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Interpretation of Russian Military Thinking on 21st Century Warfare

Ph.D. Dissertation

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1. Formulation of the research problem

The invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent war in eastern Ukraine have once again focused attention on Russian military thinking. Over the past nearly a decade, this has resulted in the production of excellent and influential academic works that have contributed to a deeper understanding of Russian military thinking. However, the increased interest in Russian military thought has led to a misunderstanding of the essence of Russian warfare in many respects. Indeed, the ideas of Russian authors were viewed by most Western military experts through the lens of Western strategic thinking.

Moreover, the ideas described by the Russian authors as Western way of war seemingly had many similarities with the warfare that Russia employed in the occupation of Crimea. Therefore, a significant part of Western military experts focused on this apparent correlation, ignoring the fact that the Russian presentation of a "new type of warfare", exemplified by the "color revolutions" and the "Arab Spring" and attributed to the West, reflects real convictions and is part of a coherent threat perception. This has led to a distorted image of both Russian warfare in general and the Crimean military operation in particular. Based on the success of the latter, the capabilities of the Russian military forces, and of the Russian state itself, have been grossly over-estimated by most Western experts.

Russian warfare, typically described as "hybrid", was therefore defined as being about asserting interests below the threshold of war, maintaining the appearance of deniability, and, closely related to this, the minimal use of military force. In my research I have shown that the theory and practice of Russian warfare does not support this view.

2. Research objectives and hypotheses

Consequently, my research objective was to examine whether the views on Russian warfare that have become dominant in Western strategic thinking after 2014 are justified by the theory and practice of the Russian way of war. This necessitated the distinction between the Russian perception of the Western warfare and the concepts proposed by Russian military academics with regard to the Russian way of war. In order to achieve the research objectives, I put forward three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: A significant number of Western analysts misunderstood the nature and essence of Russian warfare before 2022 for a number of well-defined reasons.

Hypothesis 2: The misinterpretation is manifested in two assumptions in particular: first, that the essence of Russian warfare is to operate below the threshold of war, and second, that the main content of Russian warfare is the minimal use of armed force. I assume that neither of these constitutes the essence of Russian warfare.

Hypothesis 3: Indirect and asymmetric methods, which are interpreted by a significant number of Western experts as an intent to operate below the threshold of war or to rely on the minimal use of armed force, and as the essence of Russian warfare, are in fact a complementary set of tools that Russian military thinkers seek to apply within a broader war logic.

3. Research methods

The research is based on the examination of Russian military sources, in particular the works of authors associated with the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces and the General Staff's main scientific research institute, the Centre for Military-Strategic Research on the one hand, and on the analysis of Russian military practice on the other. The timeframe of my study is the decade of 2013-2023, which is justified by the misunderstanding of Russian warfare by key Western experts in the context of Russia's 2014 aggression against Ukraine and the 2013 keynote speech by Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov. The case studies examine the armed conflicts fought by the Russian regular armed forces in the ten years covered by the research timeframe, including the 2014 Crimea operation, the 2015 Syria intervention and the 2022 large-scale war against Ukraine, comparing the Russian theory and practice of the use of military force. In the case of the 2014 military aggression against Ukraine, the research places particular emphasis on a critical examination of Western expert assessments of 'Russian hybrid warfare', as these were the root causes of the misunderstanding of the Russian way of war.

4. A concise description of the research carried out, chapter by chapter

In the first chapter, I introduced the institutions and the most important persons associated with them, whose writings and speeches were the source of my research. Also in the first chapter, I presented some of the most significant international and Hungarian academic works. A part of these studies attempted to provide a theoretical framework for the Russian warfare seen in Ukraine in 2014, while others tried to find the theoretical sources of the seemingly new way of war in the Russian military literature. The literature review was not intended to be a self-serving, itemized list of works on the topic, instead, its purpose was to demonstrate that my

research has a *raison d'être* despite the large number of excellent academic publications on the subject.

In the second chapter of the thesis, I presented the most important methodological and scientific concepts that infuse Russian military thought; the *holistic way of thinking*, which determines both Russian action and threat perception. The law of *dialectical materialism*, which formed the methodological basis of Soviet military science, but is also well embedded in contemporary Russian military thinking. And finally, *scientific foresight* as the most important goal of military science in both Soviet and Russian military thought. It is these key concepts that are indispensable for understanding the purpose and function of Russian military science.

