

POLICY
BRIEF

FLANKS 2

**How to make NATO better
prepared to meet the challenge
of the Russian political warfare?
Lessons from Norway and Romania**

FLANKS 2 Policy Brief 4 – How to make NATO better prepared to meet the challenge of the Russian political warfare? Lessons from Norway and Romania

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Introduction

This Policy Brief presents key policy-relevant findings from the [FLANKS 2](#) project conducted jointly by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs NUPI in Oslo, Norway and the leading Romanian think-tank the New Strategy Center in Bucharest. Based on the findings of this project, this Policy Brief also presents some conclusions and recommendations to both national and international policymakers who must deal with the challenge of the Russian political warfare in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The main objective of the FLANKS 2 project was to develop and further consolidate the understanding and knowledge of how societies and institutions in the Nordic and Black Sea Region must be prepared to meet and deal with the challenges posed by political warfare in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. By examining the use of various instruments of national power by actors challenging the existing rules-based order and international law, the project aimed to map what instruments of national power short of military one are at the disposal of Russia and how Russia has been using them to influence perceptions of the conflict in societies in question. The project aimed also to provide policy-relevant support and advice for citizens and institutions dealing with the challenge of political warfare in Norway and Romania, and in the broader region.

The key findings of this project are presented in a report published in 2024 by the project team.¹ In addition, the project team has published another report on how NATO, the most important security organisation both Norway and Romania are members of, has addressed the issue of Russian hybrid warfare² and how what Norway and Romania have been doing to deal with this challenge could be seen as their contribution to addressing this important strategic issue at the NATO level.

In the following sections we will present some of the project findings and conclusions on how they should be internalised by those who will shape policies in NATO and other Western institutions dealing with this type of challenges as well as in member states.

¹ Ionita, D., Cristea, I., Melnic, C., Stefureac, R., Godzimirski J.M., Blackburn, M. (2024). *Norway and Romania: Navigating Information Warfare*. New Strategy Center and Norwegian Institute of International Affairs NUPI at <https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Norway-and-Romania-Navigating-Information-Warfare.pdf>

² NATO has chosen to use the term 'hybrid warfare' and not 'political warfare' in its official statements, but the core of the problem in political terms is the same no matter what terms are used to describe the challenge posed by Russian overt and covert influence operations aiming at changing the perceptions and policies in countries targeted by these Russian actions.

National idiosyncrasies matter

One of the aims of the FLANKS 2 project was the mapping of public attitudes to questions related to war in Ukraine and the use of various information channels. The two national surveys conducted in Romania and in Norway have revealed relatively significant differences in public attitudes towards war-related developments, use of various information channels as the source of information about the conflict as well as different levels of trust in information stemming from various available sources.

In other words, the fact that public opinion polls revealed significant differences in public attitudes and approaches to the use of various information channels in two surveyed NATO countries must be factored in as factor in the process of shaping national and international policies on how to address questions related to hybrid operations and threats in the most efficient manner. These national idiosyncrasies must be therefore well understood by actors designing and implementing policies related to hybrid threats at the national and international levels.

To make these policies most effective they must be tailored to address local concerns and specific issues revealed by studies mapping local variations. This also means that to devise and implement the most efficient policy on how to address questions related to hybrid threats the institutions and organisations responsible for these policies must have a very good understanding of the local context. An approach based on the idea that ‘one solution fits all’ should be therefore avoided.

Resilience can be improved in different manners

The approach considering the local context was also successfully adopted by the FLANKS 2 project team when we organized Training for Trainers workshops for representatives of the local communities in Romania and Norway. In Romania we involved students from the University of West Timișoara to share with them our insights on hybrid warfare and make them better prepared to share this knowledge with their peers and other members of their local communities. In Norway we decided to involve members of the local youth organisation YATA working on various aspects of security in the transatlantic context with representatives of the younger generation from various parts of the country.

