



# Metis

## Study

**Scenarios of Russian  
influence until 2030**

**Russia's hybrid influence on  
the EU / NATO eastern flank**

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# Summary

Russia is increasingly using teleological hybrid warfare to achieve strategic and geopolitical goals. Each hybrid measure serves one of two underlying purposes: paralysing the adversary to gain a physical advantage, or completely taking over reality to win psychologically and cognitively. The

study proposes a new classification of hybrid warfare in order to analytically clarify the concept of hybrid warfare. It also outlines fictional and partly dystopian scenarios of future Russian influence to destabilise Europe's eastern flank in order to demonstrate the different effects and objectives of hybrid warfare.

## Fifth generation – teleological hybrid warfare

Teleological hybrid warfare (THW) belongs to the fifth generation of warfare and serves as a link and precursor to the transition to the sixth generation (see Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The concept combines two ideas: teleology (the explanation of phenomena by their purposes or goals) and hybrid warfare (the use of primarily non-kinetic means). THW therefore refers to a form of warfare in which hybrid means are used that serve clear, overarching strategic purposes. In principle, two objectives are pursued:

As part of the fifth generation of warfare, the first telos (kinetic and non-kinetic physical THW) is to protect one's own sphere of influence using hybrid means and to weaken opponents through influence. Permanent, non-kinetic (and partly kinetic) interference is intended to physically weaken an opponent. At the same time, their societal decision-making processes, economic and communication

processes and social cohesion are to be paralysed in the long term. By maximising the attribution problem and establishing parallel narratives, the possibility of plausible deniability of the authorship of hybrid means deployed is also maintained. This is primarily achieved by weakening and disrupting society through disinformation, by exploiting the processes of deliberative and democratic decision-making and transforming them into vulnerabilities, through targeted strategic corruption and through surgical physical and cyberattacks against critical infrastructures. The aim is therefore to disrupt or constantly "reset" the OODA loop (*observe, orient, decide, act*) of an adversary. The repertoire of possible means of hybrid influence is almost limitless as long as physical weakening or paralysis can be achieved. Current examples include the severing of undersea cables by merchant ships or social engineering attacks on curators of software standards in order to establish backdoors. Hybrid warfare is flexible and adaptable, so that it can evolve depending on the actions and reactions of the targeted state. Thus, THW, which serves a physical telos, focuses primarily on preparing for a possible conventional conflict and improving one's own starting position. Hybrid influence is therefore aimed in particular at achieving added physical value through the use of kinetic and non-kinetic means.

As a nexus from the fifth to the sixth generation of warfare, the second telos (non-kinetic psychological-cognitive THW) focuses on taking over the reality of the enemy. In contrast to physical weakening through paralysis, psychological-cognitive THW – using partly identical means – pursues the goal of preventing a conventional escalation in the first place.

<sup>1</sup> The six generations of warfare describe warfare typologies. These are generally used in parallel. The categorisation into generations is primarily used for conceptual classification. While the first three generations (formation, firepower and movement warfare) are characterised by conventional warfare to physically destroy the enemy, the focus shifts from the fourth generation onwards to psychological influence and indirect warfare, particularly by insurgents. The fifth generation pursues two objectives (physical and psychological-cognitive) and uses kinetic and non-kinetic means such as cyberattacks, disinformation and social engineering to influence decision-making processes and public opinion by exploiting the attribution problem. The sixth generation is about completely taking over the reality of the adversary. The classification presented here is based on previous studies. See "New Hybrid Threats", Metis Study No. 26 (July 2021); see "Trends and Developments in Hybrid Threats", Metis Study No. 35 (June 2023).