The aim of the third chapter was to examine the argument that Russian experts attribute certain methods and tools to the West in order to describe intent, namely, how they want to prosecute war. Although it was common practice in Soviet military studies to introduce new combat concepts and procedures by attributing them to Western armies or by referring to the experience of the Great Patriotic War, this was not the case with the presentation of the 'color revolutions' or the 'Arab Spring' as Western warfare. I have also refuted the notion that, although Russian descriptions of Western warfare reflect actual perceptions, Russian military scholars would urge the implementation of the same mode of warfare.

In the fourth chapter, I discussed the main concepts that Russian military scientists have outlined in recent years on Russian warfare, based on scientific predictions of future war. The research method used in this chapter was based on separating the predictions about general trends in warfare from the specific proposals that Russian experts have put forward specifically as part of Russian warfighting.

In the fifth chapter I examined the practice of Russian warfare. In the first case study of the 2014 military aggression against Ukraine, I critically examined the dominant Western views on the Crimean operation. I have shown that many of the conclusions of Western experts are unsubstantiated, which largely derive from the fact that Western military experts have assumed possible Russian intentions based on the results achieved, thus confusing ends with means. This in turn led to an overestimation of the capabilities of the Russian armed forces and, more broadly, of the Russian state. In the case studies, I have examined the three armed conflicts under study according to a consistent set of criteria. I first described how the Russian leadership perceived these conflicts and then pointed out the parallels between Russian theories and practices of the use of force.

In the sixth chapter of the thesis, I summarised the main conclusions of the research, examined whether the hypotheses I had formulated were fulfilled, and presented the new scientific results of my research. In connection with the latter, I have made recommendations for further research and for the practical use of the results obtained.

5. Summary

In my research, I have presented the results of the most important Hungarian and international publications written thus far on the subject, pointing out that, in spite of the large number of valuable scientific works, there is a need for further research on the topic. Indeed, researches so far have made only very limited attempts to distinguish perception from intentions, i.e. to distinguish proposals for the prosecution of Russian warfare from descriptions of perceived Western way of war. The ultimate goal of my research was to contribute to a deeper understanding of Russian warfare by trying to methodically separate intents from perception, which have been mostly blurred in previous researches.

Since the misunderstanding of the theory and practice of Russian warfare stems from the fact that Western experts have examined Russian military science through the lens of their own strategic culture, I have devoted a separate chapter to the most important methodological concepts of Russian military science. Throughout the subsequent chapters of this thesis, these guide the reader to treat Russian military scientific works in their appropriate context by understanding better their goal and function.

Keeping in mind the most important basic concepts of Russian military science, I have demonstrated that the Russian views on Western warfare are authentic, reflecting actual beliefs and (mis)conceptions. The Russian perception that the West is using non-military means to provoke regime change in order to put political forces serving Western interests in power and, if this does not work, to try to incite a humanitarian crisis thus creating a pretext for open intervention by military force, is genuine. This is also demonstrated by the fact that the Russian leadership is taking steps against the perceived Western threat. Based on the perceived and actual experience of armed conflicts fought by the West, Russian military scientists are trying to identify trends in the changes of war, the objective laws of armed struggle, in accordance with the concept of *scientific forecasting*. On the basis of this, they come up with their own domestic theories of warfare taking into account Russian capabilities and strategic culture, and do not aim to adopt the perceived Western way of war.

Categorisation of concepts in Russian military thinking			
Concepts relating to the perceived Western warfare	Terms relating to general trends in warfare	Concepts describing the operational environment	Concepts relating to Russian warfare
color revolution, hybrid warfare, controlled chaos	non-contact war, blurring lines between: war and peace, combatant and civilian, levels of war, front and rear, growing role of non-military means, dominance of indirect strategy, etc.	new generation warfare, a new-type warfare	asymmetric and indirect operations, strategy of active defense, strategy of limited actions

The West's perceived superiority in the non-military means of asserting its interests generated both a debate on the broadening of the concept of war and the need for the Russian military elite to study and apply non-military and asymmetric methods in the Russian way of war. As regards the former, I have shown that the most important Russian military actors in this debate were *opposed to* the broadening of the concept of war, as it would ultimately result in Russia being at permanent war with the West. Instead, Russian experts advocate a more thorough study of non-military means and methods, in line with their view that due to the changing trends in warfare indirect strategy will become the dominant form of warfare. However, *indirect* and *asymmetric methods* are not discussed by Russian experts in isolation, but in combination with traditional offensive and defensive forms of warfare in the context of a large-scale war.

