

ADAPTING THE MILITARY STRATEGY. RUSSIAN HARD POWER PRESENCE IN THE FORMER SOVIET SPACE AFTER 2008¹

VASILE ROTARU*

Abstract. *Embedded in a realist worldview, Russia has a “weakness” for hard power and zones of influence. For Moscow the control of the former Soviet republics represent both the guarantee of its security and the condition for the growth of its geopolitical strength. The present paper analyses Russian hard power presence in the former Soviet space, with a focus on the countries residing between the EU and Russia, assessing that Moscow has modernized recently not only its capabilities but also the military strategy and tactics in the area. The author compares the Georgian and Ukrainian wars arguing that the changes in approach of these military operations prove also Russian attempts to adapt its hard power to the evolutions of the international environment.*

Keywords: *Russian hard power; Georgian war; Ukrainian war; ‘near abroad’, power projection.*

Introduction

Weeks after the Georgian 2008 War, Russian president Medvedev clearly stated that “Russia, like other countries in the world, has regions where it has privileged interests, [and that] these are regions where countries with which we have friendly relations are located”². This declaration was aimed as a warning to the West and especially NATO, which Georgia and Ukraine had expressed their intentions to join, that Moscow would not accept any hard power intrusion of others in the former Soviet space.

* Postdoctoral Researcher at the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration from Bucharest, Romania; vasilerotaru@yahoo.com.

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² Dmitri Medvedev, *Interview on the TV channels “Russia”, “Pervyi” and NTV*, 31 August, 2008, available online at: http://archive.kremlin.ru/appears/2008/08/31/1917_type63374type63379_205991.shtml.

Trapped in a realist way of thinking in matters of foreign policy and obsessed by the fear of being encircled by enemies³, the Kremlin perceives the control of the hard power of the former Soviet republics as a guarantee of the security of its own borders. With a good historical memory of the 19-20th century's military invasions from Western Europe, Russia pays a particular attention to the countries residing currently between its borders and those of the EU. Thus, remembering that Western invaders used to make their way towards Central Russia and Moscow towards Belarus, the Kremlin keeps this country as close as possible as a precaution. Ukraine is seen as Russia's southwestern anchor and its Achilles' heel. And what Ukraine is to Russia, Moldova is seen to be for Ukraine. Therefore, Moscow considers that if Ukraine cannot be defended, neither can Russia, Chişinău "earning" this way a strategic importance for Russia too⁴. And, finally, the South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) has been for Moscow the buffer zone and an area of rivalry with Turkey, Iran and the USA.

The invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the on-going war in Ukraine has showed how far is Russia ready to go in order to maintain its hard power positions in the former Soviet space. These wars deserve a special analysis not only due to their impact on Russia's relations with the West but also because they show how has Russian Army evolved recently in terms of capabilities and military strategy and tactics.

After analyzing Russian military presence in the former Soviet republics, the paper will focus on Moscow's differences of approach of the wars in Georgia and Ukraine, arguing that Russian army is trying to adapt to the international system not only in terms of military equipment but also in terms of military tactics and strategy.

Projecting Power in the 'Near Abroad'

Markowitz and Fariss define power projection as "the deployment of military force beyond one's own capital", arguing that the ability of a state to project power is determined by two variables: the amount of power of the state and the degree to which that power decays over distance. The more powerful a state is and the less of its power decays over distance, the higher is its power projection capability⁵. The ability to project power plays an important role in influencing the international affairs. States with robust power projection capability can also export security, which allows them to reassure allies and deter potential adversaries. The stronger is the ability to project military power (farther, more precise, discriminate and destructive) the bigger is the influence of a state over

³ Vasile Rotaru, *The Eastern Partnership. A turning point in EU-Russia relations?*, Military Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014, p. 97.

⁴ George Friedman, "Geopolitical Journey, Part 4: Moldova", 2010, available online at: https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20101118_geopolitical_journey_part_4_moldova.

⁵ Jonathan N. Markowitz, Christopher J. Fariss, "Going the Distance: The Price of Projecting Power", in *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations*, 39: 2, 119-143, 2013, p. 123.

international actors and on the international system on the whole⁶. The ability to project power determines, though, which states can compete for global or regional leadership.

The intensity of power projection depends on geographic proximity. It is cheaper to deploy, resupply and maintain soldiers closer to home-state borders and on the other side, a state is first interested in having influence in the area close to its borders, both for security and economic reasons.

