

# IS THE EUROPEAN MIGRANT CRISIS ANOTHER STAGE OF HYBRID WAR?

*Yurii Punda, Vitalii Shevchuk, Viljar Veebel*



**Abstract:** This article provides an overview of the roots of large-scale migration flows to the European Union (EU) during the past ten years. In addition, the article also explores the potential link between such migration flows and modern hybrid warfare, characterised by the coordination of various types of warfare (i.e. military and non-military means, conventional and non-conventional capabilities, state and non-state actors, etc.), all employed with an aim to cause instability and disorder. In the 2010s, the migration flows to EU countries increased significantly, particularly from the conflict areas in Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, as well as from Albania, Kosovo and Ukraine. The analysis focuses on the question of whether the increase in migration flows could be linked to the ongoing confrontation between Russia and the West. Specifically, the article focuses on two particular cases: Syria and Ukraine. The article explores the commonalities of the resulting migration flows to the EU and proposes policy recommendations for reducing the negative impact of such events in the future.

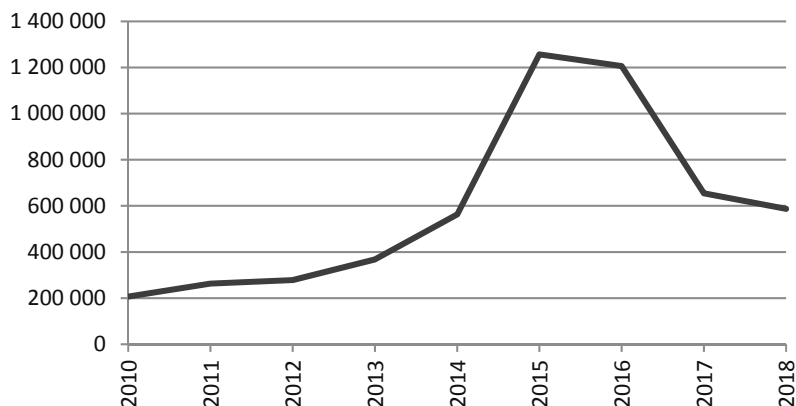
**Keywords:** migration, hybrid warfare, security, European Union, Ukraine, Syria

## 1. Introduction

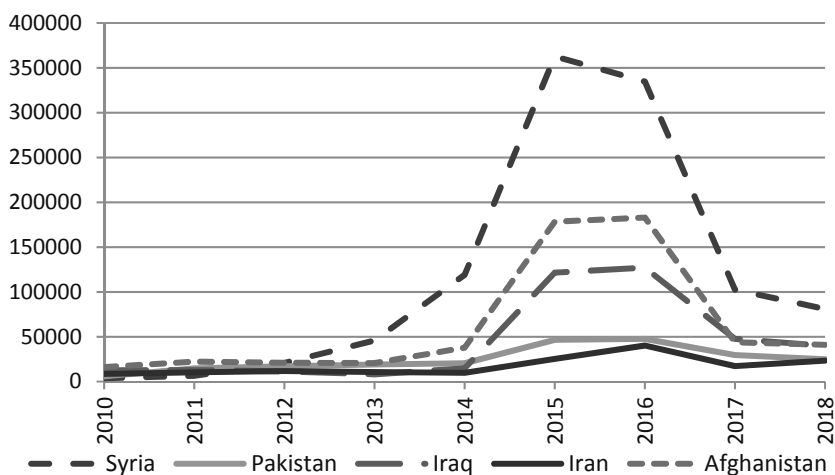
During the 2015 European migration crisis, an unusually large number of refugees flowed into the European Union. During the past decade, the number of first-time asylum applications submitted by non-EU citizens has increased exponentially, peaking in 2015–2016 when more than a million people from non-EU countries applied for asylum in the EU over the course of just one year (Figure 1(a)). A large number of first-time asylum applications were submitted by people originating from conflict areas in Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in the Middle East or in the South Asian region (Figure 1(b)), as well as from Kosovo, Albania and Ukraine, to name some European countries (Figure 1(c)). In some cases, those past or current conflicts have been linked to Russia's activities in the international arena (e.g. the Donbass War in Ukraine or its military interference in Syria), raising the question whether these migration flows to the EU could potentially be part of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy, aimed at stirring up regional instability

and weakening the authority, credibility and unity of the European Union in the international arena.

**Figure 1.** The number of first-time asylum applications submitted to EU countries from 2010 to 2018 [persons per year]<sup>1</sup>

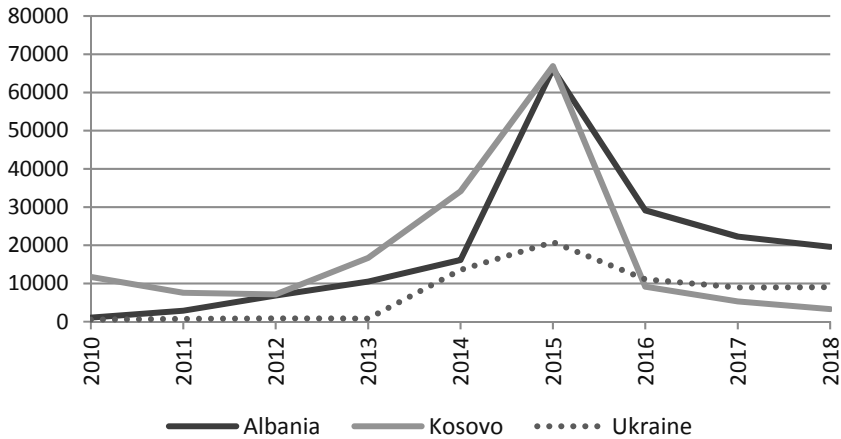


**Figure 1 (a).** The number of first-time asylum applications submitted from 2010 to 2018 to EU countries by non-EU citizens [persons per year]



**Figure 1 (b).** The number of first-time asylum applications submitted from 2010 to 2018 to EU countries by the citizens of Syria, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan [persons per year]

<sup>1</sup> Source: Eurostat 2019. Eurostat Database. Categories: Demography and migration – Asylum and managed migration – Applications. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>. [Eurostat 2019]



