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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Civil Warfare: Russian Foreign Policy Strategy in Eurasia

A Capstone Submitted to the

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Political Science

By

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Civil Warfare: Russian Foreign Policy Strategy in Eurasia

In the aftermath of NATO's 2008 expansion into Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation has implemented a new foreign policy strategy based upon hybrid warfare. This strategy aspires to reorient Eurasia around a Russian nucleus of power and incorporates traditional hard power and soft power tactics, including but not limited to, conventional military equipment, proxy paramilitaries, and disinformation. The combined sum of these tactics has destabilized the presence of western institutions in key European border countries, such as Ukraine and the Republic of Georgia, allowing the Russian Federation to prevent E.U or U.S. influence in the area, while promoting pro-Russian narratives, economic agreements, and military conventions.

Drawing on ground experience in Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia—as well as expert knowledge from: U.N., OSCE, and EUMM reports, as well as academic journals and interviews, this paper will analyze this Russian hard power – soft power strategy in Donbass, Ukraine and South Ossetia, Georgia. Each representing two distinct paths the Russian Federation establishes for “breakaway” regions, while underlining the implications of this Russian foreign policy shift and how western nations ought to respond to prevent further proliferation of these hybrid strategies in the post-Soviet space.



Map of regions where Russia is currently implementing this hybrid warfare strategy and foreign policy

Overview – Russian Foreign Policy in 2020

The Russian Federation has come under global scrutiny over the past ten years for its recent anti-western activist approach to foreign policy and its use of a foreign policy toolkit that includes, but is not limited to: disinformation, propaganda, and even military escalation in the post-Soviet space and global arena. However, these tools, and the larger foreign policy ambitions they serve, are nothing new as far as the Russian foreign policy schema – and the implementation of that schema is concerned. Military expansionism, buffer zone politics, and disinformation have been integral to larger policy objectives for over 300 years; in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Period, and now, in the Russian Federation. As the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Moscow stated in their 2019 analysis of Russian Foreign Policy, entitled “Russia’s Global Ambitions in Perspective (in 2019)” –“...core components of the current Russian toolkit have withstood the test of time, and there is every indication that Moscow will continue to rely on them, even in a post-Putin era.”

The Russian Federation, although as media reports over the last ten years suggest, still implements hard-power tools *en masse*, it is now implementing more adept means of achieving its current foreign policy objectives – (i.e. hybrid warfare). What are Russia’s main foreign policy objectives that hybrid warfare aims to achieve? Globally, they include: the restoration of the Russian Federation’s ‘great power’ status that it enjoyed during the Russian Empire and the Soviet period, the return of Russian hegemony over Eurasia, and the overall deterioration of the U.S.-led unipolar global *politique* that came into being following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in exchange for a multipolar world order, where Russia could play a more sizeable role in global decisions.

These foreign policy objectives were outlined in 1996 by ex-Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, in what is now known as the “Primakov Doctrine” of Russian foreign policy. When this ‘doctrine’ was written by the now reclaimed Primakov, the Russian Federation had to begrudgingly associate itself with western political formats, struggle to adapt to market capitalism, and see its regional influence wane more and more due to its internal political instability and economic spiral. However, during the economic growth and stability of the 2000s and the domestic consolidation of power within the Russian Federation, following the implementation of Vladimir Putin’s “vertical of power” approach, the Russian Federation turned its sights outwards for the premier time since the fall of the U.S.S.R.; first, to the Republic of Georgia in 2008, and second, to Ukraine in 2014.

As the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Moscow asserts in their 2019 report on Russian foreign policy, “Contemporary Russian foreign policy displays the unmistakable presence of three centuries-old drivers of Moscow’s posture on the world stage. Chief among these drivers is:” one, “Russia’s quest for strategic depth and secure buffers against external threats;” two, “expansion to satisfy its ambition as a great power;” and three, “it’s complicated relationship with the west, which combines rivalry with the need for cooperation.” All of which exemplify the tenants of the ‘Primakov Doctrine’ and underline Russian expansionism in the post-Soviet space during the last decade. However, due to the limited means of Russia’s military, economy, and political format in comparison with larger Western powers, it must engage in opportunistic “military adventures” as the Free Russia Foundation has stated, and enforce a foreign policy based upon hybrid warfare. This hybrid warfare uses hard power in the form of discrete financing of paramilitary groups that enforce borderization in these “breakaway” regions, and soft power vis-à-vis the manipulation of ethno-linguistic-religious ties and

passportization, which obfuscate the legitimacy of conflict in these zones, often favouring Russian outcomes.

