

**Russian Hybrid Threats During the Libya Civil War**  
Lessons Learned and Their Applicability to a Baltic States Scenario

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## **Abstract**

Russia has demonstrated effective use of hybrid threats to increase its influence on global affairs. Most recently, Russia leveraged the Libyan Civil War to refine its hybrid threat capabilities to decrease Western and European influence for the benefit of the Kremlin. These hybrid threats include private military companies (PMC) and information warfare (IW). PMCs provide a physical Russian presence in Libya without the costs of active Russian conventional forces. Information warfare (IW) enables Russia to guise its agenda by leveraging pre-established media to sow pro-Libyan National Army messages and disseminate disinformation to taint the Government of National Accord's reputation. Each of these hybrid threats have enabled Russia to gain regional political and economic influence while maintaining plausible deniability of its involvement. Lessons learned during the Libyan Civil War will be leveraged for current and future Russian foreign affairs, including increasing Baltic States.

## Introduction

Russia's global influence has been enhanced by their use of hybrid threats in the Libyan Civil War. These threats include private military companies (PMC) and information warfare (IW). This paper will highlight lessons learned by Russia's effective use of both hybrid threat techniques to support the Libyan National Army. Through their successful use of these threats, Russia has gained regional political and economic benefit, which may embolden the Kremlin to extend these threats to other regions, specifically the Baltic States

## Hybrid Threats

The term hybrid warfare and hybrid threat are not interchangeable. *Hybrid warfare* is the phrase for combining warfare types. This includes asymmetric troops such as militias or special forces conducting operations in a region concurrent with a state's own, traditionally uniformed troops. In contrast, *Hybrid threat* is the appropriate phrase for actions that exploit the gray zone between peace and war. It is pre-conflict, before state-on-state skirmishes occur. Hybrid threats attempt to, "target vulnerabilities across a society to achieve goals gradually without triggering a decisive response" (Monaghan 2019, 85) and can be considered a subset of political warfare (2019). Traces of current Russian hybrid threats date back to the Cold War, and Russia's employment of hybrid threats has increased during the 2000s (Altman 2016). Previously, Russia employed hybrid threats in Estonia, Georgia, and Crimea and has continued this trend via their involvement in the Libyan Civil War.

## **Private Military Companies**

Russia's effective use of PMCs provides it a physical military presence in foreign lands while also enabling plausible deniability of their involvement. Outlawed by Russian law, PMC is the term du jour for today's version of the historic Russian/Soviet Cossacks and similar groups used by Russia since the 1500s (Sukhankin 2018). The plausible deniability of PMCs allow Russia to avoid national dissent while masking the Kremlin's true political global objectives. Primarily, PMCs have enabled Russia to gain access early into a conflict and inflict political and economic influence. An additional benefit of PMCs is Russia's ability to get involved in conflict without invoking public outcry. This decreases negative perception that would likely occur if the Russian uniformed military were involved in drawn-out conflicts similar to their experience in Afghanistan during the 1980s (Sukhankin 2019).

PMCs offer Russia an opportunity to enter tenuous conflicts early and begin to exert influence before other global powers can intervene. Since 2013, about two years before focus US involvement in Syria, Russia leveraged the Syrian battlegrounds to enable the Wagner Group (and similar PMCs) to garner credibility via combat (Borshchevskaya 2019).

Most Russian PMC involvement in conflict commences as foreign contracts provide security of key infrastructure (which is legal under international law) but soon balloons into essentially a skilled, experienced army of hundreds to thousands of Russians. Once established, PMCs offer Russia an opportunity for a long-term presence and access, often accompanied by economic and political benefit. In Libya, Russian PMCs started with providing mine clearing operations for the LNA leader, Khalifa Haftar, in areas that ISIS previously controlled. The infamous Wagner Group's involvement has ballooned into guarding oil installations and, eventually, military training and advanced weaponry for the LNA. Now, Russia is discussing a

naval port in Libya, which could cheapen and quicken the shipment of PMC troops and supplies to the North African nation (Borshchevskaya 2020).