**Figure 1 [c].** The number of first-time asylum applications submitted from 2010 to 2018 to EU countries by the citizens of Albania, Kosovo and Ukraine [persons per year]

This article focuses on the discussion of the roots of migration flows to the European Union over the past decade, exploring the potential link between migration flows and the tools of modern hybrid warfare as utilised by the Russian Federation. The concept of *hybrid warfare* has been previously discussed in the context of recent events in Ukraine and also in Syria by several other authors (e.g. Michael Kofman<sup>2</sup>, Nicu Popescu<sup>3</sup>, etc); however, to the knowledge of the authors, none of them have previously undertaken an in-depth analysis of migration flows from the perspective of modern hybrid warfare, and this article purports to take the first step in that direction. The analysis focuses on two specific cases – Syria and Ukraine – looking to establish commonalities between migration patterns originating from Syria and Ukraine to EU countries, as well as offering policy recommendations aimed at reducing the negative impact of such events.

This research bears much importance also for the security of the Baltic states, taking into consideration that on the one hand, hybrid threats emanating from Russia are seen as critical national security concerns<sup>4</sup> and on

<sup>2</sup> **Kofman, M.** 2016. Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts. – War on the Rocks, March 11. <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/> [Kofman 2016]

<sup>3</sup> **Popescu, N.** 2015. Hybrid Tactics: neither new nor only Russian. – European Union Institute for Security Studies, Alert Issue 46, October. [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Alert\\_4\\_hybrid\\_warfare.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Alert_4_hybrid_warfare.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> **Veebel, V.; Ploom, I.** 2016. Estonian perceptions of security: Not only about Russia and the refugees. – Journal on Baltic Security, Vol. 2(2), pp. 35–70. <https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/EstonianPerceptions.pdf>.

the other hand, the social tensions caused by the refugee crisis and the fears that have been triggered by these developments, are among the main factors of political instability and social fragmentation in the Baltic countries<sup>5</sup>.

The next section of the article provides a brief overview of the concept of *hybrid warfare* and analyses Russia's understanding of contemporary conflicts from that perspective. The following section outlines Russia's most recent interventions in Syria and Ukraine, linking them to the dynamics of migration flows to the EU, and discusses the dynamics of migration flows in the framework of hybrid warfare. The authors also acknowledge that in addition to Russia's influence, the recent large-scale migration flows to the EU are affected by other factors as well (e.g. changes in behavioural patterns, political instability, economic reasons, push-and-pull factors, climate conditions, etc.). The final section concludes the research by posing a hypothetical question about the possible consequences of large-scale migration flows as a new form of hybrid warfare, both at the national level and globally.

## 2. Varying Concepts of Hybrid Warfare

Conceptualising *hybrid warfare* is a challenging task mainly for two reasons. First of all, the term's connotation is 'the intangible', referring to the wide variety of measures or tools of hybrid warfare as well as the elusive nature of associated activities, actors and objectives. To quote Frank G. Hoffman:

*hybrid threats incorporate a full range of modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts that include indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict*<sup>6</sup>.

In this respect, the 'attractiveness' of hybridity lies especially in its asymmetrical nature and in the opportunity to remain just below the legal threshold at which the target state would be compelled to respond militarily.

---

<sup>5</sup> **Veibel, V.; Markus, R.** 2015. Europe's Refugee Crisis in 2015 and Security Threats from the Baltic Perspective. – *Journal of Politics and Law*, Vol. 8(4), pp. 254–262. <http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/jpl/article/view/54524>.

<sup>6</sup> **Hoffman, F.** 2009. *Hybrid Warfare and Challenges*. – The Joint Forces Quarterly, 1<sup>st</sup> quarter, Issue 52. Washington: National Defense University Press, p. 36. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/jfqhoffman.pdf>.

Furthermore, the main ‘advantage’ of using hybrid modes of warfare lies in the potential to simultaneously utilise multiple measures/tools to pursue certain goals, while managing to avoid the costs of retaliation from the target<sup>7</sup>. What is more, Ukrainian security expert Volodymyr Horbulin also highlights the absence of clearly defined time horizons as an inherent feature of hybrid war<sup>8</sup>. Thus, it is clearly very difficult to define what specifically constitutes *hybrid warfare* or where it starts and ends.

On the other hand, the concept of the term *hybrid*, as in *hybrid war*, *hybrid warfare*, *hybrid threats*, *hybrid world order* etc., is in essence dynamic and thus, changing all the time. For example, Michael Kofman argues that

*in two short years, the word [hybrid warfare] has mutated from describing how Moscow was fighting its war in Ukraine to incorporating all the various elements of Russian influence and national power. The term continues to evolve, spawning iterations like ‘multi-vector hybrid warfare’ in Europe. Hybrid warfare has become the Frankenstein of the field of Russia military analysis; it has taken on a life of its own and there is no obvious way to contain it*<sup>9</sup>.

Consequently, in a discussion of *hybrid warfare*, all of its possible forms of should be carefully considered, including when referring to migration flows as a potential tool of hybrid warfare used to simultaneously pursue certain goals while also trying to avoid the costs of retaliation from the target.

While the term *hybrid warfare* was used for the first time in the early 2000s, the strategies of hybrid warfare are much older, seeming to date back to ancient times.<sup>10</sup> What is more, the use of the term seems to vary slightly across individual countries and even institutions. For example, Andersson and Tardy have pointed out that the 2015 National Military Strategy of the United States refers to *hybrid conflicts*<sup>11</sup>, while the United Nations mostly

<sup>7</sup> Śliwa, Z.; Veebel, V.; Lebrun, M. 2018. Russian Ambitions and Hybrid Modes of Warfare. – Sõjateadlane (Estonian Journal of Military Studies), Vol. 7, pp. 86–108.

<sup>8</sup> Horbulin, V. 2018. Ukrainian Front of the Hybrid World. – Strategic Panorama, Vol. 1, pp. 3–6.

