Russia’s annexation of Crimea and proxy war in Donbas are often seen as the classic or at least the first case of ‘hybrid’ warfare, the trendy term today to denote what is a mix of conventional military operations with non-military methods of corrosion of an opponent, such as economic pressure, fomenting political and social conflicts, subversive activities and massive propaganda campaigns. Since many believe that ‘hybridity’ will be a predominant trait of armed conflicts in the twenty-first century, analysing Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine could be helpful for comprehension of the future security environment as well as for assessing strategy and methods of Russia’s power projection in nearby regions. With this in view, the chapter exposes the Russian concept of a hybrid warfare, describes Moscow’s strategic goals towards Ukraine, outlines evolution of its war plans from ‘traditional’ to hybrid operations and analyses tactics and efficiency of Russian interventionism in that country.

Ukraine in Russia’s ‘grand strategy’

Conventional wisdom often deems that Russia’s aggression against Ukraine was caused by a mix of transient factors, such as the views of a few people at the very top, President Vladimir Putin above all, suffering from a wounded amour-propre, post-Imperial syndrome and a parochial mentality. These drivers of Russia’s international behaviour are valid, indeed. However, Moscow’s hybrid war on Ukraine results also from some fundamentals of Russian political thinking typical both of the elites and the majority of society. It combines historical myths with a few elements of the Kremlin’s ‘grand strategy’.

Russians often, yet falsely, perceive Ukraine not as a separate country, but as a part of a single Russian political and cultural entity united by common values based on Orthodoxy and by common descent from Kievan Rus. Albeit this concept contradicts historical facts since late eighteenth century, it became one of the cornerstones of Russia’s imperial policy and philosophy. Within this intellectual and psychological framework, Ukrainian national self-identification and desire for national independence was – as it is now – seen as a nonsense, something unnatural and perverted, which has no right to exist. In addition, by the annexation of Crimea and fuelling the separatist mutiny in Donbas, Moscow wanted to meet a number of geopolitical ends, above all, to stop Ukraine’s drive to Europe and to turn it, or at least a part of it, into a de facto Russian protectorate. This is seen as the first step in
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implementation of the Russian ‘grand strategy’ aimed at building a new international architecture comprising Moscow’s spheres of influence in the vast area between Russia and so-called ‘old Europe’ and to redraw ‘the lines of power running through Eastern and Southern Europe, which would secure new borders and frontiers for the coming decades and protect them from challenges arising from either side’ (Inozemtzev, 2014). Many also believe that the Kremlin’s fear that the Kyiv’s Euromaidan might ignite similar processes in Russia and by destabilising and disintegrating Ukraine, Putin and his cabal planned to demonstrate that democratic revolutions result in chaos and the collapse of statehood.

In this light, it was by no means a coincidence that already in 1993, Yury Skokov, then Secretary of the Russian Security Council, told Oleg Bay, then Deputy Head of the Ukrainian Embassy in Moscow, that if any ‘difficulties’ in the Russo-Ukrainian relations occurred, they would begin in ‘Donbass will start, Novorossiya will support, Transnistria will complete’ (Portnikov, 2017). Put differently, well ahead of the Putin-era members of the top echelon of the Russian government considered destabilization of the Southeastern provinces of Ukraine and their factual separation from the country as an instrument of pressing upon Kyiv and returning it into Moscow’s domain.1