For example, The Russo-Georgian War in 2008 was the largest instance of this newly conceived Russian ‘troika’ of foreign policy, relying on the Putin-Medvedev approach to ‘Madman’ Foreign Policy, Strategic Patience, and the Primakov Doctrine. Following ex-Georgian-President Mikheil Saakashvili’s military action to retake the *de facto* Republic of South Ossetia in August 2008, the first signal in Russia’s switch from a near-Eastern partner with which the West could negotiate amicably to an anti-western alternative power, was underway. Subsequently, the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, specifically in Donbass was where the Russian Federation solidified its commitment to this anti-western path and the pursuance of this Primakov ‘troika’ vis-à-vis hybrid warfare. This capstone will analyse both the case of South Ossetia, Georgia in 2008 and after, and the case of Donbass, Ukraine in 2014 and after, and draw conclusions on their effect, if any, on Russian foreign policy and the implications of the Russian Federation’s use of hybrid warfare in 2020.

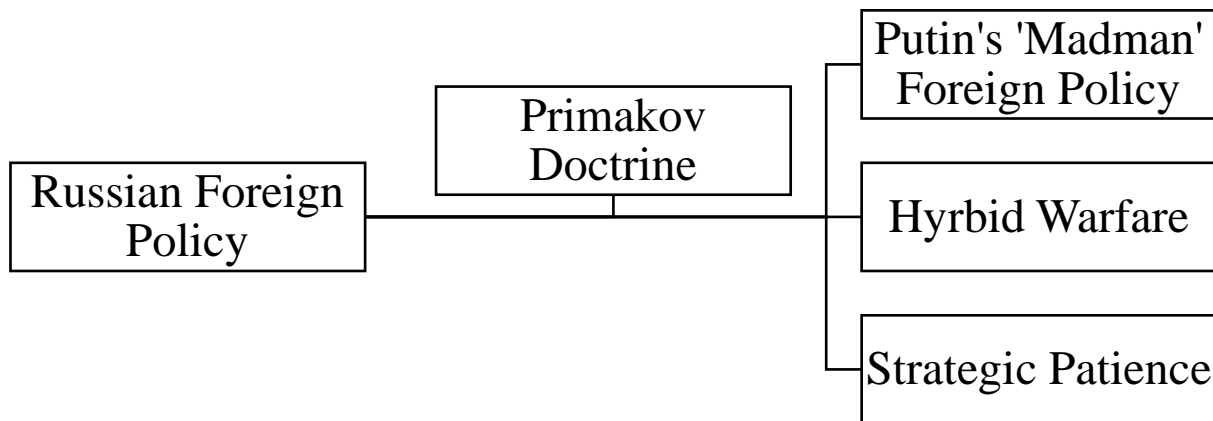


Diagram 1.1 – Russian Foreign Policy: How the Primakov Doctrine is Achieved

Case Study – South Ossetia, Republic of Georgia:

According to Georgian political commentator Gela Vasadze, “In 2008, for Berlin and Paris, just like for many in Washington, Putin was still a good guy with whom you could and should do business.” Therefore, the hope that the Russian Federation would continue to be a partner to western countries was still feasible before and after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, albeit misguidedly. The Russian Federation in 2008, and well before it, had been on a path to consolidating its power in Eurasia, specifically in areas such as South Ossetia, Georgia. A year prior, at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, both then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and then-Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin had made remarks, indicating the Kremlin would continue to pursue the Primakov Doctrine and utilize Russia’s growing military to protect “Russian speakers” and Russian “interests” throughout the world (Atlantic Council).

In August of 2008, after ex-Georgian-President Mikheil Saakashvili mobilized Georgian forces to take back Tskhinvali, the capital of the *de facto* Republic of South Ossetia, the world saw the Russian Federation do exactly what it had promised a year prior in Munich. Within days the Georgian military was fighting South Ossetian security forces and contingents of Russian peacekeepers in the area around the *de facto* capital of South Ossetia, that is until the Russian Federation intervened. Over 2,500 Russian land and air units, who were conducting a military exercise in the Russian Military District of Ossetia (1 of 5 Military Districts in the Russian Federation and positioned just North of South Ossetia when this Georgian assault took place), quickly rushed to aid the small semiautonomous republic.