<sup>9</sup> Kofman 2016, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion, see, e.g. Yenidünya, A.; Atalay, M. 2016. Comparative Analysis of Russian Hybrid Methods in Ukraine and Syria Crisis. – American Scientific Research Journal for Engineering, Technology, and Sciences (ASRJETS), Vol 26, No 4, pp. 1–13. [https://asrjetsjournal.org/index.php/American\\_Scientific\\_Journal/article/view/2407](https://asrjetsjournal.org/index.php/American_Scientific_Journal/article/view/2407).

<sup>11</sup> The strategy states that “such ‘hybrid’ conflicts may consist of military forces assuming a non-state identity, as Russia did in the Crimea, or involving a violent extremist organisation (VEO) fielding rudimentary combined arms capabilities, as ISIL has demonstrated in Iraq

talks about *asymmetric threats* without using the term *hybrid*<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, NATO seems to use the term *hybrid* relatively often, referring to *hybrid attacks*, *hybrid threats*, *hybrid challenges*, *hybrid actions*, *hybrid campaigns*, *hybrid warfare*, etc. For example, the 2018 NATO Brussels Summit Declaration stresses the existence of a “*dangerous, unpredictable, and fluid security environment, with enduring challenges and threats from all strategic directions; from state and non-state actors; from military forces; and from terrorist, cyber, and hybrid attacks*”, pointing to several specific threats, such as Russia’s aggressive actions, the instability and continuing crises across the Middle East and North Africa, terrorism, irregular migration, human trafficking, the crisis in Syria, disinformation campaigns, malicious cyber activities, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and advanced missile technology, etc.<sup>13</sup>.

What is more, NATO has also indicated that in the case of *hybrid warfare*, it could decide to invoke Article 5, as it would in case of a traditional armed attack<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, the declaration stresses that the Alliance is ready to assist its member states at any stage of a *hybrid campaign*, although the primary responsibility for responding to *hybrid threats* would remain with the targeted nation.

From this perspective, *hybrid warfare* may also not be the right term to accurately portray Russia’s understanding of contemporary conflicts/warfare. Discussions on hybrid conflicts intensified in Russia in the early 2010s, when the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, presented his understanding of contemporary warfare for which Russian armed forces should prepare themselves in the future. According to Gerasimov, “*frontal engagement of large formations of force /.../ is becoming a thing of the past*” and will be effectively replaced

---

and Syria”. The strategy also stresses that “*hybrid conflicts may be comprised of state and non-state actors working together toward shared objectives, employing a wide range of weapons such as we have witnessed in eastern Ukraine*”. **The National Military Strategy of the United States of America**. 2015. Washington D.C., June. [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015\\_National\\_Military\\_Strategy.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015_National_Military_Strategy.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Andersson, J. J.; Tardy, T. 2015. Hybrid: What’s in a Name? – European Union Institute for Security Studies, October, pp. 2–4. [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISS-Files/Brief\\_32\\_Hybrid\\_warfare.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISS-Files/Brief_32_Hybrid_warfare.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> NATO 2018. The Brussels Summit Declaration. NATO Press Release 074, July 11. [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2018\\_07/20180713\\_180711-summit-declaration-eng.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_07/20180713_180711-summit-declaration-eng.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2018. Countering Russia’s Hybrid Threats: An Update. Special Report by Special Rapporteur Lord Jopling [NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2018]

by “*the use of special forces, exploitation of internal opposition*” and “*informational actions, devices and means*”. Interestingly, Russians seem to prefer using the term *non-linear war*, instead of *hybrid war*.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, both Russia’s political and military leaders have clearly stated that external threats to Russia are primarily of a hybrid nature, referring, for example, to increased global and regional instability, the use of ICT, territorial claims against Russia, the violation of international agreements, etc.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Russian leaders seem to constantly reiterate that the West uses hybrid warfare in Russia’s near-abroad in the form of promoting and supporting ‘colour revolutions’ in those countries (e.g. Ukraine). In 2016, to counter the potential threat of ‘colour revolutions’, General Gerasimov called for the development of a ‘soft power’ strategy, referring to the toolkit of soft measures (i.e. political, diplomatic, economic, informational, cybernetic, psychological and other non-military means) to complement conventional ‘hard power’ measures<sup>17</sup>.

Thus, the concept of *hybrid warfare* has not only changed the way we define and understand modern wars and conflicts, but it also poses serious threats to modern societies. According to Kersten Knipp, one dangerous trend that is associated with hybrid warfare and hybrid conflicts, is the undermining of democratic values<sup>18</sup>. In a wider context, this could also lead to the undermining of democratic values, which, in turn, could result in undesirable consequences. In this respect, subjective and targeted ‘advocacy campaigns’ on social media or other so-called ‘free media platforms’ aiming to promote the ideas of certain parties or politicians under the guise of simply ‘sharing information’ could also be interpreted as a potential tool of hybrid warfare. The same applies to the emergence of large migration waves headed to democratic countries that could pose a threat to democratic values. Last but not least, the incitement (?) of (military) conflicts in neighbouring countries clearly undermines democratic values, the current rules-based global

<sup>15</sup> **Kaldor, M.; Chinkin, C.** 2017. *International Law and New Wars*. Cambridge University Press, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> **President of Russia** 2014. Address by the President of the Russian Federation. Presidential Executive Office, March 18. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>. [**President of Russia** 2014]

<sup>17</sup> **McDermott, R.** 2016. Gerasimov Calls for New Strategy to Counter Color Revolution. – *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 13, Issue 46. <https://jamestown.org/program/gerasimov-calls-for-new-strategy-to-counter-color-revolution/>.

<sup>18</sup> **Knipp, K.** 2016. Extremist views on the rise – *Deutsche Welle*, June 16. <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-extremist-views-on-the-rise/a-19335946>. [**Knipp** 2016]

order and international law, and should, therefore, be considered as another form of hybrid warfare.

### 3. Possible Connections between Migration from Syria and Ukraine to the EU and Russia's Interventions in those Countries

#### 3.1. Russia's Intervention in Syria

The conflict that erupted in Syria back in 2011 has lasted for almost a decade, drawing in many countries like Russia, the United States, Iran, the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel throughout the different stages of this conflict. The Syrian conflict began with pro-democracy demonstrations and a civil uprising in 2011, rapidly devolving into a full-scale civil war from 2012 to 2013. Although Syrian presidential elections took place in June 2014, the situation did not normalise and fighting continued. The conflict was further fuelled by the rise of the terrorist formation ISIL with its own ambitions to rule the region. The U.S. actively intervened in the Syrian conflict from September 2014 to September 2015 by supporting the opposition to President al-Assad and targeting ISIL fighters<sup>19</sup>.

