiations for the settlement of these conflicts. Only in the mid-2000s, after the Color Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine and the expansion of NATO and the EU towards the East, did the West start to pay more attention to the Black Sea region and the frozen conflicts. Consequently, in 2005, the US and the EU were incorporated, though in the capacity of observers, into the established framework for resolving the Transnistria conflict (referred to as the 5+2 Mechanism). Furthermore, the EU established the mission (known as EUBAM – the European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine) with the primary objective of fostering positive trade practices at the Moldovan-Ukrainian border within the Transnistrian region (European Union External Action Service, 2023). Also, the West decided to play a more prominent role in Georgia by mediating the agreement that put an end to the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and deploying afterwards the civilian mission to Georgia (EUMM – the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia). However, the influence of the Western engagement in addressing frozen conflicts remains limited. The European Union, functioning as an observer within the 5+2 Mechanism, lacks the decision-making authority within an outdated framework following the Russian incursion into Ukraine. Additionally, the EU mission in Georgia encounters the constraints imposed by the Russian-dominated Abkhazian and South Ossetian administrations, preventing it from fully executing its intended mandate.

Taking into account all that was discussed above, it can be said that the post-Soviet space has certain characteristics to which the Russian strategy is addressed. The convergence of the sizable and influential Russian diaspora, coupled with the absence or limited influence of other significant players, creates an environment conducive to a specific strategy employed by the Russian Federation. This strategy involves leveraging elements from the hybrid warfare toolkit against nations that are at risk of drifting away from its sphere of influence, such as Moldova and Georgia. We have previously observed that an immediate outcome of the frozen conflicts was the inclusion of these two nations into the Russia-influenced CIS. However, in order to make sure that frozen conflicts, in a broader sense, are aligned with the comprehensive Russian strategy in which hybrid warfare approach is used, it is the imperative to scrutinize shared attributes in these three conflicts. These attributes should correspond with the forthcoming definition of hybrid warfare that will be examined.

A framework for analysis

With the presented research objective and the steps to demonstrate the supported hypothesis, as well as the specificities of the analyzed space (the post-Soviet space) highlighted, it is necessary to establish the terminological delimitations of the main concepts used in this research. Considering the intention to demonstrate how the manipulation of frozen conflicts represents a specific way of hybrid warfare, it is understandable why the concept of 'hybrid warfare' will be discussed first, followed by the concept of 'frozen conflicts'.

The concept of "hybrid warfare" is paradoxically as simple to understand as it is vague in itself. This might explain the significant interest of analysts studying military phenomena in this term. However, the primary reason for leaning towards understanding this concept is that the term "hybrid warfare" captures the complexity of modern armed conflict in the 21st century very well. The technological advancements specific to this era combine with diversity expressed at all levels. The involved actors, the multitude of used means, and the operating environments are interconnected. The effect can be devastating. In many analyses, the concept of "hybrid warfare" is used with the same meaning as the concept of "hybrid threats" (Weissmann, 2021). Providing security increasingly becomes a challenge, and the solution has to begin with the understanding of the nature of the threats we face.

Regarding threats of hybrid nature, the conceptual debate is quite controversial. It has to be mentioned that the concept of "hybrid warfare" lacks a universally accepted definition, and depending on technological advancements and developments in military affairs, the significance of this concept may evolve over time. Moreover, even though the concept is closely linked to understanding the behavior of the Russian Federation on the international stage, Russian military analysts do not use this concept (Renz, 2016).

Therefore, in the West, most analysts believe that the debate on this concept gained momentum with the actions of the Russian Federation leading to the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and events in eastern Ukraine in 2014 (Monaghan, 2015; Renz, 2016; Wither, 2020; Pynnöniemi & Jokela, 2020; Libiseller, 2023). However, the first definitions of the concept do not revolve around that date. Moreover, from a historical perspective, the concept is not considered to be a phenomenon that originated from that moment (Wither, 2020). Although the initial discussions of the concept date back to 2002, the US Marine Corps, through Frank Hoffman's contribution, "Conflicts in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars", represents a primary source that brought the debate on this concept to the attention of general public. In this paper, hybrid warfare, understood through the concept of "hybrid threats", incorporates "a full range of different modes of warfare" that can be categorized both in the realm of conventional military (kinetic actions) and non-military (irregular and asymmetrical tactics and operations) actions conducted by state or non-state actors to achieve "synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict" (Hoffmann, 2007).

Based on this method of arguing the conceptual understanding, over time, multiple similar definitions have been adopted. Naturally, the effort to find a definition for the concept intensified after 2014. For example, according to Reisinger and Golts (2014), "hybrid warfare" is "an effective and sometimes surprising mix of military and non-military, conventional and irregular components, [that] can include all kinds of instruments such as cyber and information operations" (p. 3). In addition to Hoffmann's approach, the two authors highlight an exemplification of the non-kinetic component that belongs to this hybridity. This perspective can be complemented by the definition provided by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2015)

regarding the concept of "hybrid warfare" as "the use of military and non-military tools in an integrated campaign, designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative and gain psychological, as well as physical advantages utilizing diplomatic means; sophisticated and rapid information, electronic and cyber operations; covert and occasionally overt military and intelligence action; and economic pressure" (p. 5). A better synthesized hierarchy of specific action dimensions in "hybrid warfare" is highlighted by Mikael Weissmann (2021), who, in addition to the military dimension (kinetic actions), proposes six other dimensions: diplomatic, economic, cyber (technological), information and influence operations, the dimension of unconventional methods and the civilian (non-military) dimension (p. 65).

It is not an easy task to explain this concept while attempting to reduce its complexity. However, from the entirety of the presented approaches and those studied, the following specific characteristics of the "hybrid warfare" approach can be extracted.

