



Statement before the
Senate Armed Services Committee
Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities

***“Russian Influence and Unconventional
Warfare Operations in the ‘Grey Zone:’
Lessons from Ukraine”***

A Testimony by:

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Subcommittee Chair Ernst, Ranking Member Heinrich, and members of the subcommittee, I am honored to be here today. I have been asked to address the topic of Russian influence and unconventional warfare operations in the “grey zone:” lessons from Ukraine. I begin by defining terms a bit, because there are a few ways to think about this question. I will then talk briefly about what we have seen in Ukraine, Russian activities elsewhere, and how Russians appear to think about these issues, before concluding with some thoughts about what we in the United States might learn from these experiences.

Defining Terminology

The “grey zone” means different things to different people. In the United States in recent years, one definition that has emerged is geographical. It refers to countries and parts of the world to which there is not a clear U.S. commitment, but where the United States has interests. In Europe, this means countries that are not members of NATO (as NATO members do have an explicit security commitment from the United States). This, of course, includes Ukraine.

Another definition for grey zone refers to operations, specifically those that are more difficult to define as either peace or war, and indeed possibly those undertaken intentionally to obfuscate and blur the lines between the two. Of course, those lines have always been blurry. Carl von Clausewitz wrote that war is an extension of politics; he did not mean that politics ends when war begins, or that there is a stark divide between the two. Rather, military, political, economic, and diplomatic instruments should all be expected to be used to attain national goals, together and separately. Armed conflict then, is, definitionally enough, characterized by the use of armaments in a conflict, almost certainly alongside other tools.

In the context of Russian operations in Ukraine, we are interested today in two kinds of activities. Influence operations, which seek to leverage media and propaganda efforts as well as business and political ties to attain national goals are, if not always aboveboard, surely short of armed conflict. They thus may be in the grey zone from a geographical perspective, but are not from an operational perspective. This said, such actions, even when undertaken in countries that are not in the “grey zone,” may still be of strategic interest. Unconventional warfare, if it is unquestionably armed action by military personnel, is of course armed conflict. If, however, it is characterized by subterfuge and actions by those who cannot be clearly identified as combatants, it may be in the operational grey zone as well (it is also, in its own way, an influence operation, in that it seeks to affect the calculus of other parties). In Ukraine, we see all of these to varying degrees, with a range of implications for other parts of Europe and the rest of the world.

Influence Operations in Ukraine

As I alluded to above, I see two types of non-military influence operations that have been and

continue to be used by the Russian Federation in Ukraine and elsewhere. The first is public information campaigns and propaganda—efforts to target a broad population with press stories, social media tools, and so forth. The second is building up and leveraging business and political relationships. This includes support to political activists and parties, and efforts to develop business “lobbies” that will support Russian goals.

I start with the first of these. In Ukraine, Russian-language print, internet, and television media had fairly heavy saturation prior to 2014, particularly in Crimea and in the East. Their narrative, aimed at both Russians and Ukrainians, was meant to convince audiences that EU association would lead to political chaos, widespread homosexuality, and economic collapse. Social media activism amplified these messages, particularly on Russian-language websites. As the crisis unfolded, the coverage denigrated the protesters on Ukraine’s Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) who called for the ouster of then-President Yanukovich; the government that took control after Yanukovich fled; Western governments, which were depicted as orchestrating this “fascist coup;” and eventually the elected government of new President Petro Poroshenko. Social media disseminated both intercepted and apparently doctored recordings of Western officials discussing the situation in Ukraine, with the intent to both embarrass and to suggest a Western hand behind Kyiv’s emerging government. The narrative emphasized unrest in Kyiv and elsewhere and reported that fascist gangs were roaming the capital city’s streets. Another thread sought to instill and play on fear among Russian-speaking Ukrainians that they would be persecuted by the new government (this was admittedly helped along by some of the rhetoric in Kyiv, including an ill-considered, and quickly reversed, effort to require the use of Russian in official transactions when other languages had previously been allowed).

What did this do? I would argue that it likely did make some people even more nervous than they had been before. But the extent to which Russian media coverage contributed to protests and unrest in both Crimea and Eastern Ukraine is difficult to judge. These campaigns were surely most successful with populations that were already inclined to believe them—people who were nervous about EU association, distrustful of the West, and, once a new government took shape in Kyiv, fearful of what this might mean. In Crimea, where a large part of the self-identified ethnic Russian majority is comprised by retired Russian military personnel and their families, and where the Russian Black Sea Fleet continued to be based after the collapse of the USSR, this was a substantial proportion of the population. In Eastern Ukraine, where Yanukovich had his base of support, this message also resonated. But if information operations of this sort helped bring people into the streets, they cannot be credited with Russia’s annexation of Crimea. This, while almost bloodless, was a military action made possible in large part by Russia’s pre-existing preponderance of force on the peninsula.

