

# DGAP POLICY BRIEF

EUROPEAN  
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## European Security in the Era of Hybrid Warfare

### Active Measures in Russia's Confrontation with Europe



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Russian hybrid warfare operations against Europe have increased sharply since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Conventionally inferior, Russia is playing in the "gray zone" to undermine public support for Ukraine and unity in the EU and NATO. European responses remain defensive and reactive, struggling to address the uncertainty Russia sows. A proactive approach requires insights into Russian military thinking on "active measures" in conflict and a focus on how Europe can deal with uncertainty.

- Russian military thinkers see non-military and indirect military means as fundamental to achieving strategic objectives. So-called active measures, such as disinformation campaigns, sabotage, or cyber threats, are inherent to Russia's understanding of war.
- Throughout the escalation cycle, Russian active measures serve to prepare the battlefield, complement direct military force, and secure Russia's strategic interests.
- Europeans should aim to reduce the uncertainty created by Russian malign activity through a better grasp of Russian strategic thinking, information sharing, and by minimizing the gray zone.
- Second, they should embrace a degree of uncertainty and develop their capacity for innovation and improvisation, notably via swift decision-making, by improving their societies' resilience, and by considering taking a more assertive approach.

## EUROPEAN REACTIONS TO RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE: TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

Recent drone and fighter jet incursions into European airspace are just the latest manifestation of the steep rise in Russian hybrid warfare operations against European allies of Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022.<sup>1</sup> The primary aim of these actions is to undermine public support for Ukraine by creating a sense of insecurity in European countries.<sup>2</sup> Along with these immediate goals, Moscow's strategic objective is to challenge the collective security mechanisms of NATO and the EU and, consequently, to refashion the European security architecture according to its own interests.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Russia is playing a long game, manipulating perceptions of threats, fueling political crises, disturbing and hindering resistance to its aggression against Ukraine at the European level and within individual countries. To this end, Moscow resorts to cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, sabotage of critical energy, transportation, or financial market infrastructure, attacks against military and government facilities, or the instrumentalization of anti-migration sentiment.<sup>4</sup>

Both the EU and NATO have recognized the scale of the problem in their declarations and strategies.<sup>5</sup> They have launched multiple initiatives to counter Russian hybrid attacks, including, for example, the EU's Hybrid Toolbox, the EUvsDisinfo project, NATO's Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell, its Baltic Sentry Mission, and the NorthSeal platform, and expelled

Russian diplomats and intelligence operatives.<sup>6</sup> However, so far, Western policies remain largely defensive and reactive.<sup>7</sup>

This is the consequence of several factors. First, the ambiguity of hybrid warfare and problems of attribution: When an adversary operates outside of clearly defined red lines in a gray zone, it is difficult for targeted states to identify whether seemingly unrelated hybrid activities are actually strategically related hostile acts.<sup>8</sup> In their ambiguity, the activities blend notions of war and peace and deliberately remain below the threshold that would trigger a forceful military response. Their deniability – achieved in the shadows and through the use of proxies, such as “little green men” (unidentified military troops), criminals, or disposable agents – moreover makes it difficult to clearly and swiftly attribute them to a specific aggressor.

Asymmetric underlying conditions are another factor. Unlike European democracies that uphold freedoms and liberal principles, Russia does not subject itself to the same self-imposed constraints. Considering itself in a permanent confrontation with the West, Russia thinks it has the legitimate right to act upon an alleged Western threat. This is expressed literally, as confrontation is translated from the Russian word “counter-struggle” (*protivoborovstvo*). Russian strategy is premised on the expectation that Western governments will continue to prioritize de-escalation and self-restriction and that Russia will not find itself forced to make any major concessions.<sup>9</sup>