War plans and preparations in 2004–2014

It is indeed difficult to find out when exactly Russia’s ruling clique started to plan a war on Ukraine in a practical manner. Yet, it seems that Pavel Felgenhauer, a leading Russian independent military expert, was correct in saying that the preparation for this began just after the first Maidan in 2004. Since then, he pointed out, the Black Sea Fleet year by year reinforced its bases and facilities located in Crimea, which was evidence of preparing for annexation of the Peninsula (quoted in Tammsaar, 2015). However, since almost all combat-capable Russian military units were employed in the war in Chechnya, military aggression against Ukraine was hardly possible until 2007, when appeasement in Chechnya made Russian armed forces available for operations in Ukraine. It is also telling that Putin speaking at the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Summit in Bucharest in April 2008, for the first time openly threatened to dismember Ukraine by force along ethnic lines and to annex its lands populated by Russians. Aspirations to integrate with NATO, he claimed, could threaten the Ukrainian territorial integrity (Allenova, Heda, and Novikov, 2008). Almost immediately Russian media published the plan of war against Ukraine named Operation ‘Mechanical Orange’ (Dzhadan, 2008). It included three scenarios of the Russian invasion of Ukraine from then seizure of the Crimean Peninsula up to occupation of the entire Left Bank Ukraine and Kyiv.2 It presumed massive use of land forces and aviation and even ‘demonstration of nuclear explosions in the stratosphere above the southern part of the Pripyat marshes’ to suppress Ukrainians’ will to defend themselves. However, until 2012–2013, Russia had no practical ability of waging a ‘large war’ with Ukraine. The war in Chechnya and then not very successful experience of aggression against Georgia showed that the Russian army was in critical condition. In these circumstances, Moscow focused on economic and political pressure upon Ukraine and creating networks of agents of influence within the military and security services command, the political and business communities and the mass media.

In practical terms, the preparations for armed aggression against Ukraine started in autumn 2008. Within the framework of the 2008–2012 military reform, a large grouping of the armed forces was formed in the Southern Military District bordering with a few Ukrainian provinces. By the end of 2012, Moscow deployed there nine Motor Rifle brigades,
two Special Forces (Spetsnaz) units and one reconnaissance brigade, an Airborne Assault (Mountain) Division and an Airborne Assault Brigade. In 2012, there were more than 400 tanks, about 1,000 artillery pieces, more than 2,000 armoured fighting vehicles, and a powerful air force consisting of 90 fighters, 100 theatre bombers, 80 attack aircraft and 170 attack helicopters (Ryadovoy Ru, 2012). Russian sources assured that these troops were intended for suppressing riots and local guerilla groups in the Northern Caucasus, as well as for operations against Georgia. However, since the combat might of this grouping apparently exceeded what was needed for these tasks, its most feasible mission was the occupation of the wide belt of Ukrainian lands stretching from Donetsk to Odessa oblasts by massive assault operations. Also, regular land forces, with the exception of the mountain infantry and Spetsnaz units, were hardly suitable for fighting paramilitary groups in mountainous terrain and urban guerillas in cities. This task is carried out by Russian Interior troops stationed in the Northern Caucasus. Two reinforced Motor Rifle brigades (about 10,000 men) deployed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia are more than enough for a new invasion of Georgia. Fully manned units of the 102nd Russian military base in Armenia will be quite able to strongly support Armenian troops, if a new war over Nagorno-Karabakh happens (Kavkazsky uzel, 2015).

Although, since the end of the past decade, the Kremlin has formed military units designed for a large-scale ‘traditional’ war with Ukraine and developed plans of such wars, its actions in Ukraine in 2014 and later were performed in accordance with a hybrid war template. There were a few reasons for that. By the end of 2013, Russian military and security services developed the concept, strategy and plans of hybrid warfare against Ukraine. Most probably, the Kremlin concluded that by mobilization of local populations and mercenaries from Russia and flinging them against the Kyiv government, Moscow would be able to attain its goals in Ukraine at much less cost than by a ‘traditional’ one. And by presenting its invasion of Ukraine as an uprising of the local population, the Kremlin hoped to disguise its aggression as a civil war and, thus, avoid an aggravation of relations with the West.

**Russia’s hybrid war concept**

It seems that initially the hybrid war theory was developed in the 1960s by a prominent Russian émigré military thinker, Evgeny Messner whose monograph *A Worldwide Mutiny-war* became a desk book for officers of the Russian General Staff in the 2000s. Messner wrote that ‘making war by guerrillas, subversives, terrorists, wreckers, saboteurs and propagandists will acquire an enormous scope in future’. Irregulars, he added, ‘become powerful’ since the successes of regular troops ‘strengthen the activities of irregular forces and increase their numerical strength’ (Messner, 2005). This theory was confirmed, at least partly, by some conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century, including the Vietnam War and the guerilla warfare in Nicaragua.

