NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Civil Warfare: The Use of Civil Society in Russian Foreign Policy

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Honors

Department Of

Political Science

By

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DeKalb, Illinois

May 2020
Washington D.C., June 2019. Over a hundred people have gathered in room 215b of the Capitol Building to listen to a panel of Eastern European scholars and military analysts from the Pentagon discuss Russian foreign policy and the threat it poses to western institutions. The event, attended by Congressional staffers, think tankers, and Congressional interns such as myself, is supported by a group of bipartisan Congressman and Senators in conjunction with the Free Russia Foundation, whose experts, many of whom exiles of the Russian Federation for their journalistic work, came to underline the dangers of Russia foreign policy. Most notably among this crowd, however, is Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) and Congressman Kitzinger (R-IL). Both of whom gave opening remarks to the one hundred and some odd few of us that were cramped next to the assorted coffee cups and cooled water glasses on either side of the conference room. One, Senator Jack Reed harkened back to precautions that were reminiscent of the Cold War, citing the varied scope of Russian influence and alarming attendees to heath the warnings of the expert panel that would be speaking with us in a few moments. Two, Congressman Adam Kitzinger, who decided to adopt a completely different and limited analysis of Russian influence in 2019, that is summed up by the following statement, “Russia is weak, aging, and poses a limited threat to the United States.”

In the hours to follow these opening remarks, one truth would be elucidated more than any other – Russia may still be recovering from the economic downturn and infrastructural stagnation of the 1990s and early 2000s, its population of over 140 million may be aging in key regions, and its hard power and military capabilities may not be able to subdue any U.S. countermeasures to Russian aggression outright, but Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, President Vladimir Putin, and Prime Minister Medvedev are not concerned with quelling the U.S. or Europe with fantastic economic might, surpassing U.S. population growth, or even engaging in
full-scale traditional conflict. Instead, in the years of monopolar, U.S. led, global politics that have propagated Western institutions founded on liberal thought and traditions, and in the wake of vast digitalization that has brought myriad narratives, pseudo-facts, and nations to the fore, Russia is looking to hybrid warfare to achieve its post 2014 ‘Greater Eurasia’ policy and larger global multipolarity. In other words, an elegant and equally haphazard mix of hard power, utilizing the revitalized remnants of the Soviet military industrial machine in tandem with oligarch funding, merged with the elaborate, semi-private and semi-public manipulation and destabilization that only soft power can achieve. As mentioned, only one truth was elucidated in those following hours, and only one truth will be explored in the following pages, and that is that the Russian Federation is indeed economically weak, it is indeed aging, but through the use of foreign policy reliant on this mix of hard power military growth and soft power manipulation of western institutions, it is indeed a threat.

In the aftermath of the nationalist campaign of the 2012 presidential election in the Russian Federation and the impromptu invasion and occupation of Crimea by Russian forces and the continued fighting in Donbas (Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts), Ukraine that followed the Euromaidan Revolution, the Russian Federation has had to alter its course in multiple regards. First, in its pursuit of ‘Greater Europe’ a U.S., European, and somewhat Russian dream of the post-Soviet era (Atlantic Council). A conglomeration of economically and politically related states stretching North to South from Glasgow to Ankara and East to West from Lisbon to Vladivostok. In the early 2000s, European, Russian, and even American politicians jumped on the opportunity to forge new strategies, plans, and policies to facilitate this vision of ‘Greater Europe’—but none of the parties involved took into consideration the difference in each other’s policy desires and the realities of the socioeconomic and political climate of the era. As Igor
Ivanov, the former Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation said, reflecting on the policy of ‘Greater Europe’—“(Greater Europe policies) were ahead of their time: the political elites in our countries were not prepared for such groundbreaking ideas – we should learn this lesson. We need to be more realistic and develop proposals that reflect the political situation. That means not falling behind, but also not racing ahead of ourselves” (Atlantic Council). Second, in its approach to foreign policy across the board. No longer could the Russian Federation rely purely on its nuclear armament or natural resources and be held in a pattern of stagnation after the U.S. and NATO offered Membership Action Plans to countries within the Russian sphere of influence (e.g. Ukraine and The Republic of Georgia) or following the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014; it had to grow and adapt in the sphere of foreign policy.

