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HYBRID WAR(FARE): THE CHALLENGE OF CONTAGION

ABSTRACT

Whereas scholarly accounts have mushroomed, especially since 2014, on what a 'hybrid warfare' is and is not, the phenomenon has taken center stage in international politics, thus confidently entering the everyday political discourse and practices in a growing number of states and societies worldwide. Drawing on the recent evidence of spatial and temporal diffusion of hybrid warfare theatres, this article argues that hybrid wars are highly contagious, thus prone to substantially challenge the international order as well as its normative and structural foundations. It therefore aims to explore the trends in the ideational spread and political uses of both hybrid warfare methods as well as the proliferating instances of hybrid wars fought across the globe. Finally, drawing on the empirical evidence and scholarly achievements in related fields of study, the article offers explanatory account of the mechanisms, conditions and dimension of hybrid war(fare) contagion. Among other featured cases, Russian hybrid war(fare) campaigns in Ukraine, Europe and further afield are employed as illustrative paradigm cases.

Keywords: hybrid war; hybrid warfare; contagion; proliferation; Russia

1. INTRODUCTION

With great (power) wars past long ago and today's decline of inter-state conflicts worldwide, with Pax Americana and Pax Europaea largely enduring since the end of the WWII (thus, democratizing nations and relations among them)[1], a Fukuyama-styled decisive victory of a liberal democratic order willy-nilly crosses one's mind. And yet, the 1989-declared 'end of the history' has to be postponed – again:

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    [1]   For an empirical overview of confirming historical data on war and peace since 1400s, cf. Roser (2018).

'There is a feeling abroad today that Western civilization is on trial before history. One of the clearest signs of it is the increasing frequency with which we hear the word "challenge" in connection with the policies and progress of ~~Soviet~~ [Putin's] Russia and the ~~Communist~~ [illiberal] world at large' (Tucker 1959: 1) (edits to the original mine. – *AT*).

It sufficed two tiny edits (updates – if you wish) in the afore-quoted statement to render the strategic world-political assessment of the 1960s-peaking Cold War, made by a renowned American Sovietologist at Harvard and Princeton Universities, its full-sound quality and resonance in the realities of our-age and twenty-second century global politics.

Indeed, just a decade ago, as Russia's military campaign in Georgia was unfolding, the near and far neighbourhood's discourses were intensively echoing questions such as: 'Is Ukraine next?' Some half a decade ago, as Russia's less conventional military aggression and political subversion campaign in Ukraine erupted, questions did resonate in the region and far beyond: 'Are the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia next'?[2] Couple of years ago, as Russia's covert military and political overtures in Syria and Libya, US and the UK, Germany, France, Poland, the Netherlands and so forth unraveled, the answers to the question 'who's next?' seem to have been tacitly found – at least no more geographical directions are being pointed to. The paradox discovered here lies in the simplicity that was self-delusively denied being accepted in many European capitals: the genuine realist answer to the 'what/where/who next?' question has always been 'where necessary – to defend national interests' (however defined). Waging a hybrid war(fare) has become one of the proven ways to defend Russia's interests in near and far neighbourhoods. Rather disturbingly, it is incrementally becoming a preferred way to advance interests of *other* state and non-state actors. The *spread* of the *hybrid warfare methods* and the *culture of hybrid war* as such is a new reality to which the policymakers and scholarly communities alike need to wake up.

A number of analytical works written so far have been dedicated to disentangling the hybrid warfare's nature and manifestations, i.e. the art of war. It is of little use if it is not accompanied with the analysis of *'whose war?'* problem in the sense of seeking response to the fundamental questions who is waging the war (*aggressor*), to what end (*broad strategic and tactical aims*), against whom (*war targets* and *theatres*) and who will stand in defence (*national and/or collective defence and deterrence*)? The vast majority of these questions is left unanswered in much of the scholarly and policy writings. Ambiguity and deliberate straight-talk avoidance abound. Ambiguity is the best bedfellow of hybrid war(fare). Thus, as long as there is a lack/avoidance of clarity in scholarly and political answers to the aforementioned questions, the international constellations will remain thriving for a spatial and temporal contagion of hybrid war(fare).

This article seeks to problematize the contagion of hybrid war and hybrid warfare – both with the zoom on Russia and in a much wider world-political perspective: geographic, temporal and agential.

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[2]   One of the rare scholarly accounts that looked into the risks of (regular) war between Russia and its neighbours is, for instance, Maness and Valeriano's (2012) appliance of 'risk barometer for war', which – already in times preceding the surge of hybrid warfare phenomenon – concluded that Ukraine's chances for a conventional military standoff with Russia were only half as smaller as those for Georgia in 2008.

With no pretense to pathetic or inflated claims, this article casts a broad analytical perspective on the creeping hybridization of war and order and posits that the phenomenon is there to stay unless strategically contained and devaluated as a proliferating means of twenty-first century politics. Thereby, it invites thinking beyond 'the Ukraine crisis' and 'the Russia challenge' in (Eastern) Europe – i.e. a well-founded, though, admittedly, a way too narrow (both spatially and temporally, as well as in terms of agency and warfare modalities) hyper-focus in much of the political and academic debate today. The currently observed expansion of Russia's theatres of hybrid war(fare) from Ukraine to Middle East, Europe and the US, as well as the tactical variance and constant innovation of warfighting methods, as practiced and mutually observed/emulated by agents beyond Russia (such as Iran, China, or the ISIS), points to the pertinence of broader emerging trends that concern the foundations of international theory, strategic and military studies – rather than policy or area studies *alone*. The contagion effects of hybrid war(fare) discursive and political practices across the globe is what shapes the core analytical puzzle of the current article. Focusing on the ontologies of the hybrid war and warfare contagion, as evidenced in proliferating ideologies and politics of hybrid war(fare) as well as richly documented in policy analyses and scholarly literature, this article problematizes the agency (action-reaction) dilemmas for both states and societies directly targeted by such hostile campaigns as well as the international (liberal democratic) community at large.

2. ON WAR AND WARFARE – HYBRID, RUSSIAN, AND BEYOND

Since the early 2000s, the rise of the 'hybrid warfare' term can hardly go unnoticed. From a new term in U.S. military and operational code, introduced with the 2005 National Defence Strategy Review, to a consolidating phenomenon in strategic studies and a proliferating buzzword in public and political debates, especially in Europe, the notion of *'hybrid warfare'* seems to be living a life of its own. Coined by Hoffman (2009) as a way to describe modern fanatical fighting styles, supported by new technologies and deployed in the shadow of state agency (no full deployments of army, no uniforms – and no need to obey the laws of armed conflict), the 'hybrid warfare' term is now used and abused in many possible ways – including the cases in which it is misleadingly equated with the idea of 'hybrid war', understood as something less than war. The lack of clarity as to what is what is particularly disturbing as the term(s) virally spread in public and political debates as well as academia. Hardly any security journal or a strategic studies event save an effort in addressing the 'complexity' of the notion. Some find it fancy and meaningless, some – revolutionary but evasive in its conceptualization (cf. e.g. a critique of the literature by Johnson (2018)). The term seems to be broad and flexible enough to encompass many things at once – and different things in different contexts, wherefore it is often used as a catch-all term for all non-linear threats. And yet, the idea is rather simple: modern technology has enhanced the known modes of warfare as well as it enabled the discovery of new battlefields, methods and 'fighters' – beyond armed troops. NATO's 2014 Wales Summit declaration described 'hybrid warfare threats' as 'a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary and civilian measures [that] are employed in highly integrated design' (*NATO* 2014). As such, they 'blend the lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervor of irregular warfare' (Hoffman 2009: 37). The notion is therefore not constrained to a particular set of fighting methods or a particular agent of war – it can equally be deployed by any state and non-state actor and will hardly be deployed

in precisely the same manner twice – and, thus, can hardly be 'calculated'. Critiquing Fox and Rossow's (2017) attempt at 'making sense of Russian hybrid warfare' on their sixteen-page working paper published by the AUSA Institute of Land Warfare, Ricks (2017) laments that '[t]hey offer a series of unsatisfying summaries of other experts' unsatisfying claims, and come up with an unwieldy version of "hybrid war = information operations + unconventional + cyber + conventional, spread out along an axis of covert and overt operations"'. This can be said about much of the literature on the subject trying to find and 'patent' the universal formula of hybrid warfare applicable in any context and in any part of the world – which does not exist, of course: every instance of this evolving warfare campaign has its specific sources, strategic and operational goals, battlefield(s) and tactics – all within a particular hybrid war strategy.