Throughout history empires have relied on foreign military bases to enforce their rules, whether it was the Empire of Alexander the Great, Rome, British or French Empires. Today's global or regional powers prove their strength through military bases spread abroad as well: both for protecting their interests and for exporting security. In this respect Pax Americana does not differ from Pax Romana or Pax Britannica⁷. However, the military bases abroad should not be seen only in terms of direct military end, but they also influence the security the economy and the culture of the host country, inevitably interfering in domestic politics. Sometimes foreign military bases can give rise to major social protests in the host countries⁸. A recent example in this respect is the January 2015 mass protest in Gyumri and Yerevan, after a Russian serviceman stationed at the Russian military base in Gyumri was accused of brutally murdering seven members of an Armenian family. The incident generated a wave of anti-Russian sentiment, protestors demanding the removal of the Russian military base from Armenia. However, like all powers owning military bases abroad, Russia has always been reluctant to renounce at any base once acquired.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union many (Russian) domestic military bases found suddenly on the territory of new independent neighbouring countries: in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. Despite domestic economic problems Russia has put efforts into keeping these bases whether it had to resort to leases (in Kazakhstan), military actions (in Moldova and Georgia), economic and political pressure (Belarus and Armenia) or territorial annexation (Ukraine). Of the ten former Soviet republics where Russia had military bases, Moscow "lost" only two of them, Azerbaijan (Baku and Moscow failed to negotiate the continuation of the lease of Gabala Radar Station, which expired at the end of 2012) and Uzbekistan (since 2012, after Uzbekistan left the Collective Security Treaty Organization the Karshi Kanabad (K2) air base has been used exclusively by Uzbek Army).

In the European 'near abroad' Russia had the easiest task in maintaining its military bases in Armenia and Belarus. The small Caucasian republic hosts two Russian military facilities: a base in Gyumri, where was located the Soviet army's 127th Motor Rifle Division and a small air base in Yerevan⁹. The Gyumri

⁶ *Idem*, p. 124.

⁷ George Marion, "U.S. military bases and empire", in *Monthly Review* 53:10, 2002, pp. 1-14, p. 1.

⁸ *Idem*, p. 11.

⁹ Gevorg Melikyan, "The dynamics of military basing in South Caucasus", in L. Rodrigues and S. Glebov (Eds.), *Military Bases: Historical Perspectives, Contemporary Challenges*, IOS Press, 2009, pp. 188- 196, p. 190.

base has around 5,000 permanent staff and is equipped with S-300 anti-aircraft missiles and Mikoyan MiG-29 fighters¹⁰. In 2010 Russia extended the agreement on hosting the military base in Gyumri to 2044. Moscow does not pay any lease fee to Yerevan, providing instead weapons and military equipment for Armenian army and Russian border guards ensure the protection of Armenia's frontiers with Turkey and Iran.

Belarus hosts currently two Russian military bases, both technical facilities. The Vileyka (Minsk region) 43d Communication Center of Russia's Navy has been in operation since 1964. It ensures the communications of the Navy's main headquarters with Russia's strategic nuclear submarines in Atlantic, Indian and partly Pacific Oceans. The Vileyka base deals also with radio electronic warfare and radio and technical intelligence. The second military base, Volga radio-technical unit, is located near Baranavichy (Brest region). It is a missile attack warning system, which is able to detect missiles and space units from the distance of 4,800 kilometers, and which follows also the movements of NATO submarines in North Atlantic. Belarus does not collect any lease fee from Moscow. Russia plans to open a third military base in Belarus, an air base that would host Russian Su-27M3 fighter jets, capable of carrying bombs and hitting land targets three times more efficiently than a basic Su-27 jet¹¹.

Russia has not encountered many difficulties in maintaining its military bases in Central Asian former Soviet republics neither. In the Eurasian Union's partner, Kazakhstan, Russia has three military test centers; leases the Baykonur Cosmodrome, whose rental agreement was extended for through 2050; has a radar station that provides coverage against missile attacks from western and central China, India, Pakistan and the Bay of Bengal; and a regiment of the transport aviation.

In Kyrgyzstan, Russia has a naval testing base where conducts tests for anti-submarine weapons; leases an air base, a Navy long range communications center, an automatic seismic station and a radio-seismic laboratory designed to detect the earthquakes and any use of nuclear weapons.

Tajikistan hosts the 201st Russian Military Base with around 7,000 regular personnel and an opto-electronic complex (Okno) that is able of providing global monitoring for orbiting objects over Eurasia, North and Central Africa, and the Indian, Pacific, and Atlantic Oceans.

The hardest tasks in maintaining the military presence in the 'near abroad' turned to be the cases of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. In all three countries, Russia has secured its military bases by using hard power means: supporting secessionist wars (in Moldova – Transnistria), invading sovereign country (in Georgia) or officially violating the territorial integrity of a neighbouring state (in Ukraine). In all of these cases, Moscow justified its actions by protecting the

¹⁰ *Sputniknews.com* (2013), "Russia to upgrade its bases in Armenia", available online at: <http://sputniknews.com/military/20130627/181913865/Russia-to-Upgrade-Its-Bases-in-Armenia.html>.

¹¹ *Charter97.org* (2014), "New Russian military base may emerge in Belarus in 2015", available online at: <http://charter97.org/en/news/2014/8/6/109959/>.

rights of Russian ethnics living in the former Soviet republics and by the need to protect its own borders from NATO's advancement in its "sphere of privileged interests" (the war in Transnistria was determined by Moldova's policy of rapprochement with Romania, however, the protracted conflict has been used lately as a leverage on Chisinau's government to keep Moldova away from NATO, by insisting on the neutrality status of the country).