Russia and its South Ossetian allies quickly repelled the Georgian forces and soon began a putsch into Georgian territory. This swift victory against an increasingly aggressive neighbour,

Georgia, emboldened Russia; however, the casualties and losses the Russian forces underwent from a considerably smaller and lesser trained Georgian force, proved that the Russian Federation was still in no shape to claim it was a great military power. As a U.S. Army College review of Russian involvement in the conflict indicated, “Russian military operationalization was lagging – 60 percent of Russian military equipment broke down and were severely antiquated” and added that “the general Russian invasion was ‘simple’ which “caused higher Russian casualties than was necessary.” Additionally, the Swedish Défense Research Agency, reviewing Russian air capacity in the conflict, indicated that “the Russian air component showed a ‘remarkably’ limited capacity to wage air combat for a country aspiring to be a military great power.” It seems that to deliver on their 2007 promise in Munich, the Kremlin would need to pursue these opportunist military adventures in the post-Soviet space with soft power as well as their growing military hard power in order to garner any success in other post-Soviet spaces.

In this regard, no other quotation could exemplify this post-2008 strategy more than the following: “Russia creates the appearance of operating one step removed from the Russian government” (Carnegie Endowment, 2019). In Georgia, the Russian Federation initially accomplished this by acting on the existing controversy it had fuelled via proxy groups in the years after the Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts of the 1990s. For example, prior to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the Russian Federation had installed more than one military base in *de facto* South Ossetia, it had mobilized Russian “peacekeepers” throughout the region, and had started a process known as “passportization” to make Russian-speakers, ex-Soviet citizens, and those with ethnic ties to the Russian Federation, legitimate Russian citizens. By the time the 2008 Russo-Georgian War had started, this passportization process had been very successful and around 90 percent of the population in South Ossetia had either South Ossetian or Russian

passports (EUMM). During this process, waves of ethnic Georgians fled the area and those who remained in *de facto* South Ossetia, were subjugated while their ability to participate in politics, own property, and conduct business were severely diminished. These two processes, along with the distribution of South Ossetian passports, had loosened and continues to loosen Tbilisi's hold on the breakaway region. Furthermore, this confusing political and military landscape has made it easier for the Russian Federation to justify its military intervention in the area, as it was and is protecting ethnic Russians and Russian citizens as well as its peacekeepers and military personnel in *de facto* South Ossetia.

After the 2008 War, the Russian Federation has limited the influence of the E.U. Monitoring Mission's (EUMM) ability to conduct its peacekeeping engagement that was outlined in the Russia and Georgia signed Six-Point Agreement, and has kept its hard-power projection to borderization, base building, and military exercises which further limit external involvement from Georgia or the EUMM. Simultaneously, the Russian Federation continues to funnel money to social projects and pursue passportization across the *de facto* republic. According to Reuters, Russia currently stations around 7,600 soldiers in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and has built over three bases to conduct patrols and maintain borderization efforts in the area.

To conclude, Russia's first serious expression of this Primakov foreign policy 'troika' taught the Russian Foreign Ministry, military, and the Kremlin, that it must utilize considerable soft power connected to ethno-linguistic-religious groups affiliated with the Russian Federation and its ideals in order to support its existing hard power approach in the regions where it would like to project power. This strategy would rely on civil society as well as political and economic manipulation, which would aid in achieving one of two goals the Kremlin has for these

breakaway regions: (one) to either incorporate regions such as South Ossetia into the Russian Federation, or (two) to maintain their status as semiautonomous states within the home country, ensuring the countries to which they belonged cannot obtain NATO or E.U. membership, and remain in Russia’s sphere of influence. This strategy would slowly but surely achieve the three primary objectives of the Primakov Doctrine: the restoration of the Russian Federation’s ‘great power’ status that it enjoyed during the Russian Empire and the Soviet period, the return of Russian hegemony over Eurasia, and the overall deterioration of the U.S.-led unipolar global *politique*. In the case of South Ossetia, Georgia, the Russian Federation is implementing this strategy to groom the semiautonomous republic for future incorporation into the Russian Federation, based on its growing military presence, borderization and passportization efforts, and consistent level financial assistance to the region.