Now, in 2019 we can analyze the subsequent events of 2008, 2012 and 2014 with more precision and therefore, we can analyze the trajectory Russian foreign policy has taken in this eight-ten-year period since the invasion of Georgia, the Russian presidential election of 2012 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and how Russian foreign policy has adapted and grown to utilize civil society to execute the hard power-soft power pivot of its new ‘Greater Eurasia’ foreign policy initiative. Most notably, how the Russian Federation has cultivated its civil society –comprised of GONGO, Oligarch-backed Nonprofit Organizations, and state organized think tanks, to be a ‘pawn’ and not a ‘partner’ to its foreign policy objectives. Whereas as the West (represented through the example of the United States to follow) has done the opposite, utilizing its deep-rooted civil society to be a ‘partner’ acting independently of government actors to benefit U.S. foreign policy where interests intersect in certain regions and outlets, and occasionally running counter to government interests.
The partner—in this case, is defined as U.S. civil society, as they will be represented in this analysis through NGOs, nonprofit organizations, and think tanks, and its role in facilitating and aiding U.S. foreign policy objectives. As a whole, this ‘partner’ will represent western civil society and the liberal traditions on which it is founded that make it ostensibly a partner to western societal aims as a whole (e.g. U.N., NATO, E.U., and the Council of Europe) providing a contrast to the subservient ‘pawn’ role that Russian civil society, as they will be represented in this analysis through Pseudo-NGOs, GONOGS, and State Think-Tanks/ Non-Commercial Organizations, currently serves within the framework of Russian foreign policy.

After analyzing the roles of civil society organizations in American foreign policy and Russian foreign policy, both models will be evaluated in a mutual sphere of influence, one that has become considerably more volatile and high stakes to both countries’ larger foreign policy objectives since 2014—Ukraine. There we will examine the depth of this ‘partner’ vs. ‘pawn’ model of civil society organizations that are connected with the Russian Federation and the United States and of which, the capacity both possess to affect foreign policy directly and indirectly vis-à-vis their presence in third-party environments.

First, the origins of American civil society. To refer to Tocqueville and his observations on American communal and political engagement in early America. Many of the factors de Tocqueville described regarding American politics and the society that supported it in the nascent years of America’s existence as a country, continue to exist and have even grown and become more prevalent in the 200 years following these observations. What we call civil society—la cite, le corps politique—as de Tocqueville may have referred to them, is a dichotomy. Equally acting as a partner to the policies of popular government and as a protective bulwark against the atomized aspirations of the smallest individual, dissenting against the very
existence of the *politique* and its governing institutions that allow it the freedom to express itself as such. This, as to which I have already referred it, is American civil society, a partner of the people and the *politique* within the society, and it is the first among equals and the standard under which we will measure western institutions in the paragraphs to follow. Specifically, we will look at three pillars of American civil society—think tanks, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and nonprofit organizations.

“*D’abord*” as de Tocqueville might have said, there are think tanks and although there are varieties upon varieties of think tanks with policies and points of interest that might as well be defined as endless, the classic definition of think tanks will be our base of understanding going forward. A think tank is defined as a body of experts providing advice and ideas on specific political or economic problems. An example of a think tank is Center for Strategic and International Studies (CISI), a think tank that was founded at the University of Georgetown in 1962 (CISI).

