



Entering the Grey Zone: Hybrid Warfare and Protection of Civilians in Ukraine

OVERVIEW

While the concept of hybrid warfare remains contested, there is clear evidence of states using a broad range of coercive actions both directly in support of conventional military activity and also beyond the battlefield. Since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, fighting along the contact line in eastern Ukraine has been responsible for substantial civilian harm, and civilians continue to face risks to their livelihoods, infrastructure, and essential services. **The conflict in eastern Ukraine has been a laboratory for the application of new warfare techniques**, many of which differ from the tactics of previous eras in the way that they exploit digital technology. **These hybrid activities are often targeted directly at the civilian population**, seeking to reduce trust in the authorities and exploit potential and existing divisions in society.

Throughout the course of the conflict, Ukraine has seen a range of hybrid actions including economic coercion and the disruption of essential services through cyber-attacks. However, **the primary form of hybrid activity has been the use of disinformation**, much of which has been targeted at discrediting the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) – placing blame on the AFU for incidents of civilian harm despite contradicting evidence. The creation of a sense of instability and crisis engendered by these disinformation campaigns is likely to be a **source of significant psychological harm to civilians and can also lead to physical harm** as tensions within communities and between civilians and the military escalate. These types of hybrid activities also contribute to a deterioration in the protective environment, making resolution of the conflict increasingly difficult.

Without careful consideration of the implications of hybrid activity on civilians, strategies to protect civilians in eastern Ukraine will continue to be insufficient. **National and local authorities, including the AFU, must take steps to mitigate the impact of these hybrid activities.**

In the context of Ukraine, CIVIC has identified two broad forms of hybrid activity: hybrid warfare and hybrid threats.

Hybrid warfare describes activities that are directly linked to the area of military conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Hybrid threats are the broader set of coercive activities conducted across Ukraine and against its partners.

KEY FINDINGS

- While the purpose of both hybrid warfare and hybrid threats may be aggressive and coercive, labeling all of these activities as “war” or “warfare” risks focusing solely on military solutions when those might not be the most appropriate.
- States using hybrid approaches select from a broad range of activities and techniques. Most frameworks assessing the concept of hybrid warfare highlight the integration of multiple elements of national power (military, informational, cultural, and economic) as a defining component.

KEY FINDINGS CONT.

- The conflict in eastern Ukraine has seen examples of all elements:



Military Operations

The targeting of Ukrainian soldiers and their families through the mobile phone network. These attacks intercept the voice and text communications of soldiers, and, in some cases, deliver malware to soldiers' phones in the form of pictures of their spouses or families.



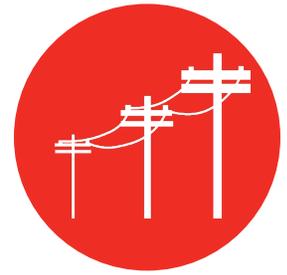
Information Warfare

Disinformation campaigns about the source of attacks by indirect fire weapons, such as in Mariupol in 2015, designed to discredit the AFU and the Ukrainian authorities through the manipulation of information on civilian casualties.



Cultural Manipulation

The dissemination of narratives that European values such as gender equality and human rights are damaging to traditional Ukrainian family values leading to increased violence within communities.



Economic Coercion

Cyberattacks against the power grid in Kyiv in 2015 and 2016, designed to intimidate the population, interfere with access to services, and undermine the credibility of the Ukrainian authorities.

- Since a large portion of hybrid activity is directed against the civilian population, civil-military cooperation is needed, in addition to support from civilian authorities, in order to effectively enhance protection of civilians and increase trust between civilians and the military.
- It is also crucial for the Ukrainian government and the Armed Forces of Ukraine to adopt a people-centric approach to civilian protection that is aligned with humanitarian principles and compliant with international humanitarian law.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Ukrainian government must prioritize the vetting and approval of the National Strategy on the Protection of Civilians by the National Security Council and the Office of the President, and develop an effective implementation plan that takes into consideration hybrid activities.
- Ukrainian authorities at both the local and national level should work to counter disinformation campaigns by ensuring the civilian population has access to credible sources of information through supporting the development of a free and open media landscape.
- The AFU should continue developing and improving civilian harm monitoring capabilities, including the Civilian Casualty Tracking Provisional Group (CCTPG), to identify sources of civilian harm from hybrid activities, particularly in the form of psychological harm and access to services. These mechanisms should also be used to counter disinformation surrounding civilian casualties.
- The AFU should continue facilitating civil-military dialogues and deepen the topics covered to include the impact of hybrid activities.
- Civil society, as well as the Ukrainian authorities, should enhance research of the psychological impact of hybrid activities in order to better inform protection of civilians frameworks and mechanisms for addressing harm.
- Further consideration should be given by the Ukrainian authorities to the utility of total defense approaches that integrate military and civil defense as an effective means to counter the risk of civilian harm from hybrid activities. The impact of hybrid warfare cannot be mitigated by military activity alone.