

Mirosław Banasik\*

# The challenges for Central Europe posed by the rivalry of the Russian Federation below the threshold of war

Wyzwania dla Europy Centralnej wynikające z prowadzenia przez Federację Rosyjską rywalizacji poniżej granicy otwartego konfliktu zbrojnego

**Abstract:** This article identifies the political challenges for Central Europe resulting from the Russian Federation conducting competition below the threshold of war. The main research methods, both inductive and deductive, were analysis and a survey of the existing literature. There is still aggression in international rivalry, and its level is deliberately regulated so as not to cross the threshold of open armed conflict as defined by international law. The contemporary rivalry of the Russian Federation takes on an unlimited scope and goes beyond the physical sphere: the main emphasis in its application is on non-military and non-lethal forms of influence that can be easily combined with kinetic ones. The exploitation of the space between the binary borders of war and peace was practically verified both under the Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. It has been confirmed that a great deal of importance in Russia is now attached to unconventional activities and that their application offers great opportunities to achieve strategic objectives without the need to resort to direct military confrontation.

**Keywords:** international rivalry, threshold of war, aggression, Russia, politics, strategy

**Streszczenie:** Celem badań, których rezultaty przedstawiono w niniejszym artykule, było zidentyfikowanie politycznych wyzwań dla Europy Centralnej wynikających z prowadzenia przez Federację Rosyjską rywalizacji poniżej granicy otwartego konfliktu zbrojnego. W procesie badawczym zastosowano chronologiczno-problemowe podejście badawcze. Dominującymi metodami były indukcja i dedukcja, a także analiza i krytyka literatury. Ustalono, że w rywalizacji międzynarodowej ciągle występuje agresja, a jej poziom jest celowo regulowany tak, aby nie przekroczyć granicy otwartego konfliktu zbrojnego określonego przez prawo międzynarodowe. Wyjaśniono, że współczesna rywalizacja Federacji Rosyjskiej przybiera zakres nieograniczony i wykracza

\* Mirosław Banasik – PhD Habil., Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, Poland, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9358-1240>, e-mail: [miroslaw.banasik@interia.pl](mailto:miroslaw.banasik@interia.pl).

poza sferę fizyczną. Główny nacisk w jej stosowaniu kładzie się na niemilitarne i nieśmiercionośne formy oddziaływania, które mogą być łatwo łączone z kinetycznymi. Ustalono, że eksploatacja przestrzeni znajdującej się pomiędzy dwiema binarnymi granicami wojny i pokoju została praktycznie zweryfikowana za czasów zarówno carskiej Rosji, jak i Związku Radzieckiego. Potwierdzono, że obecnie dużą rolę w Federacji Rosyjskiej przywiązuje się do działań niekonwencjonalnych. Ich zastosowanie daje duże możliwości osiągnięcia celów strategicznych bez potrzeby uciekania się do bezpośredniej konfrontacji zbrojnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rywalizacja międzynarodowa, granica wojny, agresja, Rosja, polityka, strategia

## Introduction

An assessment of the international environment shows that some states with an authoritarian model of governance have strategies that allow them to achieve certain benefits at both regional and global levels, while at the same time posing transnational challenges. They pursue their own interests and achieve political objectives with the means at their disposal without engaging in an open armed confrontation. A wide range of strategic actions are used, ranging from negotiations through the use of special forces to the threat of armed intervention. The combination of instruments of influence may directly lead to the achievement of the strategic objectives pursued or indirectly create the conditions for their implementation. Cunning and provocative in their essence, such tactics can change the conditions in which specific negotiations are conducted, or increase attempts to respond aggressively.