Map 1.1 – Occupied Territories in the Republic of Georgia

Red: Russian-Occupied Territories **Grey:** Georgian Territory

Case Study – Donbass, Ukraine:

The Russian Federation simplified its passport and citizenship process in 2012. According to a report by the Atlantic Council, entitled “Separatists Launch New ‘Passportization’ Strategy in Eastern Ukraine” – the Russian Federation’s legislative body the *Duma*, simplified the process and conditions for obtaining a Russian passport to include all previous citizens or those directly related to citizens of the Russian Empire/ Soviet Union, those who serve in the Russian military, and/or those who speak Russian natively. However, in order to qualify for Russian citizenship under these new provisions, a person must renounce their current citizenship. This, like the 2007 statements by Dimitri Medvedev and Vladimir Putin at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, which precipitated in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War to come, represented an imperative piece of the Russian Federation’s actual policy to secure its influence in areas with distinct Russian-speaking and ethnically Russian populations in the post-Soviet sphere, such as Crimea and Donbass, Ukraine.

In many ways, the passage of this law transcends the importance of the Maidan Revolution, the later exodus of ex-Pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, and the subsequent Russian invasion of Crimea and Donbass, Ukraine in 2014-2015. This law, along with Russia’s perception of the Maidan Revolution, was foretelling of Russia’s impending hybrid warfare in Ukraine and how it would engineer this hybrid war effort to maximize the benefits that would be wrought by pursuing a new conflict in Ukraine.

First, the steps the Russian Federation had taken to cultivate and exacerbate its relationship with Russian-speaking populations and the Russian diaspora in the “near-abroad” of Eastern Europe was directly in accordance with Dmitri Medvedev’s assertion that Russia would “protect Russians” and “Russian speakers” throughout the world at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, before the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. In the time after that war, Russian reliance on

these populations for legitimate and illegitimate influence in neighbouring countries only widened, and with it, the previously mentioned 2012 Duma citizenship bill was passed. This bill served to strengthen the ethno-linguist-religious arm of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy in the region, and would make the Russian-speaking, ethnically Russian, and Russian Orthodox population in Donbass and Crimea, Ukraine the focus for Russian and Russian proxy hard power and soft power targets during and after the initial invasion in 2014-2015.

Second, paramilitaries, borderizations, and ceasefire violations. The Russian Federation understood there were considerable military pitfalls during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and intended to prevent further hard power failures from happening in the future. Between 2008 and 2014, the Kremlin had increased military funding, military research, and professional troop numbers to compensate for the losses it underwent in Georgia. For example, Russian military spending went from 3.14 percent of its GDP in 2008 to 4.14 percent in 2014 (WorldBank). Furthermore, the Russian Federation's set a goal to increase its total number of contracted military personnel to 500,000 by 2020, which poses a significant growth from its estimated 200,000 contracted personnel in 2010. However, in the relatively short amount of time and under the constraint of international observation, the Russian Federation had to act fast and act through a third party pro-Russian group; in other words, a proxy force supported by Russian equipment and trainers, instead of utilizing its growing military directly in Ukraine.

Shortly after Yanukovych fled the aftermath of Maidan in 2014, masked troops without Russian insignias secured the centre of Sevastopol Crimea and quickly enacted a referendum to allow the Crimean Peninsula to join the Russian Federation, while proxy groups launched an assault across the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts that comprise Donbass, Ukraine, many of whom using Russian military equipment and with armed support from Russian tank units.