What can be said with (a greater) certainty, is that this twenty-first century art of warfare is *multi-modal, multi-theatric* and *multi-agential.* Hybrid wars begin long before the first shots are fired, if at all. With the use of both overt and especially covert means such as external financial and organizational support of democratic tools (referenda, elections, other public participation and influence campaigns) or less 'visible' information or cyber operations in target countries, the challenge is to instantly and firmly attribute an action, or a result thereof, to a hostile foreign agency. Both public debates, policymaking processes, digital transactions or physical battlespace may become theatres of warfare in hybrid strategies. In hybrid warfare, conventional military operations are not excluded – they just form the latest operation level. Before that moment, the place of uniformed soldiers is taken by soldiers without insignia (special forces, private mercenaries), astroturfed irregulars, troll and bot 'armies', cyber hackers, criminal racketeers, captured or corrupt elites, propagandists, psychologists and by manipulated media. In their 2012 book, Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor define hybrid warfare as a 'conflict involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars (guerrillas, insurgents, and terrorists), which could include both state and nonstate actors, aimed at achieving a common political purpose' (Mansoor 2012: 2). Thereby, '[i]rregular forces need not be centrally directed, although in many cases they form part of a coherent strategy used to oppose an invader or occupation force' (Mansoor 2012: 3). The range of 'hybrid actors' is, too, context-dependent and may include any combination from the variety of interpenetrated state and non-state agents – from insurgent or terrorist networks, organized crime groups, social groups (such as clans, tribes or ethnic groups), and ideologically or religiously motivated organizations, all of which may be backed covertly, or overtly, by states and/or legitimate businesses (Schroefl and Kaufman 2014: 867).

Notably, 'hybrid warfare' is only one of the many known names under which this twenty-first century warfare manifests itself. The relative terms include 'non-linear', 'unconventional', 'insurgency', 'asymmetric' or 'new generation' warfare, among many others. Similar patterns are observed in the development of the *'hybrid war'* idea, which, too, has become a buzzword in many capitals of the world – but is, to a larger extent, equated with the discussion of hybrid warfare modes or used as a façade talk to 'soften' the discourse of war being waged and, respectively, faced. As astutely put by Snyder (2018: 193), '[t]he problem with phrasings in which the noun "war" is qualified by an adjective such as "hybrid" is that they sound like "war minus" when what they really mean is "war plus"'. Whether in Ukraine or in the larger Euro-Atlantic context, Russian hybrid war is a war that deploys hybrid warfare methods – and not a 'hybrid something', a conflict of an unclear nature that only distantly resembles something like war.

In this very context, it has become sensationalist, if not (ill-)fashionable, as well to speak of 'a new Cold War', thus falsely constraining the possibilities of gaining *knowledge* about new-age technological, tactical, and operational features of hybrid war, warfare and (world) order to the *knowability* of the past (and still lasting?) Cold War script. In other words: references to the 'Cold War' unsuitably put the postmodern – hybrid – war(fare) in the uncomfortable and inapplicable confines of modernity. An accompanying sensationalist and pseudo-heuristic language, too, essentially detracts from broader issues and questions at stake.

Not only are the analogies with the 'cold' war false: unlike in those times of bipolar confrontation in the world, today's multimodal standoff has less than clear ideological and agential poles as well as far from a clear understanding among all parties involved that there is a war. Thus, this type of conflict and warfare is *trans-ideological, faceless and (ethically and perceptively) asymmetric.* The Cold War analogies are also misleading for they point to the 'passivity' of a conflictuality in question, with deterrence taking the center stage of rivalling parties' efforts. And quite to the contrary, the currently observable spectrum of overt and covert, military and non-military activities undertaken under the broad slogan of political warfare are both *discursively offensive* and *materially conflictual, multi-theatrical,* and (way too) far-reaching in unilateral malevolent exploitation of permeating interdependence and connectivity, which renders the conflict yet another distinguishing feature of being *(strategically and tactically) asymmetric*. It is, therefore, a kind of a *warm war*: not a large-scale, all-armed, openly declared and totalized hot war; but not a cold war-style shadowboxing alone either.

Thus, the interchangeable use of 'hybrid warfare' and 'hybrid war' terms, as well as the misinterpretation of the qualifier 'hybrid' of the latter notion, create real challenges for policy analysts and policymakers alike: whereas the focus of attention is laid upon the discovery of the variety of methods used to fight by an actor, the idea of being actually at war with that actor goes somehow unnoticed. For instance, Galeotti (2018) points to a widespread misunderstanding of Russia's – two – 'hybrid wars':

> 'A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of 'hybrid war'. Whether we call it that or one of the other terms sometimes used, from 'non-linear war', simply to 'a new Cold War', there can be little doubt that at present Russia and the West are locked into a political and normative struggle being fought in familiar and unfamiliar battlefields, from the virtual realms of cyberspace to the minds of people, whether in Topeka, Tallinn, or Tomsk.

> […]

> In the West, this is generally described as 'hybrid war', a style of warfare that combines the political, economic, social and kinetic in a kind of conflict that recognizes no boundaries between civilian and combatant, covert and overt, war and peace. Rather, achieving victory – however that may be defined – permits and demands whatever means will be successful: the ethics of total war applied even to the smallest skirmish' (Galeotti 2018).
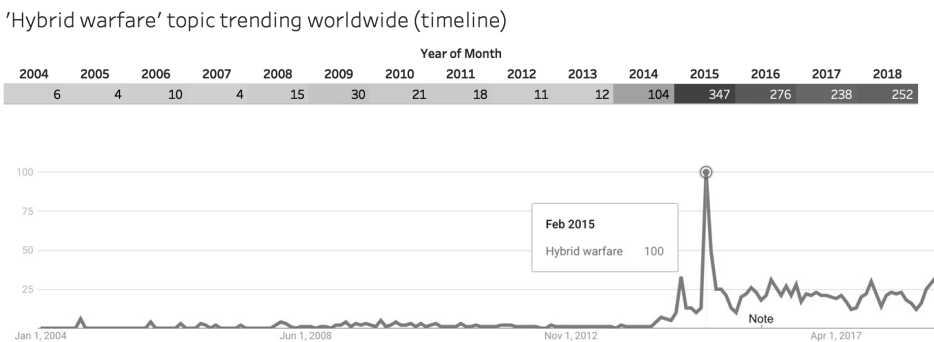
That is to say, a war is no less a war in situations in which the methods of warfare deployed do not include large troops of regular army. It is just a different type of war. Thus, a clear distinguishing line needs to be drawn between the notions of 'hybrid war' (a type of a modern post-classical war) and 'hybrid warfare' (the art of fighting modern wars). Both of them are unhelpfully (and, rather, confusingly) intertwined in the trumpeting public and

political debate. Both of them need to be differentiated in the context of national or allied security, deterrence and defence policy planning in the context of rising hybrid threats of sorts (from disinformation to astroturfing, military and paramilitary operations or criminal asset exploitation) and the proliferation of hybrid war (as a form of modern *geo*political and *geo*economic struggle) and its antagonists.