At the beginning of this decade, the Russian military command developed its own concept of a hybrid war. It was initially outlined by the Chief of the Russian General Staff Colonel-General Valery Gerasimov in early 2013:

> The use of non-military methods to achieve political and strategic objectives has in some cases proved to be far more effective than the use of force […] These [methods] include special operations and usage of internal opposition to create a zone of permanent hostilities throughout the enemy state, as well as the impact of information pressure, forms and methods of which are constantly being improved.  

*(Gerasimov, 2013)*
A year later, Colonel-General Vladimir Zarudnitzky, then the Head of the Main Operational Directorate of the Russian General Staff, revealed a more detailed scenario of hybrid intervention. At first, a ‘hybrid aggressor’ kindles national, religious, social or territorial contradictions and controversies in a country that is its victim. Then such contradictions evolve into an open confrontation between the opposition and the government, which escalates into a civil war if a ruling regime is trying to retain power. Also, a country launching hybrid aggression uses its military potential for ‘open pressure’ with the view to prevent the use of the security forces (of a victim country – YuF) to restore law and order. Then, with the deployment of opposition hostilities against government forces, foreign countries begin to give the rebels military and economic aid. Later, a coalition of countries participating in the overthrow of the lawful government can start a military operation to assist opposition in the seizure of power. […] Squads of mercenaries and band-formations purposefully use civilians as ‘human shields’, which results in large losses among the civilian population not involved in armed hostilities.

(Zarudnitzky, 2014)

Finally, the current Russian military doctrine approved by President Putin in late December 2014, includes a set of distinctive facets of contemporary armed conflict elements typical of hybrid wars: the creation of zones of permanent armed hostilities on the territories of opposing states; participation of irregular armed formations and private military companies in military operations; the usage of non-direct and asymmetric means of action; and the use of political forces and social movements financed and controlled from outside (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 2014).

**Plan ‘A’ and plan ‘B’**

Historically, Moscow expected to achieve its objectives towards Ukraine by controlling the Ukrainian ruling elite. In particular, right up to February 2014, Putin and his lieutenants placed their hopes in the ‘Yanukovych administration that in late 2013 became fully dependent on Russia due to its refusal to sign an association agreement with the European Union. The Kremlin then believed that the ‘Yanukovych regime would be able to survive the mass demonstrations against the government called Euromaidan and control the country until the presidential election in 2015. One may call this strategy ‘plan A’.

At the same time, Russia was also preparing for the implementation of ‘plan B’, also known as ‘project Novorossiya’ aimed at separating the southeastern part of Ukraine, comprising Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizh’ya, Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts and Crimea from the other half of the country and to turn it into Russia’s protectorate. Most probably, the Kremlin planned that these regions would form a quasi-state entity, a Southeastern Ukrainian Republic, or something similar, which would be proclaimed at the Congress of deputies of the Southern and Eastern regions of Ukraine in Kharkiv on February 22, 2014 (Socor, 2014).

Russian propaganda claimed that the very idea of Novorossiya is of defensive nature. Some Moscow pundits added that among the real goals of this project, there was prevention of Ukraine’s membership in NATO. Dmitry Trenin, the Head of the Carnegie Moscow Centre and a sophisticated advocate of the Putin regime, admitted in June 2014 that if ‘project Novorossiya’ was implemented, it would provide ‘real institutional guarantees against any moves toward NATO accession’ (Trenin, 2014). Yet, in effect, the Kremlin’s plan ‘B’
was aimed at the radical strengthening of Russia’s strategic position in the northwestern part of the Black Sea region. If executed, then the main Ukrainian industrial centres, including a few key military-industrial facilities, strategically important ports and transport routes would fall under Russia’s control; the rest of Ukraine would turn into an economically unviable and politically unstable formation; Russian troops would appear at the border with Moldova and strategic situation in southeastern Europe would dramatically change in Russia’s favour. Putting it differently, Novorossiya was seen in the Kremlin as a location of strategically important industries and a bridgehead from which its troops can threaten and attack NATO’s area on its southeastern flank.

