# "OLD METHODS IN THE NEW FRAMEWORK".
# STRATEGY OF GREY ZONES IN HYBRID WARFARE

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***Abstract:*** *The concept of waging conflict in Grey Zones was adopted in the US community of international security analysts several years ago. It refers to the use of primarily non-military instruments to create spaces of deep conflict at multiple social, political, cultural, religious and economic levels. These conflicts take place below the threshold of war. One of the first concepts that we can consider as the genesis of this type of strategy is the concept of rebel wars created in the 1960s, by the Russian strategist, Colonel Yevgeny Messner. This new type of war was to be characterised by the predominance of civilian combat, the key importance of psychological impact and the decisive importance of the use of troops and special services. Messner also pointed to the growing role of terror in the conduct of military operations. Another important feature of the new concept was the "denationalisation of war". Fighting social groups, military and paramilitary sub-units were to be deprived of recognition marks.*
***Keywords****: insurgency wars, asymmetric conflicts, hybrid wars, Yevgeny Messner, grey zones.*

The concept of hybrid warfare has not usually become fashionable in the world of international security studies, both in Western countries and in the Russian Federation after the latter's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Hybrid warfare combines the concept of classical military action with actions below the threshold of war. It therefore includes psychological and informational operations, sabotage and diversionary activities, economic pressure, etc. Its objective is the destruction of the enemy. In hybrid conflicts, governmental structures, the economy, the information and cultural-ideological sphere, the critical infrastructure of the state and its power structures are attacked covertly, without a formal declaration of war, the morale of the population and its confidence in the structures of its own state are lowered. In subsequent stages, diversionary activities are carried out with the participation of local rebels and sent mercenaries, private military companies. Local oligarchs, organised crime groups, radical religious activists and revolted ethnic groups are used. A significant dimension of hybrid warfare is action designed to economically exhaust an enemy state, drawing it into excessive military spending. Also

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important is social destabilisation, which is the result of deep internal polarisation of society, supported by information and psychological operations carried out by secret services[165] .

## THE CONCEPT OF GREY ZONES

The concept of conducting conflict in Grey Zones was adopted in the US international security analyst community several years ago. One of the most popular definitions of this type of conflict was introduced by the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM): *gray zone challenges are defined as competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality. They are characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks*[166] .

The grey-zone strategy involves the phased pursuit of strategic objectives. Its aim is to implement a number of integrated operations, where each of them is characterised by low intensity and small scale (below the threshold of war). The essence is the synergy effect of all these operations, which is to allow the creation of a new strategic reality. This concept implies the achievement of strategic objectives primarily through non-military methods. The main feature of grey-zone operations is that they require the use of instruments that go beyond classical international relations. We are dealing with the space between classical diplomacy and commercial activities in the field of diplomacy (including public diplomacy) and open military conflict. By the Grey Zone we mean the space of the accumulation of various conflicts below the threshold of war, which lead filially to the destabilisation of a given state[167] .

The main techniques used in the Grey Zone strategy include psychological and informational operations aimed at weakening the resistance of the hostile society and its political elites. In addition to operations in cyberspace, information operations in real space are used, employing the tool of propaganda, often in support of other hybrid instruments. For this purpose, the activities of intelligence institutions are widely used, conducting covert operations in the field of classical espionage, agent of influence, sabotage and diversionary activities. An important element of the implementation of operations in grey areas are the activities of special forces and subordinate groups that do not have the status of soldiers (official members of the armed forces). In addition to direct operations, extensive support is used for separatist, terrorist movements, extremist political groups and religious movements. The secret services also recruit members of organised crime

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[165] F. G. Hoffman, J. N. Mattis, Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars, "Proceedings" 2005, Vol. 131, No. 11, November 2005, pp. 18-19; F. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Arlington 2007.
[166] U.S. Special Operations Command, *The Gray Zone,* September 9 2015, pg. 1, available at: https://info.publicintelligence.net/USSOCOM-GrayZones.pdf.
[167] J. Antulio Echevarria II, *Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for U.S. Military Strategy,* U.S. Army War College Press, Carlisle 2016.

groups for such operations. Assistance to irregular military and paramilitary forces. Also included in the category of Grey Zone operations are all kinds of economic activities that go beyond standard operations and normal competition[168].

US analysts cite the actions of the Russian Federation in Ukraine (annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, creation of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic in the east of that country) as examples of activities in the Grey Zones; The People's Republic of China in the South China Sea and East China Sea (demonstrations of military power, construction of artificial islands, methods of accomplished facts); Iran in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East (support for groups considered terrorist by the US and activities calculated to exploit ethnic and religious divisions in order to change the balance of power in the region) [169].