Not least because of such an instrumental and teleological 'flexibility' of 'hybrid warfare', this type of war and warfare poses an immense challenge for strategizing any response as it can be hardly predicted, or anticipated, 'what comes next?' broadly speaking, i.e. what next tactical goals will be advanced, what next theatres of operation will be charted as well as what next ruptures will be exploited and exaggerated and, last but not least, who will be the 'local' agents in every next step taken? That very unpredictability of hybrid war(fare) echoes well with centuries-old maxims on the art of war formulated by Sun Tzu, who gave the following advice to future military strategists: 'if [your adversaries] are united, cause them to be separated [;] attack where they are unprepared [;] go forth where they will not expect it' – and keep deceiving adversaries about your plans as they 'cannot be spoken of in advance' (Tzu 2003: 16). After all, all '[w]arfare is the Tao [i.e. way] of deception' (Tzu 2003: 14).

All terminological ambiguities aside, the factuality of the term's rise is quite eloquent: with the recent outbreak of conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, where state and non-state actors such as Russia or the ISIS have deployed hybrid warfare tactics of sorts (from guerilla and insurgency warfare to information and cyber warfare, from political subversion and blackmail to organized criminal racketeering and military overtures by mercenaries from private military companies, PMC), the 'hybrid war(fare)' term has solidly gained traction in public and political discourses around the world (cf. *Figure 1*).

Figure 1. 'Hybrid Warfare' topic trending in *GoogleTrends*³, 2004–present

'Hybrid warfare' topic trending worldwide (timeline)

Year of Month														
2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
6	4	10	4	15	30	21	18	11	12	104	347	276	238	252

Feb 2015
Hybrid warfare   100

Source: Author's own data retrieval from *GoogleTrends* (https://trends.google.com)

Certainly, an unnecessary reverberation (if not simply a hype) of the term bears nasty consequences for policy response as the first question being naturally advanced is whether the hybrid warfare talk is 'much ado about nothing' or a serious concern about the emerging

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³   *GoogleTrends* worldwide web search returns numbers from 0 to 100, which represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given time. A value of 100 signifies the peak of popularity.

security gap? In a way, the entire *problematique* gets ridiculed to the somewhat simplified and overgeneralized dilemmatic question to be resolved: is it prudent or paranoid to talk about proliferating hybrid threats and hybrid world order? Rich empirical evidence, which is only selectively presented in the next section, suggests a positive answer to the afore-stated question.

3. EXPLORING HYBRID WAR(FARE) CONTAGION: TRENDS AND GEOGRAPHIES

Evidence from much of the public, political and academic debate convincingly demonstrates: the proliferation of hybrid war and warfare are more than a 'buzzword' matter – legible concerns about it incrementally grow across the nations, regions and even entire continents, with some being more and some less affected by hybrid war(fare) contagion. Both public, political and academic issue salience point to such a conclusion.

For instance, the hybrid war(fare) topic trending in public discourse exhibits quite a revealing picture of issue salience since at least 2004, with the European terrain being the epicenter of public attention to the issue in question (cf. *Figure 2*). The geographical spread of hybrid war(fare) – or a threat thereof, as perceived in public discourses, is most concentrated around the top topic-trending countries, with Ukraine – rather expectedly – enjoying the place of the most important locus of attention, followed by Poland, Estonia, Bulgaria and Georgia, Croatia, Czechia, Latvia, Belarus, and Finland on the top-10 list.

Figure 2. Geo-mapping 'Hybrid Warfare' topic trending worldwide, 2004–2018

GeoMapping 'Hybrid Warfare' Topic Trending Worldwide, 2004-2018

Source: Author's own *Google Trends* data visualization with *Tableau* (https://www.tableau.com)

In policy debate, the hybrid war(fare) topic salience can be observed in a number of world's regions – from the topic-trending Russia and the former Soviet Union space to integrated EUrope and North America, but also Middle East, Asia and Africa (cf. *Table 1*).

Table 1. Regional and country references to 'hybrid war' in *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy* articles corpora

(Greater) region/country		Foreign Affairs	Foreign Policy	Cumulative score
greater region	region/country	(1922–2018)	(2009–2018)	(FA + FP)
Russia & FSU		31	36	**67**
	Russia	24	20	**44**
	Ukraine	18	12	**30**
	Belarus	n/a	1	**1**
	Baltic states	n/a	2	**2**
Americas		28	12	**40**
	North America	22	n/a	**22**
	United States	17	11	**28**
EUrope		28	8	**36**
	Western Europe	9	n/a	**9**
	Central & Eastern Europe	n/a	3	**3**
Middle East		19	7	**26**
	Syria	n/a	4	**4**
	Iran	n/a	1	**1**
Asia		20	n/a	**20**
Africa		12	n/a	**12**

Note: The data in the table represents the article search and analysis results from online corpora with query engines of the two internationally renowned foreign policy magazines – *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*. The numbers featured represent the number of articles retrieved in each case. Articles may contain key term references to more than one region/country. Raw data used – region-wise generalization attempted. Only applicable time periods indicated (i.e. where the key term search returned positive results).

Source: Author's own data retrieval and analysis based on keyword search in *Foreign Affairs* (http://www.foreignaffairs.com) and *Foreign Policy* (https://foreignpolicy.com) articles corpora

As seen from the table, hybrid warfare clearly presents a salient policy issue for Russia's neighbours – first and foremost, Ukraine, Belarus, CEECs such as Poland or Czechia as well as the Baltic states. Within the so-called Commonwealth of Independent states (CIS) alone, the situation is quite telling as '[e]ach of Russia's reform-minded neighbours is plagued by "separatism"[4] [– and] it's no coincidence' (Orttung and Walker 2015). Of course, the scope

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[4] Quotation marks added to the part of the original quote, as the current author holds that references to 'separatism' in the context of Russia's neighbourhood (in particular, as regards Transnistria, Crimea, Donbas/Eastern Ukraine, Abkhazia and South Ossetia) require indication that it is unfounded to talk about homegrown, grassroot and genuinely 'local' (authentic) separatism on those territories, as much of what they resemble is part of external effort in 'astroturfing' and political subversion (be it called insurgency warfare, hybrid warfare or otherwise). The idea of '***astroturfing***' describes a political technique, an inauthentic (external) politically subversive effort in deceivingly supplanting (faking) the local phenomena and developments with externally-imposed or directed dynamics (*disingenuous*

and extent of hybrid threats is bigger than that: in addition to the weaponization of self-determination (so-called astroturfed 'separatism'), both information and culture, economics and democratic openness, etc., are seen being weaponized within respective hybrid warfare stratagems.