Annexation of Crimea

Both these plans were ruined. Late in the evening on February 21, 2014, ‘Yanukovych in panic fled Kyiv, his regime crashed and on the next day the Congress in Kharkiv refused to discuss separatist projects. Under these circumstances, the Kremlin commanded the annexation of Crimea after which the ‘Crimean scenario’ was planned to be repeated in other regions of Southeastern Ukraine. In the early morning on February 23, 2014, Putin personally ordered the invasion of Crimea and putting Russian nuclear forces on a war footing (Baklanov, 2015).

The annexation was performed in four steps. At first, pro-Russian organisations in Crimea were activated, forming the so-called ‘self-defence’ squads and launched massive rallies in protest against the new government in Kyiv. In the next few days, pro-Russian marchers and rioters provoked clashes with pro-Ukrainian groups, yet were not able to force the then Crimean Parliament and government to declare independence from Ukraine or to address Moscow asking for unification with Russia. To turn the tide in favour of Moscow after February 24, Russian Marines stationed in Crimea and the so-called ‘polite little green men’, in actual fact Spetsnaz task forces without insignia airlifted and transferred to Crimea, started taking control over governmental buildings, strategic locations and key points. On February 27, Russian Spetsnaz units seized the buildings of the Crimean Parliament and the government. On the same day, regional legislators who were held at gunpoint voted for replacement of the former prime minister by Sergey Aksenov, the head of one of the pro-Russian organisations in Crimea, for the referendum on the future of the Peninsula and for dismissal of the government (Goncharova, 2015). Simultaneously, Russian troops and ‘self-defence’ squads established security checkpoints separating Crimea from the Ukrainian mainland.

During early March 2014, Russian troops stationed at the naval base in Sevastopol, together with troops, armour and helicopters from Russia, encircled Ukrainian units in Crimea, which did not resist the invaders – and many of them went over to the enemy side – and exercised complete control over the Crimean Peninsula. Military occupation, political pressure by the Russian security services and local ‘self-defence’ gangs, and an intensive propaganda campaign led to the expected result: on March 16, 2014, most of the residents of Crimea voted for joining Russia.

Many in Moscow portrayed the annexation of Crimea as the brilliant success of the hybrid war tactics and the example of excellently planned and implemented military operation. Yet, as the matter of fact, Moscow’s success resulted not so much as from the potency of the Russian task forces and the intellectual capacity of the General Staff as from the dramatic situation in Ukraine just after the crash of the ‘Yanukovych regime. The Ukrainian Armed Forces were incredibly weak, partly because of treachery among the top brass. Ukrainian
troops deployed on the Peninsula were not prone to resist invaders, in particular because 90 per cent of their personnel were inhabitants of Crimea. A shocking propaganda campaign frightened the local population with imaginary threats emanating from the new Ukrainian authorities. And at that time, Kyiv was seeking above all the prevention of the massive invasion of the Russian Army, which would have been inevitable had the new Ukrainian government attempted to stop the annexation of Crimea by force.

**Project Novorossiya and its fiasco**

Simultaneously with the infiltration of the Russian Spetsnaz into Crimea all across Russia, a campaign began for recruiting mercenaries and volunteers to fight in other parts of Ukraine (Makarenko, 2014). The local branches of the FSB and the military registration and enlistment offices were especially interested in hiring recently retired officers, former soldiers and non-commissioned officers who had served as airborne and Spetsnaz troops, military intelligence, specialists in military communications, former tank crew members and other varieties of men with professional military backgrounds (Kostyuchenko, 2014). This was a clear signal that Russian hybrid war plans included the formation on the territory of future Novorossiya ‘quasi-armies’ capable of fighting Ukrainian Armed Forces. On April 17, 2014, Putin revealed his ambitions to annex the whole southeast of Ukraine:

> What was called Novorossiya (New Russia) back in the tsarist days – Kharkov, Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa – were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. [...] They were won by Potemkin and Catherine the Great in a series of well-known wars. [...] Russia lost these territories for various reasons, but the people remained.