The case studies have shown that the Russian practice of warfare does not underline either the conviction that the minimal use of armed force or the pursuit of interests below the threshold of war, are inherent parts of the Russian way of war. The reason why a significant number of Western experts have overestimated the weight and role of non-military means and methods in Russian warfare is that they have based their analysis of the 2014 military aggression against Ukraine on the outcome rather than on actual Russian intentions and objectives. Moscow's ultimate goal was not territorial conquest - it was merely a means of forcing a political compromise on Kyiv that would have guaranteed Russia's institutionalized control over Ukraine. Thus, while a significant number of Western analysts have regarded the retaking of Crimea as a complete success, in reality the Kremlin has failed in its strategic objectives. Moreover, it was claimed that in the preceding months Russia has used non-military means extensively to prepare the ground for the invasion, but this was not backed up by convincing arguments. Indeed, all the conditions for a swift and bloodless military invasion

were in place, but the vast majority of them were not created by Moscow. The 2014 war in Ukraine thus demonstrated not the success of the Russian non-military toolkit, but its failure.

The Russian military leadership has seen the 2015 intervention in Syria as proof that Russia is capable of fighting *new-type wars*. From a Russian perspective, this meant that Moscow was able to stall the West's attempt at regime change and achieve a strategic result with limited military forces. When planning the operation, the Russian military leadership drew on the West's perceived experience in cooperating with local proxy actors. The Syrian military operation and the Russian interpretation of it demonstrated that the Russian armed forces had taken significant steps to put into practice the theories developed by the Russian military science in the preceding years. Above all, to ensure the effective operation of the Russian Armed Forces in the operational environment of new-type wars.

Although the concept of the 2022 special military operation against Ukraine seemingly resemble in many aspects to the perceived Western warfare, I have shown in the case study that the preparation of the use of force with non-military methods was probably not meant to be a crucial element of the operation, as the Russian leadership decided to launch the war anyway, despite the failure of the preparatory phase of the invasion. Both the special military operation and the protracted war that followed its failure reflected elements of the asymmetrical approach that Russian military scholars had been advocating in recent years. The Russian leadership believes that, based on the asymmetry in time and will between itself and the dominant actors in the collective West, it will be able to realize at least part of its strategic objectives as the war drags on, because it sees the unity and political will of the West as unsustainable against Russia in the long term. The war has also shown that the absence of moral and ethical barriers gives Moscow considerable room for maneuver in choosing the means and methods it uses in the conflict against Ukraine. The suffering inflicted on the civilian population is an integral part of the Russian theory of warfare in its attempt to impose its political will on the opposing political leadership by inflicting unacceptable damages.

6. New scientific results

1. I consider the delineation of perception of Western strategy on the one hand, and observations on the general character of war as well as concepts of Russian warfare on the other as a new scientific result.
2. I proved that the avoidance or minimalization of armed violence is not a goal in the Russian way of war. With this, I refuted those erroneous Western views that implied

that Russian concepts of warfighting are centered around the activity in the *grey zone* – under the threshold of war.

3. I have demonstrated that the application of the asymmetric and indirect approach is envisaged by Russian military scholars in the context of a large-scale war, in combination and coordinated with traditional forms of warfare.

7. Recommendations

For further research, I consider it of particular importance to monitor closely the development of the Russian discourse on asymmetric and indirect approaches, as well as views on nuclear deterrence. As the war in Ukraine temporarily weakens the conventional capabilities of the Russian armed forces significantly, the role of nuclear forces as well as asymmetric means and methods of deterrence, which Moscow can use to cause significant damage to the West, will presumably play a greater role in ensuring deterrence. The debate among Russian foreign policy experts on the need for Russia to restore the credibility of its nuclear deterrent through a demonstrative nuclear strike indicates that Russia's ability to realize deterrence and coercion on a non-nuclear basis is limited, and that the threat of a nuclear weapon is not credible in a war scenario where the existence of the Russian state is not under threat. Therefore, it is likely that Russian military scientists will continue to devote considerable attention to the study of asymmetric methods and tools that allow for a more flexible and credible implementation of deterrence and coercion.

Russian military scholars dedicate considerable attention to the study of what they see as the methods and means of "color revolutions" and "hybrid warfare" used by the West, and how to defend against them. Following this academic discourse can also provide important new academic results that can be put into practice, contributing to the development of effective countermeasures against destabilization activities against the West exerted by Russia and other actors.