- 1 Seth G. Jones, “Russia’s Shadow War Against the West,” CSIS Briefs, Center for Strategic and International Studies (March 2025), p.9: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-shadow-war-against-west> (accessed October 23, 2025); Charlie Edwards and Nate Seidenstein, “The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations Against Europe’s Critical Infrastructure,” The International Institute for Strategic Studies (August 2025), p.4: <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2025/08/the-scale-of-russian-sabotage-operations-against-europes-critical-infrastructure/> (accessed October 23, 2025).
- 2 Edwards & Seidenstein, “The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations,” p.2; Benjamin Schmitt, “Wake Up NATO: It’s Sabotage,” Center for European Policy Analysis (June 12, 2024): <https://cepa.org/article/wake-up-nato-its-sabotage/> (accessed October 23, 2025); European Commission, *Safer Together – Strengthening Europe’s Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness* (October 30, 2024), p.42: [https://commission.europa.eu/document/5bb2881f-9e29-42f2-8b77-8739b19d047c\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/5bb2881f-9e29-42f2-8b77-8739b19d047c_en) (accessed October 23, 2025).
- 3 Edwards & Seidenstein, “The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations,” p.2; Benjamin Schmitt, “Wake Up NATO: It’s Sabotage,” Center for European Policy Analysis (June 12, 2024): <https://cepa.org/article/wake-up-nato-its-sabotage/> (accessed October 23, 2025); European Commission, *Safer Together – Strengthening Europe’s Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness* (October 30, 2024), p. 42: [https://commission.europa.eu/document/5bb2881f-9e29-42f2-8b77-8739b19d047c\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/5bb2881f-9e29-42f2-8b77-8739b19d047c_en) (accessed October 23, 2025). *ression\_rsi\_final.pdf* [https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/Report\\_opportunistic-aggression\\_rsi\\_final.pdf](https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/Report_opportunistic-aggression_rsi_final.pdf) (accessed October 23, 2025).
- 4 Daniela Richterova, “The Long Shadow of Soviet Sabotage Doctrine?,” *War on the Rocks* (August 19, 2024): <https://warontherocks.com/2024/08/the-long-shadow-of-soviet-sabotage-doctrine/> (accessed October 23, 2025).
- 5 Notably NATO’s Strategic Concept (2022) and the Resilience Objectives adopted at the 2023 Vilnius Summit, the EU-NATO declaration (2023), and the EU’s Strategic Compass (2022).
- 6 Ken McCallum, “Director General Ken McCallum gives latest threat update,” *MI5* (October 8, 2024): <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/director-general-ken-mccallum-gives-latest-threat-update> (accessed October 23, 2025).
- 7 Edwards & Seidenstein, “The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations,” p.4; Erik Stijnman, “Countering Russian hybrid warfare: The best defence is a good offense,” *Clingendael Alert*, Clingendael Institute (July 2025): [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/Countering\\_Russian\\_hybrid\\_warfare.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/Countering_Russian_hybrid_warfare.pdf) (accessed October 23, 2025); Rusinaitė also warns against overreliance on resilience and escalation avoidance, which can invite exploitation by hostile actors, see Viktorija Rusinaitė, “Turning strategy into praxis: Lessons in hybrid threat deterrence,” *Hybrid CoE Paper 25*, The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (August 2025): <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/turning-strategy-into-praxis-lessons-in-hybrid-threat-deterrence/> (accessed October 23, 2025).
- 8 Mikael Weissmann, Niklas Nilsson and Björn Palmertz, “Conclusions,” in *Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations*, eds. Mikael Weissmann, Niklas Nilsson, Björn Palmertz, and Per Thunholm (London, 2021), p. 270; See also Elisabeth Braw, *The Defender’s Dilemma: Identifying and Deterring Grey-Zone Aggression* (Lanham, MD, 2022).
- 9 Keir Giles, “What deters Russia? Enduring principles for responding to Moscow,” *Research Paper*, Chatham House (September 2021), p.19: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/21-09-23-what-deters-russia-giles.pdf> (accessed October 23, 2025); Jones, “Russia’s Shadow War,” p.14.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the perception of Russia as a threat has converged across European states.<sup>10</sup> A sense of urgency is spreading across capitals, opening political room for countering Russian malign activities more effectively. For a proactive strategy, European states need a better understanding of the role Russian military thinkers assign to "active measures" in the cycle of escalation when confronting an adversary. Active measures comprise a mix of military and non-military means to pursue Russia's strategic goals while keeping the conflict below the threshold of military escalation with NATO.<sup>11</sup> They are inherent to the Russian understanding of war and must be seen as part and parcel of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Understanding the role of active measures in contemporary Russian military thinking is crucial to addressing the severity of the threat that Russian malign activities pose in Europe. To proactively counter such measures, European governments must address and embrace the uncertainty they induce. The following analysis is only a first step in making sense of Russia's hybrid war strategy. A comprehensive assessment thereof is essential if Europe wants to counter those actors involved in Russian active measures.<sup>12</sup>

