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Guest post: Russia's hybrid war as international corporate raiding

Guest writer Jan 21 13:34 Comment



By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta

The escalating hostilities around Donetsk airport, already dubbed Europe's new Stalingrad, could lead to the first full-scale war between European countries since World War II. In the event that the fighting escalates, Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine's president, has prepared a decree that would institute a state of emergency as a prelude to moving from an anti-terrorist operation to a state of war. Eighty per cent of Ukrainians already believe their county is at war with Russia.

Grigory Karasin, Russia's deputy foreign minister, said this week it would be "the biggest, even strategic mistake of the Ukrainian authorities to bank on a military solution to the crisis" and warned: "This may lead to irreversible consequences for Ukrainian statehood."

The depth of the international crisis can be seen in the gulf that exists between western countries that believe Ukraine has a right to defend its territorial integrity and a Russia that refuses to recognize it.

Russia's hybrid or non-linear war is an international extension of the corporate raiding that has become prevalent in its domestic environment, where there is little rule of law. Six years ago, Russia was described as a "mafia state" and recent developments point even more to this conclusion.

Massive corporate raiding of Ukrainian state and private assets has followed Russia's annexation of the Crimea. As Mark Galleotti, an expert on transnational crime and security, argued in an article for Vice, organized crime is closely intertwined with the separatist fighters.

Russia's hybrid war introduces virtuality to its conduct of international affairs that is an extension of its virtual domestic politics. Deep levels of cynicism, doublespeak and duplicity underpin fake parties, virtual elections (like those held in the Soviet Union) and surrogate proxy forces.

Since signing the Minsk peace accords in September, Russia has built up separatist forces in Ukraine as civilian and military casualties have continued to mount. While Moscow blames Ukraine for undermining the peace process, the EU says Russia has violated its OSCE commitments and separatists have taken control of an additional 500 square kilometres of territory since September.



The BBC and other news outlets have shown Russian marines fighting at Donetsk airport, as Moscow continues to strenuously deny that its forces are present in Ukraine. Meanwhile, Russia's foreign ministry issued a statement supporting separatist claims that the Minsk accords provided for their control over Donetsk airport.

Russia's duplicitous hybrid war is arming the separatists to the teeth, sending its troops to lead their attacks on Ukrainian forces and training insurgents for attacks throughout Ukraine. This week, a bomb in Kharkiv caused 20 casualties and in Zaporizhzhya a train was derailed as it was crossing a bridge. Russia is warning Ukrainians of the consequences of defending their territorial integrity; a policy Russia demanded be upheld in Chechnya and Kosovo.

Russia's approach has three pitfalls.

First, Russia cannot hope to defeat Ukraine using limited numbers of its troops in a hybrid war. At the same time, if Moscow were to commit tens of thousands of troops it could no longer hide their presence and further western sanctions would follow. Ukrainian officials estimate that there are 8,000 Russian troops on Ukrainian territory with more moving across the border.

Second, the rate of growth of Russian casualties, as in the 1980s when Soviet casualties in Afghanistan were growing at a slower pace, will eventually lead to political instability. Russian casualties continue to rapidly grow, as witnessed by overflowing morgues in the Donetsk region and casualty figures collected by Russian NGOs and independent bloggers. Oleg Yarchuk has calculated in detail Russian casualties of 5,665 dead, 2,759 wounded and 2,834 missing in action in less than a year's combat.

Third, Russia's hugely popular annexation of the Crimea and hybrid war in the Donbas has opened up a Pandora's box of extreme Russian nationalism. If Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, were to back away from his hybrid war some of these Russian nationalists could return to Russia with their weapons and seek to effect regime change. This could be dangerous if Russia's socio-economic situation continues to deteriorate as the oil price falls.

Extreme right-wingers from the Russian Party of National Unity, cossacks, monarchists who desire the restoration of the tsar and empire, Orthodox Holy Warriors and Stalinists provide an eclectic and combustible mix of volunteers in the Donbas, a region that until 2014 had been without manifestations of Russian nationalism and voted for the Communists and the oligarchic Party of Regions. These volunteers see the Donbas conflict in apocalyptic terms as a "holy war".

These Russian extremist groups share three similarities. They believe Putin is too "soft" and Russia should fight openly, not in a hybrid war, and annex the Donbas. They are Ukrainophobes who believe the Ukrainian nation does not exist; an analogy in the 1930s would be that of Germany's Nazis looking at Austria. Finally, they are anti-western and see the Euromaidan Ukrainians as "puppets" in the hands of Washington and Brussels.

The Russian-led renewal of separatist attacks in the Donbas has revealed just how naïve was the attempt by Federica Mogherini, the EU's foreign policy chief, to scale down sanctions by exchanging values for interests. Meanwhile, the arrest of five Russians in France shows to what degree the conflict in Ukraine can spread to other parts of Europe.

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