First and foremost, there has to be a combination of various elements that give meaning to the concept of hybrid. These elements can be a part of the realm of conventional means of conducting military actions (kinetic actions) or from the sphere of irregular actions through which an armed conflict can be waged (non-kinetic actions). According to Bercaru (2023), the main differences between the conventional and irregular approaches are "the legal and political status of belligerents, as well as the means and methods of conducting armed combat" (p. 51).

Secondly, these elements have to be used in a coordinated and combined manner (Jasper, 2020). Hybrid actions involve a high degree of surprise, primarily triggered through used irregular and asymmetric means. If we redirect our attention to the definition provided by the Institute for International Strategic Studies mentioned earlier, as well as many other formulated definitions (e.g.: Libiseller, 2023), we will notice that the hybrid approach places significant emphasis on the unpredictable nature achieved through the combination of used means. Particularly, non-kinetic actions provide the element of surprise because there are no clear indicators signaling the use of certain means falling under the non-kinetic sphere (e.g.: cyber-attacks). However, considering the Russian Federation's attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, it has been demonstrated that surprise can also be triggered through kinetic means. Of course, in this context, such a status could not have been achieved without the utilization of certain non-kinetic tools (e.g.: information operations). It is important to note that the target of hybrid threats is not an army; it is the entire society of the adversary (Treverton, 2021). According to Weissmann (2021), "it is sometimes difficult to know for sure that warfare is ongoing, and in the same way, it is inherently difficult to identify if, and when, a perceived threat of future actions becomes a reality" (p. 69). A fundamental characteristic of the hybrid approach is this problem in differentiating between a state of peace and a state of war. This condition also favors the element of surprise because, despite some doubts, in the absence of clear factors, a state actor can easily assume its society is in a period of peace while a presumed rival is using specific non-kinetic instruments against it. Hence, the characteristic of ambiguity is inherent to hybrid warfare.

Thirdly, the desired effect sought through the use of the hybrid warfare approach has to encompass both physical and psychological advantages. While in conflicts conducted through traditional (kinetic) means, the balance of effects on the enemy may lean more towards physical gains (military losses), concerning actions specific to the realm of irregular (non-kinetic) warfare, the balance tilts more towards achieving effects at psychological level (exploiting the vulnerabilities of the enemy's society). Despite the fact that the effects at physical level are more visible, psychological effects can be much more destructive. The ultimate goal is to impose one's own will on the adversaries through any means that can destabilize their center of gravity. According to Monaghan (2015), "hybrid warfare seeks to deceive, undermine, subvert, influence, and destabilize societies, to coerce or replace sovereign governments, and to disrupt or alter an existing regional order" (p. 67).

Regarding the concept of "frozen conflicts", it appears to have not garnered as much interest among analysts as the concept of "hybrid warfare" has done, but nevertheless, it remains a topic of considerable debate. It is believed that the "Cold War" itself, with its avoidance of a direct confrontation between two superpowers, can be considered the first conflict that falls under this title (Milevschi & Secrieru, 2013). However, in the current vocabulary, the concept gained prominence at the end of the 20th century, immediately after the end of the bipolar era.

The definition of this term that will underpin our analysis is the one proposed by Michael Smetana and Jan Ludvík. According to these two researchers, frozen conflict can be defined as a protracted, post-war international conflict process, characterized by the absence of stable peace between the opposing sides and core unresolved issues (Smetana & Ludvík, 2018). We will not view this concept as a static phenomenon and will adhere to Fergoso and Živković's perspective (2012, p. 20), where the term "frozen" implies that the existing tension between parties does not simply disappear, but rather transforms as its violent phase, for a moment, has come to an end.

Since we aim to study this concept in the well-defined context of the post-Soviet space, we find it suitable to analyze "frozen conflicts" through an approach focused on the interstate level. This approach, compared to the individual, intrastate, and global ones, argues that the nature of relations between neighboring states and the characteristics of the macro-regional system are the main explanatory factors of the process of unfolding "frozen conflicts" (Milevschi & Secrieru, 2013). This perspective helps explain how the Russian Federation, due to the collapse resulting from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, tends to become a hegemonic power in its geographic proximity.

The Russian perspective on hybrid conflicts

From a terminological point of view, due to different historical and conceptual roots, there is no exact adaptation of the Western theory regarding "hybrid warfare" in the Russian military literature. Russian theorists use two options to refer to what the Western military thinking understands as the concept of "hybrid warfare". Either

the term "*gibridnaya voyna*" is used at the policy-making level, or the term "*New Generation Warfare*" is used at the war-making level. The distinction in the meaning of these two terms used is not clear because of "the pressure by the Russian military for greater funding" (Suchkov, 2021). However, whenever the meaning of "hybrid warfare" is used in the Russian military literature, it is meant to discuss the Western strategies of "non-linear war" (Friedman, 2017).

According to Friedman (2018), the Russian approach to the concept of "hybrid warfare" is particularly focused on ways that political actors can undermine their adversaries by eroding their national and international political legitimacy and stability (p. 95). A more in-depth Russian perspective on hybrid warfare aims to achieve both an informational and a political objective (Clark, 2020). The informational objective seeks to gain information superiority, while the political objective aims to manipulate the governance of the target state. In pursuing this direction, all the tools utilized, both kinetic and non-kinetic, are oriented towards achieving the final goal of reshaping the target state's strategic orientation and international policy. Two aspects have to be mentioned. Firstly, in the logic of this hybrid approach, the kinetic tool (armed conflict) is reserved for the final phase, when the desired objectives cannot be strictly achieved through non-kinetic means. Secondly, information operations are the main non-kinetic tool used within this hybrid approach (Bercaru, 2023). According to Lilly (2022), the information component represents "the agent of cohesion and the lifeblood" of modern conflicts (p. 18). On the other hand, gaining information superiority is a prerequisite for achieving political objectives.