## ACTIVE MEASURES AS A MEANS TO INFLUENCE THE GEOPOLITICAL BALANCE OF FORCES

Russian military scholars see active measures and, more broadly, the influence of information, as a means to maintain a "geopolitical balance of forces"<sup>13</sup> – and to shift this in favor of Russia's strategic interests wherever

possible. This balance is measured by Russia's ability to control – directly or indirectly – regions bordering Russia. That, in turn, is perceived as a prerequisite for Russia's status as a (global) great power. Therefore, Russia perceives Ukraine's political independence as a threat that requires – and legitimizes, from Moscow's point of view – a confrontation to forestall a negative shift in this balance of forces. As shown by Kukkola and others, Russian military scholars consider asymmetry and asymmetric actions – the use of disinformation campaigns, sabotage, or cyber operations – as an integral part of modern military conflicts.<sup>14</sup> The official discourse continues to present hybrid warfare exclusively as an external threat to Russia and does not reflect this shift in Russian military thinking, which increasingly perceives non-military and indirect military means in conflicts as fundamental to achieving strategic objectives.<sup>15</sup>

To better understand the role Russian military thinkers give to active measures at different stages of conflict escalation – the transition from peace to confrontation to war – it is instructive to start with a seminal – and controversial<sup>16</sup> – 2013 article by Russian Army General and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov. This is often reduced by Western commentators to the misleading notion of a "Gerasimov doctrine."<sup>17</sup> But Gerasimov is representative of – and has been actively driving – the shift among Russian military authorities since the late 1990s to embrace non-military measures in war and conflict. Chief of the General Staff since 2012, he has built on debates fostered by his predecessors.<sup>18</sup> In his 2013 article, Gerasimov schematically outlines how non-military measures are aligned with "military measures of strategic deterrence"<sup>19</sup> during different phases of conflict.

10 European Commission, *Safer Together*, p.32.

11 On the Soviet legacy see Daniel V. Gioe, Robert Lovering and Timothy Pachesny, "The Soviet Legacy of Russian Active Measures: New Vodka from Old Stills?" *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 33, no. 3 (March 2020), pp. 514–539; Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (London/New York, 2019).

12 European Commission, *Safer Together*, p.24.

13 A. V. Manoilo, A. I. Petrenko, and D. B. Frolov, *State-Information Policy in the Context of Information-Psychological Warfare* [in Russian] (Moscow, 2012), p.524.

14 Juha Kukkola, "The Promise of Cunning: Asymmetry, Indirectness, and Non-Military Measures as Focal Points of New Russian Military Art," [in Finnish] *Research Reports* 22, Department of Warfare, National Defence University (Helsinki, 2022), p.61: [https://www.doria.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/186010/Oveluuden%20lupaus\\_Kukkola\\_verkkoversio.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://www.doria.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/186010/Oveluuden%20lupaus_Kukkola_verkkoversio.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (accessed October 23, 2025); Dimitri Minic, "How the Russian army changed its concept of war, 1993-2022," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 47 (May 2023), pp.3-5.