(*Putin, 2014*)

Acting on instructions from Moscow pro-Russian groups and some local bosses of the Party of Regions and the Communist Party of Ukraine in Donbas, Kharkiv, Odessa and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts fomented mass disorders, arranged anti-government rallies under separatist slogans, provoked clashes with Ukrainian law-enforcement forces, attacked administrative buildings, military depots, headquarters of police and security service, and practiced ‘human shields’ to challenge the Ukrainian police with the dilemma either to refrain from use of force or to use weapons against civilian population. In many cases, rioting was guided by task forces of the FSB and Russian military intelligence (GRU). Core elements of violent mobs have been often grouped of the so-called ‘Russian tourists’, in fact petty criminals, hooligans, sports fans and members of nationalist organisations mainly from neighbouring Russian oblasts. In particular, according to Ukrainian sources, an attack on the building of the Kharkiv Regional State Administration on March 1, 2014, was committed by members of the local Oplot organisation with the assistance of about 2,000 ‘storm trooper tourists’ from Russia (Roth, 2014).

At that point, according to Moscow’s hybrid war plans, regional legislatures were to vote for no confidence in the new government in Kyiv and to appeal to Putin with a request for assistance, including by sending troops to protect the separatists and to suppress pro-Ukrainian groups. This tactic was outlined by Sergey Glaziev, an adviser to Putin and one of the main figures in planning and managing the hybrid war in Ukraine. Glaziev informed his inferiors in Odessa on March 1, 2014, that he ‘was given the direct instruction from the top’ to excite people in Ukraine and to get them to go in the streets ‘as soon as possible’.
He declared,

The president has signed the decree [it was not clear what particular Putin decree Glaziev had in mind, yet most probably he meant the decree of the Federation Council authorized Putin to invade Ukraine – YuF]. Hence, the operation is going on. It was reported that the military forwarded the troops already. What are they [pro-Russian rioters – YuF] sitting still?! […] Decisions of regional councils [legislatures – YuF] are very important. […] Occupy the [building of – YuF] regional council in order to allow lawmakers to come and explain them that they should come and vote. Those of them who will not come and will not vote will be traitors, Banderovites, fascists and so on with all the consequences for them.

(Neimyrok, 2016)

Simultaneously, Russian troops were massing near Ukrainian borders to exert pressure upon the new Ukrainian leadership with a view to preventing the use of the Ukrainian army against the pro-Russian separatists, mutineers and rioters.

By mid-May 2014, Ukrainian authorities were able to quell separatist mutinies in the south-east and, what was most important, attempts to proclaim ‘people’s republics’ in Kharkiv and Odessa. Yet, the key reason why the insurgency failed was the position of Ukrainian society. Despite their ethnic origins, the majority of the people living in most parts of Southeastern Ukraine did not support the very idea of separation from this country and joining Russia.

The proxy war in Donbas

Since the attempts to separate the southeastern oblasts from Ukraine failed, the Kremlin concentrated upon other goals: first, to compel Kyiv to transform a unitary state into a loose confederation of regional entities, each of which has a right of shaping foreign economic relations and foreign policy orientations; second, to deny potential membership in NATO; and third, to agree that an enclave in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, although formally a part of Ukraine, would be fully controlled by Moscow. The Kremlin and its followers in Ukraine called it ‘federalisation’ and neutrality.

Setting forth these goals was linked to developments in Donbas in some parts of which in spring 2014 pro-Russian separatists, as well as mercenaries, paramilitaries, military and security ‘advisers' from Russia were able to seize power. A combination of factors has contributed to this. Donbas, especially Donetsk oblast, was the political bulwark of the Yanukovych regime. All important positions in regional legislatures and administrations, police and security apparatuses have been occupied by people belonging to the ‘Yanukovych clique and, because of this, having grounds to fear the new authorities in Kyiv. Also, a large part of the local populace consisted of ethnic Russians and was highly susceptible to Moscow’s propaganda that browbeat them with imaginary threats emanating from the new Ukrainian government.