Valery Gerasimov was one of the prominent figures who, through his writings, provided explanations that later could be used to understand Russia's behavior concerning the events in Ukraine in 2014. Due to the fact that his explanations could fit into what the Western conception considers "hybrid warfare", Snegovaya regarded him as one of the theorists representing the "face of the hybrid warfare approach" (Snegovaya, 2015). The main ideas of Gerasimov's theory, known as the "Gerasimov Doctrine", are as follows.

Firstly, it emphasizes that Russia feels threatened by the Western actions perceived as "imperialist" (e.g.: supporting Color Revolutions, exerting influence in international organizations). Consequently, the West is viewed as the source of the economic and political disruptions felt internally by Russia (Pynnöniemi & Jokela, 2020). These destructive effects on Russian society are brought about through the exercise of a combination of kinetic and non-kinetic instruments, with an emphasis on the use of the latter. Therefore, Russia believes that the Western states employ the specific tactics of hybrid warfare against it.

Secondly, Gerasimov, while considering the alleged modus operandi of the West and the difficulties in achieving planned objectives when maximizing the benefits of Russia derived from the kinetic tool (as seen in Georgia and Chechnya), argued that the "rules of war have changed" (Gerasimov, 2013) and therefore the Russian Armed Forces have to adapt to this new reality. This change is defined by the role that non-military instruments have to play in a conflict. Therefore, there has to be a

transition from simply using military force to employing political, diplomatic, economic, and other non-kinetic instruments, crucially, in a combination with military force. Through this approach, the aim is to destabilize the adversary's center of gravity (the adversary's will to fight and a country's ability to engage in a war) by using non-kinetic instruments in such a way that little or no military force is necessary. However, the importance of kinetic instrument should not be entirely excluded. This fact is demonstrated both by its use in the Syrian conflict and by the "special military operation" launched on February 24, 2022, against Ukraine. In addition to this aspect, with the Russo-Georgian War (2008), a revolution in military affairs focused on modernizing the armed forces and enhancing military capabilities to strengthen readiness levels was noticed. It is interesting that, just as an observer of the US military phenomenon noted, even though Russia and the United States have similar perceptions regarding the characteristics of the operating environment, their perspectives are different in the sense that "the US military is cutting back heavy conventional capabilities, while Russia is doubling down on hers" (Monaghan, 2015). This leads us to believe that, despite Russian focus on using non-kinetic instruments against the militarily stronger West, there is also a tendency to find solutions to balance this disadvantage from a military perspective.

Thirdly, the differentiation between a state of peace and a state of war becomes a consciously challenging effort that is increasingly difficult to achieve. According to Weissmann (2021), the Russian style of warfare can be understood as a conflict that combines the political, economic, social, and kinetic elements without recognizing clear boundaries between civilian and combatant, covert and overt, war and peace. It is a strategy where achieving victory permits and demands whatever means will be successful (pp. 61-62). This perspective is also reflected by Gerasimov, who emphasizes that "war in general is not declared, it simply begins with already developed military forces" (Gerasimov, 2013). As a result, the concept of the "grey zone" seems to be less applicable in this situation. The blurred lines between peace and war, civilian and combatant, overt and covert actions make it challenging to identify the exact starting point of a conflict. The Russian approach to warfare seems to blur these lines deliberately, allowing for actions that might not fit neatly into traditional definitions of war or peace. This ambiguity creates a strategic advantage by confusing and destabilizing the adversary, making it harder for them to respond effectively. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between peacetime activities and acts of aggression in the context of hybrid warfare.

Even though we agree with the view that not every action of the Russian Federation should be perceived as a form of "hybrid warfare" (Renz, 2016), we believe that frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, in their specific phase, can represent instruments of hybrid warfare. In order to justify this assertion, we have to clarify Russian position in these conflicts. The Russian Federation is the powerful third-party involved in the dynamics of these conflicts, presenting itself as an actor capable of solving the underlying causes through peaceful means, such as dialogue. However, this position can lead to what Smetana and Ludvík (2018) refer to as

"complex patron-client relations". When the interests of a state (the patron) clash with a timely resolution of the dispute that gives a conflict its "frozen" character, the conflict itself may be preserved in a latent state or even thawed to return to a violent phase. In any case, a return to stable peace is unlikely. Regarding the nature of interests held by the third-party state, King (2001) noted that the frozen conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia are the examples where "multiple domestic actors with parochial economic and political interests intervene to keep the conflict frozen". These conflicts are maintained or reignited through Russian influence, serve Russian strategic interests in the region, allowing it to exert control over the territories involved and maintain leverage over the neighboring states. By perpetuating the unresolved disputes, Russia can assert its influence and manipulate the situation to its advantage, using both kinetic and non-kinetic means.

Therefore, while not every action by Russia can be labeled as "hybrid warfare", the exploitation and manipulation of frozen conflicts to further its strategic objectives exemplify how Russia employs hybrid strategies to exert influence in the region. These frozen conflicts become a tool in the broader context of hybrid warfare, enabling Russia to pursue its geopolitical goals while avoiding a direct confrontation with the international community.

Firstly, we believe that the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space serve as a tool of hybrid warfare due to the privileged position that Russia holds within these conflicts. We view the Russian military presence (often under the guise of peacekeeping) in the disputed territories involved in frozen conflicts as a kinetic aspect of frozen conflicts. This perspective is supported by Gerasimov (2013), who includes peacekeeping operations as a part of the measures in the "New Generation Warfare". Additionally, when a frozen conflict escalates into violence, complex measures can be undertaken to reduce tensions between the disputing entities, which Gerasimov perceives as non-military actions. Hence, it can be noticed that depending on the state of relations between the entities involved in the frozen conflict and the way in which the Russian Federation relates to it, "frozen conflicts" can represent instruments of the hybrid approach that can be interpreted both as a part of the kinetic sphere and as a part of the non-kinetic sphere.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, manipulating the developments in the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space can be coordinated and combined with other kinetic or non-kinetic instruments, such as information operations, to achieve established strategic objectives. The effects of Russian position on the targeted areas can be felt both physically (through the military forces available in these territories in the event of a nearby intervention) and psychologically (towards the internationally recognized states to which these territories with secessionist tendencies belong).