In the Republic of Moldova, the Soviet 14th Army was stationed in Transnistrian region in 1956. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union it passed under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation and in 1992 it was actively involved in the war of Transnistria, determining the outcome of the conflict. Despite Chişinău's reiterated demands that Russian troops be withdrawn, Moscow has refused under the pretext that Russian soldiers needed to protect the large amount of heavy technology and ammunition stored in Transnistria (in Colbasna) since the Soviet times. At the 1999 OSCE summit in Istanbul Russia agreed to withdraw its troops from Moldova completely by December 31, 2002. However, Moscow has not respected its commitments, linking later the withdrawal to the peaceful resolution of the Transnistrian conflict.

Official data indicate that at the moment there are around 1.500 Russian military personnel in Transnistria and the military base comprises a motorised rifle brigade, an anti-aircraft missile regiment, regiment communication systems and an air group. Officially Russian soldiers are deployed there under the status of peacekeeping operation, in fact, however, they maintain the protracted character of the conflict and put a great pressure on Moldova's government, influencing to an important extent the foreign policy of the former Soviet republic.

In Georgia, before 2007 there were four Russian bases: in Akhalkalaki (on the southern border with Turkey), Batumi (Adjara), Gudauta (Abkhazia) and Vaziani (near Tbilisi); and peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Under the provisions of the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit Treaty, by July 2001, Russia withdrew officially the military bases from Gudauta and Vaziani and before of the end of 2007 closed Batumi and Akhalkalaki bases as well. However, Russian peacekeeping forces remained in Abkhazia where they continued to use Gudauta base. In fact, the military base in Abkhazia remained functional and Moscow insisted that the facilities were used only by Russian peacekeepers.

Thus, despite the official commitments, Russia was not willing to give up its military presence in Georgia. Moreover, once Tbilisi accelerated its efforts to join NATO, Moscow was already making plans to reinforce its military presence in the Caucasian republic. In August 2012, Putin told journalist that by late 2006 – early 2007, the Russian General Staff developed the plan of invading Georgia and negotiated it with Russian president, and that South Ossetian militia was trained by Russians under that plan¹². Therefore there is no wonder that after the 2008 war, Moscow deployed military bases in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia,

¹² RT (2012), "Russia was prepared for Georgian aggression – Putin", available online at: <http://rt.com/politics/putin-ossetia-war-plan-168/>.

the separatist regions it has recognized as independent states. Thus, currently, Russia has officially about 3,500 troops in Abkhazia within the 7th Russian Military Base, equipped with battle tanks, armoured personnel carriers and fighter crafts Su-27s and MiG-29s. In South Ossetia, Moscow deployed the 4th Russian Military Base with about 3,800 soldiers, tanks, armoured personnel carriers, tactical missiles and launch and anti-missile rockets. Both bases are leased for 49 years with a possibility of automatic extension for 15 years (in 2010 Abkhazia extended Russia's lease of military base until 2059 with 15 years extension possibility).

Russia has recently strengthened even more its military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, further complicating Georgia's plans to join NATO. On November 24, 2014 Vladimir Putin and Abkhazian "president" Raul Khadzhimba, both former KGB officers, signed The Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on Alliance and Strategic Partnership which provides the creation of a joint force of Russian and Abkhaz troops and a "joint information / co-ordination centre of the organs of internal affairs". On March 18, 2015, on one-year anniversary of the annexation of Crimea, Vladimir Putin signed a similar agreement – The Treaty on Alliance and Integration with his self-declared South Ossetian counterpart, Leonid Tibilov, envisaging the creation of a common defense and security space. In other words, Russia formalized its intentions to maintain and defend its military presence in Georgia.

Similarly to Georgian case, Russia has used the hard power to ensure its strategic military presence in Ukraine as well. The annexation of Crimea, justified in the name of defending ethnic Russians living there, aimed in fact to secure Russian military presence in the peninsula. Vladimir Putin clear stated that the seizure of Crimea was 'needed' for avoiding Russia to be "practically ousted from the Black Sea area" and to avoid NATO ships to be docked in Sevastopol. For avoiding this danger, Russia had to "react accordingly"¹³. At stake was the main Russian overseas military base. The Crimean peninsula occupies a strategic position in the Black Sea, being practically in the middle, which confers considerable advantages for both, naval and air deployments.

Before the annexation of Crimea, Russian Naval Base of the Black Sea Fleet employed about 13,000 soldiers and 13,000 civilian specialists¹⁴. According to the 1997 Agreement between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Status and Conditions of the Russian Federation Black Sea Fleet's Stay on Ukrainian Territory, Russian fleet was limited to 388 ships (including 14 submarines) and 161 planes and helicopters. The initial lease contract was to expire in 2017, however, in 2010 the 'gas for fleet' agreement extended the lease of Russian military base until 2042.

¹³ Vladimir Putin, "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin", 2014, available online at: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/7034>.

¹⁴ Carlo De Marco, "Russia's presence in the shared neighbourhood", in Belyaeva Nina (ed.), *Russia and the Council of Europe: topics for common agenda. A look from Norway*, Intelcorp, Moscow, 2011, pp. 57-73, p. 69.