Finally, the evidence of hybrid war(fare) topic salience can also be found in the academic debate, as the herewith undertaken bibliometric analysis shows. Whereas the current article's effort is concentrated on pinpointing the academic salience of the topic as covered in major *Web of Science* indexed journals (cf. *Figure 3*), it should be acknowledged that the topic is covered much broadly in non-*WoS* indexed peer-reviewed journals. Still, the academic production corpus of *WoS* indexed journals reveals the topical salience of hybrid war(fare) in scholarly enquiries on security and defence affairs in Ukraine, the US, Romania, UK, Poland, Russia, Czechia, Germany, Austria and Italy. A clear gap in topic coverage by academic literature, as revealed by the *WoS* corpus analysis, is rather surprising compared to other indexed outlets as well as public and political debates – much broader in their geographic and issue-matter foci, with a centre of analytical gravity that massively revolves around Russia's agency in that very context (at the expense of a wider perspective?).

Figure 3. Country-specific topical salience of 'hybrid war' in *Web of Science* academic production corpus, 2011–2018
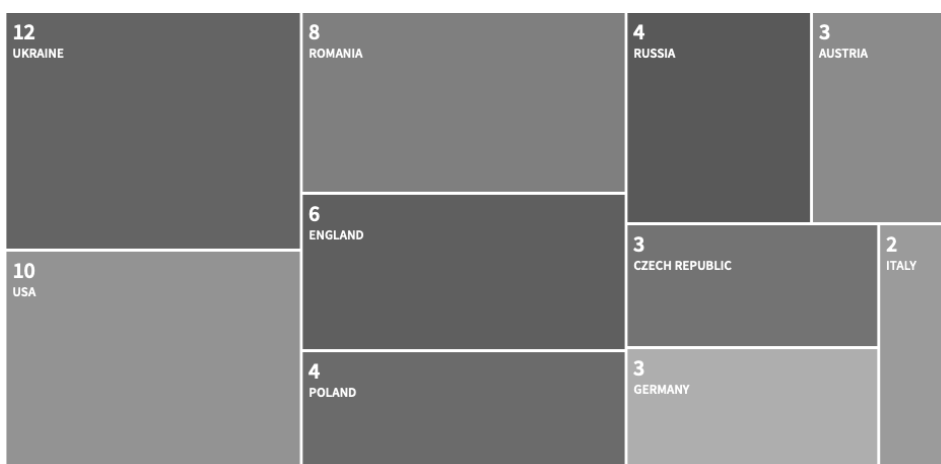
Source: Author's own data retrieval and analysis based on topic search in the *Web of Science* (http://webofknowledge.com) scholarly articles corpus.

Thence, with a varying intensity and focus laid on state and non-state agency as well as geographic theatres of hybrid warfare operation, the topic is clearly salient in both public,

campaigns), or in deliberately creating misperceptions of in/authenticity through deceptive political discourse (*inauthentic communication*), i.a. through dis-/mis-information, hidden propaganda, fake news, social media and cyber hacking, narrative offensive (*deception*). In political communication, '*astroturfing*' is 'the attempt to create an impression of widespread grassroots support for a policy, individual, or product, where little such support exists' (Bienkov, 2012). A case for an astroturfing campaign during the Brexit referendum in the UK is presented in Broomfield (2018).

political and academic debates, and this salience is very much predicted to expand further – together with the proliferation of the hybrid war culture and hybrid warfare methods among countries and regions worldwide.

An exponential rise of the 'hybrid warfare' phenomenon owes its dynamics particularly to the number of military and politically subversive operations Russia has undertaken since early 2014 in Ukraine's Crimea and eastern regions of Donbas. The phenomenon is much broader both in terms of geographical and agential spread worldwide, with some parts of Eurasia, Middle East and Asia Pacific looming large as the hotbeds of this proliferating type of warfare below (classical understanding of) war.

Internet search retrievals abound in references to academic and policy writings as well as journalist investigations on the matter.

Official communications delivered by government officials and high-ranking international fonctionnaires worldwide, too, contain increasing references to the proliferation of 'hybrid threats' and the necessity of developing a suitable policy response – both in national and intergovernmental contexts.

All that points to a rather new development where the prerogatively military term and the related vocabulary of 'hybrid warfare' lose their exclusivity as concepts applied by, and relevant for 'military strategists only', thus entering the everyday political and diplomatic vocabulary as well as public discourses.

Whether in Estonia, Czechia or Poland (Schultz 2017), Germany, France or the Netherlands, Russia's hybrid warfare operational theatre steadily expands to new sovereign terrains of the Western liberal democracies.

Following Russia's resonant and highly plausible meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections, in 2017, then-presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron successfully dodged similar hack-and-leak cyber-attacks and fake news reports widely attributable to the Kremlin. In late 2018, the French authorities faced a renewed challenge of Kremlin's digital offensive – now from among 600 Twitter pro-Kremlin accounts that, under the top hashtag #gilets-jaunes, i.e. 'yellow vests', intensively fuel outrage of street protesters. Possible involvement of the Kremlin in amplifying the 'yellow vests' protests in France (cf. e.g.: Blakely 2018; Matlack 2018) is now being investigated by the French authorities in spite of Russia's 'traditional' implausible denials.

In response to the Skripal poisoning earlier in 2018, yet another widely attributed to the Kremlin undercover operation in Europe and the UK in particular, British PM Theresa May bluntly put it that '[t]he Russian threat does not respect borders, and as such we are all at risk' (quoted after: McTague, 2018). The threat looms even more so large if one considers the strategic rationale of Russia's hybrid gambit – in fact, an undeclared war against the Western-dominated world order and the hegemony of the liberal democracy as such.

In this war, Ukraine is only one of the many targets and theatres, which expand in both the scope and depth of engagement – as far as the strategic and operational goals will require.

The case of Russia's *'hybression',* i.e. hybrid aggression, in *Ukraine* is quite illustrative when it comes to the contagion effects of (strategic) hybrid warfare proliferation.

First, the *Blitzanschluss* of Crimea (the so-called 'self-determination' staged by the Russian special operation forces), then the (failed) attempts to extend hybrid incursion to Ukraine's wider South-East (the so-called 'Novorossia' offensive), successful detachment of Ukraine's eastern areas (the so-called 'separatism' in Donbas region), and, more recently, renewed

attempts to twist the 'Novorossia' offensive, now undertaken as a naval offensive in the Kerch Strait of the Sea of Azov. Not only did the geography of Russia's operational theatre expand in Ukraine – every next struggle, however narrow (MacFarquhar 2018), risks wider war.

Fifth year on, the contagion of Russia's hybrid warfare can now however be traced far beyond Ukraine's borders. Already back in 2015, Zbigniew Brzeziński, a senior political scientist and former adviser to the US-American President Jimmy Carter, was not sparkling with optimism as the Russian war in Ukraine was concerned. In the wake of his March 2015 visit to Poland, he put his advice for the compatriots in a very succinct and unequivocal passage: 'Ukraine is not the endpoint. We have to be ready to defend ourselves' (Brzeziński 2015).

Time and again, *Polish* intelligence agency ABW and investigative journalists uncover Russia-linked subversive groups who – via disinformation campaigns or political subversion (astroturfing, false flag outrage) – seek to exacerbate tensions both within the Polish society and with Ukraine – to sow discord between Poland and Ukraine, thus directly or indirectly promoting the Kremlin's interests (*DW,* 2018). The tension in Polish-Ukrainian relations may resonate well beyond the confines of this bilateralism, not least in the context of Poland's role as a key supporter of pro-Western policy attitudes in Ukraine and pro-Ukrainian policy attitudes in the European Union, both of which run contra Kremlin's illiberal script for the post-Soviet space.