Russia is seen as a state that poses security risks and creates political challenges as it constantly seeks to revise the international order. By applying economic coercion and political pressure and conducting unconventional information operations using cyberspace, it poses real threats to international security, especially for Central European states, and remains unpunished due to the ineffectiveness of countermeasures traditionally used in times of peace or war.<sup>1</sup> In international relations, rivalry below the threshold of open war is becoming increasingly important, as state and non-state actors acquire new capabilities to be active between the binary boundaries of war and peace. Various

1 C. Clark, 'CJCS Dunford Calls For Strategic Shifts; "At Peace Or At War Is Insufficient"', *Breaking Defense*, 21 September 2016, <https://breakingdefense.com/2016/09/cjcs-dunford-calls-for-strategic-shifts-at-peace-or-at-war-is-insufficient/> [2019-10-16].

forms of intimidation are also increasingly being used and the principles of sovereignty of Eastern European states are being violated by exploiting ambiguities and deliberately blurring the boundaries between civil and military influence.<sup>2</sup>

The Russian Federation (RF) now has access to a wide range of instruments to achieve its political objectives, without having to involve armed forces in direct confrontation. The new dimensions of competition, including cyberspace and outer space, significantly expand the possibilities for influence in the information sphere and enable remote intervention from any corner of the world. Regardless of the existing physical borders between states, continuous interference from outside and inside the attacked state is possible, in times of peace, crisis, and war. The effects of threats created by the Russian Federation in relation to Central European states may have a material dimension, e.g. in the form of the physical destruction of critical infrastructure or resources critical for the functioning of the state, and an immaterial dimension, expressed, for example, in a loss of political cohesion or a decrease in the morale of society. A significant contribution to the achievement of intangible effects is made by propaganda tools, which are used openly through the mass media or camouflaged through trolling in social media, combined with hacking activities.<sup>3</sup>

The problematic situation identified in this way leads to the formulation of the main research problem: What political challenges for the states of Central Europe result from the rivalry conducted by the Russian Federation below the threshold of war? The research problem was defragmented and the following specific issues were identified: 1) What is the essence of international competition below the threshold of war? 2) What is the origin and evolution of Russia's international rivalry below the threshold of war? What are the political consequences for Central European states?

2 *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>, p. 2 [2019-10-16].

3 *Defence and National Security Strategic Review 2017 – Key Points*, Paris 2017, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/layout/set/popup/content/download/520198/8733095/version/2/file/DEFENCE+AND+NATIONAL+SECURITY+STRATEGIC+REVIEW+2017.pdf>, p. 47 [2019-10-16].

This article identifies the political challenges for Central Europe resulting from the Russian Federation's rivalry below the threshold of open armed conflict. The main research methods, both inductive and deductive, were analysis and a survey of the existing literature. The passive non-participatory observation was also used in relation to the activities carried out by RF in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The research focused mainly on English-language sources, on the basis of which it was possible to trace and identify actions taken by Russia to achieve political goals without the need for war. The theoretical framework on which this article is based is embedded in the essence of political warfare presented by George F. Kennan. The rivalry conducted by the Soviet Union on the international arena is mainly based on studies by Tomas D. Schuman and Stephen J. Blank. In identifying ways in which Russia uses non-military instruments, studies by researchers from Rand Corporation were particularly useful.

## 1. The essence of rivalry below the threshold of war

The essence of the rivalry conducted below the threshold of war is embedded in the realities of the Cold War, while its scope includes geopolitical influences. In the US, the term “political war” describes the logical application of Carl von Clausewitz’s doctrine in peacetime, meaning the use of all possible means at the disposal of the state to achieve national goals without the need for open armed conflict. This requires overt operations, which includes political activities such as the formation of alliances or the use of tools of economic influence, and camouflaged operations, such as the use of propaganda to support secret operations, providing assistance to underground resistance groups, using elements of so-called “black psychological warfare,” and even encouraging the formation of underground resistance movements in hostile states.<sup>4</sup> Activities below the threshold of war defined by international law include, inter alia, negotiations, embargoes, intimidation, covert subversion, killings and limited use of armed forces. According

4 S. Lucas, K. Mistry, ‘Illusions of Coherence: George F. Kennan, U.S. Strategy and Political Warfare in the Early Cold War 1946-1950’, *Diplomatic History*, vol. 33, issue 1, January 2009, p. 39, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00746.x> [2019-10-16].

