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Red Cell Analytics Lab

Current Events Team

## Russian Hybrid Warfare: An Analysis and Proposed Countermeasures

### Executive Statement:

Russia utilizes hybrid warfare, conventional and unconventional tactics, to achieve the Kremlin's agenda. These tactics infiltrate Russia's institutional and infrastructural spheres with measures such as information and cyber tools, proxy groups, direct conflict, economic and political influence, and clandestine measures, all unified into one strategy. Countermeasures vary widely by resources and locations but focus on international cooperation, truth, and retribution.

### Key Characteristics:

Russia's hybrid warfare strategies are cheap and easy to execute on a small scale versus conventional strategies. Russia cannot afford to support a large scale conflict like their adversaries, such as NATO. Instead, they need to use indirect and affordable measures; therefore, cost efficiency is one of the foremost goals in all campaigns.

Russian tactics can be uniquely identified by attack persistence. Russian campaigns to further Kremlin agendas are constantly underway worldwide. The only significant difference between all these campaigns is the intensity of actions over time. For example, Russian institutions have disseminated propaganda in preparation for operations that may not take place for decades more.

The overarching targets of Russian hybrid warfare are social constructs and institutions. Russia aims to swing the public consensus in certain states, often to sow dissent just as much as to support Russia's agenda. Russia uses the uncertainty and division of afflicted nations as the foundation for all operations. The Kremlin first divides or deceives the target before further pursuing its grand plan.

### Standard Objectives:

One of hybrid warfare's standard objectives is to capture territory without overt military action. For example, during the Russo-Georgian War, Russia backed separatist groups taking strategically valuable territory. Similarly in Ukraine, Russian forces invaded Ukraine under the guise of separatist rebels in order to seize land and exacerbate the conflict. Hybrid warfare is also used as a pretext for overt action. In Estonia, ethnic-Russians have been used as a pretense for Russian interest in the region, and in Crimea, elections were propagated by Russian militants that legitimized Russian state forces to take control. Hybrid warfare is designed to influence groups and their policies. This goal is the purpose of Russian activity using bots on social media to skew worldwide public perception of different items.

#### Typical Tools and Operations:

##### Information Tools:

Russian hybrid warfare uses information tactics to cause unrest in areas of interest. To push this program further, Russian-backed media outlets provide pro-Russian propaganda, in an effort to shape the political scene throughout the globe. RT and Sputnik are two leading Russian news outlets that dispense information with the Kremlin's spin. Though their bias is well known to some, many would take these propaganda-filled articles at face value. Public acceptance of Russia's narrative is key for supporting Kremlin goals domestically and abroad.

##### Cyber Tools:

Russia uses state-backed cyber entities to breach Western institutions, specifically infrastructure. Democracies in North America and Europe have been affected by Russian cyber efforts. Information leaks during the 2016 US election and the 2017 French election reportedly were acquired and disseminated by Russia. US electrical grids have been probed by Russian cyber entities for decades, and they are constantly pursuing larger targets, such as nuclear plants. On a larger scale, Russian cyberattacks on Estonia in 2007 completely froze the country. In 2017, Russia used Petya and later NotPetya ransomware against a variety of Ukrainian companies, including the Ukrainian central bank. Petya spread to other countries in Europe and

America, including UK hospitals, and became one of the most costly cyber incidents in human history.

#### Proxy Groups and Conflicts:

A key component of Russia's hybrid warfare is the ability for the Kremlin to deny responsibility for any incident or damage as a result of their military actions. To achieve this they employ several proxy groups, which range from criminal organizations such as the Night Wolves or official private military companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group. The Night Wolves are an ultranationalist biker gang that operate several chapters in Russia and have close ties to Vladimir Putin. Members of the Night Wolves have been fighting in Ukraine alongside separatist forces. The Wagner Group PMC has been involved in both Syria and Ukraine. They augment regular Russian military units already stationed there. Russia uses PMCs like Wagner especially for military action too unseemly for Russia's main army to engage in, while criminal groups such as the Night Wolves are typically used in political scenarios, such as opposition intimidation and supporting or undermining protests.