CISI, like many of its compatriot U.S.-based think tanks, provides intellectual guidance for policy makers in governing bodies such as the U.S. Congress, economic institutions—such as the World Trade Organization—or private corporations—like Microsoft or Boeing—and other civil society organizations and independent actors looking to effect a specific policy area (i.e. Freedom House, Chatham House, and the Bill & Malinda Gates Foundation). As it stands, CISI’s repertoire and scope spans to cover subjects from aerospace security to the U.S.-Turkey relationship, with experts whose fields of study and nationalities range from the Americas to Australia. Think tanks such as these routinely council Congress, U.S. government agencies, and the executive branch on foreign policy issues, and offer proposals for new directions policies can take, but they hardly capitulate when errors have been made in the formulation of these new
policies or when criticizing ones that tried and failed. Whereas think tanks in the Russian Federation, as we will soon discuss, offer alternative analyses to the facts the Kremlin bases its decisions upon, think tanks in the U.S. profit from a larger level of ingrained civil society that allow them to critique and offer counter foreign policy projections to what government organizations are purveying. Hence, think tanks, like American civil society at large, are a partner in foreign policy formulation, not a pawn, as they operate independently and can equally deviate and dissent from government policy and support it (Yale).

Ensuite, there are nonprofit organizations that act as advocates for domestic and foreign policy directions. In the western model—represented by the United States in this case—these organizations can be religious or irreligious, civically or economically minded, have a global presence or a simple state presence, but their effects transcend boundaries and offer alternative civilian outlooks to guide U.S. foreign policy decisions. For example, when the United State is deciding which aid packages to offer Israel or whether or not to advocate policy initiatives put forth by Israeli political parties and candidates, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) offers information on these actors and events and tries to encourage Congresspeople, Senators, and others to heath their advice, which is commonly derived from an expert and on-the-ground opinion. There are myriad other examples of this phenomenon; like the Arminian American Lobby, which has lobbied Congress and the State Department for decades in an effort to convince the United States to acknowledge the genocide of Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the last century, while other nonprofits—like Amnesty International—take a different approach and actively cooperate with USAID and the State Department to formulate dialogues and projects in various areas throughout the globe.
Enfin, there are Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs), the antithesis to the Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs) that the Russian Federation has haphazardly copied and employed in order to manipulate dialogs and spread “alternative narratives’ in locales where global discussions on foreign policy, human rights abuses, and current events are occurring, and which will be analyzed as the prime nexus where Russian foreign policy meets civil society in the era of Russian hybrid warfare during this strategic shift from ‘Greater Europe’ to ‘Greater Eurasia.’ Although, nongovernmental organizations in the U.S. context are not deployed to harass journalists and human rights lawyers, suppress dialogues that run counter to its policy objectives, like their Russian GONGO counterparts, they are equally a prime nexus of civil society and foreign policy in the U.S. that produces a varied range of dually desired and undesired foreign policy outcomes for the U.S. government.

For example, harking back to the Armenian American Lobby which, in September 2019, successfully lobbied Congress to pass a bill recognizing the Armenian genocide within the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the last century. This bill represented a success for the Armenian American Lobby, a nonprofit organization that—was in turn—a partnership between constituents and represented officials. Yet it also ran counter to the Trump Administration’s policy at that point regarding Turkey, where President Trump had been trying to curry favor with President Erdogan while pulling U.S. troops out of Northern Syria. This confluence of interests and how they run parallel to domestic values of democracy and representative obligations to constituency groups while also hindering foreign policy at the executive level, highlight the love-hate partnership that defines CSOs and U.S. foreign policy. Where the state Duma in the Russian Federation, would have sided with the executive office of President Putin and silenced or ignored
a similar lobbying effort within Russia, or the CSO in question would not have had the avenue to lobby government to begin with, the United States’ political mechanisms and liberal culture offered the opportunity for lobbying against the executive’s (and in truth, some congresspeople’s) foreign policy desires (Yale).

Now that some dimensions of American civil society and its connection to U.S. foreign policy have been established as the basis on which the western model operates, it is time to evaluate Russian civil society, how it has progressed since the fall of the Soviet Union, and how in the aftermath of the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the 2012 Russian presidential election and 2014 invasion of Ukraine, Russian civil society organizations have moved from an auxiliary position to the forefront of Russia’s hybrid warfare and shift from Greater Europe to Greater Eurasia.