15 Katri Pynnöniemi and Minna Jokela, "Perceptions of Hybrid War in Russia: Means, Targets and Objectives Identified in the Russian Debate," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33 (December 2020), pp. 828–845; Katri Pynnöniemi and Amelie Tolvin, "Reconstructing Kremlin Strategic Deception: The Logic of Disinformation Narratives During the First Phase of the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 38 (October 2025), pp. 299–320.

16 Charles K. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," *Military Review* 96 (January–February 2016); see Kukkola, "The Promise of Cunning," pp.49-51 for an analysis by Russian military scholars on asymmetric measures at different phases of conflict escalation.

17 Mark Galeotti, "The Mythical 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and the Language of Threat," *Critical Studies on Security* 7, no.2 (2019), pp. 157–161.

18 Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right"; Minic, "How the Russian army changed its concept of war," pp.20-24; Kukkola, "The Promise of Cunning," pp.49-51; Mason Clark, Catherine Harris, and Jennifer Cafarella, "Russia in Review: The Gerasimov Doctrine Is Here To Stay," *Institute for the Study of War*, October 30, 2018, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russia-in-review-gerasimov-doctrine-is> (accessed October 23, 2025).

19 Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations," *Military Review* 96 (January–February 2016), pp. 23-29: [https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview\\_20160228\\_art008.pdf](https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview_20160228_art008.pdf) (accessed October 23, 2025); deterrence in Russian military thinking is considered as a system that consists of "deterrence by intimidation or fear inducement, deterrence through limited use of force, and deterrence by defence," see Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts," CNA Research Memorandum, Center for Naval Analyses (April 2020), pp. 1–50: <https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/04/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf> (accessed October 23, 2025).

## ACTIVE MEASURES IN DIFFERENT PHASES OF CONFLICT ESCALATION

The general assumption in Russian military thought is that active measures can achieve strategic objectives without the conflict escalating into a full-blown military conflict (war).<sup>20</sup> This requires careful balancing of the level of tension while pushing confrontation to the limits of military escalation, followed by periods of de-escalation. For Russian strategic thinkers, the entry point of conflict is a combined use of covert and overt (non-violent or violent) measures already during peacetime, first to weaken military-political decision-making (manipulation of threat perceptions) and second to restrain and damage the adversary's military and political power (ability to respond effectively to the attack).<sup>21</sup> State-to-state confrontation,<sup>22</sup> in short, is considered an omnipresent feature of the international system that transcends the peace/war division.

However, Russian military thought is not explicit about when and under what circumstances, the *nature of conflict* changes.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the challenge is to identify the transition between four phases of escalation: from **peacetime to confrontation (A)**, from **confrontation to war (B)** and from **war to conflict resolution (C)** (see Figure 1 on page 5).<sup>24</sup> As a general rule, with each phase, activities become more visible, the level of violence grows, and the scale of activities increases.

### Preparing the Battlefield Through Active Measures

In peacetime, covert and overt information-psychological operations to influence a target population are designed to achieve **subversion** – to allow “indirect control”<sup>25</sup> of major decisions (for example through the covert activation of groups or decision-makers that serve the interests of the attacker. In addition,

resources required for active resistance are eliminated, including by means of assassination, blackmail, or disinformation). The aim is to eliminate opposition to **information expansion** (long-term influence operations aimed at changing the worldview of targeted populations or decision-makers),<sup>26</sup> and to weaken resistance, for example by manipulating threat perceptions and situational awareness in the target country. Ultimately, the use of active measures can lead to a “state capture”<sup>27</sup> that limits independence and sovereignty of the target country.