## GENERATIONS OF WARFARE

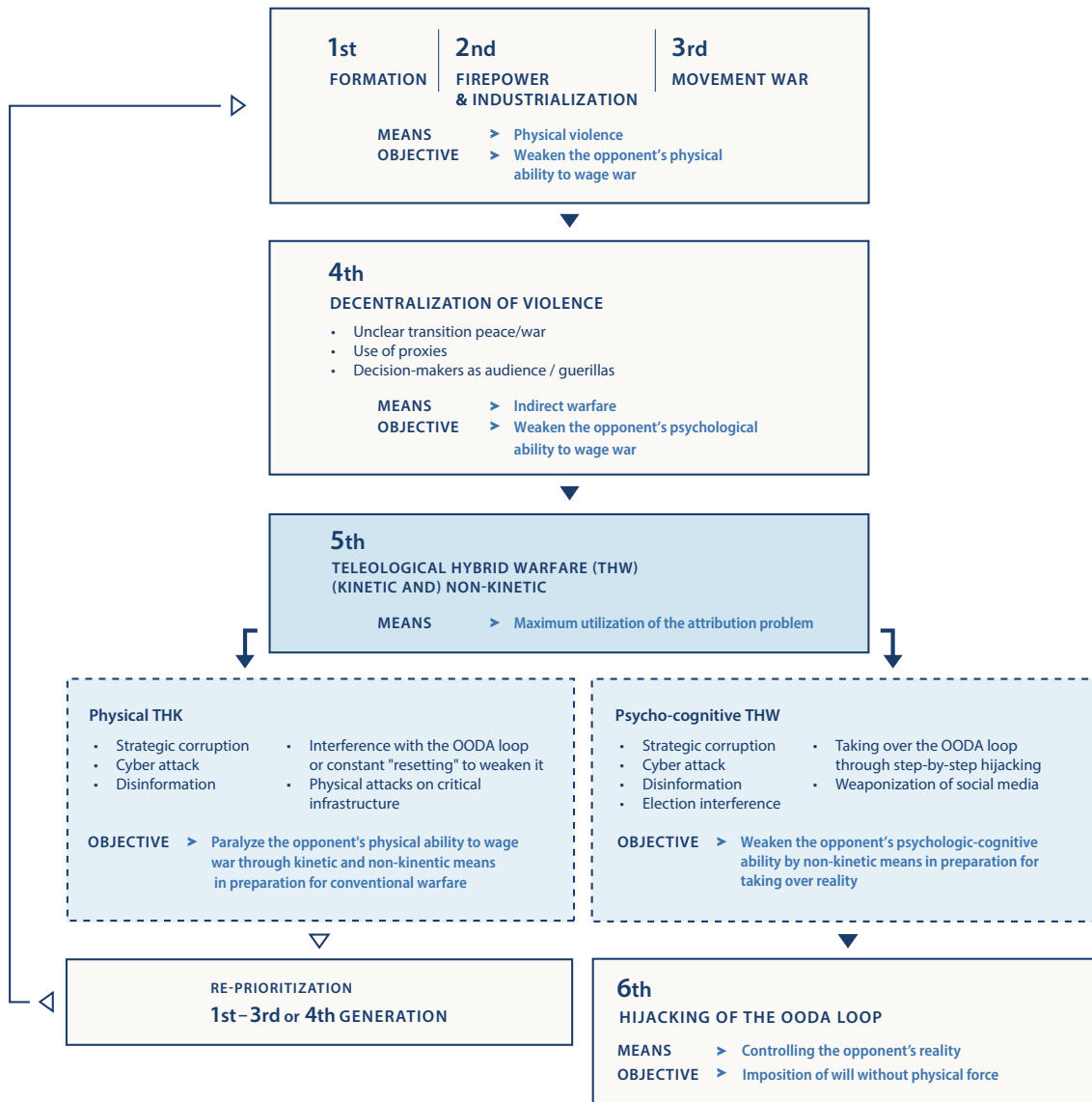


Fig. 1 Generations of warfare | Source: author's own conception and presentations

The aim is therefore not to disrupt the OODA loop, but to take it over completely through cognitive warfare. If cognitive interference influences the population and decision-makers of a targeted state so successfully and sustainably that political, national and economic interests and social preferences are aligned in favour of the state using hybrid means, it can be assumed that psychological-cognitive THW has been successful. In the targeted state, political elites and social decision-making processes are dominated by the information sources and narratives of external actors to such an extent that democratic decision-making is undermined. Current examples of this include election interference through disinformation in Moldova and Georgia. Even rational decisions serve the external actor, as they are made based on predetermined information and interpretations. The targeted state degenerates into a puppet. In

the case of THW, which serves a psychological telos, the psychological-cognitive added value of asserting one's own interests by adopting the reality of an opponent therefore predominates.

