



| Brief |

Russia Increases Use of Hybrid War Tactics After Aid to Ukraine

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Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: HIGH

Intelligence Requirements: Geopolitical, Cyber

May 10, 2024

Scope Note

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Brief | Russia Increases Use of Hybrid War Tactics After Aid to Ukraine

Key Points

- The recently authorized U.S. military aid package to Ukraine is likely to empower Ukraine to stall Russia's recent military gains.
- Russia began increasing its operational tempo on the battlefield soon after voting on the aid package began, probably in a bid to advance as far as possible before the promised aid reaches frontline positions.
- Russia will likely increase its aggressive hybrid war strategy using tactics like disinformation campaigns, the weaponization of energy resources, sabotage, and cyber campaigns to limit the effectiveness of military aid to Ukraine and force a repeat of battlefield conditions seen in the early part of 2024.
- These hybrid attacks will likely seek to influence elections in key Western nations by making support to Ukraine a primary wedge issue and exacerbate underlying societal fissures around continued financial and military support for Ukraine.
- Attacks on critical infrastructure, energy targets, and online targeting of U.S. and European elections and politicians will likely reach a crescendo ahead of major elections, especially the U.S. presidential election.

Details

United States Approves USD 61 Billion in Military Assistance for Ukraine

On April 24, 2024, U.S. President Joe Biden signed legislation authorizing USD 60.8 billion in assistance for Ukraine.¹ Biden had first requested these funds in October 2023; however, voting was delayed until April 20 due to domestic political considerations.²

- The United States has been Ukraine's largest source of military assistance since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022; Ukraine faced significant military supply shortages during the six-month delay.³
- Ukraine particularly lacked artillery ammunition and air defense components, which allowed Russia to make marginal advances between February and April 2024.
- Towards the end of April, the situation was beginning to look especially dire, as Ukraine lacked needed supplies to defend against a renewed Russian offensive expected to begin in May or June.

Immediate Impact

U.S. assistance, combined with several other European military aid pledges to Ukraine, is likely to allow Ukraine to blunt Russia's expected upcoming offensive.⁴ Throughout the course of the war, Ukraine has proven effective at defending its positions when properly provisioned. Once U.S. military aid arrives on the frontlines, Ukraine will likely regain its ability to halt Russian advances and extract heavy enemy losses. However, this success is contingent on how fast the aid can reach the frontlines.

- The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) vowed to rush a large tranche of assistance that will arrive in Ukraine between late April and mid-May; however, Ukraine must then distribute the supplies to frontline positions. This timeline suggests aid will begin arriving at the front in force around mid- to late-May.⁵

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[hXXps://www.defense\[.\]gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3754238/biden-administration-announces-significant-new-security-assistance-for-ukraine/](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3754238/biden-administration-announces-significant-new-security-assistance-for-ukraine/)

² [hXXps://kyivindependent\[.\]com/what-caused-johnson-to-allow-vote-on-ukraine-aid-after-months-of-delays/](https://kyivindependent.com/what-caused-johnson-to-allow-vote-on-ukraine-aid-after-months-of-delays/)

³ [hXXps://www.ifw-kiel\[.\]de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/](https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/)

⁴ [hXXps://www.understandingwar\[.\]org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-updates](https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-updates)

⁵ [hXXps://meduza\[.\]io/news/2024/04/29/belyy-dom-voennaya-pomosch-v-ukrainu-uzhe-postupaet](https://meduza[.]io/news/2024/04/29/belyy-dom-voennaya-pomosch-v-ukrainu-uzhe-postupaet)

The Russian military likely aims to take advantage of any delay in provisions getting to the frontlines to advance as far as possible.

- Immediately after the U.S. House of Representatives approved the aid package, the Russian military increased the pace and veracity of its attacks on Ukrainian positions in Donetsk Oblast, where Russia has been slowly advancing since February.
- Russia captured the city of Avdiivka in February and has since achieved marginal advances beyond the city.⁶
- Russia is likely to attempt further advances west and northwest of Avdiivka while Ukrainian forces wait on aid to be distributed. Russia is likely to make some gains, but any advances around Avdiivka are unlikely to prove operationally significant.