Up north in the *Baltics*, the spread of Russian hybrid warfare became a serious political concern the very moment Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in early 2014. Whether the Baltic states were (to be) next, has been since then one of the permeating questions in security debate both within the small region and Europe-wide (Radin 2017).

A *number of other European countries and Western democracies* have been affected by the spread of Russia's hybrid war from Crimea to Salisbury, for the past five years now. Whereas tracing (and predicting) the contagion effects of hybrid warfare in toto is quite a daunting task – not least because of the problematic means identification and agency attribution, its main components, such as information weaponization (fake news spread, public and media propaganda campaigns) or 'weaponized self-determination' (external orchestration, partisan sponsoring or otherwise supporting of 'self-determination' processes regionwide), can be feasibly analyzed. For instance, Cunningham and Sawyer's (2017: 598) spatial analysis of the spread of self-determination claims – statistically – confirms that that self-determination is contagious, for the onset of self-determination claims in a country is strongly predicted by the onset of self-determination claims in the neighbourhood. The observations of the micro-regional dynamics in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus well-illustrate such a contagion – from Nagorno Karabakh to Transnistria, form Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Crimea and (partially) Donbas, and to a smaller extent, Gaugauzia. Rather unsurprisingly, Russia's orchestrating or other-how instrumental efforts behind these processes have been disentangled and moderately well documented. With Putin's *Blitzanschluss* of Crimea in 2014, the debate about the challenges of a weaponized 'self-determination in the age of Putin' (Simpson 2014) loom large – and not only in the context of lasting fears in the Baltics about the externally-strategized secession of Latvian Latgale or Estonian Narva provinces; the concerns grow in 'old Europe', too, especially after Russia's considerable politically subversive effort was identified behind the 2017 Catalan referendum in Spain (Palmer 2017; Emmott 2017; Alandete 2017b; *EFE* 2018) and the 'Brexit' campaign in the UK, which, in a way, too, can be seen as a case for (a different but still a kind of) 'self-determination' – i.e. British determination

to 'depart' away from Brussels and the EU's institutional embrace. Importantly, one should, to a lesser extent, perceive such a subversion driven by the Kremlin as a hostile act strictly against respective nation-states, or at least nation-states *alone* (Cohen and Radin 2019) – such a weaponization of 'self-determination' processes in Europe targets the European Union and its transatlantic links, which stand in the epicentre of Russia's fight against the liberal democratic hegemony of the Euro-Atlantic order. Bonet (2017) put it quite eloquently when referring to the Russian influence campaigns in Spanish Catalonia: 'Russia's official media speak about Catalonia, but they are really shooting at Brussels, using the referendum as ammunition'.

The Russian uses of referenda as part of political warfare campaigns abroad are not limited to the cases of self-determination. Its uses span across a variety of deliberative democratic policymaking processes – from policy-consultative referenda, such as the 2016 Dutch referendum on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement or the 'Brexit' referendum (Ostanin and Rose 2016), to electoral campaigns, such as the 2016 US presidential elections, German 2017 parliamentary elections (Applebaum et al. 2017), French 2017 presidential elections (Dearden 2017), etc. The evidence abounds that the 'weaponization of referenda' has meanwhile successfully broadened in its use as part of the hybrid warfare toolkit. NATO Parliamentary Assembly STC's most recent report on Russian meddling in elections and referenda in the Alliance (cf. Davis 2018) draws on the collected evidence of the Kremlin's past elections and referenda influence campaigns in the US, UK, France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands, and argues that such interference operations pose a serious threat to the Alliance and its members, especially when seen against the broader efforts of Russia to divide, destabilise and otherwise undermine Alliance members.

Russia's hybrid warfare proliferates, however, well beyond the weaponization of 'self-determination' and 'referenda' campaigns. It includes a range of activities in stirring up dissent abroad – from influencing campaigns to financial military and political support of local radical groups or insurgent forces. In this context, *Afghanistan* is yet another largely overlooked grey zone of Russia's proliferating hybrid war against the West sought to undermine the latter's global hegemony and resources in sustaining it, inter alia by provoking – mainly the US – to fight on several fronts (cf. e.g: Sazonov 2017). Casting a look at Afghanistan (again!) and actively courting the Taliban through arms supply and diplomatic conciliation amidst still designating it a terrorist group and domestically outlawing as such (cf. e.g.: Ramani 2019) has little good reason and military-strategic promise – if not considered against the Kremlin's prima facie irrational (but no lesser deployed for that very reason!) strategy of inducing a 'manageable chaos'[5], i.e. an operation in shaping a strategic environment conducive to Russia's broader political warfare against the West. In the Kremlin's forceful drive against the international liberal order and the 'power of rules', the strategic value of a spread of ambiguity, uncertainty, chaos and hesitation (be it via proliferation of grey-zone conflicts and hybression of sorts, weaponization of migration, populism or the rise of the so-called illiberal democracies, etc.) can hardly be overestimated (cf. e.g.: Tyushka 2018).

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[5] Oftentimes attributed to the Russian military thinkers, the origins of ***'manageable chaos'*** strategy can be traced back to Sun Tzu's postulates on the art of war: 'Create disorder in [adversary's] forces and take them' (Tzu, 2003, p.15). On Vladimir Putin's contemporary reading of chaos as a strategy, whose main objective is to achieve an environment of distrust, confusion, disagreement up to permanent unrest and conflict within the targeted state(s), cf. Jensen and Doran (2018).

Reviving dormant ethnic-political tensions, sowing distrust, exaggerating tensions up to staging coups (such as the attended coup in Montenegro, cf.: Higgins 2016) is yet another modality of political warfare the Kremlin wages in the *Western Balkans*, in addition to the heating-up of separatist and revisionist movements (Bechev 2018).

Ironically enough, hybrid warfare campaigns can, too, spread to include deceptively 'integrative' agendas. As the pressure of Western sanctions and tensions between Russia and *Belarus* grow, the discussions on Russia's possible hybrid invasion of Belarus have started to unfold among regional security scholars, especially after their joint 2017 'Zapad' ('West') military drills (Wilson 2017) and more recent Kremlin's calls for a closer integration between Russia and Belarus (Applebaum 2019).

Even though the prominence of Russia's hybrid warfare in the region abounds in its scope and intensity, it would be wrongful to attribute all the endeavor and 'brilliance' in contemporary practices of hybrid warfare to Russia alone: a number of other state and non-state actors worldwide, unilaterally or collectively, resort to hybrid tactics in support of their diverse strategic goals – from *China*, *India*, *Pakistan*, *Qatar* or *Iran* to the *US* (cf. *Figures* 2 and 3, and *Table 1* above). In the Middle East, Iran and Qatar come to the fore of attention. Dalton (2017: 312) posits that, for as long as the past three decades, *Iran* 'has grown proficient at using hybrid-war capabilities and tactics to achieve its regional objectives', typically operating below the threshold of conventional warfare, thus 'using a blend of military and paramilitary tools, including proxy forces, missiles, cyber tools, maritime forces, and information operations to share and coerce regional actors to its advantage'. Supporting non-state actors, like Hezbollah and other proxy groups from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan, forms part of the Iran's regional leverage toolkit. In Asia and its regional security architecture, proliferation of hybrid warfare may, too, be fraught with systemic consequences. Niruthan (2016) contends that, already now, '[m]any of the conditions that breed hybrid threats are ripe for harvest in the Asian continent, with its ethnic conflicts, a vibrant tech industry, territorial disputes, and inconsistent rule of law'. Whereas the topic reappears more frequently in the discussions of China's 'legal alchemy' and political subversion around the South China Sea dispute, potential cradles of hybrid warfare in Asia may also become Burma (Myanmar), Thailand or *Pakistan*, with the latter one becoming incrementally framed in the regional political discourses as both a target (Khan 2018) and a wager of hybrid warfare in its rivalry with *India* (*AFP Kargil,* 2014; Kumar 2017).