### Sixth generation Trapped in Plato's cave

THW's transition from the fifth to the sixth generation of warfare can be aptly compared to Plato's allegory of the cave: the cave dwellers see only the shadows of objects projected onto the wall behind them by a fire and believe these shadows to represent the only reality. It is only when one of them is freed and recognises the world outside the cave that he understands the true, more complex reality. But his attempt to warn those left behind fails due to their inability to question their familiar perceptions.



Applied to THW, this means that the hybrid actor deliberately controls the “shadows”, i.e. manipulated information and narratives, in order to dominate the perception of the target society (see Fig. 2). Digitally networked societies in which people obtain information primarily from social media are particularly at risk. Existing loss of trust in the political system and resentment towards the respective government can then be channelled and instrumentalised in a targeted manner. Algorithms that prioritise content based on existing beliefs create filter bubbles that make critical questioning more difficult and encourage manipulation. This form of influence can not only lead to political polarisation and election interference, but also systematically undermine trust in democratic institutions and the media. Another aim of psychological-cognitive THW is to weaken the education system by questioning basic truths and politicising teaching content. By influencing teachers and manipulatively integrating narratives into lessons, a cross-generational distortion of reality is created.

To counter this threat, media literacy, critical thinking and transparency are essential. Both political actors and platform operators have a responsibility to combat manipulation and protect the integrity of democratic processes. Only when citizens learn to look beyond the projected “shadows” and critically scrutinise information can the cycle be broken and control over their own reality be regained.

### Russian influence from Finland to Cyprus

For decades, Eastern Europe has been characterised by transformation processes and geopolitical dynamics that are significantly influenced by Russia’s actions. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow has repeatedly attempted to regain its influence in the region – partly through diplomatic initiatives, partly through economic dependencies or even direct military interventions. Russia’s interference manifests itself in various forms, ranging from disinformation campaigns to support for separatist movements or populist parties. In the region, national sovereignty, Western ties, Europeanisation and Russian interests often compete in a delicate balance. From Russia’s perspective, for example, the aim is to weaken the key strategic region along its borders as a buffer zone to such an extent that, in the event of a conventional conflict with the EU or NATO, the technological and numerical inferiority can be compensated for by a previous disintegration of Eastern European societies. Ideally, however, the Kremlin hopes for success through psychological-cognitive THW, including the takeover of the political realities of the target countries, so that a physical conflict does not even have to occur. In the following, fictitious but possible and plausible scenarios up to 2030 are examined from the perspective of THW, which illustrate the possible future extent and mechanisms of Russian influence in Eastern Europe and their consequences for regional and European stability.



Fig. 2 Plato's cave: Successful takeover of reality by the sixth generation of warfare | Source: delcarmat, Shutterstock; Editing: colour adjustment, removal of graphic elements, replacement of projection