During the second phase (confrontation), the operation grows in intensity. The target country is **intimidated** by “information aggression”<sup>28</sup> – by fueling internal contradictions, fabricating sources of those contradictions, eliminating resistance and overall **destabilization** of the situation. In combination with indirect military-technical actions (show of force), the political system is exhausted (**attrition**)<sup>29</sup> and coerced into a reactive posture. During peacetime and the confrontation phase, strategic disinformation narratives are synchronized to hide the real intentions of the attacker and to manipulate perceptions of threat in society and among decision-makers.<sup>30</sup> Targeted violence (sabotage, street violence, assassinations) at this stage may serve to escalate fabricated political crises into a breaking point that leads to state capture and, as a result, the cessation of escalation. Alternatively, it may lead to a situation that is used as a pretext (**provocation**) for direct military intervention.

The employment of different types of active measures should be understood in a sense of **preparing the battlefield** for purposes of weakening the societal and political resilience of the target country and wearing down its resources (critical infrastructure, military

20 Kukkola, “The Promise of Cunning,” p.51; see also Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight.”

21 E. G. Shalamberidze, “Theoretical issues of developing Russia’s national defence policy in peacetime using a system of non-military and military measures,” [in Russian] *Vestnik Akademii Voenykh Nauk* 4 (2011), pp.35–43; Kukkola, “The Promise of Cunning.”

22 The use of non-military and military (active) measures are conceptualized as part of “military struggle/battle” (borba) and thus, part of the confrontation (protivoborovstvo) period. According to Kukkola (2022, 50) it is highly likely that Gerasimov’s table is based on the analysis published in 2011 by Russian military scholar Shalamberidze, see Shalamberidze, “Theoretical issues of developing Russia’s national defence policy.”

23 As explained earlier by Kofman, Flink and Edmonds, “there appear to be two triggers for transition from the period of danger or ‘threatened period of military conflict’ to the actual conflict phases: a massed imminent military threat; and an externally driven political subversion, which, in Russian thinking, is likely to be combined with a credible military threat.” Kofman, Flink, and Edmonds, “Russian Strategy for Escalation Management,” p.51.

24 Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight”; see also the following conceptual model of hybrid threats, see Hybrid CoE, *The Landscape of Hybrid Threats. A Conceptual Model* (2021): <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC123305> (accessed October 23, 2025).

25 Manoilo et al., *State-Information Policy*, pp.528–529.

26 Ibid. For example, the manipulation of historical memory.

27 State capture is seen as means to the end, that is, the restoration of the geopolitical balance of power and with it Russia’s status as global great power, see Katri Pynnöniemi and Kati Parpei, “Understanding Russia’s War Against Ukraine: Political, Eschatological and Cataclysmic Dimensions,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 47 (2024), pp. 832–859.