to Kennan, there are no established rules of influence in the conduct of a political war. Anything can be done as long as it is in the national interest, for example, use of persuasion, intimidation, fraud, corruption, penetration, subversion, negotiation, bluffing, psychological and economic pressure, seduction, blackmail, theft, fraud, rape and even murder.<sup>5</sup> Generally speaking, it can be assumed that state entities act on the opposite side by means of military instruments, including intelligence, diplomatic, economic, informational and other means without waging war, as understood in its classical sense.<sup>6</sup>

Chinese analysts describe contemporary international competition using the terms “unlimited war,” “Russian new generation wars” or “soft power,” “American gray wars,” “hybrid,” “asymmetrical” or “irregular wars.” In all these terms, the main emphasis is placed on non-military and non-lethal forms of influence, which can easily be combined with military operations. Sometimes non-lethal forms can have more serious consequences than the use of military force, as we saw in 2014 during the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia.<sup>7</sup>

Taking into account the arguments put forward, competition below the threshold of war can be understood as the deliberate use of one or more instruments of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic influence in order to exert a certain effect on the political system or the decisions taken by the authorities of another state. This is very often but not always carried out in secret and goes beyond the context of a traditional war.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary forms of international competition can be assigned eight specific attributes. Firstly, the range of influence of states and non-state actors is practically unlimited. Secondly, all available elements of national power are used. Thirdly, the rivalry does not use pre-planned forces and resources. Fourthly,

5 *Measures Short of War: The George F. Kennan Lectures at the National War College, 1946-1947*, eds. G.D. Harlow, G.C. Maerz, Washington 1991, p. 8, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/139669/1991-05\\_Measures\\_Short\\_War.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/139669/1991-05_Measures_Short_War.pdf) [2019-10-16].

6 Compare: *Mała encyklopedia wojskowa*, vol. 3, Warszawa 1971, p. 494; J. Białocerkiewicz, *Prawo międzynarodowe publiczne. Zarys wykładu*, Olsztyn 2005, p. 440; J. Pawłowski, *Słownik terminów z zakresu bezpieczeństwa narodowego*, Warszawa 2005, p. 156.

7 L. Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses*, Santa Monica 2018, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1700/RR1772/RAND\\_RR1772.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1700/RR1772/RAND_RR1772.pdf), p. XIV [2019-10-16].

8 D. Pronk, 'The Return of Political Warfare', *Strategic Monitor*, 2018-2019, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/strategic-monitor-2018-2019/the-return-of-political-warfare/> [2019-10-16].

the information sphere becomes a key battlefield, determining the possibility of success or failure. Fifthly, the above-mentioned forms of influence can be used in various ways. They can reinforce or obscure the image of conflict and rivalry, and sometimes induce certain attitudes. Providing timely and convincing arguments is the best antidote to disinformation. Sixth, timely detection of hostile influence requires substantial investment and resources, including intelligence. Seventh, competition uses religious, ethnic or other arguments to intensify internal conflicts. Lastly, rivalry below the threshold of war expands rather than replaces traditional forms of conflict and usually produces the intended results at a relatively low cost.<sup>9</sup>

In competition below the threshold of war, violence is not used to defeat the opponent's armed forces. Its physical form and other antagonistic means vary in intensity but are ubiquitous. They are specific tools used to achieve political goals. All aggressive actions are subordinate to these goals, in which a new paradigm of rivalry emerges based on the Chinese theory of unlimited war, or war without rules.<sup>10</sup>

Modern technologies are increasingly used to influence the opposite side. For example, these technologies make it possible to exert various forms of influence with financial, media, or terrorist consequences. Most of them are not military in nature; nevertheless, in certain situations, they can be seen as warfare which forces the decision-makers of the opposing party to make decisions that satisfy the interests of the attacker. Such activities have the same, and sometimes even more, destructive force as warfare and pose serious challenges to the states under attack and to international security.<sup>11</sup> Unrestricted activities used in competition below the boundary of open armed conflict are multidimensional and tailored to achieve specific, targeted objectives. They always go beyond the physical domain and focus on culture, information, economics, natural resources, and energy. The already emphasized use of cyberspace offers a large scope for this.