After the annexation of Crimea, Russia denounced the agreement on lease of the military base, took over Ukrainian military installation in Crimea for free and announced a modernization and strengthening of the Black Sea Fleet. By 2020 Russia's Black Sea Fleet should receive 30 new warships, submarines and auxiliary vessels, one of the French Mistral assault ship might also be housed by Sevastopol port¹⁵ if it is delivered to Russia; air defense systems will be deployed to Crimea and the number of Naval Infantry (the 'little green men') will be increased. On 26 March 2014 (less than a week after the annexation of Ukrainian peninsula), Russian Ministry of Defense announced its plans of establishing a "missile-carrying regiment" near Crimea's capital, Simferopol, that would host Tupolev Tu-22M3 long-range supersonic bombers. These plans of remilitarization of Crimea shows how important it is for Russia to maintain its strategic positions at the Black Sea, to project its power in the region and that Moscow has no intention to return the annexed Ukrainian peninsula to its legal owner.

CSTO – a kind of “Regional NATO”?

Besides the above efforts to maintain its military forces in the former Soviet republics, Moscow has put efforts to strengthen the legitimacy of its presence in the 'near abroad' by getting behind its own security organization. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was established in 2002 by the Tashkent Treaty and originally included 9 member states: Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It is the successor of The Collective Security Treaty, which was founded in 1992. The main task of the CSTO is "to provide national security of member states on collective basis, to provide help, including military one to the member state which became a victim of aggression"¹⁶. The organization is mimicking NATO trying to impose itself as an alternative to the Western military alliance for the former Soviet space: the CSTO has similar structure as NATO, the Collective Rapid Reaction Force corresponds to NATO's Responsive Force, on the model of NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence the CSTO intends to establish a Centre for cyber incidents. Similar to NATO's article 5, the CSTO's article 4 states that an aggression committed against one member state will be considered as an aggression against all members of the organization and the other states will render the aggressed member necessary assistance, including military one.

However, besides the obvious differences concerning the experience, number of members, military capabilities and budget of the two organizations, the CSTO stands out for two more important aspects: contrary to its Western model, instead of expanding, Russia-led organization has shrunk from 9 members in 1993 to

¹⁵ *The Moscow Times* (2014), "Second Mistral warship to head Russia's Mediterranean Fleet", July 27, available online at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/2nd-mistral-warship-set-for-mediterranean-role/504117.html>.

¹⁶ www.odkb.gov.ru.

only 6 today (Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan have left the organization); and while NATO does not accept members with unsettled disputes over unsettled national borders, the CSTO has ignored this aspect, which only has weakened the coherence of the organization.

So far, the CSTO has failed to win confidence even among its members that it can provide stability and security for the region. In 2010 the CSTO did not succeed to pass one of the most important exams – the crisis in Kyrgyzstan. The organization failed to intervene during the protests that threatened the political leadership in Bishkek and refused to send peacekeepers to calm the violence that erupted in the South of the country between Kyrgyz and Uzbek groups. It was the first time when a member state asked directly for collective support and the CSTO proved that it was not able to cope with real regional threats.

Yet, even if the CSTO has never yet undertaken any collective security operations and the utility and reliability of the CSTO for its members states is questionable, for Russia it represents a useful instrument for projecting its power in the region. The CSTO offers Moscow the perfect justification for Russian existing military facilities in the member states, provides motivation for the former Soviet republics militaries to cooperate with Russia and to allow Moscow to extend its military presence in the area. Thus, under the guise of protecting CSTO member states from potential threat from NATO, Russia has announced recently that plans to expand its airbases in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan and to establish an airbase for fighter jets in Belarus in 2016, the CSTO Secretary-General Nikolai Bordyuzha motivating this as a “response to actions taken by the U.S. in deploying air assets to the Baltics”¹⁷.

Beyond the former Soviet republics, Moscow has currently only one military base abroad – in Tartus, Syria (in 2002, Russia closed its military bases in Cuba and Vietnam). In February 2014, Russian Defense Minister declared that Russia was having discussions with Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Algeria, Cyprus, the Seychelles, Vietnam and Singapore to build military bases in those countries¹⁸. In February 2015, Russia and Cyprus signed an agreement which give Russian navy ships access to Cypriot ports, and officially requested Greece to allocate (and apparently have been chosen) land for the construction of a military base on its territory¹⁹. These plans show Russia’s ambitions to increase its influence in the Balkans and on global level. However, severely affected by the economic crisis, it is to be seen to what extent Russian military ambitions can be achieved on global level. For the time being, Moscow remains a strong regional military power.

¹⁷ Matthew Bodner, “With Ukraine Revitalizing NATO, Russia Dusts Off its Own Security Alliance”, in *The Moscow Times*, October 23, 2014, available online at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/russia-s-csto-stumbles-on-regional-conflicts-in-drive-to-rival-nato/509986.html>.

¹⁸ *Cnsnews.com* (2014), “Russia Seeks Access to Bases in Eight Countries for Its Ships and Bombers”, February 28, available online at: <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/russia-seeks-access-bases-eight-countries-its-ships-and-bombers>.

¹⁹ *Zn.ua* (2015), “Russia wants to build a military base in Greece”, February 3, available online at: http://mw.ua/WORLD/russia-wants-to-build-a-military-base-in-greece-1093_.html.