The aim of these Training for Trainers exercises was to bring together young people with the task of reaching other young people on topics of high interest and relevance for societies exposed to various malign operations. In the case of Romania, the public opinion poll revealed that young people do not have information of historical relevance, do not know what is happening in Ukraine and do not trust information provided by official Romanian information channels which makes them more exposed to false information or manipulative narratives

launched directly or indirectly by Russians. The goal was therefore to implement a project that was to increase the awareness and critical thinking of members of the young generation. We expected that by sharing with them knowledge about the challenges posed by hybrid operations we will not only increase the level of their knowledge on these important questions, but also contribute to boosting the resilience of this target group to disinformation campaigns which in turn will increase the level of resilience in the Romanian society in general.

In the case of Norway, the public opinion poll revealed relatively high level of media literacy among most of the groups as well as very high level of trust in institutions and official information channels. However, since the question of hybrid operations in the information space is a relatively new phenomenon the question of raising public awareness as a way of dealing with hybrid challenges and possible influence operations in the public space is also very important and relevant. For this reason we decided to organize similar Training for Trainers in Norway and invited 10 members of the YATA selected by this organization who responded to a call and expressed interest in learning more about questions related to hybrid operations in the information space. They joined the members of the FLANKS 2 team who shared with them relevant knowledge on various aspects of hybrid warfare and the Russian use of this type of instruments during the conflict.

In both Romania and Norway, we shared not only information on the threats posed by hybrid activities but also introduced the trainers to critical evaluation of information conveyed through various channels using the so-called CRAP method.

By organizing Training for Trainers, presenting the findings of the FLANKS 2 project to a broader audience in both Romania and Norway, publishing the results of the studies and by organizing exchange of views on questions related to Russian hybrid operations involving leading national experts and policymakers from Romania and Norway the project contributed to raising public awareness about the use of hybrid instruments by adversarial powers and measures that must be adopted by national and international institutions to protect societies against malign influence.

In addition, the main findings of the project were presented by the FLANKS 2 team to NATO experts and policymakers at a session organized in Brussels in June 2024. By sharing the findings of the project with NATO policymakers representing all member states we hope this project to contribute to raising awareness about the importance of addressing challenges posed by hybrid warfare not only in the two countries directly involved in its realization, but also in NATO and in other member states. The format of the cooperation on these important issues involving key actors representing expert communities in Norway and Romania can be repeated by other NATO countries and this can in turn increase the public awareness in other member states and make them adopt efficient policies based on their local solutions and addressing more specific local concerns.

What role for NATO and who else should be involved?

Multilateral organizations such as NATO have various roles to play when dealing with hybrid threats. The objectives they should pursue include raising awareness among their member states, establishing coordination mechanisms, enabling support and assistance where necessary among countries, especially in border regions, encouraging and funding research, and identifying and sharing lessons to be learnt.³ However, to achieve the best effect, the efforts of the multilateral organizations should be complemented by other actors. In his recent study on hybrid warfare de Conning⁴ argued that the best way to deal with challenge of hybrid warfare was to involve various groups of actors including civil society and the private sector, local government and local emergency services, national governments and civil defence agencies, and finally multilateral organizations such as the European Union and NATO.

He also listed reasons why these actors could play a role in addressing challenges posed by hybrid operations. Civil society organizations could serve as nodes and networks for information sharing, for organizing the distribution of relief goods, and for mobilizing their members. Since elements of critical infrastructure that could be targeted are in many cases owned and managed by private companies, they will also play an important part in both preventing damage to be done as well as in dealing with the consequences of hybrid operations targeting critical infrastructure. Local government authorities and especially the emergency services have a duty to plan and prepare for emergencies, also those caused by hybrid attacks. In addition, local authorities and emergency responders should also act as facilitators and enablers for community self-organization as a way of dealing with the challenges posed by hybrid operations. National governments and civil defence organizations must ensure that the necessary enabling legislation and policies are in place and implemented. In addition, they also should fund research into specific areas, including hybrid threat related issues as well as share lessons gained from experiences elsewhere, and identify and share best practices on how to deal with challenges and threats posed by hybrid operations.