The seizure of power in Donbas by local separatists and Moscow’s emissaries was followed by the formation of pro-Russian administrations and political bodies pretending to represent the local population. The so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DPR and LPR) were proclaimed in April 2014. They allowed Moscow to substitute the previous regional administrations, which sometimes leaned towards compromises with Kyiv with ones fully controlled by Moscow. Establishment of DPR and LPR was used also to portray the Russian aggression against Ukraine as a civil war and a revolt of the Russian peoples of Eastern Ukraine against a ‘fascist regime’.
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However, up to mid-2015, real power in the separatist enclaves lays with a number of warlords heading armed militias practically independent of 'republican' governments. These formations were manned by some former members of Ukrainian law-enforcement agencies, activists of pro-Russian organisations, two-three dozen thousands of marginal folks and local cheaters for whom membership in militias was a cover for illegal activities; unemployed working-class and lower strata people for whom service in separatist militias was the only source of income. Militias were supported by members of the Russian security and intelligence agencies; army officers officially 'on leave', who served in the separatist gangs as trainers, advisers and planners of operations; mercenaries, including professional military folks; poorly skilled rank-and-file personnel to compensate losses in manpower; Cossacks; volunteers of far-right and far-left orientations. The key instruments of Kremlin policy in that area were FSB and GRU task forces numbering in mid-2014 according to Ukrainian sources, 1,000–2,000 officers (Kupriyanova, 2014).

Poor discipline, ineffective central command, insufficient coordination between different units and rivalry between warlords for control over economic resources reduced the combat potential of the separatists’ force. By June 2014, when the Ukrainian governmental troops began an offensive against the self-proclaimed ‘republics’, the separatist militias were not able to resist regular troops. At the end of August 2014, separatists groups were on the brink of total defeat, and Moscow covertly sent a number of battalions of tactical groups of regular land forces into Donbas.4 It was Russian regular troops that were responsible for the defeat of the Ukrainian army near Illovaisk and Saur Mogila in late August and early September 2014. In November 2014, it was reported that there were about 7,000 Russian troops in Ukraine, while between 40,000 and 50,000 of them massed at the country’s eastern border (Harris, 2014). Finally, Russian regular troops played the decisive role in the battle near Debaltseve in February 2015. Put differently, Moscow deviated from the hybrid war template and sent to Donbas regular forces to save its local clients from defeat.

The Kremlin understood that consolidation of political circles and armed groups in the separatist enclaves under cliques fully controlled by Moscow was of crucial importance for the survival of the pro-Russian regimes there. In this light, since 2015, Moscow’s efforts were focused on consolidation of different militias into an integrated armed force subordinated to a single command. Some warlords were expelled from Donbas, some others were murdered, most probably by Russian agents.

By the end of 2015, the Russian military command succeeded in consolidating and training two well-armed army corps intended to conduct offensive operations that integrated odd terrorist and separatist armed groups and formations. Ukrainian official sources summarising intelligence information revealed at the end of August 2015 that there were about 30,000 men in the terrorist/separatist forces heavily armed with armour and artillery. Russian supplies of modern armaments have turned the separatist forces into one of the best equipped forces in Central-Eastern and Eastern Europe: the pro-Russian militants had about 900 armoured vehicles, 450 tanks, nearly 370 units of artillery, and about 380 multiple rocket launchers in service with, as well as hundreds of units of other military equipment provided by the Kremlin. In addition, then there were about 9,000 Russian contract servicemen in the occupied territories of Donbas (Censor.Net, 2015).

Strategic deadlock

By mid-2015, the Russian hybrid aggression resulted in a strategic impasse in Donbas, continuing so far without any expectation for a solution. The Ukrainian army and National
Guard are unable to free the areas under the control of separatists because of the presence of Russian regular troops there and in the near vicinity in Russia’s neighbouring areas. At the same time, although the very existence of the separatist-controlled territories of Donbas poses a serious economic and political problems for Kyiv, Moscow is unable to achieve its fundamental goal: to create Novorossiya. Also, Russia has not had leverage strong enough to force the Ukrainian authorities to ‘federalise’ the country into a lax conglomerate of semi-independent formations or to give chiefs of the DPR/LPR veto power regarding Ukraine’s foreign and security policy. Due to this, since 2015 and up to now, Moscow has seen a low-intensity war in Donbas as a bleeding sore poisoning the Ukrainian state and society and hindering reforms. In this light, Moscow seeks two strategic objectives: to prevent the military defeat of the separatist enclave and to turn it into a source of permanent tensions and armed clashes in the east of the country.