In September 2015, Russia intervened in the conflict at the request of the Syrian government headed by President al-Assad, relying on the long-term cooperation between the two countries. In the following months, Russia carried out extensive air strikes in Syria against both ISIL and the anti-government opposition<sup>20</sup>. It has been argued that Russia's air campaigns in support of President Bashar al-Assad in 2015 and early 2016 were crucial in turning the war in al-Assad's favour<sup>21</sup>. From February to July 2016, a partial ceasefire was introduced under the aegis of the UN Security Council; however, after its expiration, intensive fighting resumed. In 2017, an agreement was signed to establish de-escalation zones and to introduce a ceasefire, with Russia announcing in late 2017 that Syria had been liberated from

---

<sup>19</sup> **Bannelier-Christakis, K.** 2016. Military interventions against ISIL in Iraq, Syria and Libya, and the Legal Basis of Consent. – *Leiden Journal of International Law*, Vol. 29(3), pp. 745–748.

<sup>20</sup> **Segall, M.** 2019. The Rocky Marriage of Convenience between Russia and Iran in Syria. – Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, January 29. <https://jcpa.org/the-rocky-marriage-of-convenience-between-russia-and-iran-in-syria/>.

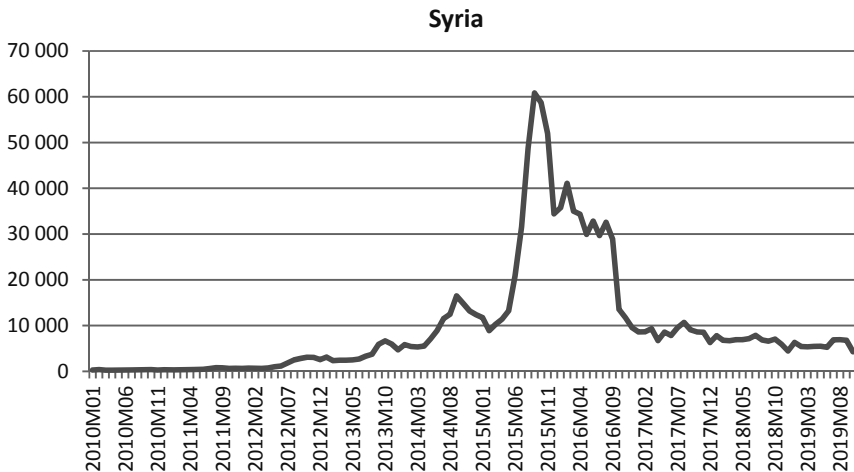
<sup>21</sup> **Why is there a War in Syria?** 2019. – BBC News, February 25. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229>. [**Why is there a War in Syria?** 2019]



ISIL. In 2018, the conflict escalated once more, after a reported chemical attack, triggering missile strikes from Western countries on multiple targets in Syria. In addition to that, ISIL attacks have also continued. Currently, the conflict in Syria is still ongoing.

The conflict in Syria has resulted in unprecedented migration flows from Syria to other countries. Based on Eurostat data regarding first-time asylum applications submitted to EU countries, the situation seemed to be mostly under control during the initial phase of the conflict in 2011. However, as of May 2012, the number of first-time asylum applications to the EU started to increase drastically after the initial confrontations devolved into full-scale civil war. The first peak was reached in September 2014, when more than 16,000 asylum applications from Syria were submitted to EU countries within one month (Figure 2). Another peak came in September 2015, with the submission of more than 60,000 first-time asylum applications. The migration flow from Syria to the EU started to significantly decline starting from October 2016 and have currently dipped back to the levels of 2013.

To sum up, migration waves from Syria to EU countries started to significantly increase from September 2014, after the conflict gained an international dimension following the U.S. intervention. Although migration to the EU peaked in September 2015, overlapping with Russia’s direct intervention and air strikes, a clear cause-and-effect relationship cannot be drawn between Russia’s actions in Syria and the migration wave from Syria to the EU.



**Figure 2.** The number of first-time asylum applications submitted from 2010 to 2018 to EU countries from Syria [persons per month]<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Source: Eurostat 2019.

On the one hand, migration from Syria began already in 2011–2012, but at that time the pressure was mostly on Turkey, not the EU. On the other hand, there are many other factors that have contributed to the massive migration from Syria (e.g. high unemployment, corruption, lack of political freedom and poor economic conditions)<sup>23</sup>. It has also been posited that in 2015 the Syrian refugees discovered a migration route through the Balkan countries, and by sharing that information on social media probably contributed to the large-scale migration waves of 2015.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Eurostat’s data may not reflect the full picture of the migration waves from Syria to the EU, especially considering the fact that some refugees from several other countries have been known to falsely report that they originate from Syria when applying for asylum in the EU. However, despite the reasons mentioned above, it is still a fact that migration waves from Syria exploded in numbers particularly after the U.S. intervened in the conflict, and that Russia’s support for President al-Assad’s regime led to the escalation of the conflict. Referring to Russia’s support to al-Assad’s regime, Kelly Craft, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, has stated that: *“What we are witnessing is not counterterrorism, but an excuse to continue a violent military campaign against those who refuse to accept the Assad regime’s authority”*<sup>25</sup>.

### 3.2. Russia’s Intervention in Ukraine

Similarly to the Syrian conflict, the Ukrainian conflict started with popular mass protests against the decision of the former President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, to suspend the implementation of the EU association agreement in November 2013. The anti-government protests basically evolved into a revolution and in February 2014, Yanukovich fled from Ukraine to Russia<sup>26</sup>. Claiming that President Yanukovich

<sup>23</sup> **Why is there a War in Syria?** 2019.

<sup>24</sup> **What caused the refugee crisis?** 2015. – The Guardian, December 9. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/09/what-caused-the-refugee-crisis-google>.