Similarly, while Russian propaganda may well have played a role in public dissatisfaction, to truly get a conflict going in Eastern Ukraine took more than that. As the protests grew, there was

increasing evidence that while some of the protesters were local, Russians crossed the border to join in as well. When fighting flared, Russian supplies of armaments (and, it soon became clear, advisers and troops) were what kept it viable in the face of Ukrainian response. Today, Russian efforts to propagandize to Ukrainian populations in the East are blocked and countered, to the extent possible, by the Ukrainian government. However, the best defense against false narratives at this point is surely the stream of displaced persons from the separatist-controlled territories, the experience of continued fighting for those near the front lines, and other first- and second-hand knowledge of the realities of the situation.

Influence engendered by economic and political ties presents a different dynamic. Ukraine's and Russia's economies were deeply intertwined since the collapse of the USSR. This involved both legal, above-board activity and a variety of corrupt contacts and ties, including with the Yanukovich regime and its supporters. Ukraine's East and South were particularly closely tied to Russia, with highly interdependent economies. To the extent that these ties and exchanges were corrupt, they, along with other forms of corruption, made it highly unlikely that their beneficiaries would support EU association, with its requirements of greater transparency and a more open business climate as a whole. Today, it is plausible to argue that some continuing ties with Russia, many of them increasingly secretive, may be part of what is hampering reform efforts and thus undermining Ukraine's future. But the broad range of economic relationships, most of them completely legal, also created concerns among the many Ukrainians whose livelihoods were genuinely less certain if ties with Russia waned, something that surely exacerbated their other fears.

Unconventional Military Operations in Ukraine

The line between conventional and unconventional military operations is not always a clear one. Among unconventional operations are counterinsurgency and insurgency missions, the use of specialized forces, electronic warfare and cyber campaigns, and such things as the use and backing of foreign government and non-government forces as proxies. All of this is present in most conflicts, to varying extents. Because of our focus on the "grey zone," we are most interested here in areas that appear to be, genuinely or arguably, short of actual international armed conflict.

In the case of Russian operations in Ukraine, perhaps the most touted example is the insertion of additional Russian forces into Crimea in late February 2014.¹ Wearing uniforms without insignia, these personnel, termed "little green men" in the Ukrainian and Western press and "polite people" by Russia, took an active part in events on the peninsula, including seizing the Parliament building and surrounding the Belbek air base. Russian military personnel also pretended to be Ukrainian military and police and worked with local "self-defense" units. Their

¹ Russia of course had a sizable pre-existing military presence on the peninsula, in the form of its Black Sea Fleet.

lack of uniform markings contributed to confusion, even as Russia denied the deployment of additional forces to Crimea.

Russia has also denied its support for the separatists fighting the Ukrainian Army in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, as well as the insertion of its regular army troops into that fight as both advisors and active troops. Here, too, we see examples of Russian forces masquerading as locals. We also, of course, see the support and development of a proxy force. As with the “little green men” in Crimea, this feeds confusion and allows for deniability. The actual fighting in Eastern Ukraine, however, is highly conventional, tending towards a great deal of artillery and some trench warfare.

Finally, it is important to note the use of cyber in the Ukraine conflict. Early in the conflict, these took the form of distributed denial of service (DDOS) and defacement attacks on Ukrainian government and NATO websites. This was more a form of harassment, however, than anything else. More debilitating was a December 2015 attack on Ukraine’s power grid, which shut down electricity to hundreds of thousands of people for several hours. Both Ukrainian and U.S. officials blamed Moscow. If this was, indeed, an orchestrated attack by Russia, it is an example of precisely the type of cyber operation that could be seen as warfare, in that it approximates effects similar to those that might be attained through the use of armed force.

Russian Activities Elsewhere

In assessing Russian activities outside of Ukraine, I focus on influence operations. In the military context, the only current example of Russian operations outside of Ukraine is Syria, where the most unconventional aspect is Russian support of proxy forces, which the United States and its allies are also engaged in. As noted above, influence operations against the United States and its NATO allies cannot really be termed “grey zone” operations, because they fit neither the geographical nor operational definition of the term. However, the growing concern about these activities requires us to pay attention to them as what they are—political influence operations undertaken with hostile intent, in this case, efforts to undermine and subvert Western unity and trust in existing governments and institutions.