*Diagram 1.1: Interaction of American Civil Society, U.S. Foreign Policy, and the Key Areas They Effect*
We begin in Warsaw, September 2019. Civil society representatives from the 57 member states that comprise the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) met at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM). This meeting brings over 1,000 diplomats, human right activists, U.N. representatives, and more to discuss genuine issues that are eroding the state of human rights throughout the globe (U.S. OSCE). HDIM’s main draw is that it is a forum for actors, academics, and activists to coalesce, learn, and hopefully, discern solutions to these issues. However, this was not entirely the case during the OSCE HDIM in Warsaw in 2019, as dozens of Russian and Central Asian GONGOs infiltrated the event in an effort to undermine its aforementioned objectives to support the development of human rights and instead, provided alternative and false dialogues that supported both the agenda of Greater Eurasia and the Kremlin.

This is not a novel occurrence. Since the reelection of Vladimir Putin in 2012, where he and his legislative party—The United Russia Party—intensified nationalist rhetoric and consolidated the majority of civil society within Russia to either help Kremlin objectives, adopt a pro-Kremlin stance, or be disbanded, Russian civil society has resultingly become either a complicit pawn in the Kremlin’s implementation of hybrid warfare across what we will consider the ‘Russian Petri Dish’ (i.e. Russian implementation of this hybrid warfare in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in The Republic of Georgia, Transnistria in Moldova, and Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk in Ukraine) or it has decayed into a silent vestige of what was once a promising part of Russian domestic and foreign politics in the years following the secession of Russia from the U.S.S.R. and the creation of the Russian Federation in 1991.

Although there are small pockets of Russian civil society both in the foreign and domestic sphere that seek to democratize the Russian Federation, normalize relations with
western powers, and develop civil liberties within the vast expanse between St. Petersburg and Vladivostok, these organizations are few and far between and have minimal—if any—effect on the creation of long lasting policy within Russia. Within the limited means this paper will evaluate the cavernous history of Russian civil society, it will compare the founding principles, initial history, and current practices of key civil society organizations in Russia to determine (one) how Russian civil society history and principles differ now from those of the Western model (i.e. the United States), (two) how these organizations are therefore not true civil society organizations (CSOs) as the Kremlin tries to insist they are, and (three) how these CSOs have fit into the Russia’s foreign policy shift from Greater Europe to Greater Eurasia since 2012 and 2014 in a bid for a multipolar world and Russian regional hegemony in Eurasia.

“Cnachala”—To begin—there are think tanks. Think tanks in the Russian Federation differ greatly from their western U.S. counterparts and it is in evaluating the history of think tanks in the later years of the Soviet Union, the 1990s, and subsequently, the 2000s, that one begins to understand the trend of Russian civil society from the role of potential “partner” to politicized “pawn.” Whereas in the United States, according to R. Kent Weave, there are three ideal-typical forms of think tanks: “universities without students,” “contract research organizations,” and “advocacy think tanks,” in the Russian Federation there is currently only one true type of think tank, “Non-Commercial Organization” (Atlantic Council).

Initially, scholars, military and political elites, and emerging businessmen created think tanks throughout the 1990s that were based on soviet International Relations models. Although these newcomers were often short lived, they often enjoyed a large deal of autonomy and some influence throughout the course of the decade and the early 2000s, where the chaos of the Yeltsin administration allowed for a chasm of competing interests. However, once the Russian economy
began to exit a period of hyperinflation and minimal foreign investment in 2003 (along with the rise of Vladimir Putin two years prior), the Russian Federation began to consolidate existing think tanks that fit into those three ideal-typical forms of think tanks consolidate them to fit authoritarian and centralized control of their content and outcomes.