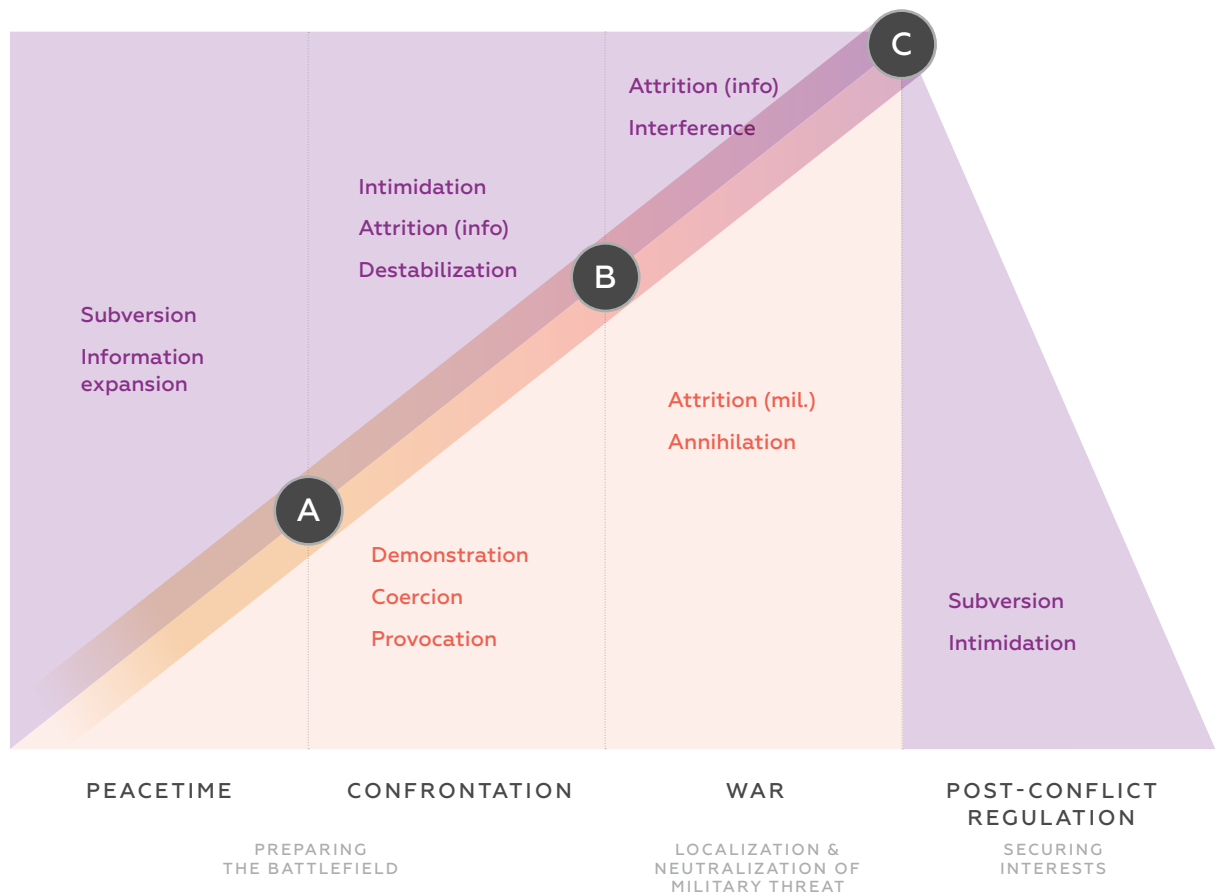
28 Manoilo et al., *State-Information Policy*, pp.498–450.

29 In the context of Russian debate on hybrid and information war, attrition warfare is conceptualized by Alexander Barthos as activity aimed at “wearing down and exhausting the enemy’s resources by keeping it in constant state of alertness.” The ultimate aim is “self-disorganization and self-disorientation of the target state,” see Hybrid CoE, *The Landscape of Hybrid Threats*, p.38.

30 See Pynnöniemi and Tolvin, “Reconstructing Kremlin Strategic Deception.”

## Figure 1 – The Function of Active Measures in Different Phases of Conflict Escalation

Based on Gerasimov 2013 and other sources



This illustration aligns the abovementioned four phases of escalation with different forms of **non-military active measures** and **military measures**. It highlights tactical goals (subversion, intimidation, coercion etc.) at each phase of conflict escalation. | Source: Own illustration

facilities, energy, cyber and media). This phase may take years when active measures alternate between rapid targeted action and long-term intimidation.

### Resolution and Post-Conflict Regulation to Russia's Advantage

Gerasimov suggests that the “resolution” of inter-state conflict requires the **localization and neutralization of military threat**. The set of military measures

mentioned in his original graph (strategic deterrence, strategic deployment and conduct of military operations) makes it clear that this refers to the use of regular military force (war in the classical sense<sup>31</sup>). The assumption of the last phase (post-conflict regulation) is that military and non-military active measures are used in combination to reduce tensions and to achieve an outcome that secures Russia's strategic interests. In this framework, there is no place for a negotiated