In order to understand the essence of the rivalry conducted below the threshold of war, it is useful to learn the theory of conducting an

9 L. Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare...*, p. XIX.

10 This term appeared in China in 1999 after the publication of a book entitled *Unrestricted Warfare*.

11 Q. Liang, W. Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, Beijing 1999, p. 11, <https://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf> [2019-10-16].

unrestricted war. The first principle of the unlimited war is that there are no rules or prohibitions.<sup>12</sup> In developing this idea, it can be assumed that strong states should not apply the same approach as weak states, because the strong states establish rules, while the weaker ones break them and exploit loopholes. However, one cannot go to extremes and it is understood that states (especially authoritarian states) can do whatever they want to achieve any goal. Such irresponsible behavior could conceivably lead to war involving nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the term unlimited war does not reflect the traditional understanding of war in terms of physical destruction, but only the use of aggression of limited scale and amplitude, such as terrorist attacks or hits in cyberspace. It means strategies and tactics that are neither unrestricted nor warlike in nature.<sup>13</sup> In other words, both states and non-state actors are increasingly inclined to achieve their own strategic objectives through actions where the level of aggression does not exceed the threshold of war, taking into account risk assessment and incurring certain consequences if the permissible limits are exceeded. They are, after all, aware that despite the lack of international regulations on the application of certain methods of influence, the aggressor may still face repercussions from the international community. Even states with leaders with psychopathic tendencies do not exceed a certain limit of international activity, as they do not have sufficient advantage to achieve success in classical armed struggle.

## **2. The genesis and evolution of the Russian Federation's international rivalry below the threshold of war and its political consequences**

Russia is competing especially with Central Europe and the US in political, military and social spheres, using primarily non-military instruments. This has allowed for the achievement of an advantage in the long term and has the immediate effect of inducing the opposing

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> B. Connable, J.H. Campbell, D. Madden, *Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War How Russia, China, and Iran are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War*, Santa Monica 2018, p. 6, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1000/RR1003/RAND\\_RR1003.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1000/RR1003/RAND_RR1003.pdf) [2019-10-16].

party to behave in accordance with the expectations of the influencing party. To compete, Moscow uses the possibilities offered by cyberspace, including information warfare. It blackmails and manipulates political leaders and journalists who are hostile to Russia's politics, while it finances and supports groups that are antagonistic to the West, especially those that are waging so-called "alternative wars" on behalf of the RF.<sup>14</sup>

In the last five years, Russia, under Vladimir Putin, has been successfully using the opportunities offered by influence below the border of open war. It is exerting influence and intimidating states beyond the borders of Central Europe; Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and central Asian states have long been exposed to attempts to interfere in state elections. Russia, seeking to rebuild zones of influence in Europe, supports the formation of pro-Russian rule and anti-Western political parties and movements. It is influencing energy security through the so-called gas war. It spreads lies through a well-funded media machine, and when everything else fails, it intervenes militarily to maintain control over its neighbors.<sup>15</sup> There is also evidence that Russia is influencing the US.<sup>16</sup> However, the mechanisms of influence are not new; they date back to the Soviet Union and even to the reign of the tsars. In the opinion of Jeffrey V. Dickey, the genesis of Russia's international destabilization efforts goes back to the early Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>17</sup>

The Bolsheviks did not recognize national borders. The Russian civil war was not about controlling the territory; it was mainly a po-

14 M. Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, Santa Monica 2017, p. XII, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1400/RR1498/RAND\\_RR1498.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1400/RR1498/RAND_RR1498.pdf) [2019-10-16].

15 A. Polyakova et al., *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses. Russian Influence in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom*, Washington 2016, p. 3, <https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/Atlantic%20Council-The%20Kremlin's%20Trojan%20Horses.pdf> [2019-10-16].