New forms of conflict, including the Grey Zone strategy, are conditioned by the increasing role of new technologies (including artificial intelligence), the increasing role of cyberspace (including social media) in shaping the international security architecture, and the increasing role of non-state actors in shaping the international balance of power and interests. Asymmetric conflicts create situations in which there are no perfect allies and there is often ambiguity about intentions, capacity for real action and even who is on whose side. It is worth noting, however, that in conceptual terms this strategy has its clear prototype in the form of the concept of rebel wars, created by Yevgeny Messner in the 1960s.

## ORIGIN OF ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT STRATEGIES

The Russian strategist Colonel Yevgeny Messner (1891-1974) in the 1960s and 1970s, writing in exile in Buenos Aires, formulated a new concept of warfare, which he called rebel warfare. It was a theory that was the prototype for the concepts of asymmetric conflicts and hybrid wars as we know them from the second half of the 1990s and the beginning of the present century. Messner's concept was widely developed by officers of the armed forces and special services of the world's most important powers during the Cold War, and it has experienced a renaissance since the beginning of the 21st century.

Yevgeny Messner pointed to the process of blurring the distinction between a state of peace and a state of war, just as the boundary between regular and irregular military subdivisions, paramilitary formations (police, border guards, intelligence, etc.), stateless military formations, or revolted and ad hoc armed social groups (trade unions, criminal groups, armed formations of enterprises, party militias, political and social organisations, etc.) was blurring. The Russian

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[168] N. P. Freier (ed.), *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone. A Report Sponsored by the Army Capabilities Integration Center in Coordination with Joint Staff J-39. Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment Branch*; https://publicintelligence.net/us-army-outplayed (14.04.2020).
[169] W. G. Pierce, D. G. Douds, M A. Marra, *Countering Gray Zone Wars: Understanding Coercive Gradualism*, "Parameters" 2015, Vol. 45, No. 3, pp. 52-53.

strategist stressed that the basic form of combat in rebel wars was *irregular* action. Messner included in them: diversion, terror, partisanship, insurrection. As a classic example of the use of irregular actions, the author of the concept of rebel wars cited Poland in the years 1939-1945, with the Warsaw Uprising at the forefront[170].

The concept of using the revolted masses of society in order to destabilise a given state, as well as possibly using its territory for proxy wars, is a topic widely present in international strategic discourse. By proxy war we mean a type of armed conflict in which the conflicting parties fight on the territory of a third state. The form of military involvement may be open - official intervention - or covert (participation of formations without state markings, or "under a foreign flag"). Examples of such conflicts were the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939, the Korean War of 1950-1953 or the war in Angola (1975-1991)[171] .

Not only the actions of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, but also the events referred to as the Arab Spring or the so-called 'colour revolutions' bear traces of practical use of the concept of rebel wars, enriched with the achievements of new technologies of the information era. The old concept of Colonel Messner has been enriched with new solutions called network wars, the latest achievements of information warfare technology (the use of the Internet - Web 2.0 among others), network-centric systems of conducting military operations and everything that constitutes the definition of asymmetric conflicts and hybrid wars[172] .

### MUTINOUS WAR

Yevgeny Messner considered war an inseparable part of human life. He wrote, among other things, *war is one form of struggle for existence. As long as it is not destroyed by other forms, it will be tolerated by the Laws of Life*. He pointed out that the industrial revolution and the emergence of geopolitics as a scientific but also practical means of political analysis resulted in the emergence of new military strategies. In the understanding of the Russian officer, modern war can have a limited coalition character or an unlimited coalition character, i.e. global. At the same time, each side of the conflict has its overt and covert participants. Messner gave the example of, among others, the war on the Korean Peninsula, in which the North Koreans were overtly supported by China and covertly by the USSR. Due to the large number of participants, this kind of war blurs the objectives of the conflict[173].

The traditional enemy – hostile armed forces – Is thus blurred, the enemy becomes society, the nation. The importance of the traditional understanding of space is diminishing in favour of mental space, the sphere of people's

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[170] *Khochesh' mira, pobedi myatezhevoynu. Tvorcheskoye naslediye Y. E. Messner,* Moskva 2005, pp. 90-91.

[171] Cf. P. Towle, *The strategy of war by proxy*, 'The RUSI Journal' 1981, vol. 126, issue 1, pp. 21-26.

[172] M. Kaldor, *New & Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era,* Stanford 2001.