From Blitzkrieg to “New War”

Since 2008 Georgian war Russian army has evolved not only in terms of capabilities but also in terms of military tactics and strategy. If in 2008, Russian army relied on Blitzkrieg tactic, which brought the victory over Georgian army in just five days, but Russia had to assume officially its military involvement; in Ukraine, Moscow annexed Crimea without any bloodshed, denied first any involvement, recognizing that its troops were involved in the seizure of the Ukrainian peninsula only one month after the annexation. Moscow has denied any involvement in the war in Donbas as well despite multiple evidences of rebels using Russian arms and dead Russian soldiers in the fighting in eastern Ukraine. Moreover, Moscow has accused Kiev of genocide and has used massively the means of information to spread doubt and disturb the reality of the events in Donbas. Is this change in war character evidence of Russian military strategy modernization or of adaptation to the international context? In order to answer to this question we should first analyze the two wars.

The Georgian Blitzkrieg

The word *blitzkrieg* (“lightning war”) is classically associated with the German military tactics and operations in the first half of the Second World War. According to Oxford dictionary, it represents “an intense military campaign intended to bring about a swift victory”²⁰. The blitzkrieg is centered on the notion of quick battlefield decision and aims at big achievements in an extremely short period²¹.

The Georgian war lasted only five days and despite the severe weaponry and coordination shortcomings Russia achieved a crushing victory against the Georgian army. The war was planned by Moscow already in 2006-2007 and started on 8 August 2008 by Georgian forces attack against South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali. In the first week of August, Tbilisi had been provoked by frequent skirmishes along the ceasefire line between South Ossetia and Georgia, which determined president Saakashvili to start the military operation. The most probably the skirmishes were part of Russian plan to put the blame on Georgians for the war that would follow. Russia made obvious preparation for the invasion of Georgia since the beginning of summer 2008. In June and July Moscow had made repairs of the railroad track in Abkhazia; and in mid-July Russian army deployed 8,000 soldiers, 30 fixed-wing aircrafts and helicopters and 700 vehicles close to Georgian border for the military exercise “Kavkaz-2008”. The exercise officially ended on August 2, however, according to media reports, the command posts remained operational and the 58th Army maintained a state of alert²².

²⁰ www.oxforddictionaries.com.

²¹ Avi Kober, “From Blitzkrieg To Attrition: Israel’s Attrition Strategy and Staying Power”, in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 16:2, 216-240, 2005, p. 217.

²² Pallin Carolina Vendil, Fredrik Westerlund, “Russia’s war in Georgia: lessons and consequences”, in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 20:2, 400-424, 2009, p. 406.

Having its troops close to Georgia and just finishing rehearsing “scenarios of a military operation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia” during the military exercise²³, the intensification of skirmishes provoked by the pro-Russian separatist forces of South Ossetia came on time and only facilitated the implementation of Russian military plan to coerce Georgia for its stubbornness to join NATO.

Thus, after 12 hours since Tbilisi launched the attack on Tskhinvali, Russian troops invaded Georgia through South Ossetia. On 9 August Russian forces opened a second front in Abkhazia. Russian aircrafts were bombing both Georgian military and economic targets (bridges, railways) while the Black Sea Fleet left Sevastopol for Georgian territorial waters to impose a naval blockade. In five days, Russian army defeated the American-trained Georgian army with minimal casualties²⁴. On 12 August, Moscow announced the end of military operations, however, the next day Russian troops occupied Poti, the main port of Georgia, where only withdrew on 22 August.

Russia reached the main military objectives – to take irreversible control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow established sizable military bases in both separatist republics and controls the critical mountain crossings, which has significantly improved its strategic military positions in the Caucasus²⁵. It was a victory reached in a short time war, achieved not due to sophisticated tactics or technology by mainly due to the numerical superiority of Russian army, and due to the quantity rather than the quality of the military equipment.

During the Georgian war Russia tried to appear as the victim and not the initiator of the war and for achieving this purpose tried to combine the military operations with cyber warfare and diplomatic offensive. Moscow put efforts to create pro-Russian media coverage of the war and IT attacks on official Georgian sites. These attempts have not enjoyed much success though, Russian analysts criticizing the General Staff’s information and media management for inefficiency and lack of qualified personnel for Information Warfare²⁶. The war in Ukraine would show that Russia has learned from these mistakes.

The “New War”

The Crimean crisis erupted within the context of the political turmoil and civil unrest (the Euromaidan) in Ukraine, triggered by the refusal of president Yanukovich to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. On 21 February 2014 Viktor Yanukovich left the capital and the next day Verhovnaia Rada voted to remove him from office and tried to pass the bill for the abolishment of the controversial Language Law that offered Russian and other minority languages

²³ Martin Malek, “Georgia & Russia: the “unknown” prelude to the “Five Day War”, in *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 3 (2), 2009, pp. 227-232, p. 229.

²⁴ Emmanuel Karagiannis, “The Russian Interventions in South Ossetia and Crimea Compared: Military Performance, Legitimacy and Goals”, in *Contemporary Security Policy*, 35:3, 2014, 400-420, p. 408.

²⁵ Pallin Carolina Vendil, Fredrik Westerlund (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 403.