Thirdly, having the ability to manipulate the manifestation of a frozen conflict offers an opportunity to influence it towards either a state of peace or a state of war. If influenced towards war, the effects can be felt at regional level. Conversely, keeping a conflict unresolved allows a state to maintain a sense of instability and insecurity in the region, which can create influence over other states and a fragile security environment.

In consequence, in a context of an indirect confrontation with the West and viewing this conflict in inter-civilizational terms, Russia manipulates the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space to protect its regional sphere of influence, retain control over the territories in that area, and preserve the vision of its former Soviet empire. Obtaining these advantages influences the strategic orientations and international policies of the Western states. Therefore, manipulating frozen conflicts contributes to achieving the political objectives of the Russian Federation promoted through this "New Generation Warfare" that is being conducted.

Thus, despite opinions similar to those of Kofman & Rojansky (2015) that "hybrid war becomes a catch-all phase...resulting in a misguided attempt to group everything Moscow does under one rubric" (p. 7), we support the viewpoint that the existing frozen conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia are an important instrument in Russian hybrid approach. To illustrate Russia's behavior as the third-party in each of these frozen conflicts, we will briefly examine the history of the conflicts and then we will select and discuss three characteristics (patterns) that the three conflicts have in common.

The emergence and evolution of the post-Soviet frozen conflicts

Under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union experienced dramatic changes at the end of the 1980s, which culminated in the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union two years later. Although this fate was certainly not desired or expected by Gorbachev, the policies of perestroika and glasnost initiated by the party's secretary-general not only failed to maintain the reformed Soviet Union, but also paved the way for centrifugal movements within the constitutive republics of the USSR. As public debates regarding history, ethnicity, culture, and identity were no longer taboo subjects according to the official policies, republics like Moldova and Georgia, though not the only ones, began to distance themselves from Moscow and followed a path to secession and independence, a move which alienated their national minorities in Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, respectively.

In Moldova, the new law adopted by the Supreme Soviet in 1989 declared Romanian (called Moldovan at that time) the sole state language in the republic, while Russian was granted the status of "the language of interethnic communication" (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 1989). This rather moderate linguistic legislation, although a significant departure from the previous situation, caused discontent among the Russophone minority (which comprised 35% of the total population), especially in Transnistria, a strip of land on the left bank of the river Dniester. Not only ethnic Russians and Ukrainians were in an absolute majority there, but the impact of the new law was more pronounced in this heavily urbanized and industrialized area as its Russian-speaking bureaucratic elite risked losing their status

and privileges. By accusing the central authorities in Chișinău of nationalism and violation of minority rights, the Russophone minority in Transnistria began the process of detachment from Moldova. Another factor that added to the mistrust of the Russophones and even Moldovans on the left bank was Moldova's strengthening relations with Romania and the fears of a union between the two countries. In these circumstances, Transnistria sought to remain in the Russian sphere of influence as only Moscow could guarantee their privileged position (Oprea, 2022b).

As Moldova proclaimed its sovereignty (23 June 1990) and independence (27 August 1991), the separatists established their parallel political and paramilitary structures and declared their independence. The conflict evolved into a brief war between March and July 1992 in which the separatist forces were backed decisively by the Russian 14th Army. On 21 July 1992, the ceasefire negotiated in Moscow between the President of Moldova Mircea Snegur and the President of Russia Boris Yeltsin, established the peacekeeping mission composed of Russian, Moldovan, and Transnistrian troops.

With the conflict being frozen, the negotiations for its resolution, held under the mediation of the OSCE, failed to produce any result. The two main issues that blocked a final settlement are the future status of Transnistria and the withdrawal of the former 14th Army (whose presence in Transnistria is not regulated by any international agreement nor accepted by Chișinău). Even if Russia had made the commitment at the 1999 Istanbul OSCE Summit to withdraw its troops, it has never fulfilled that promise until now, as Moscow argues that its forces have to be withdrawn only after a political settlement is reached. Officially, Russia does not recognize Transnistria and therefore views this territory as an integral part of Moldova. Nevertheless, the separatist regime in Tiraspol would not have survived for more than 30 years without the economic, military, and diplomatic support of Moscow.

Regarding the situation in Georgia, at the end of the 1980s, a new wave of nationalism led to the worsening of relations between the ethnic Georgian majority and the Ossetian and Abkhazian minorities. The authorities in the autonomous region of South Ossetia came into conflict with the central government in Tbilisi and unilaterally declared South Ossetia an autonomous republic separated from Georgia and demanded to be accepted as an entity of the Soviet Union (Coyle, 2018). Ethnic tensions rose further as the government in Tbilisi, led by the prominent nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia, abolished the autonomy of South Ossetia and declared a state of emergency in the country (Muradov, 2022). The war that followed (1991-1992) ended after Gamsakhurdia was replaced by the moderate Eduard Shevardnadze, who accepted the disadvantageous ceasefire elaborated by Russia that established the joint peacekeeping mission established by Russian, Georgian, and North Ossetian forces (Milevschi & Secrieru, 2013).

Simultaneously, Tbilisi had to deal with another conflict in Abkhazia. Despite the fact that ethnic Abkhazians represented only 18% of the population, their leaders declared their independence and requested to be accepted as a republic within the USSR (Muradov, 2022). Just like in South Ossetia, tensions between the separatist

and Georgian government led to the violent war in 1992. In 1994, the parties signed the ceasefire agreement in Moscow, mediated by Russia, under the supervision of the UN and OSCE. The document provided for the peacekeeping mission established exclusively by Russians, with their activity supervised by the UN monitoring mission (Milevschi & Secrieru, 2013).