[173] *Khochesh' mira...*, pp. 60, 67, 75.

consciousness and their ideas about space. Messner predicted an increase in the importance of the 'electronic brain' and modern technologies that allow the number of staffers to be reduced, even as the number of participants in conflicts and the number of fighting soldiers/combatants/insurgents increases.

In rebel wars, the distinction between lawful, from the point of view of international law, armed action and unlawful means of fighting is blurred. This is due, among other things, to the blurring of the distinction between the military and society. In rebel wars, irregular armies, composed of disaffected members of social groups (e.g. armed trade union members), constitute a viable force in urban areas. This blurring of the distinction between regular and irregular armies, also degrades the ethics of war. Messner stressed that the new character of war resulted in staffs concentrating on the development of: strategy, operational activities and tactics of terror, deception and betrayal [174].

Messner listed four types of warfare: war, semi-war, aggression-diplomacy (otherwise known as "cold war" or "hot diplomacy") and diplomacy. He stressed that the line between a formal state of peace and war was becoming blurred. It is possible to remain in a state of war without taking any action, even in the absence of public awareness of this fact. An example is the state of war between Andorra and Germany, which began in 1916 and ended only in 1958. This fact was also overlooked in the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, where Andorra was left out. In contrast, an example of a modern state of war without hostilities is the conflict between North and South Korea. There have been cases of a declaration of war that was not accepted by the other side and no hostilities took place. An example of such a situation is the declaration of war by the Polish government against Japan in 1941. There are also numerous conflicts in which war was not officially declared but bloody battles were or are being fought, such as the aggression of the Third Reich, Slovakia and the USSR against Poland in 1939, or more contemporary examples: the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 or the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2014. (as of August 2014)[175] .

One of the basic principles of rebel wars is the violation of Article 1 of the Hague Convention III of 1907: *The Contracting Powers recognize that hostilities between them shall not commence without prior and unambiguous notice, which shall take the form either of a reasoned declaration of war or of an ultimatum with conditional declaration of war*[176].

By mutinous war Messner meant a conflict in which armed action by civilians predominates. In doing so, he quoted Mao Zedong, who said that war is not an extension of politics by other means, but a form of politics. The main factor

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[174] *Khochesh' mira...*, p. 70; Y. Messner, *Vsemirnaya myatezhevoyna*, Moskva 2004, с. 134-138.
[175] A. Lamb, *Ethics and the Laws of War. The Moral Justification of Legal Norms,* London 2013; Е. Месснер, *Всемирная...*, с. 165-190.
[176] *The Contracting Powers recognize that hostilities between themselves must not commence without previous and explicit warning, in the form either of a reasoned declaration of war or of an ultimatum with conditional declaration of war*, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hague03.asp [03.03.2014].

influencing the course of such conflicts are psychological and informational activities. The Russian strategist believed that the most important task in a war of rebellion is first and foremost to unite one's own people and to draw some of the people of the enemy state to one's side. For the main element of rebel war is "psychological processing" of society. It is important to provoke feelings of fear in the hostile society, up to the level of panic. One of the most important elements of psychological operations is to undermine trust and respect for state power and faith in the strength of one's own country and nation, including its defensive capabilities. As a Russian colonel wrote: *rebel war is a war of all against all, where the enemy may be a compatriot and the ally a foreigner*[177] .

## REBEL WARFARE AND THE GREY ZONE

In the preparation of actions characteristic of a rebel war, the most crucial element is good intelligence reconnaissance, focused both on the political (surveillance of political circles, proper identification of social moods), economic and military direction. The development of rebel war plans includes both ideological (information) diversion and classic diversion and sabotage. Hence, it is important to properly identify the enem"s early warning and crisis response systems. In addition to information about the state's financial system and its defence system, collecting detailed information on critical infrastructure remains an important element.

The more important elements here are: the state's ICT systems, the transport system, the energy supply system (gas pipelines, oil pipelines, thermal power plants), deposits of energy resources and fuels, food and water supply systems, the health care system[178].

The conduct of rebel warfare is based on a network structure, a system of formally unconnected social groups, organisations. It uses the strategy of *Leaderless Resistance,* in which there is no central managerial centre controlling all organisational links. Individual groups have a high degree of autonomy of action. Additionally, in indirect actions (e.g. street fights, riots in cities) and direct actions (lowering trust in the state) disgruntled social groups of a given state are used, mostly unconsciously. This is intended to create the impression of chaos and lack of control over events. The groups exploited come from different backgrounds: marginalised politicians, radical political and social groups, national and ethnic minorities, registered and unregistered NGOs, trade unions, entrepreneurs and their associations, sectoral organisations, any discriminated groups and even charities[179].