Russia's main effort during this period, however, will be the strategic city of Chasiv Yar. Russian troops entered the outskirts of Chasiv Yar in late March and will almost certainly look to expand upon this success. If Russia was able to seize Chasiv Yar, it could use the city as a staging ground to launch offensive operations against a belt of four major cities (Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Druzhkivka, and Kostyantynivka) that act as Ukrainian defensive strongholds.

Forward Look

Throughout the six-month delay in U.S. military aid, Russian President Vladimir Putin confirmed what he has likely long predicted: that war fatigue is palpable in Western countries. Some of this fatigue is likely due to Russia's hybrid warfare tactics, which are designed to complement its battlefield operations. In this conflict, Russia uses hybrid tactics—disinformation campaigns, the weaponization of energy resources, sabotage, and cyber campaigns—alongside traditional military tactics to undermine Western support for Ukraine.⁷

In recent months, Russia stepped up hybrid attacks on the West ahead of its upcoming offensive in Ukraine. The attacks were designed to further delay Western aid to ensure that Ukraine lacked the equipment necessary to repel Russian attacks. As Russia began

⁶ [hXXps://www.kyivpost\[.\]com/post/31973](https://www.kyivpost.com/post/31973)

⁷ [hXXps://www.nato\[.\]int/docu/review/articles/2024/04/26/russias-hybrid-war-against-the-west/index.html](https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2024/04/26/russias-hybrid-war-against-the-west/index.html)

advancing, these hybrid attacks would complement these gains, leading to further battlefield successes.

- ZeroFox observed Russian-backed threat actors supporting European Union (EU)-wide farmer protests by targeting government websites in states experiencing protests.⁸
- Likely Russian-backed influencers on social media began a campaign questioning the political legitimacy of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky beyond May 20, the date his first term was set to expire.⁹ Zelensky postponed elections due to a constitutional provision prohibiting elections while the country is under Martial Law.¹⁰
- Several EU states (including France, Germany, and the Czech Republic) have cited similar Russian-backed social media campaigns ahead of EU parliamentary elections on June 6-9, 2024.¹¹ The campaigns are designed to promote candidates who back ending EU support for Ukraine, arguing it drives up immigration and the cost of living.¹²

Now that Ukraine has sufficient levels of equipment for about another year, Russia will likely double down on hybrid attacks to ensure the 2024 uncertainty over Western assistance repeats in 2025.

- Battlefield conditions were looking especially favorable for Russia in mid-April before the U.S. House of Representatives signaled it would pass military assistance; Ukraine was potentially on the brink of considerable Russian advances.
- The aid will provide Ukraine with enough military support to blunt Russian advances for another year, but is unlikely to significantly turn the tide of the war.

⁸ "German Protests Supported by Pro-Russian Threat Actor." *ZeroFox Intelligence Flash Report*, January 12, 2024.

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⁹ [hXXps://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-07/kyiv-says-russian-operatives-are-dominating-tiktok-in-ukraine](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-07/kyiv-says-russian-operatives-are-dominating-tiktok-in-ukraine)

¹⁰ [hXXps://www.rnbo.gov.ua/en/Dialnist/6342.html](https://www.rnbo.gov.ua/en/Dialnist/6342.html)

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¹¹ [hXXps://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/03/eu-and-nato-condemn-malicious-russian-cyber-attacks-against-germany-and-czechia](https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/03/eu-and-nato-condemn-malicious-russian-cyber-attacks-against-germany-and-czechia)

¹²

¹² [hXXps://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20240507-eu-green-deal-targeted-by-online-disinformation-campaign-ahead-of](https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20240507-eu-green-deal-targeted-by-online-disinformation-campaign-ahead-of)

To do so, Ukraine would require consistent, large infusions of aid and has to solve institutional manpower problems within the Ukrainian military.¹³ To date, Western powers have not secured adequate levels of long term aid, while the Ukrainian military has struggled to address its manpower shortages. Without solutions to these issues, the conditions on the front will likely return in 2025.

- Russia's hybrid tactics will likely aim to ensure these conditions do recur in 2025 but that they play out more in Russia's favor at that time, without a last-minute, Ukraine military-saving aid package from the West.

Moldova Likely to Face Especially Intense Hybrid Attacks

In October 2024, Moldova will head to the polls in two critical elections: its presidential election and a referendum on EU membership.¹⁴ Pro-European President Maia Sandu is seeking a second term in office, and the referendum would enshrine Moldova's ambitions to join the EU in the Moldovan Constitution and ensure future governments cannot derail accession talks.