The two frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia reignited in August 2008, when Russia launched a war against Georgia in response to Tbilisi's attempt to regain control in South Ossetia. After the war, Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and established military bases in the two breakaway regions, putting an end to the multilateral peacekeeping missions. These events effectively denied Georgia any real chance of bringing back the two territories under its control.

The patterns of Russian strategy related to frozen conflicts

The presence of Russian troops

The three frozen conflicts subject to our analysis followed similar sequences of events. Their military phases ended with three ceasefires, all mediated by Russia, which "froze" the conflicts and arranged for the deployment of joint peacekeeping forces, primarily consisting of Russian troops. In the case of Transnistria, along with the official peacekeeping forces regulated by the 1992 Snegur-Yeltsin Convention, Russia continued to maintain an undisclosed number of soldiers as a part of the OGRF (Operational Group of Russian Forces) formed in 1995 from remnants of the Russian 14th Army.

Despite the Russian government's attempts to portray these operations as successful, serious questions arise about whether Russian peacekeeping operations adhere to international standards. Firstly, the peacekeeping missions in all three cases lack an international mandate from the UN. Although the peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia received a mandate from the regional organization (CIS) (Coyle, 2018) and was monitored by UNOMIG (the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia) (Milevschi & Secrieru, 2013), and the one in South Ossetia was monitored by the OSCE Mission, peacekeeping missions are typically associated with the UN practice, which has overseen over 70 such operations, more than any other entity (Williams, 2022).

Hence, peacekeeping missions have to be evaluated based on the three principles established by the UN: the consent of the parties, impartiality, and the non-use of force except in self-defense and the defense of the mandate (UN, 2023). These three peacekeeping missions mostly fall short of these standards. Firstly, Russian troops sided with separatist authorities both during (in Transnistria) and after (in all three cases) the conflicts, acting as a guarantee of their survival. Secondly, given Russian failure to differentiate between peacekeeping troops regulated by the 1992 Convention and the OGRF, the Russian military presence contradicts the wishes of the Moldovan government, which has repeatedly requested the withdrawal of the OGRF in line with the conclusions of the 1999 OSCE Summit

and the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 72/282 ("Complete and unconditional withdrawal of foreign military forces from the territory of the Republic of Moldova") (UN, 2018). Moreover, Moldova deems the existing peacekeeping format outdated and calls for its transformation into a multilateral civil mission with an international mandate. In 2023, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly adopted the resolution inviting parties to initiate discussions in this regard (OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, 2023).

Concerning Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the presence of the Russian military forces as peacekeepers not only failed to facilitate the conflict resolution process, but also acted as a disruptive element in maintaining regional stability during the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia. Muradov points out that "Russian peacekeepers, along with separatist forces, could be viewed as irregular or even regular forces of Russia, capable of transitioning into regular forces against the Georgian Army" (Muradov, 2022). Following the August 2008 conflict, Russia dismantled the prior peacekeeping arrangement and established military bases in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia after evacuating its military bases in November 2007.

Considering all these factors, it becomes evident that Russia has managed to sustain its military presence after the Soviet Union's collapse under the guise of peacekeeping missions. This strategy resulted in diminishing the sovereignty of both Moldova and Georgia. Essentially, Russia maintained a state of undeclared conflict against both Chisinau and Tbilisi, and even after more than 30 years since the Soviet Union's dissolution, it continues to occupy significant portions of their territories without their consent. These observations lead us to conclude that the Russian military presence in Moldova and Georgia represents a kinetic (military) tactics within the context of hybrid warfare.

"Passportization"

The dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in various challenges, and one of them was the issue of citizenship. Each of the new 15 states adopted distinct legislative frameworks in this regard. A particularly intricate situation emerged for the residents of the unrecognized republics, as many of them declined to accept the citizenship of the state that they had seceded from. Given that passports from breakaway regions like Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia were not internationally recognized, acquiring the Russian passport became the sole means for these individuals to facilitate international traveling. The ease of this process was due to the 1992 Russian citizenship law, which allowed them to acquire Russian citizenship through a simple declaration. This approach originated from the belief that an open citizenship policy would serve the interests of the Russian Federation in safeguarding the rights of ethnic Russians and individuals who viewed Moscow as their protector against external actors, as it was the case with the three secessionist republics. However, during the 1990s, the Russian Government did not actively support or facilitate this process (Nagashima, 2009).

Significant changes occurred in 2002, when Russia initiated the passportization campaign in Abkhazia, followed by a similar effort in South Ossetia in 2004. This occurred against the backdrop of deteriorating relations between Russia and Georgia, marked by the deployment of the US troops in Georgia and the ascension of Mikheil Saakashvili to power. Saakashvili sought to restore Georgia's territorial integrity, which raised concerns in Moscow that Georgia might employ military force to regain control in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Empowered by substantial administrative support from Russia (Nagashima, 2009), the passport issuance process led to a substantial increase in the percentage of Russian passport holders in Abkhazia, rising from 20% in May 2002 to 80% by January 2003 (Kriveniuk, 2002; Glanin, 2002; Vignanski, 2003). Similarly, in South Ossetia, the percentage of Russian passport holders surged from 56% in May 2004 to 98% in September 2004 (Gordienko, 2004). In contrast, Transnistria experienced a steadier rate of passportization. While around 65,000 Transnistrian residents held Russian citizenship in 2001 out of the population of approximately 500,000 (Vinogradov, 2001), the current estimates by separatist authorities suggest that over half of the population now holds Russian citizenship (220,000 out of approximately 400,000) (Radio Europa Liberă Moldova, 2023).