Following the institution of the Russian 2012 Non-Commercial Organization (NCO) Law, think tanks, nonprofit organizations, and NGOs, sustained a larger blow to what can be considered the minimally existent level of autonomy they enjoyed previous the laws passage in the state Duma. This law required any non-commercial organization receiving outside grants or funding (e.g. Open Society Foundation, the German Marshall Fund, and the MacArthur Foundation) to file as a “foreign agent” which means nonprofit CSOs would be taxed and potentially legally scrutinized (Free Russia Foundation).

One by one, small NCOs and think tanks fell out of existence or their lead scholars joined larger think tanks run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Moscow State University (MGIMO). Today, the predominant think tanks in the Russian Federation are: Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP), Valdai Discussion Club, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), and Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI), whose funding and support is derived largely from: the Russian executive office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MGIMO, and private oligarchs. A financial reality that has made think tanks a nexus of foreign policy and CSOs at large a mouthpiece for alternative facts that—ad maximum—run minimally askew from Kremlin policy (Atlantic Council).

“Togda”—Next—there are nonprofit organizations, or as previously explained in the aftermath of the 2012 NCO law—"Non-Commercial Organizations.” Like think tanks and NGOs, nonprofit organizations and charities in the Russian Federation have faced equally as
much scrutiny on issues both domestic and foreign—sometimes more. Following the enforcement of the 2012 NCO Law and further provisions made to that law under President Putin’s two most recent terms, nonprofit organizations such as charities, human rights groups, and even religious orders, have been chased from the Russian Federation or labeled foreign agents and subsequently harassed. Examples of these organizations include: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and even the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Although the Kremlin’s rational behind harassing these organizations—both legally and literally—is multidimensional and complex, the shortest answer is that these organizations could not be made to tailor the Russian Federation’s ideal strategy for civil society as a tool for soft power coercion inside and outside of its borders. These organizations were deep-rooted, international, and had founding principles that were ingrained in over 200 years of enlightenment thinking that have defined and currently defines liberal policy outside of Russia (Yale). Thus it was simpler for the Russian Federation to institute legislation that would legally classify these civil society organizations based on the western model of civil society, as “foreign agents” and then pedal false narratives about them on Rosskaya Novosti and VGTRK as suspicious figures looking to undermine Russian development in order to legitimize the Kremlin’s actions against these outreach organizations to Russians. Today, notable nonprofits in the Russian Federation that are approved of by the Russian state include: Federation Council Committee for Social Policy, Russian Youth Union, and the Russian Federal Youth Agency—all of which are heavily involved in the hybrid war in Ukraine, as will be discussed later (U.S. Embassy, Kyiv).

“Nakonet”—Finally—there is the backbone of Russian success in soft power coercion and the implementation of its strategy of hybrid warfare throughout the Russian Petri Dish—Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs). Unlike world renowned
NGOs that work with both the United States government and many NATO-allied governments to further civil liberties, economic development projects, and more in countries throughout the world, GONGOS in the Russian Federation are utilized to advance a state’s policy objectives and are often implemented for brief, specific use. In the case of the Russian Federation, these objectives usually are subverting legitimate dialogue, draining resources from legitimate NGOs and their supporters, obfuscating the human rights environment, and destabilizing foreign competitors while delegitimizing critiques of the Russian Federation. According to the U.S. mission to OSCE’s official statement on GONGOs, their tactics at the OSCE HDIM in Warsaw, included the following:

- In formal plenary sessions, speaking time is allotted based on the number of countries and organizations that sign up on the Speaker’s List.
- GONGOs often deliver their points in the same passionate tone and tenor as the genuine civil society organizations they seek to imitate, but behind their performance of commitment are false and absurd claims.
- “Side events”—these are workshops and panel discussions hosted by governments and civil society on topics of interest—and many of us see them as the best feature of HDIM. They’re meant to create less formal opportunities to exchange views than the formal plenary sessions.
- At side events hosted by bona fide civil society organizations, states sometimes dispatch their GONGOs to intimidate human rights defenders by sending a “big brother” message that brave advocates’ words and actions are being monitored and reported back to their capitals. GONGOs also frequently abuse question-and-answer periods to make lengthy,
aggressive, and often loud statements in support of their governments’ views, again eating up time and space for dialogue.