Evidently, the geography and uses of hybrid war(fare) manifest contagion effects, which remain underexplored in the subject-matter literature.

4. EXPLAINING HYBRID WAR(FARE) CONTAGION: MECHANISMS AND DIMENSIONS

The vast body of the mushrooming hybrid war(fare) literature focuses nearly exclusively on Russia, which – even though being perhaps well-justified – inevitably creates misperceptions about the 'local' character of this type of warfare, thus diminishing the adequate assessment of the rising challenges combined with the spread of the tactic. As Ricks (2017) accurately ponders on the problem with involuntary discursive 'localizing' and 'privatizing' the temporal scope and geographical theatre of hybrid warfare:

'A theory of war isn't specific to a nation – that's a theory of nationalism or national identity. *Blitzkrieg* isn't "Germany's *Blitzkrieg*," it's a series of tactical and administrative or institutional innovations that anyone can replicate given sufficient resources (and many have)' (Ricks 2017).

In the same vein, what Russia discovered as tactical innovations in its gambit for influence within the post-Soviet space (starting with Transnistria and Georgia and ending with Ukraine and Belarus) or further afield (from European public sphere to Syrian and Libyan battlegrounds), can certainly be – and is – 'replicated' by other state and non-state actors around the world, and vice versa. The process of mutual observation, learning, and innovation is particularly conducive to this end.

Therefore, one may posit that the *geographical, agential and functional proliferation* of hybrid war(fare) occurs in at least two observable ways: *passive contagion*, or the 'contagion virus', which can be regarded as a set of varying mechanisms of mutual learning, observation, emulation and mimicry that are employed by state and non-state actors who are new to the game at the time when hybrid warfare becomes 'the only game in town'; and *active contagion,* or 'contagion strategy', which is best seen as part of geopolitically-driven contagion of new intra- and international terrains as part of respective military-political and other offensives.

4.1. MECHANISMS OF CONTAGION

4.1.1. PASSIVE CONTAGION: HYBRID WAR(FARE) VIRUS

Contagion of hybrid war(fare) should not be understood as a result of its antagonists' extended 'invitations' to others to join the gamble – the proven successes of hybrid warfare methods may per se be an unsolicited 'invite' to embrace hybrid war in national or collective strategies of geopolitical, geo-economic or geo-cultural struggles.

Contagion sets in as the idea and tactical 'templates' of 'small victorious wars' diffuse within and beyond geopolitically interconnected contexts, thus finding appeal and reception among state and non-state actors to affect the country at large, other countries within a given region as well as and other regions of the world as part of the very same or a memetic geopolitical struggle.

One may draw an analogy with the contagion effects of European Union's normative power, which may equally result from active entrepreneurship and promotion as well as from just 'being there' and having a record of success in their application (cf. the original idea coined by Manners 2002). In Manners' (2013: 315) own words, EU's normative power diffusion by contagion takes place through the diffusion of ideas between the EU and other actors, such as e.g. ideas and means of regional integration: 'ideas such as the creation of a 'common high authority', 'four freedoms' and even 'single currency' are seen in other regions of the world as being *worthy of imitation*' – and thus become both imitated, emulated, mimicked or adopted/adapted in other ways around the globe. Ideas travel. So do viruses, too.

Herein, the insights from biology and politics – biopolitics – might help better understand the viral logic and dynamics of hybrid warfare contagion as a process of 'cross-pollination' (cf. e.g.: Bell 2012: 232). In an effort to develop a generalized model of social and biological contagion, Dodds and Watts (2005: 587) define the notion as follows:

'Contagion, in its most general sense, is the spreading of an entity or influence between individuals in a population, via direct or indirect contact. Contagion processes therefore arise broadly in the social and biological sciences, manifested as, for example the spread of infectious diseases […] and computer viruses, the diffusion of innovations […], political upheavals […], and the dissemination of religious doctrine' (Dodds and Watts 2005: 587).

Other state and non-state actors may get incentivized, or forced, to resort to hybrid war(fare) methods should these prove promising to achieve their strategic goals or indeed unavoidable – if initially targeted by hybrid warfare entities themselves deploy similar tactics in their defensive moves. Thus, being viral in nature, passive contagion of hybrid war(fare) may occur with or without recipient side's effort or will.

4.1.2. ACTIVE CONTAGION: HYBRID WAR(FARE) STRATEGY

Unlike the study of biological disease contagion, mainly occurring through 'cross-pollination', the research into the causalities and patterns of conflict contagion poses a much more serious social scientific challenge. The study of *hybrid* conflict contagion, in turn, raises the level of difficulty even further. As Metternich et al. (2017: 1152) point out in their research on civil conflict contagion, '[u]nlike diseases, civil conflicts involve strategic actors that operate in a social environment' – and as such, 'conflict contagion is a truly social phenomenon that involves actors making strategic decisions on whether contagion takes place or not'. If one was looking for analogies with the biopolitical world, the idea of 'controlled infection' would be reasonably accurate to reflect the *strategic* nature of hybrid war(fare) contagion – as the strategic intent plays herein even greater role than it is said to do in civil conflicts.

Understandably, elements of hybrid warfare (seen simplistically as the deployment of conventional and unconventional means of struggle) have been ever-present in foreign political strategies. It is however their employment within hybrid war strategies that renders them a novel sounding – and serious concern: in the coming age of political war, hybrid warfare methods are highly contagious due to the boundless, borderless and reckless character of a war that is fought in peacetime – and thus does not respect any limits; be those normative, conventional or ethical. Even though the policy lines are quite blurred and the analytical approaches – quite perplexed, it appears crucial to try to disentangle conditions and dimensions of possible spatial and agential contagion of hybrid war(fare).

4.2. CONDITIONS AND DIMENSIONS OF CONTAGION

As the research on hybrid war(fare) phenomenon is only burgeoning, there is expectedly insufficient empirically and data-driven analyses that discuss the patterns, trends as well as cause-effect relationships beyond singular case studies. In such a circumstance, making claims about the causes, predictors and patterns of hybrid war(fare) contagion would equal walking on thin ice. Unless, of course, one draws on scholarly achievements from other research programmes, such as the studies on social diffusion, the spread of civil conflicts, etc., which provide answers for issues and processes equally relevant in the context of hybrid war(fare) practices.

4.2.1. THE ART OF FIGHTING HYBRID WAR: CONDITIONS OF 'CONFLICT TEMPLATE' CONTAGION

One of the recent analyses on conflict contagion, undertaken by a Harvard University scholar, introduces an original dataset of cases and non-cases of substate conflict contagion between 1946 and 2007 and finds out, in his logistic regression analysis, that the spread, diffusion, spillover, or contagion of violent civil conflict (including insurgencies, coups, or other internal armed conflict) is likely to occur in the circumstances of *high polarization, ethnic kin,* and *low economic welfare* (Black 2013: esp. p.757). Earlier works, that have specified and tested conditions under which conflict contagion might be expected to occur, also point to the relevance of *ethnic variables* and *protest potential*, including the record of previous protests (Hill and Rothchild 1986; Metternich et al. 2017), but also *territorial proximity* and *sharedness of borders* (Starr and Most 1985), and – last but not least important – the role of *media* (Hill and Rothchild 1986).