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[177] *Khochesh' mira…*, p. 110.
[178] Y. Messner, op. cit, pp. 210-214.
[179] Y. Messner, op. cit, pp. 216-228*;* J. Tomasiewicz, *Strategy of unguided resistance in asymmetric war*, "Geopolitical Review" 2009, vol. 1, pp. 161-190.

In the field of interest of the group preparing political and military actions using the *modus operandi of* J. Messner's concept, the key element is to bring about dissatisfaction of large social groups, quarrelsome political elites, then economic problems, provoking social riots and, finally, wiped-out military actions conducted, among others, by specially prepared subunits of special forces as well as functionaries and soldiers of secret services. The effectiveness of rebel warfare depends largely on the effectiveness of information warfare. Both the informational impact on the enemy society and international opinion are important here. An important element is the lowering of the reputation of the state which is the target of the attack. The optimal result of such actions is the political isolation of such a country [180].

The use of Messner's concept implies above all the avoidance of official state involvement in formal war. Diversionary groups taking part in activities may not have any identifying marks and their members, under international law, cannot be treated as members of the armed forces.

This allows for the possibility of an official dissociation from this type of action by the initiating state in the event of strong resistance from the victim. Formally, therefore, there is a "de-nationalisation" of armed groups, and of the conflict itself, which from the outside can resemble civil war and internal chaos. All the more so as the main burden of fighting is shifted to urban areas, which is one of the characteristic factors of Messer's concept[181] .

In a rebel war there is a lack of front lines. The rebellion may start inside the state far from the national border. An important element is the use of clusters of national and ethnic minorities, which can become a good base, not only for initiating social discontent and possible riots, but also play an important role as a logistical base. A separate issue in preparing a rebel war is inspiring and financing the development of radical and extremist groups (e.g. political or religious) in hostile states and developing them on the basis of the strategy of leaderless resistance, as mentioned above. That is why it is so important to skilfully use intelligence capabilities and effectively conduct information warfare, which makes it possible to transform the battlefield into a battlespace, encompassing primarily mental space (noosphere), as well as cyberspace. Decisive here are long-term psychological and informational activities.

The waging of rebel wars is facilitated by the emergence of small and weak states and the increasing role in international relations of the role of unrecognised and dysfunctional (failed) states. At the beginning of the 1970s Yevgeny Messner predicted the growing role of terror, along with possible over-terror, e.g. point hits with nuclear tactical charges, or the use of so-called dirty bombs to achieve a psychological effect. Of particular importance in this type of action is the morale

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[180] Y. Messner, *op. cit,* pp. 232-246.
[181] *Ibidem,* pp. 266-274.

of the population and the ability of state structures to contain public fear in such a way that it does not reach the level of panic[182] .

## CONCLUSIONS

Today, classical geopolitics is changing into information geopolitics. Its three main factors are understood differently: power (might), time and space. The main determinant of a country's power is no longer population, territory or even economic strength. The most important factor is social morale, the identity integrity of societies and nations and the ability to impose one's vision of the political order on other societies. Public diplomacy (including cultural diplomacy) is becoming more important than classical[183] diplomacy. The leading form of achieving political goals is information warfare, understood as a mass impact on the sphere of consciousness of entire societies, aimed at changing their views in a particular area of life.

The concept of Grey Zones, which has its genesis in the strategy of rebel wars developed since the 1960s, enriched with new technologies and the experience of many asymmetric conflicts of the last three decades, shows what direction future armed conflicts may take. What, characteristically, is the low cost of this type of action in relation to traditional wars. States no longer have to be the initiators of war. The strategy of unguided resistance and the extensive possibilities offered by modern information technology make it possible to have a global impact with relatively few resources.

The effectiveness of these concepts could be seen in early 2014 during the so-called Crimean crisis and the operation of the Russian services for the bloodless seizure of the Crimean Peninsula. The social background played a key role there. For many years, the Russian media had conducted an information campaign targeting the Russian minority on the peninsula. The military operation itself was carried out in an exemplary manner.

An important element in countering the creation of Grey Zones and the threat of asymmetric/hybrid conflicts is information activities aimed at shaping public opinion. The aim is to create a shaped perception both in one's own society and in other states. A separate issue is broad intelligence activities, which also include obtaining information in cooperation with wide circles of experts, including, among others, academic centres, business circles or non-governmental organisations. One of the most important elements here is the identification of weak points in critical infrastructure systems (energy systems, financial systems, governmental communications, etc.).

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[182] *Khochesh' mira...*, pp. 674-676.
[183]  M. Leonard, V. Alakson, *Going Public. Diplomacy for the Information Society*, London, 2000.

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