- GONGOs masquerading as bona fide civil society organizations frequently team up with repressive governments’ state-controlled media. This synergy of fake news and fake advocates helps repressive regimes create the theatrical illusions they use in support of efforts to justify their grasp on power. Eh voila! The newscasts back home in Repressia or Autocrastan only show the GONGOs singing their government’s praises and criticizing others.

In summation, Russian civil society originated with think tanks that initially borrowed research and practical philosophies from their International Relations (IR) predecessors in the Soviet Union, then coopted new IR methods throughout the autonomous period of the 1990s, and reverted back to state-guided outlooks and procedures in the period of Kremlin consolidation and crackdown between 2003 and today. Subsequently, Russian CSOs such as nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations are equally tools of foreign and domestic policy in the Russian Federation—and if they are not—then they are legally classified as “foreign agents,” taxed, and publicly scrutinized vis-à-vis state owned media outlets such as Rosskaya Novosti and VGTRK. In the words of the article ‘Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood’—“Russia employs a vocabulary of ‘soft power’ to disguise its ‘soft coercion’ efforts aimed at retaining regional supremacy. Russian pseudo-NGOs undermine the social cohesion of neighboring states through the consolidation of pro-Russian forces and ethno-geopolitics; the denigration of national identities; and the promotion of anti-US, conservative Orthodox and Eurasianist values. They can also establish alternative discourses to confuse
decision-making where it is required, and act as destabilizing forces by uniting paramilitary groups and spreading aggressive propaganda.”

Now that American civil society and Russian civil society has been explained and examined, it is fruitful to juxtapose the two and look at how both interact in a third-party environment within the “Russian Petri Dish”—specifically in Ukraine, where the brunt of Russia’s hybrid war is blazing in Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk and where regional U.S. outreach and aid is centralized. This comparison will allow us to distinguish between ‘partner’ CSOs and ‘pawn’ CSOs, and what foreign policy outcomes result, especially within the Russian context.

Diagram 1.2: Development of Russian Civil Society and Its Role in Russian Foreign Policy Since the Soviet Union
Kyiv, November 2019. The Free Russia Foundation is in Kyiv following recent elections in the Verkhovna Rada and the recent approval of a multilateral Normandy Platform Summit in Paris (December 9th, 2019). The organization, like in the U.S. Congress four months before, is discussing the details of its most recent work “The Misrule of Law: How the Kremlin Uses Western Institutions to Undermine the West” which details the myriad ways the Russian Foundation manipulates western institutions to achieve foreign policy goals. Instead of Congressman, Senators, Pentagon attachés, and exiled experts from the region, presenting on a panel, the focus of this event is on Michael Weiss, editor of the Daily Beast and co-editor of the “Misrule of Law.”

As a staff member in the U.S. embassy’s political section, I was able to attend this event and ask Michael Weiss his thoughts on Ukraine and more precisely, the role of Russian GONGOs in the region. After diving into a long analysis of specific GONGOs in Russian occupied Crimea and Russian controlled Luhansk, he summarized his position with the following “…but yeah, that is a long way of saying that I am terrified of GONGOs (in Ukraine)” and he is not the only one. Other experts from the Free Russia Foundation, Radio Freedom, Freedom House, and more have written thoughts that resonate the same message-GONGOs, and more broadly, Russian hybrid warfare in the region, is a terrifying indicator of a larger Russian shift—that shift being from Greater Europe to Greater Eurasia in pursuit of global multipolarity and Russian regional hegemony in Eurasia.