8. Practical use of research results

The results of my research are useful in education, especially in the Master's degree courses of the Faculty of Military Science and Military Officer Training of the National University of Public Service, in the Doctoral School of Military Science, and in the training of specialists working on Russia and the post-Soviet region in the Ministry of Defence and its background institutions. Some parts of the research outputs are also useful for the wider Hungarian security

elite, as they provide insights into the threat perception and thinking patterns of the Russian political and military elite. Finally, the war against Ukraine in 2022 has also focused the interest of the wider Hungarian society on the conflict. As few books or comprehensive studies have so far dealt with the topic in Hungarian, case studies on the large-scale war of 2022 and the 2014 Crimean operation may be of interest to the general public in their own right.

9. List of the author's related publications

1. Jójárt Krisztián: Út a háborúba. A 2022-es orosz–ukrán háború diplomáciai és katonai előzményei. *Nemzet és Biztonság*, 2022/4. pp. 91-120
2. Jójárt Krisztián: A Moszkva által követelt biztonsági garanciákról. *SVKI Elemzések*, 2022/1.
3. Csiki Varga Tamás – Jójárt Krisztián – Rác András – Tóth Péter: Terror Threat During Peer-to-Peer Conventional War: A Background Study. Center of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism. Ankara, Turkey, 2022
4. Jójárt Krisztián: The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace (book review) *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 2020/3, pp. 485-490
5. Rác András – Jójárt Krisztián: The Role of Irregular Forces in Russia's Hybrid Warfare. Center of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism. Ankara, Turkey, June, 2020
6. Jójárt Krisztián: A hibrid hadviselés és a jövő háborúja. *Honvédségi Szemle*. 2020/1, pp. 5-19
7. Jójárt Krisztián: Russian Military Thinking and the Hybrid War. *National Security Review*, 2019, pp. 14-30
8. Jójárt Krisztián: A hibrid hadviselés orosz elméletének változása az ukrajnai tapasztalatok tükrében. *Hadtudomány*, 2019/1-2, pp. 49-60
9. Jójárt Krisztián: Revising the Theory of Hybrid War: Lessons from Ukraine. Center for European Policy Analysis, Washington, D.C., April, 2019
10. Jójárt Krisztián – Rác András: Contemporary Russian Military Thinking on Conflicts of the 21st Century: Beyond the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' In: *Conflicts in the Gray Zone: A Challenge to Adapt*. 2017
11. Jójárt Krisztián: Az orosz haderőreform értékelése IV. – Védelmi költségvetés, *Nemzet és Biztonság*, 2017/6. pp. 79-88
12. Jójárt Krisztián: Az orosz haderőreform értékelése III. – Műveleti tapasztalatok, *Nemzet és Biztonság*, 2017/5. pp. 79-110
13. Jójárt Krisztián: Az orosz haderőreform értékelése II. – Szervezet, személyi állomány, fegyverzet, *Nemzet és Biztonság*, 2017/3. pp. 54-68
14. Jójárt Krisztián: Az orosz haderőreform I. Megkésettség, átfogó reform. *Nemzet és Biztonság*, 2017/2. pp. 43-53

10. Curriculum vitae of the applicant

Krisztián Jójárt was born in 1989 in Kiskunfélegyháza. He graduated from the Bibó István High School in Kiskunhalas and continued his studies at the Zrínyi Miklós National Defence University, majoring in security and defence policy. He obtained a Master's degree in Security

and Defense Policy from the National University of Public Service in 2013 and a Master's degree in the English language International Studies program from the Budapest Corvinus University in 2020. He became interested in Russia and the Russian language around 2013-14, spending a semester abroad at the St. Petersburg State University of Economics and Finance.

He started his doctoral studies in 2018 at the Faculty of Military Science and Military Officer Training of the National University of Public Service.

In 2018, he spent six months at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) think tank in Washington, DC, as part of the Hungary Initiatives Foundation's Andrassy Fellowship, where he published a paper on his research topic. As a Campus Mundi Fellow in 2019, he spent six months at the Eastern European Studies Centre in Vilnius, studying Russian foreign and security policy.

In 2020, he earned his second Master's degree in International Studies in English at Corvinus University, where he wrote his thesis on the war in Ukraine based on the so-called "costly signaling" theory.

Krisztián Jójárt has been involved in the work of the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies since 2016, first as an external researcher and since 2022 as a research fellow. He has authored or co-authored 37 scientific publications in Hungarian and English, and is currently working on a book chapter co-authored with András Deák. In addition to his scientific publications, he is the author of several journal articles and regularly participates in conferences and professional events. He has been a member of the Security Policy Section of the Hungarian Association of Military Science since 2023.