16 A. Deeks, S.A. McCubbin, C.M. Poplin, 'Addressing Russian Influence: What Can We Learn From U.S. Cold War Counter-Propaganda Efforts?', *Lawfare Blog*, 25 October 2017, <https://www.lawfare-blog.com/addressing-russian-influence-what-can-we-learn-us-cold-war-counter-propaganda-efforts> [2019-10-16]; J.K. Elliott, 'Theatricality and deception: How Russia uses "maskirovka" to shake the world', *Global News*, 9 June 2018, <https://globalnews.ca/news/4260938/russia-strategy-maskirovka-military-politics-putin/> [2019-10-16].

17 J.V. Dickey et al., *Russian political warfare: origin, evolution, and application*, Monterey 2016, p. 17, [https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/45838/15Jun\\_Dickey\\_Everett\\_Galvach\\_Mesko\\_Soltis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/45838/15Jun_Dickey_Everett_Galvach_Mesko_Soltis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) [2019-11-05].



litical conflict and power struggle, not a classic conventional war. The civil war was used primarily to resolve political and social issues and boiled down to the struggle of the Communist regime against its own citizens. Stephen Blank maintains that the legendary flexibility of the Soviet regime was derived from the conceptualization of conflict on all possible fronts with its center of gravity at the internal structure of the regime. The Bolshevik vision of politics, understood as a form of warfare, equipped its leaders with the maximum number of instruments that could be used to fight even against the overwhelming military force of the enemy.<sup>18</sup> The Communist movement was forced to use all means at its disposal to maintain control over internal and external threats. Due to the necessity of the classical war and the awareness of the weaknesses in this area, the Bolsheviks decided that the state of war and peace was a continuum and therefore successfully used all available options to operate between the borders of war and peace, leading to a continuous so-called political war. Established in 1919, the Communist International (Comintern) was to support and direct the global Communist movement. This organization, whose functioning was based on internal propaganda and external warfare, was determined to use every weapon at its disposal to destroy capitalism. To this end, revolutionary ideas were spread around the world and the enemies of Communism were fought insidiously with subversive activities.<sup>19</sup>

Russia has attached great importance to achieving its strategic goals with the so-called “maskirovka,” which in a common sense means creating some false image of a certain event or action. It was first recorded by historians in 1380 when Prince Dmitry Donsky and 50,000 Russian soldiers defeated the Golden Horde of 150,000 Mongolian warriors at the Battle of Kulikov. The victory was achieved through an unexpected attack on a regiment of soldiers hidden in the nearby forest and gave rise to the road to liberation from the Tartar yoke. In the long run, it allowed Moscow to play a leading role in the

18 S.J. Blank et al., *Weathers, Conflict, Culture, and History: Regional Dimensions*, Maxwell 1993, p. 11, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Books/B\\_0045\\_BLANK\\_CONFLICT\\_CULTURE\\_HISTORY.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Books/B_0045_BLANK_CONFLICT_CULTURE_HISTORY.pdf) [2019-10-16].

19 *Ibidem*, pp. 18-21.

history of Eastern Europe.<sup>20</sup> In the doctrine of the Red Army in the inter-war years, the “maskirovka” was associated with classic armed combat and meant hiding one’s intentions from the enemy in order to increase the chances of surprise at the tactical and operational levels and lead to chaos in the ranks of the enemy, creating the conditions for victory. Tactics included camouflage, misrepresentation, subversion, sabotage, espionage, propaganda, and psychological operations.<sup>21</sup> In a broader context, the “maskirovka” is a tricky strategy that many Russian leaders, including Putin, have used over the years to mislead strategic competitors, especially Central European states. In its application, one can see excessive exposure to force and lies about what was done or not done.<sup>22</sup> The current “maskirovka” is a continuation of the old military approach, to which new elements have been added: coercion, media manipulation, use of energy resources and fossil fuels as weapons, cyber-attacks, political agitation, the use of agents to provoke, deploying armed forces in a covert manner, creating and providing weapons and equipment for the opposition, and providing intelligence, logistical support, and means of command. In addition, extensive clandestine activities are used to create favorable political, military, economic and informational conditions for overt military intervention. At present, the peacetime maskirovka is used for political and geographical advantages incompatible with existing international law, while the level of aggression is always below the threshold that could trigger any direct military response from the West.<sup>23</sup> It can therefore be assumed that the maskirovka has become a geopolitical strategy of Russia. Three unchangeable elements can be distinguished in it: distracting the opponent’s attention, hiding actual actions, and spreading disinformation to create confusion and delay the reaction.<sup>24</sup>