31 In Russian military thought there are “four generally agreed-upon conflict archetypes: a local war with one state, a regional war against a coalition of states, a large-scale war on multiple fronts against a major power or several powers, and a nuclear war,” see Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, “Russian Strategy for Escalation Management,” p.19.



solution to the war between equals. Instead, the end of conflict is envisioned as a situation where the adversary is either deterred through **intimidation** or resolution is achieved by complete eradication (**annihilation**) of the “root causes” of the conflict.<sup>32</sup>

This analysis illuminates the strategic function of active measures at different phases of conflict escalation. It sheds light on their role in Europe as inherently complementary to Russian military aggression, and how Russia employs them to pursue its strategic interests. In the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine, active measures are used primarily to undermine military and financial support to Ukraine by fostering uncertainty in European societies. This perspective on Russian active measures provides a basis for improving the situational awareness among European countries, and subsequently, for considering ways to reduce Russia’s options for escalation, especially in the critically important transition from the non-military phase to open military conflict. How then could European countries harness uncertainty and ambiguity to work to their advantage, instead of Russia’s?

## DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY

What makes it so difficult to counter Russian active measures is the inherent ambiguity of methods, actors, and tactics that creates so much uncertainty for its target – Europe. Targeted states face difficulties in clearly identifying deniable activities – let alone attributing them unequivocally to a specific aggressor. The deniability and the resulting problems of identification and attribution are the reasons why traditional deterrence largely fails to prevent Russia from employing active measures. As a consequence, European approaches to counter them have been largely reactive.<sup>33</sup> By the time a perpetrator has been identified, there is little momentum left for any consequences to make a mark on the public consciousness.

To understand Europe’s relative impotence in countering Russian active measures, it is instructive to look at the notion of *protean power*, introduced by Katzenstein and Seybert.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to conventional

understandings of power, which are built on the notion of *risk* (the probability of an event occurring with or without the exercise of power), *protean power* is understood to be based on an actor’s ability to cope with *uncertainty*. While conventional understandings of power presume calculable effects, *protean power* sheds light on the unpredictable, versatile, and changeable. This is the realm of Russian active measures, which, from the perspective of the target, are amorphous, difficult to grasp, and do not follow established rules of the game – including distinctions between internal/external, military/non-military, war/peace. Russia’s evolving methods prevent a proactive approach based on an analysis of past activities. Where past experience does not yield reliable insights for future events, counterstrategies are bound to be reactive. Conventionally inferior to European allies of Ukraine, Russia plays the game of uncertainty and gains the upper hand by seizing the initiative.<sup>35</sup>

Focusing on uncertainty and the capacity to deal with it can help inform a proactive European approach to countering Russian active measures. Given that deterrence hardly works against such an elusive threat, this conceptual angle is more promising than approaches that seek to raise the costs for Russian malign activities conducted in Europe – not least because such approaches presuppose a (shared) cost-benefit calculus in Moscow, a rationale that is difficult to gauge.

### Reducing Uncertainty

From this perspective, European states should first try to reduce the uncertainty as much as possible to turn it partly into (more manageable) risk. This requires, first, a comprehension of Russian thinking on escalation and threat perception, which this paper seeks to illuminate. It also implies the need for affected states to share information and coordinate their approaches in order to expose decentralized active measures and their perpetrators. The decision<sup>36</sup> by the administration of US President Donald Trump to end international cooperation on detecting and exposing disinformation from countries like Russia, China, or Iran is a self-weakening step. Finally, Europeans should identify loopholes and communicate clear red lines to minimize the gray zone for Russia to exploit. Here the

32 In Soviet military theory, “annihilation” did not necessarily imply physical destruction, but total destruction of resistance (seen as root cause). Raymond L. Garthoff, *How Russia Makes War: Soviet Military Doctrine* (London, 2022), pp.149-150.

33 Edwards & Seidenstein, “The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations,” p.4.

34 Peter J. Katzenstein and Lucia A. Seybert, “Protean Power and Uncertainty,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (March 2018), pp.80-93.