### Scenario 1 Strategic corruption and useful idiots

Through targeted strategic corruption, Russia creates a system in which local and national politicians, entrepreneurs and prominent influencers gradually become so-called 'useful idiots'. Over the years, political decision-makers and influencers are influenced with financial incentives, consultancy contracts and covert donations until they consciously or unconsciously represent Moscow's interests. Honey traps, i.e. recruitment through the approach of sexual partners, invitations to fake conferences and social engineering activities gradually draw the target persons into the Russian orbit. The corruption measures are so subtle that they often appear as normal cooperation, entrepreneurial activity or political lobbying and their true intention sometimes remains concealed for years. This type of social engineering often results in the target person not realising or falling victim to gradual indoctrination over a period of years. The long-term consequence of these hybrid measures is a creeping change in public opinion in Europe. Influencers and politicians who originally started out as 'useful idiots' are gaining influence through populist rhetoric and emotionally charged anti-West and anti-US narratives. They are supported by an army of online trolls and bots who ensure that their content is prominently shared and discussed on social media. Through their omnipresence on social media, some of these influencers are elected as representatives in local and national parliaments, while some rise to become EU parliamentarians. Useful idiots have then become weaponised idiots. As EU politicians, weaponised idiots then demand, for example, the lifting of sanctions against Russia and a normalisation of diplomatic relations, despite ongoing violations of international law. Individual states that extensively violate human rights, for example, are praised in EU speeches by these Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Anti-EU narratives are also spread within the EU institutions to discredit the EU and its institutions as a bureaucratic juggernaut or to accuse them of wasting taxpayers' money. Via TikTok and other media, this distortion of processes and content is presented as serious and sometimes humorous criticism in order to reach a broad public of voters. By trivialising the political process, a gradual takeover of the political discourse in individual countries is pursued. The links to Russian networks remain opaque, as third countries such as Qatar are often used as cover channels for financial influence. Scandals about corrupt MEPs break out, but the links to Russian influence operations remain in the shadows.

Ultimately, Russia's aim with this scenario is to convince a broad mass of EU citizens of the dysfunctionality of the EU, its institutions and European democracies. It also aims to show that alternative authoritarian models are superior. The Russian influence and takeover of political decision-makers is aimed at undermining European unity, defence capability and further integration capacity and thus undermining the stability of the entire European and transatlantic security architecture.

### Scenario 2 Maskirovka in the Balkans

Russia skilfully exploits historical resentment in the Balkans to deliberately reignite frozen conflicts and create new areas of political instability in Europe. Firstly, conflicts between ethnic groups in Bosnia are fuelled by spreading nationalist propaganda and supporting separatist movements in the Republika Srpska. By promoting anti-European narratives and exploiting historical resentment, the Republika Srpska is increasingly alienated from the EU. At the same time, Russia undermines the reconciliation processes between Bosnians, Croats and Serbs by strengthening nationalist efforts to annex Republika Srpska to Serbia, thus further jeopardising stability.

Propaganda and targeted disinformation campaigns also fuel resentment among the Serbian population against Kosovo's perceived unjust independence, the alleged oppression of the Serbian minority in northern Kosovo and the partisanship of the EU and several Western states in favour of Kosovo from the Serbian perspective. Minor border conflicts and diplomatic incidents occur time and again. In a false flag operation, Serbian-Bosnian separatists disguised as KFOR units and Kosovar police officers attack Serbian villages in Kosovo. The aim of this action is to further escalate tensions and provoke international criticism of Kosovo, the EU and the UN mission in the region. At the same time, Moscow ignites the simmering conflict between Montenegro and Serbia by instrumentalising a clerical dispute and embedding it more strongly in a conflict of national identity. The dispute between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church over ownership claims and questions of authority is deliberately declared to be an artificial Western segregation attempt, the aim of which is to weaken Serbia and Orthodoxy in the region. The aim is to deepen social divisions in Montenegro in order to undermine the country's trust in NATO and thus alienate it from the alliance. All conflicts are deliberately kept at a low intensity to avoid escalation into open war, which could provoke a stronger international response. Russia calls for international investigations and strengthens its relations with Serbia. Serbia orients itself more towards Russia and China and gradually turns away from EU accession negotiations.

The European Union is divided by the crises. Some member states, traditionally close allies of Serbia, sympathise with the Serbian position and prevent the EU from taking a clear stance. This dissent considerably weakens the EU's ability to act and leads to a paralysing standstill in foreign policy. At the same time, Russia uses this disagreement to further exploit tensions between the EU and NATO. The discrepancies in the interests of the various NATO states along the eastern flank are exacerbated, while Moscow expands its political and military influence in the border regions.



Moscow's strategic objective is clear: through a combination of hybrid warfare, targeted disinformation and diplomatic influence, it aims to weaken the cohesion of the West, prevent the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU and NATO and expand its influence in the Balkans. The unstable situation in Montenegro, the unresolved conflict in Bosnia and Kosovo and the division within the EU over Serbia's integration also provide Russia with ideal conditions to distract attention from Ukraine and its activities in other regions.