²⁶ *Idem*, p. 404.

the status of regional official language. In reaction, pro-Russian protests erupted in Crimean peninsula. Meanwhile, military men in unmarked green uniforms and Russian weapons, the infamous “little green men”, started taking control of the Ukrainian peninsula, occupying the strategic objectives. On 27 February the (pro-)Russian gunmen sized Crimean parliament and Council of Ministers buildings, replacing the Ukrainian flags with Russian ones. The local government was dissolved and a member of Russian Unity Party that had won only 4% of the vote at the 2010 parliamentary elections, Sergey Aksyonov, was voted as the new Crimean prime-minister, during a closed door-session, where some MPs were not allowed to enter the building and those present had their phones confiscated, the voting rising questions about whether the quorum was reached²⁷.

After the seizure of the local government and parliament, the next day, the (pro-) Russian forces took control of the Simferopol airport and local TV stations. Then installed checkpoints on the border between Crimea and mainland Ukraine and isolated the local Ukrainian military bases from their headquarters. It was a bloodless occupation, Kiev ordering its troops not to resist. It is also noteworthy that while the (pro-)Russian forces were occupying Crimea, following a well-developed plan, Russia was conducting military exercises close to its western borders.

While the West was condemning Russian military involvement in Crimea, Moscow denied any implication in the actions in Ukrainian peninsula or that the “little green men” were Russian soldiers, claiming instead that those were local self-defense volunteers. Only after the annexation of peninsula, president Putin admitted that because after the fleet of Yanukovich there was “no legitimate executive authority in Ukraine [...] nobody to talk to” and Crimean population, that opposed to the coup, was threatened with repression, Russia “could [have not abandoned] Crimea and its residents in distress. This would have been betrayal on our part”²⁸, and acknowledged that “Crimean self-defense forces were of course backed by Russian servicemen”²⁹.

On 6 March 2014, the Crimean parliament voted to secede from Ukraine and to join the Russian Federation. Just 10 days later it was organized a referendum in this respect. According to the official Crimean and Russian data 95% of the participants confirmed the decision of the local parliament. On 21 March 2014, Russia officially annexed the Ukrainian peninsula. This decision of the Kremlin surprised most of the world. While the West was still trying to understand what was happening in Crimea, Moscow acted quickly, using ‘shock tactics’.

The operation of the annexation of Crimea occurred smoothly. Russian soldiers taking part in these actions wore new modern uniforms and carried new

²⁷ *Reuters* (2014), “How the separatists delivered Crimea to Moscow”, March 13, available online at: <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/03/13/ukraine-crisis-russia-aksyonov-idINL6N0M93AH20140313>.

Russia Today (2014), “Putin acknowledges Russian military servicemen were in Crimea”, April 17, available online at: <http://rt.com/news/crimea-defense-russian-soldiers-108/>.

²⁸ Vladimir Putin (2014), *op. cit.*

²⁹ *RT* (2014), “Putin acknowledges Russian military servicemen were in Crimea”, available online at: <http://rt.com/news/crimea-defense-russian-soldiers-108/>.

weapons. They had push-to-talk encrypted radios, navigation equipment, and thermal and night-vision sights for firearms and demonstrated professionalism in conducting a very well organized covert operation. They did not open fire, using instead persuasion and intimidation³⁰. Both the capabilities and the strategy differed from those used during the Georgian war.

Yet, Russian military operation in Ukraine was not over with the annexation of Crimea. Weeks after the loss of its peninsula, Kiev authorities had to face a more serious problem in the South – East of the country. On 6 April 2014 pro-Russian protestors stormed the Regional State Administration buildings in Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv raising Russian flags and calling for referendum on independence. While Ukrainian authorities regained shorty control of Kharkiv, the pro-Russian separatists continued to occupy administrative buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk, which were proclaimed People's Republics. The forces of so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) started then taking control of strategic infrastructure across Donetsk Oblast'. It is to be mentioned that the leaders of the separatist movement in the South Eastern Ukraine were Russian nationalists with various ties to the Kremlin. Both Igor Strelkov (DPR's supreme military commander) and Aleksandr Borodai (DPR's prime minister) are Russian citizens who normally reside in Moscow and who came to Donbas after being in Crimea during the events that preceded the annexation of peninsula. Strelkov had been officer in Russian security services and fought in Transnistria, Bosnia, and Chechnya, while Borodai was a member of Russian National Unity, a neo-fascist organization³¹.

On 15 April Ukraine's acting president, Olexander Turchynov, announced the start of an "anti-terrorist operation" against the insurgents. By that time DPR's forces had occupied the biggest cities of the region: Mariupol, Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Horlivka, Makiivka, etc.

While Ukrainian forces were retaking control of parts of Donetsk region, in May, clashes erupted in Odessa; Donetsk and Luhansk declared independence after unrecognised referendums and signed an agreement to create a confederative state of Novorossia, which should have included most of southern and eastern Ukrainian regions. The fighting in Eastern Ukraine worsened after Kiev signed the Association Agreement with the EU, on 27 June. On 17 July 2014 the war reached a new level, when the Malayasian Airlines flight MH17 was shot down in rebel held territory, killing 298 civilians on board. Russia has denied any involvement in the war, and was conducting an aggressive media campaign against Ukraine's forces spreading doubts in Western countries that the pro-Russian forces shot down the Malayasian plane.