Russian influence campaigns outside of Ukraine share some similarities with its activities within that country. In terms of media and social media efforts, one aspect of this is Russian-language media targeting Russian populations around the world, and particularly in neighboring countries, where it is often popular. In addition, much attention has been paid in recent years to, on the one hand, Russian government-supported outlets around the world, such as RT and Sputnik, which are heavily advertised and, by broadcasting and publishing in English and other languages, able to reach a wide population around the world. While these outlets do consistently report Russian government positions, they are probably more effective when they raise questions about the

reporting of other sources, and of other government statements and views—such as by denying Russian military presence in Ukraine. They also tend to highlight what they portray as the hypocrisy of non-Russian governments, for instance by highlighting collateral damage caused by U.S. and NATO military actions abroad.

Also notable is the Kremlin's use of social media outlets. This was also evident in Ukraine, and is utilized much the same way around the world, in a range of languages. Researchers have unearthed so-called "troll farms" that rely on human- and machine-run social media accounts to amplify Kremlin messages and raise doubts about other viewpoints. This, like the direct media campaigns, tends to combine elements of truth and falsehood, building trust among like-minded people on a range of issues in order to heighten tension and frustration and perhaps further expand influence on other issues.

While we can establish the presence of a sizeable Russian effort in this regard, this begs the most important question: does any of this work? Happily, there is no evidence to date that these messages are reaching audiences previously unfavorable to them and changing minds. In Ukraine, Russian media messages were most effective with those predisposed to trust them. The same is true of both Russian and foreign-language media and social media efforts elsewhere in the world. I would argue that the real threat posed by these phenomena is not their independent effect, but the fact that they are just one sliver of a much larger increase in chaos and untruth in the information space. The widespread use of these same techniques of smears, blatant lies, and uncorroborated reporting amplified by like-minded social media users (paid, robotic, and genuine) create an environment in which it is, indeed, difficult to tell truth from falsehood. The resulting environment is not so much one in which more people trust Russian sources, but in which people only trust whatever sources they prefer, and discount all others. This is dangerous, and Russia is exploiting the situation, but it is far from a uniquely, or predominantly, Russian threat.

Russian economic influence in Europe and elsewhere is a mixed bag. It is true that there are pro-Russian politicians in Europe, and that some of them have ties to Russian business. But it can be hard to figure out which of these came first. For instance, when Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban supports collaboration with Russian firms, is this because he seeks closer relations with Moscow (which he does) or does he seek closer relations with Moscow because of the economic gains that would accrue? In the United States, firms that had business in Russia have been more skeptical of sanctions; this plays out similarly in Europe. France's Republican Party also supports a better relationship with Russia, no doubt in part because it has constituents in industries such as defense, energy, luxury goods, transportation, and banking, all of which stand to gain from more trade with Russia. Many years of solid economic ties between Russia and Germany lead some German parties to also desire better relations with Moscow. The fact is that most of the economic ties that exist are surely above-board, the product of years of seeking to

integrate Russia into the global economy. Moreover, the requirements of operating in the West force Russian companies to adopt higher standards for transparency, which may have positive longer-term effects. Thus, while any Kremlin efforts to leverage economic ties for political gain should be monitored, this does not mean that business with Russian firms and individuals should be demonized.

A greater concern may be Russia's support for fringe parties in Europe. Bela Kovacs, who helped finance Hungary's pro-Russian ultranationalist Jobbik party, may have used Russian funds to do so. He is now under investigation for spying for Russia. Not a few have noticed the 2014 and 2016 loans from the First Czech Russian Bank to France's far right National Front Party—to say nothing of party leader Marine Le Pen's friendly relationship with Vladimir Putin. Late in 2016, Austria's far-right Freedom Party inked a cooperation deal with the United Russia Party. There is no doubt that leaders and members of right wing and nationalist parties throughout the West see Russia as a model. It is equally clear that the Kremlin sees support for these political groups, which tend to be anti-EU and sometimes anti-NATO as well, as a means of weakening Western unity. It may be particularly emboldened by seeming recent successes. Interestingly, the Kremlin is increasingly wary of its own right wing nationalists, and has been cracking down on them.

In the United States, of course, our intelligence agencies have judged that Russia released information obtained through cyberhacks of American organizations, including political party organizations, in order to influence our Presidential election last year. There is nothing particularly unusual about using cyber tools to collect intelligence. It is unusual, and crosses any number of lines, to then take action to use such information to interfere in another country's political processes. It is likely that Russia's expectations of influence were that they could, in this way, disrupt the U.S. election, contributing to confusion and raising questions about legitimacy. If they believe that this has been a success, and even more so if they judge that they had a hand in the outcome (something I do not believe to be the case), they may be emboldened to undertake similar actions in the future, vis-à-vis the United States and other countries. We have certainly heard rumors that such efforts are underway in the context of Germany's election, upcoming in September of this year. Again, particularly in concert with Russian support of right wing parties in Europe, this should be watched carefully. However, I would underline that Russian efforts at best exploit weaknesses already in place. It seems highly unlikely that they can be decisive under current conditions.