### Scenario 3 Elections in the matrix

Through targeted disinformation campaigns, manipulation of social media and infiltrated TV channels, society in an Eastern European EU and NATO state lives in an artificially constructed reality that serves Moscow's interests. Political elites, civil society and independent journalists operate in an information space based on false narratives, distorted facts and emotionally charged enemy images. Alternative sources of information have largely disappeared or are defamed as foreign-controlled propaganda. Critical journalists are murdered, while oligarchs and pro-Russian politicians gradually build a kleptocratic system. The majority of national companies are either under the direct control of pro-Russian forces or have been brought into line through targeted takeovers and economic pressure. Public perception is characterised by a constant flood of manipulated content that deliberately sows distrust of the EU, NATO and Western values. Economic crises are seen as the result of misguided EU policies. The country's youth are particularly affected. They are systematically exposed to a Russian-influenced parallel reality via social media. Videos, memes and manipulated news suggest a world in which the EU is dysfunctional and the USA is in decline, but Russia appears to be a moral force of order. The one-sided flood of information prevents critical reflection and creates a closed world view that distrusts any alternative perspective. The education system is also infiltrated. Curricula have been subtly altered to reinforce pro-Russian narratives and distort historical facts. Private universities outrank state universities and are financed by oligarchs or directly from Russia. At the same time, pupils and young voters are manipulated via social media in order to bind them to this distorted reality in the long term. Control over the education system secures Moscow's influence for future generations.

This has a profound impact on political processes. Elections are influenced by disinformation campaigns in which pro-Western candidates are portrayed as corrupt traitors, while pro-Russian actors are portrayed as protectors of traditional values. The judiciary is no longer independent in this manipulated environment. There are no critical judgements against pro-Russian actors, while opposition voices are silenced through fabricated charges and show trials. The secret service is riddled with pro-Russian loyalists

and uses its resources to monitor and intimidate dissidents. Independent election observers hardly have any access as the government strictly controls the flow of information and declares critical reporting as foreign interference.

In this climate of complete manipulation, it seems impossible for the population to distinguish between reality and fiction. Political debates have lost their deliberative character. Democratic decision-making processes appear intact to the outside world, but are completely dominated by Russian disinformation. Citizens vote, but their decisions are based on manipulated facts and psychological triggers that fuel mistrust of EU institutions and liberal values. Even rational actions by decision-makers are based on Russian-driven misinformation. The matrix in which society is trapped no longer allows for alternative realities. While the outward appearance of democracy is maintained, political pluralism has effectively been extinguished. Moscow has managed to draw the target state completely into its sphere of influence through information control, strategic corruption and systematic infiltration.

This scenario represents a psychological-cognitive victory for Russia in the sense of THW. The complete control of a state's reality without a physical invasion. Society is trapped in a modern version of Plato's cave, where shadow images replace reality and truth is a manipulative construct. The state has become the puppet of a foreign actor, incapable of independently representing its own interests.

### Scenario 4 Fire and ice in the Arctic

An island in the Arctic, part of a demilitarised area governed by international law, is suddenly occupied by Russian forces. Weeks earlier, Russia and China had conducted a large-scale military exercise in Franz Josef Land in the Arctic Ocean, testing Arctic operations and the rapid deployment of troops and equipment. Russia deploys several ships from its so-called shadow fleet as troop transports during the occupation and lands around 2,500 soldiers on the island and surrounding smaller islets. The approximately 2,000 inhabitants of the region are completely surprised when the Russian units take control. Immediately after the occupation, Russia publicly presents Western armaments – probably captured in Ukraine –, alleged radar centres, espionage facilities, weapons depots, barracks and captured soldiers in the uniforms of a NATO state. The Kremlin explains that by maintaining a permanent military presence on the Arctic island, the NATO state has violated the international treaty that stipulates the demilitarisation of the region. In addition, Russian fishermen have been illegally displaced by the coastguard for years. Russia then unilaterally cancels the treaty, claiming that it had been forced to act to protect its own national security and economic interests. Russia also justifies the occupation with the strategic importance of the archipelago and the threat it poses to the future important northern sea route.