At the beginning of August 2014, Russia deployed troops on the Ukrainian border and organized a series of training exercises after hundreds of Ukrainian

³⁰ Emmanuel Karagiannis (2014), *op. cit.*, pp. 408-409.

³¹ Andrea Peters, "Leaders of pro-Russian separatist forces in eastern Ukraine resign", 18 August 2014, available online at: <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/08/18/sepa-a18.html>.

soldiers crossed the border into Russia forced by separatists' artillery fire. Later that month, Moscow sent an aid convoy of 100 lorries in Luhansk without Ukrainian Government permission, while Kiev authorities and NATO released evidence of implication of Russian soldiers artillery and armoured vehicles in the war in eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin denied again its involvement claiming instead that Russian border soldiers crossed to Ukraine by mistake during a routine drills. Within the context of increasing tension, on 5 September, the representatives of Ukraine, Russia, DPR and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) met in Minsk where signed a cease-fire agreement.

However, the fighting broke out even on the night of 6-7 September, both parties accusing each other of the violation of Minsk agreement. The fighting worsened at the beginning of 2015, mostly near Donetsk International Airport. Another round of peace talks took place in February 2015. The "Minsk II" agreement is now in force, the effective ceasefire being established after the separatists captured Debaltseve, an important strategic point. According to the UN more than 6,000 people were killed since the war erupted in Eastern Ukraine in April 2014³².

The war in Ukraine differs from that in Georgia not only in length but especially in military strategy and tactics: Russia has fought by proxies in Donbas and has acknowledge its implication in Crimea only after the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula was completed; the Kremlin has used also its secret agents infiltrated in Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) to preserve a bloody and miserable stalemate. According to one prominent Ukrainian security expert the Russian agents constituted 30% of SBU personnel in 2014³³. In parallel with military operations Moscow has conducted a (des-)information war, both at home by vilifying the Ukrainian authorities and their Western allies, justifying its support for their "brother Russians" from Crimea and Eastern Ukraine; and abroad – by spreading doubts and confusion through presenting an alternative reality and building conspiracy theories. The economic pressure was another instrument used by Russia during the war, which besides banning of Ukrainian exports, threatened Kiev with disruption of gas supplies. These features indicate the complexity of the war in Ukraine, which a great majority of specialists called a hybrid war.

There are many definitions of the hybrid war. Lukianov³⁴ understands it as "undeclared confrontation that combines means – from military to economic and propaganda"; McCuen³⁵ defines hybrid wars as "a combination of symmetric and asymmetric war in which intervening forces conduct traditional military operations against enemy military forces and targets while they must

³² DW (2015), "UN: More than 6,000 killed in Ukraine war", available online at: <http://www.dw.de/un-more-than-6000-killed-in-ukraine-war/a-18288419>.

³³ Mark Galeotti, "Moscow's spy game. Why Russia is winning the intelligence war in Ukraine", in *Foreign Affairs*, 30 October 2014, available online at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142321/mark-galeotti/moscows-spy-game>.

³⁴ Fjodor Lukianov, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Gibridnyi-mir-17281>.

³⁵ John J. McCuen, "Hybrid wars", in *Military Review*, March-April 2008, pp. 107-113, p. 108.

simultaneously – and more decisively – attempt to achieve control of the combat zone’s indigenous populations by securing and stabilizing them”, while in Hoffman’s opinion “hybrid wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder”³⁶. Thus, to summarize, hybrid wars combine different type of warfare: conventional, insurgent, cyber; to which are added asymmetrical military means, economic pressure, spread of disinformation and propaganda.

The hybrid war is neither new nor Russian invention. In medieval ages bribing a traitor to open the gates of a castle under siege or the poisoning of wells represented hybrid tactics. Last century, hybrid tactics were used in Vietnam war as well. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 started with 700 special troops wearing Afghan uniforms seizing key military, media and government buildings, including the presidential palace, actions strikingly similar to what happened in Crimea in February 2014³⁷. Hybrid tactics were used in the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well.

However, there are some differences between the “old” hybrid wars and the “new”, recent ones. These differences are determined mainly by two factors: the globalization and technology. In support of this idea, Kaldor³⁸ presents the assessment of theorists that argue that the globalization has transformed the states changing their role in relation to organised violence: the monopoly of violence is eroded both from above by the international rules and institutions, and from below as other states become weaker under the impact of globalisation. Then, the development of military technology, which became more accurate and destructive, has made the symmetrical war increasingly destructive and therefore difficult to win. If one add to these the implication of the new forms of communication (information technology, television and radio, cheap air travel), that became an important tool of nowadays wars, making easier to spread fear and panic or to make a local conflict known across oceans; the global connections, including criminal networks; Diaspora links; and the presence of international agencies, NGOs, and journalists, argues Kaldor³⁹, then we can talk about “old” and “new wars”. The scholar draws attention that in the “new wars” it is difficult to distinguish between what is state or non-state and what is external or internal and since many combatants are police, militia, private contractors, mercenaries, paramilitaries or criminals of various kinds, the figures for other military and civilian casualties are very difficult to identify⁴⁰.