Scholars debate whether the issuance of passports to residents of unrecognized republics reflects an aggressive Russian policy towards countries in the post-Soviet space, such as Georgia and Moldova. Nagashima argues that passportization in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was a reactive measure to deter Georgia from using force against the two unrecognized republics. Similarly, in Transnistria, the granting of Russian citizenship is viewed as a tool to influence the internal politics of the region rather than exert pressure on Moldova. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that passportization is a part of the Kremlin's strategy to employ citizenship for political purposes (Nagashima, 2019). This was particularly evident in 2008, when Russia invoked the need to protect Russian citizens as a justification for its invasion of Georgia, particularly in South Ossetia.

On the other hand, the passportization of these three separatist republics contradicts Russian official policy of non-recognition and respect for the territorial integrity of Georgia and Moldova that was considered (until 2008) in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as Transnistria. A sincere approach by Russia would have refrained from widely distributing passports in these uncontrolled territories. Of note, Russia established a consulate in Tiraspol to address the considerable demand for passports in the region, without seeking the consent of Chisinau (Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Moldova, 2022).

Taking all these factors into consideration, it can be argued that while this process might not have initially been aimed directly at Georgia and Moldova, Russia manipulated the presence of the majority of Russian citizens in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria as circumstances demanded, as evident in the events of the August 2008 war. This underscores the ambivalence of Russian commitment to the territorial integrity of these two countries. Coupled with the element of surprise, as seen in the rapid passportization in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it can be concluded that passportization constitutes a non-kinetic instrument within the Russian hybrid warfare strategy.

Manipulating the Kosovo precedent

In this section, we will discuss a specific element that is a part of the Russian strategy to manipulate frozen conflicts in a manner that serves its interests. Unlike the previous two tactics that were earlier discussed, which were aimed at undermining the sovereignty of Moldova and Georgia, the following tactics reveals that Russia employs frozen conflicts in its hybrid warfare not only against neighboring states, but also against the West more directly.

Since Vladimir Putin assumed power in 2000, the relations between Russia and the West have progressively deteriorated. A point of contention concerned the province of Kosovo, where Russia and the West held differing opinions. While the United States, in particular, favored granting independence to Kosovo, Russia opposed it, citing the principle of Serbian territorial integrity enshrined in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999). Russia emphasized comparable situations, especially the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet region. President Putin took actions to ensure the West comprehended his stance. In 2006, he cautioned that if Kosovo were granted independence, denying the same right to Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be untenable (Akçakoca, Vanhauwaert, Whitman, Wolff 2009, p. 26). While Transnistria was not mentioned at that moment, Putin later added it to the list by stating that "there is nothing to suggest that Kosovo is different from South Ossetia, Abkhazia, or Transnistria" (Fabry, 2012). As anticipated, Kosovo's imminent declaration of independence fuelled demands from separatist leaders for international recognition.

Despite these factors, Russia refrained from immediately recognizing the independence of any separatist republic in the post-Soviet region following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008. Instead, in April 2008, President Putin ordered the Russian Government to de facto establish relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia as though they were already the subjects of international law (Richter & Halbach, 2009). It seemed that Russia was awaiting the opportune moment to make its final move. That moment came four months later in August when, under the pretext of "aggression" and "genocide" committed by Georgian troops against civilians in South Ossetia—arguments previously used by NATO in 1999 to intervene militarily in Yugoslavia—Russia conducted the military intervention against Georgia. This move, coupled with the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries, marked a departure from Russian longstanding commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity (Fabry, 2012). This was not the last instance of Russia manipulating the Kosovo case to serve its interests. In 2014, Vladimir Putin justified the annexation of Crimea by invoking the Kosovo precedent.

Russian actions in August 2008 indicated that Moscow's opposition to Kosovo's independence was not rooted in a commitment to the international law, as it was asserted. Rather, it originated from the West's decision to grant Kosovo independence without consulting Russia - a reflection of Moscow's aspiration to be recognized as a major power in the multipolar world (Secrieru, 2019). Another apparent contradiction arises from Russian selective use of the Kosovo formula in the post-Soviet space. This

disparity can be explained by Moscow's differing approach to Georgia and Moldova. While Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence is justified by Tbilisi's (particularly during Saakashvili's presidency) aspiration to join NATO and the Alliance's consideration of Georgia's future membership, Russia continued to support Moldova's territorial integrity, which is related to Chisinau's policy of neutrality. Moreover, recognizing Transnistrian independence would diminish Russian influence in Moldova.

The rhetoric about the Kosovo precedent and its use to justify aggressive actions illustrate that Russia has developed a strategy to exploit the Western arguments for Kosovo's independence to its advantage. By asserting that Kosovo is not an exceptional case and that it sets the precedent for other frozen conflicts, Moscow possesses a coercive tool that can be employed at the appropriate juncture (as seen in the case of Georgia) against countries that act counter to its interests. This strategy encompasses the elements of surprise and uncertainty that characterize the non-military aspect of hybrid warfare. Furthermore, it targets the West by leveraging the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia based on the Kosovo precedent, coupled with the increased Russian military presence, to weaken the Western influence in Georgia. This shift has altered Tbilisi's foreign policy trajectory, leading it to become more ambiguous and inclined towards Russian interests, following the departure of pro-Western President Mikheil Saakashvili in 2012.

Conclusion

Through this study, we have aimed to demonstrate that frozen conflicts can represent, within a well-defined and favorable context, an instrument of hybrid warfare used by Russia to achieve its strategic objectives in its indirect confrontation with the West.

Beginning with a well-delineated conceptual framework, we have shown, first of all, that the concept of "hybrid warfare" in the Russian military literature is understood with certain nuances different from how it is analyzed in the West. This aspect may even be paradoxical, especially considering that the analysis of this concept in the West has been largely formed based on Russian actions in the 21st century. Therefore, the perspective and understanding of certain aspects may differ. For instance, in the Western literature, explaining and attempting to prioritize non-kinetic instruments have received more attention than the desire to detail and approach kinetic instruments from the same perspective. Moreover, in the Western literature, there is no unified perception that considers information operations as a part of the hybrid approach throughout the entire crisis, whether it escalates into an armed conflict or not. Additionally, there are contradictory opinions regarding the connection between hybrid approaches and the concept of the "grey zone".