The occupation initially causes global outrage. The affected NATO state begins a partial mobilisation and asks NATO to invoke Article 5. NATO initially reacts cautiously, as the Russian maritime nuclear power plant has also arrived in port and air strikes on the Russian units could hit the power plant. The situation puts the alliance to the test. Whilst the USA is gathering strong naval forces in the North Sea as a precautionary measure, the government in Washington is largely showing restraint. The USA continues to focus on strategic competition with China, with the majority of its naval units located in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In addition, some member states are calling for a peaceful solution to the conflict, while pro-Russian EU and NATO members are taking a hard line against the state in question and demanding an official statement over the alleged military presence on the Arctic islands. The governments of these states are thus directly following the Russian narrative of preventive intervention against a violation of the demilitarisation of the archipelago codified in international law.

Meanwhile, Russia is relying on a mixture of propaganda and diplomatic manoeuvres. The international community appears divided. While some countries – including Brazil, China and India – are looking for more neutral positions to prevent an escalation, the affected NATO state is threatening to take independent action against Russian troops on the island in view of the situation and is publicly flirting with the idea of withdrawing from NATO. Germany, where the domestic political situation is strained by acts of sabotage against important infrastructure and pro-Russian opposition politicians demand clarification, is also unable to adopt a clear position. Europe's political and military ability to react is being severely tested by the incident. The situation on the Arctic island remains tense. Russia gradually strengthens its military presence, building a naval base and defence facilities. While diplomats feverishly search for a solution, NATO and the EU are paralysed in their ability to act for several weeks, raising doubts about the credibility of collective defence within NATO. Russia's strategic goal in this scenario is to achieve the isolation of individual states through selective escalation and to embed the crisis in – albeit contrived – legitimisation under international law in order to generate tensions within NATO and between NATO and the EU. A provocation of restraint and disunity within NATO in the defence of sparsely populated islands or regions and the resulting internal dissonance help Russia and indirectly China to demonstrate the fragility of NATO's cohesion.

### **Scenario 5** **Migration crisis in Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, Bulgaria and Greece**

As part of its geopolitical strategy, Russia pursues the goal of destabilising the EU and NATO states by deliberately fuelling social tensions, internal political crises and conflicts at external borders. One effective instrument of

hybrid warfare is the deliberate triggering and control of a migration crisis. In this scenario, Russia is at least indirectly supported by Turkey and Belarus or favoured by tolerating its measures.

Russia uses targeted disinformation and infiltration in preparation for exerting influence. False reports are spread via social networks and state-controlled media, suggesting an alleged imminent opening of borders at several of the EU's external borders. Pro-Russian actors in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa are fuelling the idea that the EU is particularly welcoming, which deliberately triggers migration movements. At the same time, Turkey relaxes its border controls and tolerates the increased transit of migrants while ignoring local smuggling networks. Refugees, primarily from Gaza, Lebanon and Syria, are instrumentalised for this purpose. In cooperation with Belarus, migrants from Turkey are flown to the borders with Poland, Lithuania and Finland.

The escalation is caused by a coordinated, simultaneous wave of migration in Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Bulgaria and Greece. Russian authorities increasingly smuggle in migrants from Central Asia and the Middle East at the Finnish-Russian border. Thousands of illegal migrants from Russia and Belarus are trying to enter the Baltic states and Poland at several points. At the same time, pro-Russian minorities and sympathisers within the countries protest the allegedly inhumane treatment of migrants. In Poland, the Belarusian border is destabilised by a massive influx of migrants, while Russian and Belarusian disinformation portrays the Polish government as brutal and inhumane in order to increase domestic and intra-European polarisation. In Greece, Turkish border authorities increasingly allow migrants to cross the Aegean Sea and the land route along the Evros River into Bulgaria, with the aim of overstressing border guards and FRONTEX. Russian disinformation spreads reports of illegal pushbacks by the Greek authorities to trigger humanitarian outrage. In the phase of political destabilisation, the hybrid influence continues to escalate. Media manipulation by Russian state media and social networks reinforce the impression that the EU is incapable of dealing with humanitarian crises.