Only through an efficient orchestration of the efforts aiming at preventing and countering the negative effects of hybrid operations launched by revisionist actors, including Russia, a sufficient level of resilience at the national and international level can be achieved. However, the approach adopted by the actors to be involved should be characterized by flexibility and adaptability because it is expected that the hybrid landscape they will have to operate in will be evolving and actors using hybrid instruments against the collective West will also be able to adjust their approaches to be able to operate in this evolving landscape.

³ De Conning, C. (2021). Strengthening the resilience and adaptive capacity of societies at risk from hybrid threats. Hybrid COE Working Paper 9. June 2021. Hybrid CoE at https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/20210601_Hybrid_CoE_Working_Paper_9_Strengthening_the_resilience_and_adaptive_capacity_of_societies_WEB.pdf.

⁴ Ibid. pp.19-20.

What to expect in the future and how to deal with these future challenges?

In our FLANKS 2 study on NATO's approaches to hybrid warfare we identified several future challenges the policymaking community and societies trying to improve their resilience in meeting with hybrid challenges will face. Here we share some ideas on what NATO, member states and partners can do to address these future challenges.

Attribution difficulties. NATO and other Western institutions should increase the level of cooperation of institutions responsible for effective management of challenges related to hybrid warfare to be better prepared to attribute responsibility for malign operations to specific actors and to make them accountable for their actions. This will require more cooperation of national intelligence organisations and expert communities and more efficient use of their national capacities to identify 'hybrid culprits'. NATO and the EU have been working together on addressing these questions, amongst others by setting up and supporting the work of Centres of Excellence in Helsinki (on Hybrid Threats set up by the EU) and in Riga (on Strategic Communication set up by NATO). One should consider setting up of a similar centre of excellence devoted to mapping the revisionist states' hybrid instruments and repertoires aiming at a more effective attribution of the responsibility for hybrid attacks.

Legal and normative constraints and the question of maintaining democratic values. Here NATO's role is limited as the main task of the alliance is to prepare members to act jointly on addressing security challenges stemming first and foremost from the military sphere. However, NATO has strengthened cooperation with the EU and the EU is much better suited to address security challenges stemming from other parts of the broadly understood security spectrum. The EU with its regulatory power can influence national policies in areas in which hybrid operations conducted by adversarial powers can have negative impacts on the functioning of societies and states by using various available regulatory frameworks. A good example here is the use by the EU of various regulatory instruments to help member states deal with the challenges caused by Russia's weaponisation of energy resources and supplies even before the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine. Similar steps can be taken to address other possible hybrid challenges in economic sphere, but also in information space where the EU and member states have very high security stakes. It is, however, important to implement these needed measures in ways that are consistent with the normative base of the two Western organisations and without undermining the liberal and democratic principles regulating political activity in liberal democracies.

Coordination and consensus building. NATO is a consensus based international organisation and solutions proposed by NATO must therefore be accepted by all members states. When cooperating with other international organisations on how to address challenges caused by hybrid operations the need for coordination and consensus can be even more crucial. Also the need to address concerns of some states that are not members of the two Western clubs – the EU and NATO – must be addressed when trying to increase the level of coordination and consensus building.

Unity of effort, resource allocation and burden sharing. Agreeing on fair burden sharing and deciding jointly on what resources should be allocated to deal with this issue at both national and institutional levels could facilitate reaching of the NATO and the EU consensus and unity of effort on how to deal with the hybrid challenge without infringing on human rights and creating intra-NATO and intra-EU splits. Having in mind that hybrid challenges have various dimensions and that NATO and the EU have different 'security specialisations' with the former paying most attention to military aspects of security and the latter focusing on economic and societal aspects of security, it is of utmost importance that NATO and the EU tighten their cooperation on how to address the hybrid challenge. Strengthening of inter-institutional unity and allocation of sufficient resources based on fair burden sharing are key preconditions of success in this policy area.