However, regardless of the approach, it should not be the subject of extensive debate whether manipulating frozen conflicts can serve as an instrument of hybrid warfare. Both from a general perspective and contextualized in the post-Soviet space, manipulating frozen conflicts can be used by the third party (especially with a

high degree of international influence) to gain benefits that may not necessarily lead to the resolution of the underlying dispute fueling the frozen conflict.

Studying Russian involvement in the conflicts in Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia has confirmed our research hypothesis. Manipulating frozen conflicts is employed by Russia as a part of its hybrid approach against the West. Depending on how a frozen conflict is managed, it can be manipulated to serve as a kinetic or non-kinetic instrument of the hybrid approach. We have identified three ways through which Russia manipulated the three studied frozen conflicts: the presence of Russian troops in the conflict zone, the "passportization" and the manipulation of the Kosovo precedent. The effect was to influence the evolution of the frozen conflict either towards a new violent phase or to keep it in a latent, non-violent phase. Having means that influence the course of such conflicts in the post-Soviet space, a climate of destabilization has been maintained in Moldova and Georgia, thereby affecting the security environment in the Euro-Atlantic region due to the instabilities in its immediate neighborhood. In this context, manipulating frozen conflicts contributes to achieving the established political end-state, which is influencing the behavior of the target actors on the international stage – the Western states.

Given this, the Western states must not remain indifferent to Russian approach to its post-Soviet space. This region should be regarded as a point of interest in Russian foreign policy agenda and may serve as a case study for understanding Russian deployment and interpretation of "hybrid warfare". Russia is capable of using any means at its disposal to achieve its interests, especially in a conflict where the Russian actor does not have a favorable position in the existing disproportionality of resources among the involved parties.

We believe that our study can open new perspectives on the discussed subject. For example, it becomes very interesting to analyze whether, as a result of the "special military operation" initiated in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russia could consider freezing the conflict at its borders. Regardless of the answer, this scenario cannot be dismissed, and the potential manipulation of this frozen conflict remains a possibility.

Bibliography

1. Akçakoca, A. & Vanhauwaert, T. & Whitman, R. & Wolff, S. (2009). After Georgia: Conflict resolution in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, European Policy Center Issue Paper, No. 57.

2. Bercaru, R. (2023). Război sau „operație militară specială"? Impactul războiului informațional al Federației Ruse în Ucraina. Monitorul Strategic. No. 1-2. 49-58.

3. Clark, M. (2020), Russian Hybrid Warfare, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf, (7 August 2023).

4. Coyle, J. (2018). Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

5. Druey Shwab, C. (2016). Between Multilateralism and Unilateralism. Russian Foreign Policy Debateswith Regard to Georgia, (1991-2008). PPHD Thesis N. 1141. Geneva: The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

6. European Union External Action Service, https://eubam.org/who-we-are/, (26 July 2023).

7. Fabry, M. (2012). The contemporary practice of state recognition: Kosovo, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and their aftermath. Nationalities Papers, Vol. 40, No. 5, 661-676.

8. Fergoso, C. & Zivkovic, N. (2012). Western Sahara: a frozen conflict. Journal of Regional Security, Vol. 7, No. 2, 139-150.

9. Fridman, O. (2017). The Russian perspective on information warfare: conceptual roots and politicisation in Russian academic, political and public discourse. Defence Strategic Communications, Vol. 2, No. 1, 61-86.

10. Fridman, O. (2018). Russian hybrid warfare. Resurgence and politicization. Hurst and Company, London.

11. Gerasimov, V. (2016). The Value of Science Is in the Foresight. New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview_20160228_art008.pdf, (7 August 2023).

12. Glanin, I. (2002). Tak pokhozhe na Rossiiu … V Abkhazii pochti ne ostalos' gruzinskikh grazhdan. [It's Similar to Russia … In Abkhazia Virtually no Georgian Citizens Remain]. Vremia novostei, August 13, 1.

13. Gordienko, A. (2004). Iuzhnaia Osetiia—eto uzhe Rossiia'. Eduard Kokoity ne vidit smysla v prodolzhenii peregovorov s Tbilisi. ["South Ossetia—It's already Russia." Eduard Kokoity sees no point in continuing negotiations with Tbilisi]. Nezavisimaia gazeta, September 17, 1.

14. Hoffmann, F. (2007). Conflict in the 21st century: the rise of hybrid wars, https://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf, (7 August 2023).

15. International Institute for Strategic Studies, Military Balance 2015, https://kupdf.net/download/the-military-balance-2015_589ffda36454a7625eb1ebc9_pdf, (7 August 2023).

16. Jasper, S. (2020). Russian Cyber Operations. Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C.

17. King, C. (2001). The benefits of ethic war: understanding Eurasia's unrecognised states. World Politics, Vol. 53, No. 4, 524-552.

18. Kofman, M. & Rojansky, M. (2015). A Closer look at Russia's "Hybrid Warfare", https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/7-KENNAN%20CABLE-ROJANSKY%20KOFMAN.pdf, (7 August 2023).

19. Kriveniuk, A. (2002). "V Abkhazii za mesiats stalo 150 tysiach rossiiskikh grazhdan bol'she" [In Abkhazia 150,000 Russian Citizens Appeared in a Month]. Novoe vremia, August 31.

20. Libiseller, C. (2023). 'Hybrid warfare' as an academic fashion. Journal of Strategic Studies. Volume 46, Issue 4. 858-880.