35 Others have suggested that aggression in the “gray zone” is in itself a symptom of successful deterrence of escalation, see J. Andrés Gannon, Erik Gartzke, Jon R. Lindsay and Peter Schram, “The Shadow of Deterrence: Why Capable Actors Engage in Contests Short of War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68 no. 2-3 (April 2023) pp. 230-268.

36 Amy Mackinnon, “US Ends International Push to Combat Fake News From Hostile States,” *Financial Times* (September 8, 2025).

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EU could play a central coordinating role, for example in the area of maritime law. A recent initiative by the European External Action Service to facilitate EU-wide inspections of vessels belonging to the Russian shadow fleet is a promising step.<sup>37</sup>

### **Embracing Uncertainty**

Second, since active measures will always retain a level of uncertainty and unpredictability, European allies should embrace this uncertainty and develop their capacity to deal with it through innovation and improvisation. While Casier argues that the EU has already substantially expanded its ability to confront Moscow by developing innovative and creative policy responses to Russia's war on Ukraine, including its sanctions regime, initiatives to reduce energy dependencies, or creative solutions to support Ukraine,<sup>38</sup> Europeans still need more agility to effectively address Russian active measures. Due to their ambiguity, it is much harder for the EU to find a consensus for swift foreign policy responses compared to its reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 and the ongoing war. On an institutional level, qualified majority voting on Common Security and Defence Policy issues would therefore vastly increase the EU's agility and raise the stakes for Russia in targeting the Union through active measures. European states should also work on increasing their societies' resilience in coping with uncertainty, for example by identifying vulnerabilities through red-teaming exercises – simulations that take the adversary's perspective to identify weaknesses. A fundamental vulnerability is arguably the lack of a shared threat perception. European leaders should actively pursue convergence in this area.

Finally, European states should consider turning the tables by raising the unpredictability factor for Moscow. This would require a more assertive approach, the rationale of which should be to inflict costs – and uncertainty – on Russia, without acting *like* Russia.

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37 Jacopo Barigazzi, "EU Seeks Boost Powers to Board Shadow Fleet Vessels," *Politico* (October 23, 2025): <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-seeks-boost-powers-to-board-shadow-fleet-vessels-exclusive-document-sanctions-war/> (accessed October 23, 2025).

38 Tom Casier, "How Russia's War in Ukraine Shifted Protean Power in EU–Russia Relations," *Comparative European Politics* 23 (April 2025), pp.633–651.

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## EUROPEAN ZEITENWENDE STRATEGY GROUP

This paper is part of a series of publications prepared in the framework of DGAP's "European Zeitenwende" Strategy Group, which seeks to help reconceptualize European Security in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. Against the background of Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, a strained transatlantic relationship, growing rivalry with China and changing global and regional orders, Europe needs to strategically reposition itself if it wants actively shape security on the continent.

Europe's strategic reorientation should be inspired by those who – as direct neighbors to Russia and Ukraine – best understand the urgency to act. The Strategy Group therefore draws on in-depth analytical discussions with experts and stakeholders from Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, as well as the Nordic and the Baltic states, where debates on security are arguably most advanced, to propel a "Zeitenwende" of security policy and thinking in Europe.

Chaired by the German Council on Foreign Relations, the group met regularly online and in-person over the course of 2025. Convinced of the need for a comprehensive approach, it considered different dimensions of resilience, including security and defense, economic security, institutional reform, and societal cohesion.

The present paper series represents the results of the group's analysis. It seeks to address questions and challenges that in the currently evolving security discourse remain conceptually and practically underdeveloped. By providing concrete analysis, definitions and reflections to these open questions, the series aspires to add substance to the European Zeitenwende debate on security and defense. The ultimate question of all the papers is how to strengthen European agency in providing European security and in ensuring peace and stability in a new geopolitical context.

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