<sup>25</sup> **Russia casts 13<sup>th</sup> veto of U.N. Security Council action during Syrian war.** 2019. – Reuters, September 19. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-un/russia-casts-13th-veto-of-u-n-security-council-action-during-syrian-war-idUSKBN1W42CJ>.

<sup>26</sup> For further information, e.g. **European Parliament** 2018. At a glance: A UN peacekeeping mission in eastern Ukraine? March. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/614737/EPRS\\_ATA\(2018\)614737\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/614737/EPRS_ATA(2018)614737_EN.pdf). [**European Parliament** 2018], as well as **Poltorakov, O.** 2015. The Functional Dynamic of Ukraine’s “Maidan” – Russian Politics & Law, Vol. 53(3), pp. 28–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611940.2015.1053783>, and **Veebel, V.** 2016. Escaping the Imperial Grip of Russia: Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, and Georgia. – Cross Border Journal for International Studies, Vol. 1(1), pp. 107–126.

had asked Moscow for assistance, Russia sent its troops to Ukraine in February-March 2014 to justify the annexation of the Crimean peninsula. In March 2014, Russia organised a referendum in Crimea, never recognized by the international community. After Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, violent confrontations broke out in Eastern Ukraine between the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the separatists backed by Russia.

The first version of the Minsk Protocols, a ceasefire negotiated under the auspices of the OSCE, was signed in September 2014; however, in retrospect, it is apparent that Russia had no intention to step back its efforts in Ukraine and to stop supporting separatists in Eastern Ukraine<sup>27</sup>. Consequently, in January 2015, a full-scale armed conflict broke out in Eastern Ukraine, culminating in the Minsk II agreements, the second cease-fire agreement in the Donbass war, in February 2015. However, the situation remains complicated to this day, with armed confrontations still taking place in Eastern Ukraine almost on a daily basis between Ukrainian armed forces and the Russian-backed separatists.<sup>28</sup>

As many authors have pointed out, Russia has clearly used the strategy of hybrid warfare in Ukraine both in terms of military and non-military measures as well as state and non-state actors<sup>29</sup>. All throughout the conflict and even before its start, various lines of operation were utilised in multiple areas such as diplomatic and political relations, economy, energy, religion, military and informational sphere, with the aim of enabling Russia to

---

<sup>27</sup> Veebel, V., Markus, R. 2018. European Normative Power during Ukrainian-Russian Conflict. – *Baltic Journal of Law and Politics*, 11 (1), pp 1–20.

<sup>28</sup> For further information, see, e.g. **European Parliament** 2018, as well as Šlaboviš, A. 2016. Chapter 4.2: Military Overview. – Sazonov, V.; Müür, K.; Mölder, H. (eds.). Russian Information Campaign against the Ukrainian state and Defence Forces. Combined analysis. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and Estonian National Defence College, Tartu, pp. 64–65. [Sazonov *et al.* 2016] <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russian-information-campaign-against-ukrainian-state-and-defence-forces-0>; and Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V. 2016. Chapter 4: Overview of Political and Military Events. – Sazonov, V.; Müür, K.; Mölder, H. (eds.). Russian Information Campaign against the Ukrainian state and Defence Forces. Combined analysis. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and Estonian National Defence College, Tartu, pp. 61–98.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g. Sazonov *et al.* 2016; Renz, B. 2016. Russia and 'hybrid warfare'. – *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 22, Issue 3, pp. 283–300; Chausovsky, E. 2019. Ukraine Provides a Test Case of Russia's Hybrid Warfare Strategy. – *Stratfor, On Geopolitics*, March 28. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/ukraine-test-case-russias-hybrid-warfare-strategy-moscow-putin-kremlin>; Midttun, H. P. 2019. Hybrid War in Ukraine – Predictions for 2019 and beyond. – *Euromaidan Press*, April 18. <http://euromaidanpress.com/2019/04/18/hybrid-war-in-ukraine-predictions-for-2019-and-beyond/>. [Midttun 2019]

gain control over Ukraine and change public opinion both in Ukraine and globally<sup>30</sup>. In addition, Russia has also provided military “aid” to the separatists to maintain a foothold in Eastern Ukraine<sup>31</sup>; not to mention the massive, comprehensive and systematic information operation Russia conducted in Ukraine in 2014<sup>32</sup>.

Thus, based on Russia’s recent actions in Ukraine, the authors propose using the term *hybrid aggression* instead of *hybrid war* or *hybrid warfare*, considering that *aggression* has connotations with hostile or violent behaviour, or general readiness to attack or confront. In Ukraine, Russia utilised a complex set of instruments, including unconventional, covert, and inherently illegal forms of pressure that seems to align better with the meaning of *aggression* as opposed to *warfare* as it is conventionally understood. Furthermore, another important aspect in defining *hybrid aggression* seems to lie in the attempt to avoid incurring the legal status of a country that is in violation of international law, which also seems to deviate from the traditional meaning of ‘warfare’. During the conflict in Ukraine, Russia’s President Putin has argued that he had every right to annex Crimea, relying on shared historical legacy, and maintaining that no violation of international law had taken place in Ukraine. Moreover, he called out other countries, particularly the United States and Germany, to acknowledge Russia’s actions, referring to their own historical practice<sup>33</sup>.

Finally, in the case of *hybrid aggression*, unlike in traditional *warfare*, it is often difficult for the attacked party to realize that it is actually under the attack<sup>34</sup>. Thus, the conflict in Ukraine is more akin to an *aggression* than traditional *conflict* or *warfare*, referring to hostile and violent behaviour exhibited by the aggressor and its overall readiness to confront and attack.

As regards the migration waves from Ukraine to the EU, they fully reflect the dynamics of the conflict, i.e. before the outbreak of the conflict in November 2013, less than a 100 first-time asylum applications from Ukrainian citizens were submitted to EU countries on a monthly basis, whereas the number of applications increased significantly during the

---

<sup>30</sup> Midttun 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Mölder, H. 2016. Chapter 7: Conclusions. – Sazonov *et al.* 2016, pp. 112–115. <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russian-information-campaign-against-ukrainian-state-and-defence-forces-0>.