On March 5, 2024, Director of the Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service (SIS), Alexandru Musteata, warned Russia plans to interfere in the Moldovan elections in 2024 and 2025.¹⁵ This interference primarily aims to destabilize Sandu's pro-Western government and derail Moldova's EU accession process. Musteata said Russia will use disinformation and Moldovan politicians loyal to the Kremlin to create "economic and social crises" and foment public unrest.

- Musteata identified fugitive Moldovan oligarch Ilan Shor as a key figure in Russia's destabilization efforts. Shor is a Moldovan businessman and politician living in

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[hXXps://www.project-syndicate\[.\]org/commentary/us-ukraine-aid-what-it-will-and-wont-do-by-ian-bremmer-2024-05](https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/us-ukraine-aid-what-it-will-and-wont-do-by-ian-bremmer-2024-05)

¹⁴

[hXXps://www.facebook\[.\]com/maia.sandu/posts/pfbid02nHdCzN1Sazm7Hw2jvXmVHNFSfdA5rQ9uRk2DFMgVmBqF7yQ21Ln52RXy7AgUCFzYI](https://www.facebook.com/maia.sandu/posts/pfbid02nHdCzN1Sazm7Hw2jvXmVHNFSfdA5rQ9uRk2DFMgVmBqF7yQ21Ln52RXy7AgUCFzYI)

¹⁵

[hXXps://balkaninsight\[.\]com/2024/03/05/russia-plans-election-meddling-to-obstruct-moldovas-eu-path-spy-chief/](https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/05/russia-plans-election-meddling-to-obstruct-moldovas-eu-path-spy-chief/)

exile in Israel after being sentenced to 15 years in prison in absentia for stealing USD 1 billion from Moldovan banks in 2014.¹⁶

- In late 2022, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Shor for funneling Russian money into Moldovan politics through his political party, the Shor Party. Over the past several years, the Shor Party has worked to advance pro-Russian policies and organize mass protests against Sandu's government.
- On April 21, 2024, Shor convened a meeting of Moldovan opposition politicians in Moscow to create a unified anti-European political bloc. The bloc, called "Victory", said it will challenge Sandu in the presidential elections and campaign against the EU referendum.¹⁷ Victory will almost certainly promote Russian disinformation campaigns and other Russia-backed efforts to destabilize Moldova ahead of the upcoming elections.
- Russia also exerts considerable influence over two key regions in Moldova: the disputed territory of Transnistria and the autonomous republic of Gagauzia. Pro-Russian political and economic elites in both territories will likely use their regional influence to assist Russia's efforts to destabilize Moldova.

Russia to Continue Influence Other Formerly Soviet Union States

Several other formerly Soviet Union (FSU) states are likely to face Russian interference designed to draw the countries back into Russia's sphere of influence. The domestic political situations in both Armenia and Georgia are especially ripe for Russian interference in the coming year.

After being one of Russia's closest allies for over three decades, Armenia has distanced itself from Russia over the past several years and pursued closer relations with the West. Russia has warned Armenia against aligning with the West and will likely use hybrid tactics to ensure Armenia remains within Russia's orbit.

- Russia and Armenia have been historic military and economic allies since the 1990s. However, after Armenia was defeated in the second Nagorno-Karabakh

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[hXXps://apnews\[.\]com/article/moldova-oligarch-ilan-shor-bank-fraud-chisinau-israel-maia-sandu-e7c9639f354f27c4975030f7b40629be](https://apnews.com/article/moldova-oligarch-ilan-shor-bank-fraud-chisinau-israel-maia-sandu-e7c9639f354f27c4975030f7b40629be)

¹⁷

[hXXps://www.bloomberg\[.\]com/news/articles/2024-04-21/moldova-s-pro-russia-parties-gather-in-moscow-to-plot-strategy](https://www.bloomberg[.]com/news/articles/2024-04-21/moldova-s-pro-russia-parties-gather-in-moscow-to-plot-strategy)

war in 2020, it accused Russia of not providing enough support so Armenia could defend itself against Azerbaijan during the conflict.