Third, semiautonomous statehood. The Russian Federation may have been able to silence the demands of local Tartars and ethnic Ukrainians who did not agree with the separatist ‘referendum’ to join the Russian Federation, in Crimea, but the Russian strategy to employ a paramilitary force and later pro-Russian proxy government in Donbass, Ukraine severely overcalculated the sentiments of the Russian-speaking and ethnic Russian population present in the Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts of Ukraine. Per the argument Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin gave in the years following the 2007 Munich Security Conference, which underlined a Russian right to defend ethnic Russian and Russian-speakers, it seems that the Russian speakers and ethnic Russian in Donbass, Ukraine were not eager to be defended. Although many Ukrainians, like Georgians fleeing South Ossetia following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, fled Luhansk and Donetsk after the initial invasion and the bloody conflicts thereafter, those who stayed as well as the ethnically Russian population in the Donbass region, were not as singular in their support for Russian or Russian proxy intervention as the South Ossetians and ethnic Russian in South Ossetia, Georgia were before and after 2008. For example, whereas 90 percent of South Ossetians had either obtained proxy passports or Russian passports by the five-year point, the official passportization process has barely begun in Donbass, Ukraine after more than five years of stalled conflict.

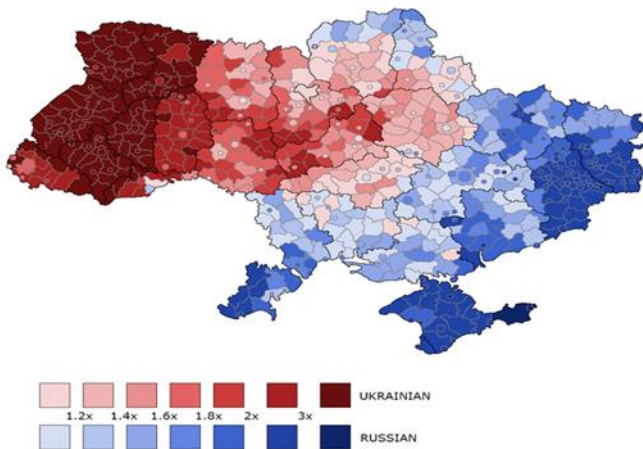
Once the Russian Federation realized a referendum in Donbass was not immediately possible, the Kremlin resorted to its hard power – soft power strategy, relying on strategic patience and Vladimir Putin’s strain of ‘madman’ foreign policy to both eventually increase pressure on Kyiv and exhaust the interest of its western partners in Europe and North America. The most prominent way Russia has done this is through borderization and the use of ceasefire violations (CFVs) along the Line of Contact (LOC) in the Republic of Luhansk and the Donetsk

People's Republic. Due to the recent nature of the conflict in Ukraine, it is still considered "hot" and thus has demanded that Moscow pressure Kyiv with more hard power vis-à-vis its proxy groups in the region. Whenever there is an international agreement related to Ukraine and Donbass, such as Minsk I, Minsk II and the most recently, the Normandy Four Summit in Paris in 2019, proxy groups have increased their activity along the Line of Contact. For example, the E.U. Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine noted that between March 9 and 22 2020, after the Normandy Four Summit, there were 11,300 CFVs including about 5,350 explosions. This compares with about 9,100 and 3,150, respectively, in the previous two-week period. Additionally, the Normandy Four Summit Agreements called for a reduction in overall ceasefire violations, especially along crucial crossing points along the LOC at Zolote, Petrivske, and Zolote, however, the SMM recorded a similar spike in CFVs in these areas during same this two-week period.

Throughout the four years following the Russo-Georgian War, similar hostile measures were used along the administrative boundary line (ABL) between *de facto* South Ossetia and Georgia. These hard power measures were later reduced after Russian bases were established and Russian troop exchanges were standardized across the ABL, satisfying the Kremlin's immediate objectives for the area.

In summation, the Russian hybrid strategy and the general conflict in Ukraine is a lot fresher than that of the one in Georgia. Furthermore, there are no wounds from previous civil wars to build upon, only the influence Russia has on its Russian speakers and ethnic Russians in the region, so soft power methods, such as passportization are less effective, whereas hard power methods, such as the use of borderization and CFVs, are more effective in exerting pressure on Kyiv and consolidating the Kremlin's goals for Donbass. This is reflected in the hotter conflicts

and the repeated growth of CFVs along key points of the LOC. Given these factors, it is fair to assess the Russian Federation would like to promote the independence of Donbass at all costs, hoping then for the semiautonomous status of the Luhansk and Donetsk proxy governments in later negotiations. If local elections for proxy governments, such as the ones the Kremlin has pushed for in Minsk I, II and Paris occur, that would legitimize Donbass' semi-autonomous status and keep the rest of Ukraine within the Russian sphere of influence, especially once Ukraine's Western allies grow weary of supporting Kyiv and the rest of Ukraine becomes more isolated and therefore dependant on cooperation with Moscow, following an eventual thaw in the overall conflict.