But, more importantly – and oftentimes rather neglected, Black's (2013: 759) findings, for instance, suggest that 'state governments play a critical and potentially underappreciated role in the most catastrophic contagion cases'. Braithwaite (2010), too, posits that *state capacity* conditions conflict contagion as states with weak(ened) governance are more prone to conflict spillover from a neighbourding country, whereas states with strong state capacity can modify the likelihood of being infected by a conflict spillover, thus having greater resistance to contagion[6].

In view of the nature of hybrid warfare as 'warfare on governance', with its tactical emphasis on creating, exploiting and exaggerating existing social, economic or political discontents (inequalities of sorts, institutional legitimacy crises, populist movements, polarization, new security challenges, unrests, etc.) within target states, this finding may be particularly relevant in assessing the risks of hybrid war(fare) contagion. Strikingly, Russia's growingly evidential meddling in electoral and referenda processes across a number of European and Atlantic democracies since at least 2016 shows that even consolidated democracies, with their strong institutions and institutional-societal bonds (aka 'deep state'), are not sufficiently resistant to the proliferation of hybrid threats. Their – to a varying extent successful – responses demonstrate, however, that the possibilities to micro-contain hybrid threats (i.e. reduce the chance of *success* of the hybrid warfare waged) are bigger where the 'whole of government' approaches can be deployed. These do not solve, however, a bigger problem at stake – i.e. containment of international proliferation of the hybrid war culture and the hybrid warfare modalities, which has all the chances to intensify and extensify in our growingly connected and digitalized, 'fake news'- and populism-polluted as well as (soon to be!) AI-driven world. The risks of hybrid war(fare) contagion in the age of AI-driven post-truth geopolitics loom really large. At least, the recent evidence of what the weaponizing of social media as a 'firepower' in Russia's hybrid warfare in Ukraine, Europe and across the Ocean, is fraught with, has clearly shown the imagined and unimaginable depth of destructive effect. One of the recent studies on the social contagion effects in new – social – media shows that *connectedness* (friend-list, community

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[6]   In a different context, Way (2009) comes to conclusion, in his study on the framework conditions of the 'third wave' of democratization (and resistance to it), that fully closed autocratic systems with strong state capacities are more likely to resist the contagion of democratic processes than hybrid or competitive authoritarian regimes.

of 'likers' and networks of sorts – as well as the very technical characteristic of being digitally connected) presents a crucial vulnerability for 'farcing attacks' (Vishwanath 2015). Russia's recent digital subversion operation, seeking to deepen 2017 Catalan crisis richly illustrates the case in point: Alandete's (2017a) big-data analysis of the case vividly shows how the Kremlin massively used both *RT* and *Sputnik* outlet networks as well as – Chavist – Venezuelan accounts to stir up the social unrest and the political spat between the Catalan authorities and the Spanish central government. Broader aspects of social media weaponization are well-presented in Singer and Brooking's (2018) introduction to the so-called 'LikeWar'.

Both, the promises of such a warfare modality (comparatively low costs, little to no own society's 'mobilization for war' and other benefits of 'peaceful war')[7] and, broadly seen, the very nature of 'cultural contagion of conflict' (Gelfand et al. 2012), may be contributing to the spread of the hybrid war(fare) template.

Combined with the growing cases of proven effectiveness and success as a 'template' for contemporary conflict, hybrid war(fare) may be expected to be strategically deployed in loci of both good and bad governance (to a varying extent and effect, of course) provided that the minimum conditions of spotting local or countrywide discontent or other tensions and challenges can be identified as 'enablers'. This is to say: everywhere where the democratic deliberation and openness are installed as governance models. This is also to say that political systems with less feasible deliberative and democratically participative practices, including totally autocratic regimes, are less prone to some forms of hybrid warfare (as war on governance) but equally exposed to other forms of struggle (cyber, electronic, or information warfare).

This should not be surprising given the very rationale and scope of this twenty-first century type of warfare: hybrid warfare targets military and non-military agents of governance, including various social-political and economic institutions as well as societies as such. In many regards, hybrid warfare can be fought on the totality of available (and made such!) battlefields along the analogous-digital-AI continuum. From insurgency warfare on the ground to astroturfing and political subversion, new media and classical influence operations, economic and legal warfare, algorithms and '*robo*trolling', etc. – hybrid warfare has the advantage of high battlefield adaptability as it allows to stealthily circumvent the regulated matters of international (armed) conflict and irresponsibly exploit the under- or non-regulated domains of international interactions. Thus, potential devastating consequences of this conflict template proliferation loom large in both the micro-context of specific international or internationalized armed conflicts as well as the macro-context of broader international systemic disturbances and instability, where 'hybrid peace', i.e. a continued state of 'peaceful war' (Tyushka 2016), might well define the form of our-age international relations globally as well as in bilateral interactions.

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7   Even though much of the (early) realist literature would feature theoretical accounts on preventive and other motivations for war, there is – rather unsurprisingly – virtually no existing data-led analyses on the 'incentives' or 'preconditions' of war(fare) methods adoption. It is a conventional wisdom in military and strategic analyses, however, that the successfully tested warfare modalities are likely to diffuse. In grappling the causes and mechanisms of hybrid war(fare) template proliferation in light of its promises, one may incorporate insights from related disciplines and researches that tackle 'similar' phenomena and processes at stake. For instance, the marketing study on the determinants of social contagion during new product adoption could be a useful source, cf. Langley et al 2012.

4.2.2. THE SPATIALITY DIMENSION: KNOWN AND UNKNOWN BATTLEFIELDS

In light of the discussion above, the issue of spatial contagion of hybrid warfare sites is also hardly a predictable matter. The said unpredictability extends even further once we consider a flexible, adaptable and evolving nature of hybrid warfare modalities that can be waged in already known battlefield and so far uncharted, or ungiven, terrains of postmodern warfare.

But the preciousness (and the challenge of analyzing) of the spatial spread of hybrid war(fare) lies in its amorphous character wherein the social and political characteristics do not play a direct, i.e. genuinely causal, role in conflict diffusion as they do in 'regular' conflicts. Usually a salient factor in conventional conflicts, territorial spatiality, with the focus on shared borders and interactions, is not an essential property in hybrid conflicts per se. For instance, Russia's expeditionary operations in Syria or Libya are inasmuch part and parcel of its revisionist hybrid war(fare) strategy as its (un)conventional military and political operations in Georgia, Moldova or Ukraine. Therefore, the hybrid war(fare) contagion carries a different dynamic than the contagion of regular inter-state or substate conflicts. As a specific process of 'social learning' broadly speaking, the contagion of hybrid war(fare) can be assumed to be borderless and boundless, thus spatially proliferating in both territorial and extraterritorial dimensions.

Hybrid war(fare) contagion is also unavoidably multi-dimensional: it can be observed in the geographical spread within the targeted country or countries, as well as within and beyond the region concerned; however, it can equally spillover from one battlefield to another – within the country or regional theatres charted. In Ukraine, for instance, Russia's post-2010s hybressive campaign evolved from territorial seizure (Crimea, 2014) to identity-weaponized 'insurgency' struggle (Donbas, 2015) or subversive military operations (Sea of Azov, 2018) and religious wars (countrywide, in 'zero phase' now). Thus, in addition to the so-far three salient theatres of Russian war in Ukraine (Rettman 2018), the fourth front-opening is not to be excluded in view of the importance of religion, or better to say (Russian) Orthodox Church, in Russia's foreign political gambit across the post-Soviet space.