- Since 2020, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has taken steps to distance the country from Russia and has explored greater cooperation with the West. Highlighting this shift, on May 8, Armenia announced it would halt financing for the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Russian-led military alliance of which Armenia has been a member since its inception in 1992.¹⁸

Armenia is currently facing disruptive protests over Pashinyan's April 19 announcement that he would cede four villages to Azerbaijan as part of broader peace negotiations.¹⁹ Soon after the news broke, residents of the affected regions began protests that blocked a major highway linking Armenia and Georgia. These demonstrations then snowballed to mass protests in the capital Yerevan on May 9 demanding that Pashinyan resign.²⁰

- Russia can be expected to take advantage of these ongoing protests in Armenia. Hybrid influence campaigns may seek to replace Pashinyan with a more pro-Russian prime minister to prevent Armenia from developing closer relations with the United States and Europe.

Meanwhile, Russian influence in Georgia will likely take more of a hands-off approach. The ruling Georgian Dream Party is working to pass its controversial "foreign agent" law, which its critics say closely resembles Russia's foreign agent legislation. Opponents fear that—similar to the Russian law—Georgia's version could restrict press freedoms and civil society organizations and are using #Russianlaw or #NotoRussianLaw to oppose the bill on social media.²¹

- While Georgia does not maintain diplomatic relations with Russia (Georgia severed relations after Russia's 2008 invasion), several of Georgian Dream's leaders have close business ties to Russia.²²
- Georgia's population overwhelmingly supports EU membership, but Georgian Dream policies—especially the foreign agent law—have undermined its chances

¹⁸ [hXXps://armenpress\[.\]am/eng/news/1136662.html](https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1136662.html)

¹⁹ [hXXps://eurasianet\[.\]org/territorial-handover-stokes-protests-in-armenia-celebrations-in-azerbaijan](https://eurasianet.org/territorial-handover-stokes-protests-in-armenia-celebrations-in-azerbaijan)

²⁰ [hXXps://www.ekhoavkaza\[.\]com/a/32939929.html](https://www.ekhoavkaza.com/a/32939929.html)

²¹ [hXXps://twitter\[.\]com/tabula_media/status/1788347929888997489](https://twitter.com/tabula_media/status/1788347929888997489)

²² [hXXps://carnegieendowment\[.\]org/politika/89796](https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89796)

of joining the bloc. Georgian Dream is essentially slowly withdrawing Georgia away from closer ties with Europe, a trend that Russia would like to see continue. Rather than conduct highly disruptive hybrid attacks on Georgia, Russia will likely strengthen its ties with Georgian Dream politicians to guide the Georgian government back into its sphere of influence.

- There have been several violent assaults on protesters, with some attacked near their homes, which supporters claim are organized by Russia.²³ Opposition figures also claim they have received threatening phone calls from unknown numbers,²⁴ likely another part of Russia's hybrid war strategy.

Similar, small-scale, violent attacks on anti-Russian interests have taken place recently in Russia's near-abroad.

- In mid-March 2024, Leonid Volkov, a former strategist of leading Russian opposition activist Alexy Navalny, was violently attacked in Vilnius, Lithuania, just weeks after Navalny died in a Russian prison.²⁵ Lithuanian intelligence said the attack was "likely organized and implemented by Russia, the purpose of which was to stop the implementation of Russian opposition projects."²⁶
- Lithuania holds important parliamentary elections in October 2024, during which support for Ukraine and increasing the military budget to combat supposed Russian threats will be key campaign issues. Russia can be expected to conduct hybrid attacks to interfere in these elections.

Recommendations

- Avoid large gatherings like protests and campaign events, particularly in Europe, where pro-Russian activists have increasingly been violently attacking participants and politicians.

²³ [hXXps://twitter\[.\]com/formulage/status/1788293146121548258](https://twitter.com/formulage/status/1788293146121548258)

²⁴ [hXXps://twitter\[.\]com/tabula_media/status/1788236186500157852](https://twitter.com/tabula_media/status/1788236186500157852)

²⁵ [hXXps://t\[.\]me/teamnavalny/23563](https://t[.]me/teamnavalny/23563)

²⁶ [hXXps://www.rferl\[.\]org/a/navalny-aide-volkov-attacked/32859028.html](https://www.rferl[.]org/a/navalny-aide-volkov-attacked/32859028.html)

Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%