Map 1.2 – Populations of Russian speakers vs. Ukrainian speakers across Ukraine

Red: Ukrainian Language **Blue:** Russian Language

Conclusion – The Three Goals of Russian Foreign Policy in Eurasia:

To conclude, there is nothing novel about Russian expansionism, save for how the Russian Federation is executing it now in 2020. Under the guise of ethno-linguistic-religious ties or

external controversy that is often manipulated by Russian sources, the Russian Federation pursues a hard power putsch followed by a wave of reoccurring pseudo-military and soft power escalations, which rely both on Putin’s belief in ‘strategic patience’ and the implementation of his supposed spin on ‘Madman Foreign Policy’ in regions that are: (one) militaristically and economically advantageous to Russian objectives, (two) contain sizeable Russian populations, and (three) act as suitable buffer zones to stave off outside competitors (i.e. the E.U. and China). To prevent the Russian Federation from replicating this hybrid warfare process in areas such as Moldova, the Baltics, and Kazakhstan where similar conditions exist, as well as to prevent the instability posed by the growth of multipolarity in global politics, western nations such as those in the E.U. and the United States must maintain a level of cohesion regarding military and economic pressure on the Russian Federation to negatively impact the Kremlin’s cost-benefit analysis of these hybrid campaigns.

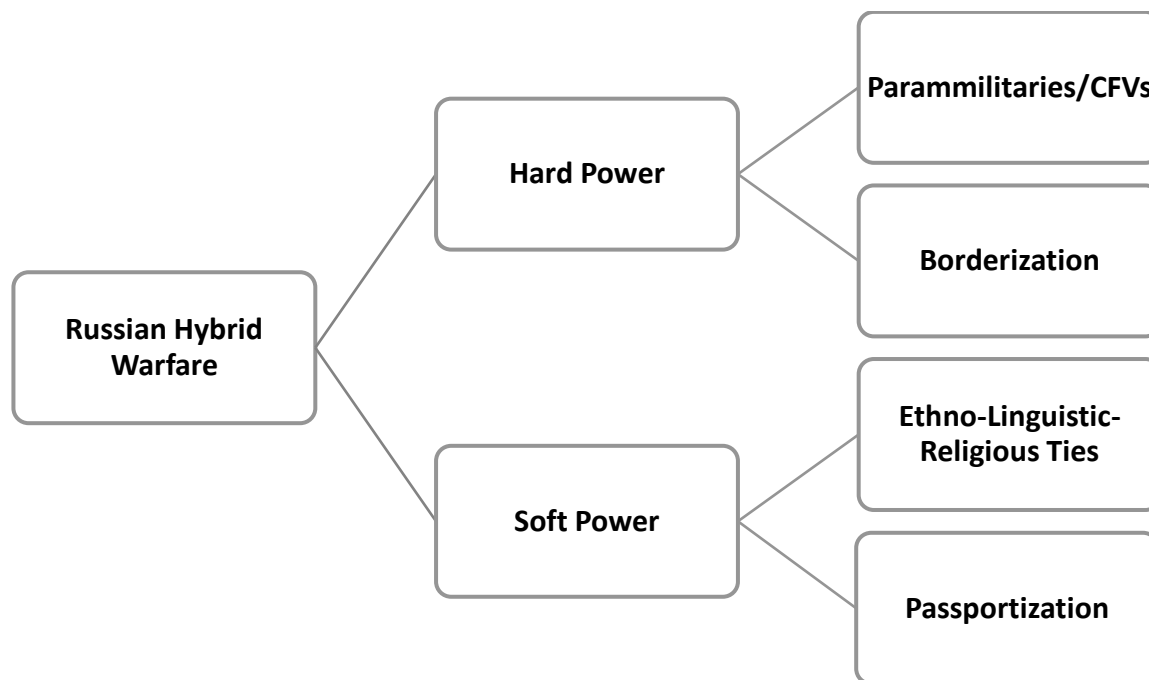


Diagram 1.2 – Russian Hybrid Warfare, Soft Power and Hard Power Strategies

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