### **Information Warfare**

The second lesson learned by Russia in the hybrid threat domain is the effectiveness of IW to influence foreign affairs. Russia has shown a keen ability to use the information domain to sow its influence alongside neighboring countries, but also in regions external to Russia's periphery. Russia has demonstrated a key competency in IW by leveraging appropriate media to disseminate its disinformation (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2020). Russia's use of IW yields two benefits: First, it further destabilizes already weakened leadership; second, it creates opportunities to sway public opinion towards Russia's interests.

Russia has shown good judgment in identifying locations ripe for disinformation based on internal turmoil or weak leadership, such as Syria and Libya (Lacher 2020). Thomas Arnold notes that Russia's IW successes in places like Libya, "deflect attention from or galvanize support for Kremlin interests rather than sow wide-spread division and discord like disinformation campaigns in the West" (2020, 7). Indications of foreign meddling in Libyan social media is evinced in a 2020 study, which uncovered Facebook posts about a recent attack in Libya and showed that the posts' slants aligned to the posts' geo-tagged originating country and their side of the conflict. These posts showed pro-LNA slants that either originated in Russian or Egypt, a location Russia very likely uses as a proxy for its disinformation campaign (Grossman et al. 2020).

Complementing Russia's use of PMCs to obscure its physical presence in foreign affairs, the Kremlin has exercised prudent use of PMCs that conduct IW. Wagner, for instance, hired Libyan consultants who sow disinformation based on local grievances to bring polarizing

subjects to the public eye. These consultants will localize disinformation depending on targets or goal, leveraging popular social media programs within the Libyan region (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2020). Wagner has also embedded itself into Libyan national media, providing money and content for pro-LNA messaging to *Aljamahiria TV*, one of Libya's longest running TV station with six million viewers in the region, and via the 300,000 daily copies of the LNA's *Voice of the People* newspaper (Grossman et al. 2020).

### **Implications to a Baltic State Scenario**

Per a NATO study, there is a strong reason to believe that Russia may be interested in revanchism in the Baltic Region (Bergmane 2020). Hybrid threats, including the employment of PMCs and an IW campaign could be conducted instead of, or ahead of, active Russian involvement. Additionally, use of hybrid threats by Russia may prevent NATO self-defense enaction in support of the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania due to the ambiguous nature of hybrid threats

One reason for Russian interest in the Baltic States includes the sizeable Russian-speaking residents inside each of these states. Per Russian doctrine, "Russia has a right and a duty to protect the interests of compatriots abroad, even at the expense of other states' sovereignty" (Bergmane 2020, 484). Reportedly, Russian descendants make up between 16-25% of the populations inside the Baltic States (2020). Akin to IW that it has conducted in Libya and elsewhere, the Kremlin may choose to increase IW to sow anti-Baltic sympathy in the region, aiming to reduce the influence of national or local government as well as NATO's. One recent example of this action occurred in March 2020, when Russian media outlet *Sputnik* alleged that COVID-19 began in a Latvian lab (2020). Having in-place sympathizers, in the form of Russian

speakers and descendants, will ease Russia's ability to disseminate disinformation ahead of an occupation or similar action within the Baltic States.

Another reason that Russia may be interested in actions against the Baltic States is because the Baltic States have decreased their dependency on Russian oil imports. Furthermore, with oil prices currently down, Russia incurs additional costs as it pays the Baltic States to use their ports for Russian oil exports (Ferris 2020). Given these reasons, Russia may decide that control of Baltic States' energy resources and infrastructure, such as seaports, may outweigh potential blowback from NATO and the West. Economically speaking, control of Baltic State seaports would provide Russia key ice-free ports for energy exports at drastically reduced cost relative to paying the Baltic State governments. Russia's PMCs have already demonstrated the capability to either capture and hold key energy infrastructure and could provide Russia plausible deniability of their involvement in the actions like what played out in Crimea.

### **Conclusion**

The effectiveness of Russia's hybrid threats cannot be questioned. PMCs like Wagner have demonstrated the effects that PMCs can have for Kremlin objectives in foreign territories, while giving Russia plausible deniability. IW use as a hybrid threat has aided Russia's influence on a global scale, and the benefits dramatically outweigh any financial costs. Russia will likely take these lessons learned from their hybrid threat employment in the Libyan Civil War to enhance future hybrid threat campaigns, including its goal to spread influence in the Baltic States. NATO and the US should continuously work to expose Russia's hybrid threats to curb the Kremlin's guised global influence campaign, especially in the Baltics

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