Russia has undergone several proxy conflicts in recent years. Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 through unmarked soldiers assisting in taking control of the Crimean government that issued the referendum. Russia appears to be sending soldiers to the Donbass region of Ukraine, as well. The PMCs in Syria are responsible for the attacks Russia would never publicly sponsor, such as an attack on US-backed groups. Americans were present at the base, so retaliation was swift. However, this is an example of how Russia circumvents standard political means to accomplish objective.

#### Economic Influence:

The Russian nation has a relatively weak economy compared to the US or EU, so Russian economic influence manifests mostly over natural resources. Russia controls vast oil and natural gas supplies, which they use frequently as a strong economic bargaining chip. In the winters of 2006 and 2009, Russia shut off gas supplies to Ukraine to control price negotiations. Additionally, Russian offers of investment in regional gas infrastructure allows the Kremlin to closely influence regional policies.

### Clandestine Measures:

Traditional espionage activities have been continued to be used to influence regions of interest and especially to gain knowledge on adversaries. The GRU and FSB have been very active intelligence services and have already earned a hefty list of past scandals. Russian intelligence forces have been powerful and capable since the Cold War, so their usage in hybrid warfare tactics is unsurprising; however, their actions have broadened to meet the needs of the new Kremlin. For example, GRU officials have insinuated that there are Russian nuclear weapons the size of briefcases throughout the United States. Additionally, in 2016 Russia condoned plans to assassinate the leader of Montenegro in an effort to overthrow the government. Still, most actions are standard information acquisition, but interests have focused more closely on technical capabilities.

### Political Influence:

Political influence is a key tool as Russia uses it to elect pro/neutral-Russia candidates into governments. For example, Russia knows that right-leaning politicians will be more likely to be less interested in retribution against Russia for their various actions. In the 2017 French election, Russian actions were consistently to support Marine Le Pen, as she had the softest stance towards Russia. In the US, propaganda on social media was directed against both candidates, indicating interest in sowing dissent in the American election and populace. Russia benefits from reduced American faith in their government and democratic process. US infighting gives Russia more freedom to act across the globe.

### Past and Present Targets

Russian Hybrid Warfare in the past has been predominantly focused on former Soviet States. States such as Georgia, Estonia, and Ukraine have been past targets and some are still ongoing present targets for the Russians. Other targets in the past have been certain western

democracies, with special attention to the election process in states such as the United Kingdom, France, and the United States.

### Future Targets

Future targets of Russian Hybrid Warfare vary due to multiple criteria. The most likely targets of this hybrid warfare is any place that has a large amount of Russian nationals and any state that was previously in the Soviet Union. Other likely targets of Russian hybrid warfare would be unstable regions lacking control and western democracies, mostly in political and cyber related incidents.

### Effective Countermeasures

Effective countermeasures fall under multiple categories depending on the type of countermeasure one is trying to employ. For the issues of Russia capturing territory without the use of overt military and using these actions as pretext for overt action; proper countermeasures would be an increase in basic military presence inside the possible target areas and to have a standard of readiness amongst disputed areas, such as eastern Europe. Furthermore, a counter narrative against Russian propaganda would also assist against these actions.

As for undermining Russia's ability with information tools, it is suggested that security agencies research and prosecute Russian-backed propaganda outlets. On top of this, counter propaganda is highly recommended in educating the public and bringing them proper news and information from a respected and trusted outlet. Another vital part of Russia's hybrid warfare is the cyber tools they utilize. In an effort to stop this a country or group must first increase basic cyber defense and reinforce all critical infrastructure from cyber attack. Information sharing between allies and inter-agency communication is also advantageous against these threats. If necessary retaliatory cyber attacks and strategies for these attacks are advised.

In an effort to hamper Russian backed proxy groups and their effectiveness, a primary countermeasure is publicizing that a group is state sponsored and that it is linked to Russia. Furthermore, funding counter groups and infiltrating select proxy groups is a suggested approach in dealing with Russian-backed proxy groups. Countermeasures against economic and political

influence would include international sanctions against the Russian state, running counter-influence campaigns, and publicizing Russian influence in the political sphere.