Apart from strategic confusion and conducting informational and psychological operations, “maskirovka” is an element of a broader campaign of disinformation against Central European states. The common

20 I. Rosa, ‘Bitwa na Kulikowym Polu – świt potęgi Moskwy’, *histmag.org*, <https://histmag.org/bitwa-na-kulikowym-polu-swit-potegi-moskwy-11811> [2019-10-16].

21 J.Q. Roberts, *Maskirovka 2.0: Hybrid Threat, Hybrid Response*, Washington 2015, p. 1, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1007494.pdf> [2019-10-16].

22 J.K. Elliott, ‘Theatricality and deception...’

23 J.Q. Roberts, *Maskirovka 2.0...*, p. 2.

24 J.K. Elliott, ‘Theatricality and deception...’

feature of these non-kinetic activities is the transmission of selective, incomplete, and/or distorted messages, aimed at redirecting the thinking of the opposite party. The tools used to fight in the information sphere, a key aspect of Russia's politics, are called information weapons. The multiplication of the power of influence on specific actors is achieved through disinformation, part of the strategic narrative together with soft influence instruments. It may also aim to undermine credibility or trust in potential opponents by distorting their narrative, creating confusion, and building mistrust. According to some studies, disinformation actively discredits the Western liberal-democratic system of governance and weakens the cohesion of selected Central European states as well as NATO and the European Union.<sup>25</sup>

Disinformation activities can be difficult to trace. Carefully selected ideas and opinions can be intertwined with factual narration, which makes it difficult to empirically assess the veracity of the information provided. It can be particularly problematic to assess the extent of disinformation affecting the target audience. There has been relatively little research on creating a conceptual and methodological framework that takes into account the goals and evolution of the so-called information warfare.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike disinformation, propaganda is usually associated with tactics and strategies that aim to disseminate information and views that support specific political, ideological or national interests. Propaganda aims to break soldiers' morale during war or peacetime, to play on ideological values of loyalty and to encourage selected people from the opposite side, including scientists and public figures, to act on Russia's behalf, for example, by spying. The dissemination of disinformation by the RF is a way to arouse distrust and antipathy towards certain practices and norms, and is more insidious than propaganda. Unlike propaganda, which is usually characterized by an open advertising campaign or the work of the secret services, disinformation is not easy to detect, as there are usually no discernible political rea-

25 H.A. Conley et al., *The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, London 2016, p. X, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/1601017\\_Conley\\_KremlinPlaybook\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/1601017_Conley_KremlinPlaybook_Web.pdf) [2019-10-16].

26 C. Moore, 'Russia and Disinformation: Maskirovka', 18 March 2019, p. 5, <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/russia-and-disinformation-maskirovka-full-report/> [2019-10-16].

sons and it is difficult to distinguish any tangible reasons for its use. In many cases, there is a very thin line between disinformation and conspiracy theories.<sup>27</sup>

During the Cold War, the pillars of Lenin ideology were the basis of hostile influence against strategic rivals. A constant element of the Communist Soviet rule was to create destabilization in the authorities, security forces, and society of rivals. The model of Soviet international influence against selected Central European states in achieving long-term benefits consisted of using all available means in such a way as to stay below the level of open provocation and usually includes phases of demoralization, destabilization, crisis, and normalization.<sup>28</sup>