<sup>32</sup> Sazonov *et al.* 2016.

<sup>33</sup> President of Russia 2014.

<sup>34</sup> NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2018, p. 2.

conflict and peaked from October 2014 to May 2015 with up to 2,100 first-time asylum applications submitted per month (Figure 3).

Granted, the scale of migration pressure from Ukraine to the EU is not comparable with the migration waves originating from Syria; however, they are still quite significant in comparison with the levels prior to the start of the Donbass War in November 2013. Considering that Russia escalated the conflict with the annexation of Crimea in the first quarter of 2014, it makes Russia also responsible for the increased migration flow from Ukraine to the EU.



**Figure 3.** The number of first-time asylum applications submitted from 2010 to 2018 to EU countries from Ukraine [persons per month]<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion: Instigation of Large-scale Migration Flows as a New Form of Hybrid Warfare?

Over the past decade, EU countries have found themselves overwhelmed by serious challenges. They seemed to be particularly unprepared for the 2013–2014 crisis in Ukraine, as nobody expected that a war would break out in Europe and that Russia would have the audacity to violate international law and infringe Ukraine’s sovereignty. These developments have seriously undermined the foundations of European security. What is more, the Syrian

<sup>35</sup> Source: Eurostat 2019.

conflict has further endangered the existing global security order, as well as set off large-scale migration flows from Syria to the European Union<sup>36</sup>. In both cases, the migration flows increased significantly after internal conflicts turned to international confrontations and escalated to full-scale warfare. Thus, over the past couple of years, EU countries have repeatedly found themselves confronted with complex situations beyond their control.

At the same time, these situations – both in Ukraine and in Syria – seem to have been fully ‘under the control’ of Russia, who played an active role in escalating both conflicts. Furthermore, in both cases, Russia had several opportunities to de-escalate these conflicts but never chose to do so. During the Syrian conflict, Russia repeatedly used its veto power to block the UN Security Council’s resolutions aimed, for example, to investigate and impose sanctions over the use of chemical weapons in Syria, to stop the bombing and achieve a truce in Aleppo, and to condemn the actions of the Syrian government against the opposition<sup>37</sup>. In Ukraine, after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Russia escalated the military conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine, sabotaged the Minsk I ceasefire agreements and conducted information campaigns to tarnish Ukraine’s image both domestically as well as internationally<sup>38</sup>. Conversely, if Russia would not have blocked Western initiatives to solve the conflict in Syria and if Russia would have withdrawn from Crimea and stopped arming Ukrainian separatists, it would not have led to drastically increased migration flows from Syria and Ukraine to the EU countries. Thus, Russia is clearly responsible for the increased migration flows to the EU originating from Syria and Ukraine.

Admittedly, increased migration flows, under controlled conditions, are perfectly normal in today’s ever globalising world. However, as the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts have demonstrated, the situation becomes critical as soon as controlled migration turns into uncontrolled migration. Regardless of whether Russia considers the instigation of large-scale migration flows to the EU as part of its strategy of non-linear warfare or not, the overall impact

---

<sup>36</sup> **Veebel, V.; Kulu, L.; Tartes, A.** 2014. Conceptual factors behind the poor performance of the European Neighbourhood policy. – *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, Vol. 31, pp. 85–102.

<sup>37</sup> **Russia’s 12 vetoes on Syria.** 2018. – RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Ireland’s National Public Service Broadcaster), April 11. <https://www.rte.ie/news/world/2018/0411/953637-russia-syria-un-veto/>.

<sup>38</sup> **Veebel, V.; Markus, R.** 2016. At the Dawn of a New Era of Sanctions: Russian-Ukrainian Crisis and Sanctions. – *Orbis*, Vol. 60(1), pp. 128–139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2015.12.001>.

of such massive migration flows is overwhelming for destination countries in several ways.

Firstly, Western societies have been shown to be extremely susceptible to social disintegration triggered by a massive influx of refugees. The increasing popularity of far-right parties in some EU countries relies to a large extent on their anti-immigrant views<sup>39</sup>, and the migration flows that have overwhelmed the EU play right into their hands.

Secondly, and quite possibly even more importantly, massive migration waves and the way they are often depicted in social media under the guise of simply ‘sharing information’ have demonstrated the potential to undermine democratic values<sup>40</sup>, and in this context, such undermining of democratic values is directly associated with the concept of hybrid warfare. It is also clearly illustrated by the popular reaction to the European migration and refugee crisis that has been, and still is, relatively painful in some EU countries, maintaining that European countries should close their borders to these migrants. Even if there are grounds for this argument (e.g. financial considerations arguing that the EU is unable to help everyone in need), these views do not reflect the higher normative values that the EU is trying to promote around the world. Should the EU lose its normative power in the world arena<sup>41</sup> as a result of undermining its underlying democratic values, Russia would once again be one step closer to realising its aggressive ambitions in other countries<sup>42</sup>.

Based on this research, it could be argued that the most recent large-scale migration flows have occurred primarily after internal conflicts have turned into international ones, mainly as a result of interventions staged by other countries, particularly Russia. In that respect, Russia is clearly implementing its idea of *selective multipolarity*, meaning that it actively participates in

---

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, **Janning, J.** (ed) 2016. Keeping Europeans Together: Assessing the State of EU Cohesion. – European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). <https://www.ecfr.eu/images/eucohesion/ECFR186%20KEEPING%20EUROPEANS%20TOGETHER.pdf>; **Veebel, V.** 2019a. The Rise of Right-Wing Populists in Estonia. – Foreign Policy Research Institute, Baltic Bulletin, July 31. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/07/the-rise-of-right-wing-populists-in-estonia/>.

<sup>40</sup> **Knipp** 2016.

<sup>41</sup> **Veebel, V.** 2019b. European Union as normative power in the Ukrainian–Russian conflict. – International Politics, Vol. 56(5), pp. 697–712.