Russian Doctrine and Thinking

Before turning to the lessons we might draw from all of this, it is worth stopping to ask how Russian military and security analysts view the situation. While much recent Russian analysis of modern-day conflict and warfare highlights the broad range of mechanisms that can advance

political goals, Russian analysts tend to present these not as approaches Russia can use, but rather as tools that are being developed by the West against Russia, which Russia must learn to counter. This was evident in Russia's most recent military doctrine, released in late 2014,² and in a variety of analysis and writing produced since. Even Russian discussions of so-called "hybrid" conflict, a term that they have picked up from Western authors, ignore the fact that those analysts use the term almost exclusively to describe Russian political and military action. Russians, by contrast, use it to describe a range of Western activity, from economic sanctions to support of "color revolutions," all geared to weaken and overthrow governments abroad. Moreover, they assume a substantial Western advantage in these areas.³ This was the nature of the much touted 2013 piece by Russian General Staff Chief Valery Gerasimov, which was, in the aftermath of Crimea, read by many in the West as presenting a new Russian approach to warfare. In fact, the text described a Russian view of Western approaches.⁴

Despite these concerns, Russian writing on the future of war continues also to emphasize the importance of conventional warfare, with particular emphasis on air power and advanced technologies. The most recent piece by Gerasimov, published just a few weeks ago, argues strongly that for all the new and creative ways Western countries are seeking to subvert Russia, conventional capabilities are at the core of what the country should itself emphasize.⁵

What We Should Be Learning from Ukraine and Elsewhere

There is no question that Russia is undertaking action across the spectrum of political, diplomatic, and military power. However, I warn against viewing Russian approaches as a well thought out strategy undertaken throughout the world. As is evidenced by Russian writing on these topics, Russia is testing approaches, experimenting, and trying to build on successes. Thus, one of the most important lessons from Russian actions in Ukraine and elsewhere in the world is that Russia is learning lessons from its own operations. It is carefully studying what works and what doesn't, and trying to assess how to adapt techniques for other purposes. Take the example of Crimea and East Ukraine. The Crimea operation was extremely successful. At least partly on its basis, Russian planners thought that something similar could succeed in Eastern Ukraine, and perhaps Ukraine as a whole. They were quickly proven wrong, and they recalibrated their goals and their tactics accordingly.

² Vladimir Putin, "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," December 25, 2014. English language version available at <http://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029> (accessed March 27, 2017)

³ Ibid., See also Samuel Charap, "The Ghost of Hybrid War.," *Survival (00396338)* 57, no. 6 (December 2015): 51–58. For more recent examples, see Valerii' Gerasimov, "Mir Na Graniakh Voyny," March 15, 2017; S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, "E'voliutsiia Sushchnosti I Soderzhaniia Poniatiia 'voi'na' v XXI Stoletii," January 2017; V. A. Kiselev, "K Kakim Voi'nam Neobkhodimo Gotovit' Vooruzhennye Sily Rossii," March 2017.

⁴ Valerii' Gerasimov, "Tsennost' Nauki V Predvidenii," February 27, 2013; Charap, "The Ghost of Hybrid War.," Charles K. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right.," *Military Review* 96, no. 1 (February 1, 2016): 30–38.

⁵ Gerasimov, "Mir Na Graniakh Voyny."

This is one of the many reasons that I do not think that a Crimea-like scenario is what we should be worrying about in, for example, Estonia or elsewhere in the Baltics. Russia's ability to use military personnel without insignia while denying their presence was specific to the Ukrainian situation, and not, in the end, decisive in the success or failure of Russian efforts. These and other Russian tactics of supporting separatist attacks on government buildings, backed by propaganda and influence operations, worked best where there was large-scale military presence and the population was confused and generally sympathetic—that is to say, in Crimea. It worked far less well where the population was more skeptical as in Eastern Ukraine, and such approaches proved completely ineffective where Russia did not have much influence, for instance in Odessa. Not only is there excellent reason to think that the population of Narva, in Estonia, has more in common with Odessa than Donetsk, much less Sevastopol, but authorities are at this point hyper-aware of this particular threat, and the Russians know that. Should Russia have designs on the Baltics, they may try many things, but I would be surprised if the operation looked much like Ukraine.

One question I am asking myself today is whether there is a Crimea equivalent in the influence operations space. Is there a point at which Russia feels that it has hit upon a successful tactic and it overreaches? I believe that its efforts to affect election campaigns may play just that role. But Russia's limitations in its efforts to weaken existing institutions depend tremendously on the strength of those institutions. Russian tools exploit weaknesses. The challenge, then, is to eliminate, or at least mitigate, those weaknesses. Thank you and I look forward to your questions.