Russian troll factories operate on social media to target migrants that Russia itself is smuggling into the EU. They spread narratives that portray migrants as a threat to European culture and security, while at the same time defaming national countermeasures and EU policies as weak and incompetent. Videos of criminal acts by migrants are shared millions of times to achieve emotional impact on the target audiences. Israel's interventions in Gaza and Lebanon are identified as the cause in order to fuel further anti-Semitism and mobilise Muslim minorities within the EU against the governments. The troll campaigns reinforce social divisions and promote xenophobic resentment in order to exacerbate domestic political crises and weaken internal security in the countries concerned. They also aim to help right-wing nationalist and Russia-friendly governments win elections.



Nationalist groups in Poland and Finland use the situation to mobilise against EU policy. At the same time, tensions are arising within the EU, as Poland, Greece and Finland increasingly demand support, while other member states are reluctant to participate in burden-sharing. This disunity weakens the cohesion of the Union and distracts from supporting Ukraine, increasing its own defence capabilities and stabilising North Africa and the Middle East. Another of Russia's strategic goals is to exacerbate tensions within NATO. Turkey's acquiescence or passive support in the escalation of the crisis will exacerbate the already existing tensions, which will impair the military alliance's ability to act. Ultimately, Russia pursues several political goals with this scenario: weakening the EU through domestic political crises and moral dilemmas, distracting NATO from Ukraine, promoting nationalist radicalisation and generally destabilising the Western alliance. The hybrid tactic of migration weaponization combines psychological warfare, disinformation with targeted political provocations and leads to a complex, widespread crisis scenario that is difficult to control.

### Implications for the Bundeswehr

Both forms of THW pose a profound challenge to the security of Germany and Europe. The implications for the Bundeswehr in the context of the scenarios outlined here require a comprehensive adaptation and further development of its capabilities and strategies in order to effectively counter the diversity of hybrid threats. One central aspect is the expansion of reconnaissance capabilities. The Bundeswehr must invest more in gathering and analysing information in order to identify hybrid threats at an early stage. This includes expanding the monitoring of digital spaces, analysing disinformation campaigns and detecting physical acts of sabotage. Specialised cyber and intelligence units and their expansion play a key role here. An important operational approach is the establishment of specialised task forces that are prepared for hybrid operational situations. These units should

cover both physical and cognitive warfare and should be capable of defending against and proactively countering hybrid operations. In addition to military responses, however, a comprehensive interministerial approach is required that integrates civilian, social and technological aspects. The key lies in prevention, a flexible response capability and close international cooperation. Cooperation within NATO and the EU is a decisive factor here. Hybrid threats require coordinated and integrated responses on a multinational and multidimensional level. Coordinated strategies, joint training programmes and the exchange of information and technologies between partners are essential in order to be able to respond flexibly to complex scenarios such as the destabilisation of the Western Balkans.

Strengthening the resilience of defence-critical infrastructures is essential. Attacks on undersea cables or cyberattacks require closer cooperation with civilian actors and partner institutions. The Bundeswehr should develop preventive protective measures and ensure rapid response capabilities in order to guarantee the functionality of defence-critical infrastructures in the event of a crisis. The psychological-cognitive component of THW aims to manipulate entire societies. Another focus is therefore on promoting media skills and psychological resilience among its own personnel. In addition, the Bundeswehr should promote cooperation with civilian media platforms in order to strengthen resilience to disinformation and cognitive warfare. Withdrawing from social media, as done recently on X, leaves parts of the information space open to possible counter-narratives without resistance. Close cooperation with civil institutions is necessary to promote social cohesion and trust in democratic processes. This includes supporting measures to curb polarisation and disinformation. Only through a holistic approach can the Bundeswehr sustainably strengthen its resilience to the diverse challenges of teleological hybrid warfare.

## IMPRINT

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