<sup>42</sup> **Veebel, V.** 2017. Russia’s Neo-Imperial dependence model: Experiences of former Soviet republics. – Romanian Journal of Political Science, Vol. 1, Issue 1. <http://www.sar.org.ro/polsci/?p=1292>.

international conflicts and carefully selects opponents that would allow Russia to present itself as a global power in the world arena, i.e. as “the one that sets things in motion”<sup>43</sup>. Assuming that Russia has not abandoned its aggressive ambitions both in its neighbouring countries as well as globally, it could be expected that Russia fully intends to conduct conflict interventions in the future as well. Thus, according to the analysis of the authors, it would be in the best interests of the West to continuously assess the situation on a case-by-case basis and to take active countermeasures to prevent massive migration flows (most likely to the EU) as soon as it becomes evident that Russia has targeted a country for those purposes. In more practical terms, it would mean systematic and careful monitoring of political situations and potential hybrid scenarios in various countries around the world (i.e. not the developments the EU would like to see in those countries, but understanding what is actually happening there/on the ground in reality). This applies particularly to the countries covered under the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy.

In conclusion, Russia’s current ‘operation’ to return Eastern Europe under its sphere of influence cannot be implemented without destroying the foundations of existing strategic alliances, including the foundations of the European Union. However, President Putin’s recent statements<sup>44</sup> and his actions clearly indicate that Russia has already started down that road. On the other side, the EU has defined itself as a community that is united by universal values rather than by fleeting interests. Those universal values are liberal values that form the foundation for the cooperation between the EU member states and they are also very attractive to people of the EU’s neighbouring countries, including Ukraine.

---

<sup>43</sup> **Polyhakova, A.** 2018. Putin’s true victory in Syria was not over ISIS. – The Brookings Institution, February 26. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/putins-true-victory-in-syria-isnt-over-isis/>.

<sup>44</sup> For example, in his recent interview with the Financial Times, Russian President Putin argued that the liberalism has outlived its purpose, stating that this is best reflected in the way the public had turned against immigration, open borders and multiculturalism. For more see **Vladimir Putin: liberalism has ‘outlived its purpose’**. 2019. – The Financial Times, September 17. <https://www.ft.com/content/2880c762-98c2-11e9-8cfb-30c211dcd229>.



## References

- Andersson, J. J.; Tardy, T.** 2015. Hybrid: What's in a Name? – European Union Institute for Security Studies, October.  
[https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief\\_32\\_Hybrid\\_warfare.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_32_Hybrid_warfare.pdf).
- Bannelier-Christakis, K.** 2016. Military interventions against ISIL in Iraq, Syria and Libya, and the Legal Basis of Consent. – *Leiden Journal of International Law*, Vol. 29(3), pp. 743–775.
- Chausovsky, E.** 2019. Ukraine Provides a Test Case of Russia's Hybrid Warfare Strategy. – Stratfor, On Geopolitics, March 28.  
<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/ukraine-test-case-russias-hybrid-warfare-strategy-moscow-putin-kremlin>.
- European Parliament** 2018. At a glance: A UN peacekeeping mission in eastern Ukraine? March.  
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/614737/EPRS\\_ATA\(2018\)614737\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/614737/EPRS_ATA(2018)614737_EN.pdf).
- Eurostat** 2019. Eurostat Database. Categories: Demography and migration – Asylum and managed migration – Applications.  
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>.
- Hoffman, F.** 2009. Hybrid Warfare and Challenges. – *The Joint Forces Quarterly*, 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 2009, Issue 52. Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press.  
<https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/jfqhoffman.pdf>.
- Horbulin, V.** 2018. Ukrainian Front of the Hybrid World. – *Strategic Panorama*, Vol. 1, pp. 3–6.
- Janning, J.** (ed). 2016. Keeping Europeans Together: Assessing the State of EU Cohesion. ECFR (European Council on Foreign Relations), September.  
<https://www.ecfr.eu/images/eucohesion/ECFR186%20KEEPING%20EUROPEANS%20TOGETHER.pdf>.
- Kaldor, M.; Chinkin, C.** 2017. *International Law and New Wars*. Cambridge University Press.
- Knipp, K.** 2016. Extremist views on the rise. – *Deutsche Welle*, June 16.  
<https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-extremist-views-on-the-rise/a-19335946>.
- Kofman, M.** 2016. Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts. – *War on the Rocks*, March 11.  
<https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>.
- McDermott, R.** 2016. Gerasimov Calls for New Strategy to Counter Color Revolution. – *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 13, Issue 46. The Jamestown Foundation.  
<https://jamestown.org/program/gerasimov-calls-for-new-strategy-to-counter-color-revolution/>.
- Middtun, H. P.** 2019. Hybrid War in Ukraine – Predictions for 2019 and beyond. – *Euromaidan Press*, April 18.  
<http://euromaidanpress.com/2019/04/18/hybrid-war-in-ukraine-predictions-for-2019-and-beyond/>.

- Mölder, H.** 2016. Chapter 7: Conclusions. – Sazonov, V.; Mütter, K.; Mölder, H. (eds.) 2016. Russian Information Campaign against the Ukrainian state and Defence Forces by NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and Estonian National Defence College. Tartu, pp. 112–115.  
<https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russian-information-campaign-against-ukrainian-state-and-defence-forces-0>.
- Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.** 2016. Chapter 4: Overview of Political and Military Events. – Sazonov, V.; Mütter, K.; Mölder, H. (eds) 2016. Russian Information Campaign against the Ukrainian state and Defence Forces by, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and Estonian National Defence College. Tartu, pp. 61–65.  
<https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russian-information-campaign-against-ukrainian-state-and-defence-forces-0>.
- National Military Strategy of the United States of America.** 2015. Washington D.C., June.  
[https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015\\_National\\_Military\\_Strategy.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015_National_Military_Strategy.pdf).
- NATO** 2018. The Brussels Summit Declaration. NATO Press Release 074, July 11.  
[https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2018\\_07/20180713\\_180711-summit-declaration-eng.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_07/20180713_180711-summit-declaration-eng.pdf).
- NATO Parliamentary Assembly** 2018. Countering Russia's Hybrid Threats: An Update. Special Report by Special Rapporteur Lord Jopling (United Kingdom), Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security (CDS), October.  
[https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=sites/default/files/2018-12/166%20CDS%2018%20E%20fin%20-%20HYBRID%20THREATS%20-%20JOPLING\\_0.pdf](https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=sites/default/files/2018-12/166%20CDS%2018%20E%20fin%20-%20HYBRID%20THREATS%20-%20JOPLING_0.pdf).
- President of Russia** 2014. Address by the President of the Russian Federation. Presidential Executive Office, March 18.  
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.
- Poltorakov, O.** 2015. The Functional Dynamic of Ukraine's "Maidan". – Russian Politics & Law, Vol. 53(3), pp. 28–36.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10611940.2015.1053783>.
- Polyhakova, A.** 2018. Putin's true victory in Syria was not over ISIS. – The Brookings Institution, February 26.  
<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/putins-true-victory-in-syria-isnt-over-isis/>.
- Popescu, N.** 2015. Hybrid Tactics: neither new nor only Russian. – European Union Institute for Security Studies, Alert Issue 46, October.  
[https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Alert\\_4\\_hybrid\\_warfare.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Alert_4_hybrid_warfare.pdf).
- Renz, B.** 2016. Russia and 'hybrid warfare'. – Contemporary Politics, Vol. 22, Issue 3, pp. 283–300.
- Russia casts 13<sup>th</sup> veto of U.N. Security Council action during Syrian war.** 2019. – Reuters, September 19.  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-un/russia-casts-13th-veto-of-u-n-security-council-action-during-syrian-war-idUSKBN1W42CJ>.