The demoralization phase consists of breaking down the ideological, structural and cultural cohesion of society. The activities are planned as long-term and can cover a period of 15-20 years. Soviet influence was directed at the internal and international policies of the opposition states, destabilizing and breaking up society, or creating conditions for external control and tensions in bilateral or multilateral relations.<sup>29</sup> Ideological manipulation consists of politicizing, using religion, and manipulating education and the media in order to create an intended image of reality, and cultural phenomena, such as role models, in order to generate strictly targeted mass changes in social moods. There is also a structural upheaval, which consists of manipulating legal systems, security systems, and social relations. The aim is to exacerbate repression by the security apparatus in order to create a sense of vulnerability to power. Internal politics are manipulated by creating antagonisms in order to cause a split in society and finally to gradually isolate the target nation on the international scene.<sup>30</sup> The demoralization phase also includes the spread of so-called black and white propaganda. The activity of the agents is aimed at exerting influence on decisions made by legal authorities. Disinformation is used to provoke and spread social unrest, expressed in mass demonstrations.

27 D. Fiott, R. Parkes, *Protecting Europe. The EU's response to hybrid threats*, Paris 2019, p. 35, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP\\_151.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_151.pdf) [2019-10-16].

28 T.D. Schuman, *Love Letter to America*, Los Angeles 1984, p. 21, <https://archive.org/details/BezmenovLoveLetterToAmerica/page/n1> [2019-11-03].

29 *Ibidem*, p. 38.

30 *Ibidem*, p. 41.

Official documents and press releases were commonly falsified and false information was spread in the Western media. Other activities financed by the Soviet Union included the creation of countless opposition organizations and mass media centers, functioning not only for the purposes of the information war but also to create semi-legal channels for financing subversive activities and local radicals. Such so-called soft campaigns were usually combined with more aggressive tactics, involving sabotage, terrorism, and even targeted killings. All this was aimed at achieving long-lasting psychological effects in the target society.<sup>31</sup>

The destabilization phase is intended to intensify the struggle for power in society. This is achieved by triggering excessive reactions, leading to a loss of control over society by the authorities and security forces. This has serious economic consequences and leads to a loss of ties between the authorities and society, and the launch of grassroots social movements that deepen the isolation of a particular nation in the system of international relations.<sup>32</sup>

The crisis phase consists of generating an image of a crisis situation, which justifies the Soviet Union's already open actions to the international community, including the use of armed forces. Taking action to resolve a deliberately triggered crisis creates the conditions for officially increasing Russia's influence and/or control over the affected state.<sup>33</sup>

The normalization phase refers to the establishment of post-conflict solutions to reduce social tensions. This could include peacekeeping activities aimed at stabilizing the international security environment. It is a time of interruption in the conduct of Soviet expansion, during which the achieved effects of the operations are assessed. This time was also used to finally and permanently remove undesirable actors from the political landscape.<sup>34</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and with the strengthening of the post-Soviet national identity, the Russian Federation developed and used opportunities to influence the states of Central Europe in the diplomatic, informational, economic, and military spheres. Each ele-

31 *Ibidem*, p. 23.

32 *Ibidem*, p. 42.

33 *Ibidem*, p. 44.

34 *Ibidem*.

ment of RF strength reflects a given instrument of influence developed at a different pace.<sup>35</sup> The dynamics of their application also differed. The authoritarian Russian power apparatus created by Putin and his well-established anti-Western narrative caused a rapid development of influence in the information sphere. In the military component, Putin, like in the times of Soviet rule, saw the possibility of creating conditions for both regional and global influence. Due to Russia's regional domination of the oil and gas industry and its established position on the global fossil fuel market, the instrument of economic influence developed relatively slowly. For the purposes of consolidating power in the state, establishing regional domination and finally challenging the unipolar world, Putin used each of these instruments of international influence both openly and covertly. Over time, new capacities were acquired and the instruments of influence were synchronized to achieve a synergistic effect, the best example of which is the conflict and the crisis situation in Ukraine.<sup>36</sup>

The political events preceding the Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula prove that it was planned in advance. The intervention was quick and decisive, but it was not the armed forces that turned the tide of victory in an open war in favor of Russia. The Crimean operation used various instruments and tools of influence in an integrated way, mainly non-military and non-kinetic, and the aggression never exceeded the threshold of an open war, which limited the political effectiveness of the international community and did not allow NATO or the US to react. The Russian strategy applied in Ukraine took into account the practice from the Soviet times of conducting rivalry below the threshold of war and showed very clearly that the Russian Federation is able to adapt similar historical experiences to its own needs and skillfully use power and diplomacy against the states of Central Europe.<sup>37</sup>

The Russian operation in the Crimea consisted of a masterful combination of open and camouflaged tactics. For the first time in history, the actions of conventional land forces were combined with special

35 J.V. Dickey et al., *Russian political warfare...*, p. 163.

36 *Ibidem*, p. 164.