21. Lilly, B. (2022). Russian Information Warfare. Naval Institute Press. Annapolis, Maryland.

22. Monaghan, A. (2015). The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'. The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters. Vol. 45, No. 4. 65-74.

23. Milevschi, O. & Secrieru S. (2013). „Conflicte înghețate" în spațiul postsovietic. Relațiile internaționale contemporane. Teme centrale în politica mondială. By Daniel Biró, Polirom, Iași, 161-184.

24. Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Moldova (2022), Precizări de presă [Press Release]. https://mfa.gov.md/ro/content/precizari-de-presa-4, (4 August 2023).

25. Muradov, I. (2022). The Russian hybrid warfare: the cases of Ukraine and Georgia and Georgia, Defence Studies, Vol. 22, No. 2, 168-191.

26. Nagashima, T. (2019). Russia's Passportization Policy toward Unrecognised Republics. Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria, Problems of Post-Communism, vol. 66, no. 3, 186-199.

27. Oprea, G. (2022a). Instrumentalizarea de către Rusia a precedentului Kosovo, componentă a politicii externe agresive a Kremlinului, Monitor Strategic, No 1-2/2022, 34-46.

28. Oprea, G. (2022b). Folosirea selectivă de către Rusia a precedentului Kosovo în conflicte înghețate din spațiul ex-sovietic (Cazul Transnistriei), Anuar. Studii de apărare și securitate, Editura Agenției pentru Știință și Memorie Militară, Chișinău, 51-60.

291. OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, AS (23) D E, Vancouver Declaration and Resolutions adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly, Vancouver, 30 June-4 July 2023, https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/annual-sessions/2023-vancouver/declaration-29/4744-vancouver-declaration-eng/file, (7 August 2023).

30. Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Lege nr. 3465 din 01.09.1989 cu privire la funcționarea limbilor vorbite pe teritoriul RSS Moldovenești [Law no. 3465 from 1 September 1989 regarding the use of language in the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic], https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=85723&lang=ro#, (19 July 2023).

31. Pynnöniemi, K. & Jokela, M. (2020). Perceptions of hybrid war in Russia: means, targets and objectives identified in the Russian debate. Cambridge Review of International Affairs. Vol. 33, No. 6. 828-845.

32. Radio Europa Liberă Moldova, "Moldovenii nu mai pot obține cetățenie rusă prin procedură simplificată și chiar o pot pierde" ["Moldovans can't obtain anymore Russian citizenship through a simplified procedure and can even lost it"], https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/moldovenii-nu-mai-pot-obtine-cetatenie-rusa-prin-procedura-simplificata-si-chiar-o-pot-pierde-/32372093.html, (1 August 2023).

33. Reisinger, H. & Golts, A. (2014). Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War Below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence. NATO Research Paper, No. 105, 1-12.

34. Renz, B. (2016). Russia and 'hybrid warfare'. Contemporary Politics. Vol. 22, No. 3, 283-300.

35. Richter, S. & Halbach U. (2009). A dangerous precedent? The political implications of Kosovo's independence on ethnic conflicts in South-eastern Europe and the CIS. Security and Human Rights. No.3, 223-237.

36. Rotaru, V. (2022). Change or Continuity in Russia's Strategy towards Secessionist Regions in the 'Near Abroad'?, The International Spectator, Vol. 57, No. 4, 86-103.

37. Secrieru, S. (2019). Russia in the western Balkans: Tactical wins, strategic setbacks, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), brief no. 8.

38. Smetana, M. & Ludvík, J. (2018). Between war and peace: a dynamic reconceptualization of "frozen conflicts". Asia Europe Journal. Springer, Vol. 17(1), 1-14.

39. Snegovaya, M. (2015). Putin's information warfare in Ukraine: Soviet origin of Russia's hybrid warfare, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%201%20Putin's%20Information%20Warfare%20in%20Ukraine-%20Soviet%20Origins%20of%20Russias%20Hybrid%20Warfare.pdf, (7 August 2023).

40. Suchkov, M. (2021). Whose hybrid warfare? How 'the hybrid warfare' concept shapes Russian discourse, military, and political practice. Small Wars & Insurgencies, Vol. 32, No. 3, 415-440.

41. Treverton, G. (2021). An American view: Hybrid threats and intelligence. Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations. By Mikael Weissmann, Niklas Nilsson, Björn Palmertz, Per Thunholm. I.B. Tauris, London.

42. United Nations General Assembly, A/RES/72/282, Complete and unconditional withdrawal of foreign military forces from the territory of the Republic of Moldova, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1632767, (7 August 2023).

43. United Nations Peacekeeping, https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/principles-of-peacekeeping, (7 August 2023).

44. Vignanskii, M. 2003. "Pasporta dlia "Nord-Osta". Gruziny nashli novyi sposob davleniia na Abkhaziiu" [Passports for "Nord-Ost." Georgians Find a New Means to Pressure Abkhazia]. Vremia novostei, January 13, 5.

45. Vinogradov, Mikhail. 2001. "Oboidemsia bez priznanii. Kishinev i Tiraspol' resheno vernut' za stol peregovorov" [We'll Make do Without Recognition. Kishinev and Tiraspol Have Decided to Return to the Negotiating Table]. Izvestiia, October 5, 4.

46. Weissmann, M. (2021). Conceptualizing and countering hybrid threats and hybrid warfare: The role of the military in the grey zone. Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations. By Mikael Weissmann, Niklas Nilsson, Björn Palmertz, Per Thunholm. I.B. Tauris, London, 61-82.

47. Williams, Paul D. (2022). Putin's "Peacekeepers", IPI Global Observatory, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2022/02/putins-peacekeepers/, (7 August 2023).

48. Wither, J. (2020). Defining Hybrid Warfare. per Concordiam. Journal of European Security and Defense Issues, Vol. 10, Issue 1. 7-9.