Analyzing the war in Ukraine we can notice that the elements presented by Kaldor can easily be identified there: Russia has conducted intense information warfare, spreading confusion and fear, constructing an alternative reality,

³⁶ Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid warfare and challenges”, *JFQ*, Issue 52, 2009, 34-39, p. 36.

³⁷ Nicu Popescu, “Hybrid tactics: neither new nor only Russian”, *EUISS Alert Issue*, no. 4, January 2015, p. 1.

³⁸ Mary Kaldor, “In defence of new wars”, in *Stability*, 2(1): 4, 2013, pp. 1-16, p. 4.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Idem*, pp. 7-9.

blurring the border between aggressor and aggressed; despite ample evidence of Russian military interventions in the South Eastern Ukraine provided by both Kiev and the West, Moscow has denied any implication⁴¹, thus maintaining confusion about the internal and external forces involved in the war; the footage in the rebel held territories has shown also the presence of the most advanced military technology⁴² and there was presented evidence of testing new technology in Donbas, including the cosmic one by Russian authorities⁴³.

If during the war in Georgia, Russia has not had a problem to openly invade the neighbouring country under the pretext of protection of Russian citizens living in South Ossetia, Moscow refrained from using the same tactics in Donbas or Crimea, preferring instead the proxy military actions and denying any involvement (Russia admitted its implication in Crimea only after the peninsula was annexed). This strategy can be attributed to the first feature of the “new wars” – the context of globalization. Moscow is member of the CIS, Council of Europe, OSCE, UN Security Council, etc. Learning the lessons from Georgian War, when Russia paid internationally for the invasion of the neighbouring country, Russia adapted its military strategy to the international environment: reinterpreted the international law (invoking Kosovo case, Crimea was annexed after a referendum of local population) and dissimulated its military involvement in Donbas, avoiding a direct war with Ukraine.

Conclusions

Russia is not willing to give up the military presence in the former Soviet republics, on the contrary – it aims to increase it. With few exceptions (Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan), Moscow has kept its military positions in this area even if that involved the use of force or the violation of territorial integrity of its neighbours. And unlike the ‘90s and 2000s, Russian military has lately experienced a modernization not only of its equipment but also of its military tactics and strategy.

As one can notice, there are similarities but also significant differences between the Georgian and the Ukrainian wars. The both military actions were planned in advance: the invasion of Georgia was prepared in 2006-2007, while the annexation of Crimea and the break of Eastern Ukraine appears to have been planned between 4-15 February 2014, weeks before the Ukrainian government

⁴¹ *The Moscow Times* (2015), “Britain Says Photos Show Russia’s Most Advanced Missiles in Eastern Ukraine”, 19 February, available online at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/britain-says-photos-show-russia-s-most-advanced-missiles-in-eastern-ukraine/516196.html>.

⁴² Roger McDermott, “Vladimir Putin’s Dirty Little War”, in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 12 Issue: 21, 2015, available online at: http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43488&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=958be7b67f9424747b4f739de99077ae#.VQaiu0ugE0T.

⁴³ *Agerpres* (2015), “Cosmonauții ruși de pe ISS au experimentat teledetecția deasupra Donbasului” [Russian cosmonauts to the ISS experienced remote sensing over Donbas], 13 March, available online at: <http://www.agerpres.ro/sci-tech/2015/03/13/cosmonautii-rusi-de-pe-iss-au-experimentat-teledetectia-deasupra-donbasului-07-29-50>.

collapsed⁴⁴; in both cases the wars were conducted under the label of protection of Russian national minorities, however, the way the military actions in Ukraine were developed shows a significant modernization of both Russian capabilities and military tactics and strategy compared to 2008. Moreover, Moscow proved to be bolder in Ukraine than in Georgia. Russia was not pleased only with creating and recognizing the independence of a puppet republic in Crimea but simply annexed Ukrainian peninsula by invoking international law precedents (Kosovo case); provoked and supported a long-term war in South Eastern Ukraine; and subtly threatened with the annexation of the whole South Ukraine (bringing back to light the memory of the historic Novorossiia).

The annexation of Crimea and Russian involvement in the war in South Eastern Ukraine have attracted worldwide attention on Moscow's hard power and its role in conducting foreign policy in the former Soviet space. What surprised the most was the speed with which the Kremlin took and implemented political and military decisions in Crimea, the magnitude of Russian (dis-)information campaign, and the sophistication of the hybrid warfare in Ukraine. All these show that the Kremlin has learned from the lessons in Georgia in 2008, has modernized its military strategic thinking and has adapted its tactics in order to feint the international system. And even if Moscow has not succeeded in convincing the West with the "precedent of Kosovo", the "right to self-determination" of the Crimean citizens, or the claims of its non-involvement in the war in South Eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin has succeeded in weakening the solidarity of the West, in spreading doubts and confusion among Western citizens about the situation in Ukraine due to the information warfare campaign it has so successfully conducted.

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⁴⁴ *McClatchyDC* (2015), "Russian news report: Putin approved Ukraine invasion before Kiev government collapsed", 21 February, available online at: <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2015/02/21/257386/russian-news-report-ukraine-invasion.html>.

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