37 B. Connable, J.H. Campbell, D. Madden, *Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds...*, p. 18.

forces and unmarked formations carrying out irregular activities. The use of the armed forces configured in this way created so much confusion and doubt in the ranks of the enemy, international organizations and states aspiring to the role of a global gendarmerie that the reaction was delayed or did not happen at all. In a short period of time, the presence of special forces on Ukrainian soil became the norm, as did groups of advisors, whose actual activities boiled down to inciting and supporting opposition groups, and sometimes fed their ranks with active actions against the legal authorities. The operation aimed at annexing the Crimea was supported by an aggressive internet and media campaign that blocked or censored the Ukrainian media and used false information to discredit competitors.<sup>38</sup> As a consequence, practically without a single shot, the political goals were achieved. Russia took control of the peninsula and thus the act of secession of Crimea took place without the need for an open armed conflict with Ukraine.

## Conclusions

On the basis of the studies, it has been determined that international competition below the threshold of war is dominated by non-military and non-lethal forms of influence, which can easily be combined with armed operations. It can be understood as the deliberate use of one or more instruments of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic pressure in order to exert a specific influence on the political system or decisions taken by the authorities of another country and thus achieve one's own strategic objectives in the international dimension. The conclusions of the study indicate that aggression in international competition is still present and its level is deliberately regulated so as not to cross the boundary of an open armed conflict as established by international law and not to expose itself to a direct response from the attacked party or the international community and thus reduce its political effectiveness. In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the armed forces are as important for the Russian Federation as they were in the past, yet instruments of non-military influence are becoming more important. Russian experience in rivalry with Ukraine

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

shows that their effectiveness exceeds the use of the armed forces and is much less costly, which is a current challenge for Central European states. Secondly, the aggression is directed against the civilian population, especially in the psychological sphere, and is supposed to lead to behavior in line with the expectations of the attacker. Thirdly, there are no international regulations on conflict between people. Considering the arguments presented, it can be concluded that the contemporary paradigm of international competition below the threshold of war is based on conducting irregular and unconventional activities in the community of the opposing entity, which can be directed and successfully implemented against the Central European states.

The research has established that international competition below the threshold of war generates a number of evolving security challenges for the Central European states. It was found that the exploitation of the space between the binary borders of war and peace was practically verified both under the Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. There has always been a practice of deceitful actions and the pursuit of the goals of international rivalries, using evolutionary forms of influence. The use of modern technologies, especially cyberspace and social media, now offers even greater scope in this area. Russia will always seek to gain a strategic advantage over the West by means of proven soft impact instruments, but unlike the US, they will be synchronized with the military component, although it does not necessarily have to wage a classic, open war as it has done in previous decades.

The campaign in Ukraine is a clear reflection of the evolution of Russian military thinking about conduct and resolution of conflicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is deeply rooted in the war doctrine going back to Soviet times. The Ukrainian experience confirms that the proven Cold War era subversive actions carried out by the Soviet secret service, as well as non-violent resistance techniques that played a key role in the collapse of the Soviet empire and the conduct of colorful revolutions in post-Soviet space are now being used. Currently, the biggest challenges for Central Europe are related to the use of unconventional measures by RF. They have undergone a profound evolution since the painful experience in Afghanistan and the failed intervention in the first Chechen war. The verified forms of unconventional activities used in the campaign against Crimea confirmed the great potential for achieving strategic goals without the need to resort to direct military



intervention, which is now a key political challenge in the sphere of international security, especially for Central European states.

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