Technological advancements, adaptability and flexibility. Technology plays a key part in the evolution of the hybrid warfare. Especially the increased level of digitalisation of various elements of critical infrastructure can pose new types of challenges as these vital elements can be exposed not only to physical attacks but also to cyber-attacks with dramatic consequences for the functioning of the Western societies. One also should expect that new technology – for instance AI – will be used to cause various types of damages and increase the level of influence and understanding for the policies of adversarial states through new forms of hybrid operations. NATO and its partners, including the EU, should be involved in mapping how new technologies can contribute to changing the parameters of the hybrid landscape through investing in research on these questions and preparing knowledge-based measures to be implemented to limit the negative impacts of the use of new technologies in the new phase of the hybrid warfare.

Information warfare and strategic communication. Information warfare and issues related to strategic communication have gained more attention in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea when Russia launched massive campaigns in the information space to justify its aggression against Ukraine. Information space remains one of the key domains in which various types of malign influence operations take place. Also launching by Russia of various strategic narratives must be countered by the collective West. NATO has addressed this issue by setting up the STRATCOM Centre of Excellence in Riga that has played a key part in mapping issues related to strategic communication and in implementing various types of measures that are to limit negative impacts of operations in the information space. These efforts should be continued, and it is also important to map the challenges in the information space in the member states that are for various reasons the most exposed and most receptive to Russian information related measures. In addition, NATO should also invest more efforts in mapping operations in information space conducted by other revisionist actors, such as China or Iran as these operations also aim at undermining the internal cohesion in NATO and the EU by sowing confusion and discord.

Economic dependencies. Economic aspects of cooperation between various NATO member states and revisionist powers should also be factored in in NATO's work on improving resilience and limiting negative impacts of hybrid operations. For instance, until recently many NATO

members had been dependent on energy supplies coming from Russia. The Russian leadership most probably expected that this energy dependence would be a factor constraining policy choices to be made by many NATO and EU member states in the wake of the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022. It turned, however, that the collective West, including the countries highly dependent on energy supplies from Russia, have adopted a unison critical approach to Russia and decided to introduce various types of restrictive measures in response to Russian aggression. This has also put some limitations on what instruments from the Russian hybrid toolbox Russia could use to influence decisions taken by NATO and the EU and what damage to economic and social interests of these countries Russia could inflict by launching hybrid operations. Lessons from how the collective West (NATO and the EU) has dealt with the question of economic dependence on Russia can be relevant for dealing with similar questions related to economic (inter)dependence on China that is one of the key economic partners of the collective West. Since China seems to work together with other revisionist powers trying to undermine the existing rules-based international order and also uses various types of hybrid instruments of power to increase its influence, we should expect that at some stage both NATO and the EU will have to find ways of dealing with economic dependence as factor that could possibly constrain their policy choices.

Increasing public awareness and resilience. One of the objectives of the FLANKS 2 project was the mapping of public attitudes and implementing of various types of knowledge-based measures to address questions related to hybrid threats. In line with the recommendations provided by expert community we also launched some actions to demonstrate that there are different ways of increasing public awareness and resilience, also by involving local experts with very good knowledge of the local context and in cooperation with representatives of groups that were most exposed to negative influences. Seen from a NATO perspective it is therefore important to provide guidelines and practical help not only to representatives of national authorities, but also to other actors in what could be labelled 'counter-hybrid value chains', including members of national expert communities, NGO's or local authorities. NATO should also increase the level of cooperation with the EU on what funds should be assigned to various types of knowledge-generating activities in NATO and EU member states to make them better prepared to meet the hybrid challenge through increasing the level of public awareness and resilience.