- Russia's 12 vetoes on Syria.** 2018. – RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Ireland's National Public Service Broadcaster), April 11.  
<https://www.rte.ie/news/world/2018/0411/953637-russia-syria-un-veto/>.
- Sazonov, V.; Müür, K.; Mölder, H.** (eds.) 2016. Russian Information Campaign against the Ukrainian state and Defence Forces: Executive Summary. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and Estonian National Defence College, Tartu.  
<https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russian-information-campaign-against-ukrainian-state-and-defence-forces>.
- Segall, M.** 2019. The Rocky Marriage of Convenience between Russia and Iran in Syria. – Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, January 19.  
<https://jcpa.org/the-rocky-marriage-of-convenience-between-russia-and-iran-in-syria/>.
- Šlabovitiš, A.** 2016. Chapter 4.2: Military Overview. – Sazonov, V.; Müür, K.; Mölder, H. (eds.) 2016. Russian Information Campaign against the Ukrainian state and Defence Forces: Executive Summary. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and Estonian National Defence College, Tartu, pp. 64–65.  
<https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russian-information-campaign-against-ukrainian-state-and-defence-forces-0>.
- Šliwa, Z.; Veebel, V.; Lebrun, M.** 2018. Russian Ambitions and Hybrid Modes of Warfare. – Sõjateadlane. Estonian Journal of Military Studies, Vol. 7, pp. 86–108.
- Veebel, V.** 2019a. The Rise of Right-Wing Populists in Estonia. – Foreign Policy Research Institute, Baltic Bulletin, July 31.  
<https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/07/the-rise-of-right-wing-populists-in-estonia/>.
- Veebel, V.** 2019b. European Union as normative power in the Ukrainian–Russian conflict. – International Politics, Vol. 56(5), pp. 697–712.
- Veebel, V.** 2017. Russia's Neo-Imperial dependence model: Experiences of former Soviet republics. – Romanian Journal of Political Science, Vol. 1, Issue 1.  
<http://www.sar.org.ro/polsci/?p=1292>.
- Veebel, V.** 2016. Escaping the Imperial Grip of Russia: Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, and Georgia. – Cross Border Journal for International Studies, Vol. 1(1), pp. 107–126.
- Veebel, V.; Kulu, L.; Tartes, A.** 2014. Conceptual factors behind the poor performance of the European Neighbourhood policy. – Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review, Vol. 31, pp. 85–102.  
<http://lfpr.lt/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/LFPR-31-Veebel.pdf>.
- Veebel, V.; Markus, R.** 2018. European Normative Power during Ukrainian–Russian Conflict. – Baltic Journal of Law & Politics, Vol. 11(1), pp. 1–20.
- Veebel, V.; Markus, R.** 2016. At the Dawn of a New Era of Sanctions: Russian–Ukrainian Crisis and Sanctions. – Orbis, Vol. 60(1), Winter, pp. 128–139.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2015.12.001>.
- Veebel, V.; Markus, R.** 2015. Europe's Refugee Crisis in 2015 and Security Threats from the Baltic Perspective. – Journal of Politics and Law, Vol. 8(4), pp. 254–262.  
<http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/jpl/article/view/54524>.

- Veebel, V.; Ploom, I.** 2016. Estonian perceptions of security: Not only about Russia and the refugees. – *Journal on Baltic Security*, Vol. 2(2), pp. 35–70.  
<https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/EstonianPerceptions.pdf>.
- Vladimir Putin: liberalism has ‘outlived its purpose’.** 2019. – *The Financial Times*, September 17.  
<https://www.ft.com/content/2880c762-98c2-11e9-8cfb-30c211dc229>.
- Yenidünya, A.; Atalay, M.** 2016. Comparative Analysis of Russian Hybrid Methods in Ukraine and Syria Crisis. – *American Scientific Research Journal for Engineering, Technology, and Sciences (ASRJETS)*, Vol. 26, No. 4.  
[https://asrjetsjournal.org/index.php/American\\_Scientific\\_Journal/article/view/2407](https://asrjetsjournal.org/index.php/American_Scientific_Journal/article/view/2407).
- What caused the refugee crisis?** 2015. – *The Guardian*, December 9.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/09/what-caused-the-refugee-crisis-google>
- Why is there a War in Syria?** 2019. – *BBC News*, February 25.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229>.

Colonel Dr. **YURII PUNDA**

Senior Researcher and Head of National Security and Defense Strategy  
Department at the National Defense University of Ukraine

Lieutenant Colonel Dr. **VITALII SHEVCHUK**

Chief of the Military Security Research Laboratory of the National  
Security and Defense Strategy Department at the National Defense  
University of Ukraine

Dr. **VILJAR VEEBEL**

Senior Researcher at the Department of Political Science and Strategic  
Studies, Baltic Defence College in Tartu, Estonia