Along with the manifested armed violence in places like Syria or Ukraine, Libya or DRC, no lesser permeating instances of hybrid warfare can be detected in the political, media and information, cyber, legal and social-economic battlefields; be that in Europe, Middle East or the Americas. Russia's playbook for social media disinformation campaigns, part of its hybrid warfare strategy and a posterchild of its post-truth geopolitics, has already gone global (Frenkel et al. 2019); its proxy warfare methods, including the tacit recourse to private military companies and mercenaries of sorts, has been consolidating over the past years in Ukraine, Syria, and the broader MENA region (Kardopoltsev 2019) – and is now set to proliferate to Latin America as well, where the recent domestic turbulence in Venezuela presents an 'inviting' opportunity for Russia's hybrid engagement (Sukhankin 2019).

There is hardly any gradation of importance among the battlefields, as it really depends on the specific context in which one battlefield is more suitable that the other to project power and undermine the adversary's standing or goals. Importantly, twisting minds is no less perilous than twisting arms – hence, hybrid war(fare) contagion in a social or politico-democratic domain is fraught with hardly any less serious consequences that the conflict contagion in land, airspace, maritime, or cyber battlefields. The democratic foundations and virtue values need to be as robustly defended as borders against the proliferating hybrid threats.

4.2.3. THE AGENCY DIMENSION: FROM SPECIAL OPERATION FORCES TO ASTROTURFS AND 'MIGRANT WARRIORS' (MERCENARIES)... AND OTHER 'HYBRID ACTORS'

An already accomplished contagion of hybrid warfare military paradigm and methods is observed in the context of agency: whereas primarily used by weak actors (such as guerilla and terrorist groups) in their asymmetric warfare strategies against (stronger) states, nowadays a rising number of countries resort to the use of hybrid warfare in their asymmetric warfare strategies – targeting democratic institutions and their societies in manifold unconventional operations, rather than confronting governments and the armies directly. Hence, the asymmetric hybrid warfare no longer remains the weapon of the weak against the strong(er) ones. Elaborating on Hizbollah's 'last war, next war', Saad-Ghorayeb (2009) contends that 'asymmetric warfare can no longer be identified exclusively with political actors who adopt "non-traditional" methods "that differ significantly from the opponent's usual mode of operations"' – not least in view of 'a "hybrid warfare" contagion among both non-state and state actors opposed to the US, for whom the Hizbollah resistance template will function as a means of balancing out power asymmetries'. New technologies give meanwhile rise to new categories of hybrid actors, such as cyber hackers, 'robotrolls', or 'political bots', that broaden the range of agential spread, usually associated with state military or special operation forces, insurgency forces or organized groups, such as terrorist networks, criminal groupings or private mercenaries.

As the burgeoning policy analyses and the findings from related research fields show, the hybrid war(fare) will further contagion as both technological and socio-political environments are conducive to this end – and the currently proliferating culture of political war will only enhance the trend. Clear patterns and certainty-proof predictors of contagion effects cannot, however, be identified – unlike the agential centres of gravity that are driving specific war(fare) campaigns. Whereas such campaigns can unfold in virtually any sovereign domain (be it a democratic or autocratic political regime), certain countries are more vulnerable to this type of warfare. Countries in a direct proximity to the hybrid war-wager (such as Russia) and ties forged to it in multiple areas of interaction are more exposed to the threat of this kind – especially if their domestic environments feature contested politics, high levels of corruption, weak governance and state institutions as well as the overall lack of awareness about hybrid threats.

5. CONCLUSIONS: IN SEARCH FOR A HYBRID CONTAINMENT?

With every new facet of Russia's hybrid war(fare) spotted across Europe or the Atlantic Ocean – from Crimea to Salisbury and beyond, a massive narrative of a 'wake-up call' reemerges with a great ire and intensity which lose their resonance soon thereafter and remain dormant until yet another 'active measure' of the Kremlin charts the already known or so-far unfamiliar terrains. Ironically, Lithuania's foreign minister asks how many of such 'wake-up calls' are needed for someone to finally wake up? (Linkevičius 2018). Indeed, such an ambivalence and moodiness in reactions to Russia's political, economic, narrational and informational subversions regionwide illustrates the very endemic problem of countering something that has been ill-defined: with security and defence-enhancing efforts noted in many European capitals that seek to strengthen their societal compacts (be those efforts revolving around

resilience or other kind of measures) in view of proliferating hybrid warfare, little strategic effort has been so far noted in countering hybrid war and its antagonists (be that pursued through reassurance, deterrence or other threat-containing measures). A policy disbalance of this kind (i.e. overprioritizing the measures of countering hybrid warfare at the expense of hybrid war-containing efforts) is little helpful in the face of the double threat of proliferating hybrid wars and warfare methods. As astutely put by Galeotti (2018), 'the whole debate about hybrid war is really two debates intertwined: about the strategic challenge from an embittered and embattled Russia, and the changing nature of war in the modern age'. These are two distinct challenges, with distinct models of contagion.

First: when, following Russia's not-so-hybrid (more conventional than unconventional) intervention in Georgia in August 2008, French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner voiced his serious concerns about Russia's next targets (*LeParisien* 2008), Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov (in his traditionally yielding and toxic non-diplomatic style) accused the French colleague of being 'confused' and having a 'sick imagination' (*Reuters* 2008).

Seen from the today's perspective, with i.a. Ukraine's Crimea and Donbas in the loop, it appears reasonable to state that imagining the unimaginable is not only a 'healthy' dare, i.e. the highest use of imagination, – it is an imperative that needs to be incorporated in strategizing responses to the ongoing instances of hybrid war(fare) and designing policies of containing its contagion. Imagined means prepared – and prepared means armed, in strategic terms. Realizing the potential of new technologies in the contagion of hybrid warfare is, too, essential. Embracing the AI, i.e. artificial intelligence, as a new theatre of war immensely widens the spectrum and geography of digitalized warfare and thus unarguably presents a facet of a 'war that threatens us all', as bluntly pondered by Thompson and Bremmer (2018).

Second: a rather axiomatic assumption can be made that the lack of political clarity, or deliberate avoidance thereof as to what kind of challenge is (to be) faced, is conducive to the spread of hybrid war as a contemporary political practice and hybrid warfare as the art of fighting/winning such wars. Hybrid war is relatively cheap and largely effective 'conflict template', a way of advancing contesting interests, yet social, economic, political, religious and other tensions/cleavages can effortlessly be detected in virtually any society – from nations in transition to consolidated democracies, and high connectivity and interdependence can be exploited in both democratic and autocratic systems.

Thus, the problem with hybrid warfare predictors is that there might be no good ways to test-and-prove them (in terms of statistical accuracy, too!) as the conflict template proliferation can hardly be contained, not least because of the case-by-case specificity and varying 'mix' of toolkits, the already familiar ones and those under invention. What can be predicted and contained, however, is the spread of hybrid war culture in actors' strategic thinking and modus operandi that rely on the use of both subversive political, military and paramilitary means, which circumvent contemporary laws and conventions, thus undermining the foundations of the current international liberal order.

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