Of course, Russia has enough troops to occupy the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and perhaps some other areas in Eastern Ukraine, yet it would require all or almost all of Russian military forces deployed near Ukraine and the large-scale use of combat aviation. Since the separatists have neither combat aircrafts nor attack helicopters, it immediately highlights the Kremlin’s lie that the Russian troops do not participate in the war in Donbas. Also, such operations will inevitably result in the mass losses of Russian servicemen and great collateral damage, especially in case of storming large cities.

There are no chances for a political solution of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The Kremlin declared annexed Crimea an indivisible part of Russia and flatly refuses to discuss even the theoretical possibility of returning the Peninsula to Ukraine. For the Ukrainian elites and society, the recognition of its annexation is unacceptable. Also, there is no prospect of settling the situation in Donbas. The so-called Minsk agreements providing for a ceasefire and a series of political steps aimed at restoring Ukraine’s sovereignty over a secessionist enclave failed, in fact. The reason for this does not lie in the divergence of the positions of Kyiv and Moscow regarding the sequence of these steps, but in the unwillingness of the Russian leadership to resolve the situation.

If all sides fulfilled the Minsk II provisions, a degree of peace and normalcy would return to the Donbas. And that precisely may be the problem for the Kremlin. A quiet Donbas no longer would serve as a means for Moscow to put pressure on Ukraine, in order to make it more difficult for Poroshenko [the President of Ukraine – YuF] and his government to implement needed reforms, grow the economy, and implement the Ukraine-European Union association agreement. At present, Russia does not appear prepared or willing to give up that leverage over Kyiv’ wrote well-known American expert Steven Pifer.

(Pifer, 2017)

Strategic deadlock means that Russia is not able to win the hybrid war against Ukraine. Among the causes of this failure, the fundamental one was Putin’s major strategic blunder of underestimating the determination of Ukrainian society and most part of its elites to resist Russian aggression and also the resoluteness of the USA and European countries to sanction Russia to stop its invasion and prompt it to withdraw from Donbas. In addition, the ability of the Ukrainian authorities to suppress pro-Russian subversive and terrorist groups in Odessa, Kharkiv and a few other regions of Southeastern Ukraine during three or four critical months after the fall of the ‘Yanukovych regime and the start of the hybrid aggression in Donbas was of critical importance for preventing the spread of the mutiny beyond the
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Donbas borders. In this light, the Ukraine’s experience of the resistance to Russia’s intervention could be useful for preventing analogous Moscow actions against other countries – the three Baltic, above all.

However, although Russia’s hybrid aggression against Ukraine, at least the first round of it, failed, it is an open question as yet whether the Kremlin has backed off from the very idea of hybrid wars in this and other neighbouring countries. The worrisome fact is that this aggression has been approved by the Russian mass mindset poisoned by anti-Ukrainian, anti-Western and militarist attitudes and great power views. This creates the preconditions for new rounds of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, either hybrid or ‘traditional’.

Notes

1 This region, termed Novorossiya (New Russia), denotes a territory north of the Black Sea captured by the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century. Up to 1917, it was referred to the chain of lands stretching from Moldova at South-West along the Back Sea littoral to Donbas. Since the fall of the Russian Empire, most of these regions became part of Ukraine. In the contemporary Russian strategic discourse, this word is used to mark the area which is an object of Russian geopolitical expansion in the northern Circumpontic region.

2 Historically, Left Bank Ukraine (Livoberezhna Ukraina) was the name of the part of Ukraine on the East (Left) bank of the Dnieper River, comprising the modern-day Chernihiv, Poltava and Sumy oblasts, as well as the eastern parts of Kiev and Cherkasy oblasts. Today, this name often applies to the entire territory of Ukraine to the east of the Dnieper River.

3 These offices, known in Russia as Military commissariats (Voennie komissariaty or Voenkomats), are responsible for conscription and registration of reserve officers, maintaining records on military manpower, providing pre-military training and performing other military functions at the local level.

4 The Russian Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) is a battalion reinforced with assets from higher-level units, above all brigades. It includes ten armoured fighting vehicles for each of three companies plus command vehicle; the number of tanks in each case is different; at least one artillery division is allocated for each BTG.

References


Yury E. Fedorov