Ukraine, since the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution has become an equal European bulwark against Russian aggression in Eastern Europe and a Russian bulwark against continued NATO expansion into regions that are key to both Russian military and economic security. In fact, it was this NATO and E.U. expansion into regions of Eastern Europe that are key to Russian
security (i.e. Ukraine, Georgia, and to a lesser extent, Armenia) that led the Russian Federation to shift from its foreign policy focus of Greater Europe to Greater Eurasia and implement hybrid warfare while the European Union and the West simultaneously abandoned its hope of a greater European cohesion while staying minimally engaged in aiding these Eastern European countries maintain their trajectories towards western integration.

2008, the NATO Membership Action Plans in Georgia and Ukraine that were ushered in by U.S. President Bush, led to Russia’s subsequent reaction in invading Georgia that same year. The result of which is its own hybrid war and subsequently, the lasting cold conflicts in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russian-Georgian War was then followed by the reelection of President Putin under nationalist circumstances in 2012 and the ousting of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych of Ukraine in 2014, which in tandem with all previous factors, jeopardized both Russia’s naval base in the Crimean peninsula, economic interests in Ukraine, as Yanukovych was pro-Ukrainian-Russian economic partnership, and on a broader scale, Russian regional security, as an E.U. and NATO aspiring Ukraine in the wake of the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution spelt disaster for Russia’s hope for regional hegemony and aspirations for its post-2012 militarization efforts.
Following these events, the Russian Federation implemented its hybrid warfare schematic on a full scale with the invasion of Luhansk and Donetsk vis-a-vis Russian Led Forces (RLFs) and the proper military occupation of Crimea. However, while the Russian Federation implemented its new mix of hard and soft power in the service of its new plan, ‘Greater Eurasia,’ the United States and its E.U. partners refocused humanitarian aid and financial support to monitoring the conflict in these regions, advising institutional reforms that would both gear Ukraine’s military towards NATO standards, its government towards E.U. standards, and its economic sector prepared for IMF assistance. It is here, in the years following 2014-2015, that a ‘Civil War’ truly commences between U.S. and western civil society organizations promoting Ukrainian reforms for Ukraine to meet its E.U. and NATO aspirations, and Russian civil society organizations meeting these western groups with destabilizing narratives, support for the pro-Russian Opposition Bloc party in the Verkodna Rada, and the outright subversion of Ukrainian politics to promote reorientation towards the Russian Federation in Ukraine.
Map 1.2: Ukraine—Language Lynchpin: the debate over “Russian speaking peoples” and Russia’s protection of them is key to “The Russian Petri Dish.” This map shows which populations speak Russian most and which Ukrainian.

Initially, Russian foreign policy had focused on three primary reasons for Russian support for “separatists” (RLFs) in Donbas and for the Russian invasion and subsequent referendum in Russian occupied Crimea. The first, is language—as demonstrated above in Map 1.2, Russian language is the predominant language in Eastern and Southern Ukraine and the Russian Federation utilized this fact in the aftermath of the Euromaidan Revolution to support “separatists” (RLFs) in Donbas and to hold a referendum making Crimea an official oblast of the Russian Federation. The second, history. The Russian Federation claims that there is an ethnic, linguistic, and cultural connection between residents of Crimea (and to a lesser extent, Donbas) and Russia due to the Russian Empire’s ownership of the peninsula from the 18th century to 20th century. The third, religion. The Russian Autocephalous Church had a monopoly on the 30 million or more Orthodox worshippers in Ukraine, making it by and large the already largest Autocephaly in the Orthodox world—even larger. With historical, linguistic, and religious ties to
Russia, the Russian Federation has tried to bolster its hard power approach in the section of the ‘Russian Petri Dish’ that is in Ukraine (i.e. Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk) by legitimizing this advance through soft power coercion—how have they achieved this? With the help of GONGOs, think tanks, and Russian nonprofits.

Whereas U.S. backed CSOs have been cooperating with the United States mission in Ukraine to support the largest issues that President Zelenskyy and the Servant of the People party are tackling following their recent landslide victories in the summer of 2019 (i.e. issues such as anti-corruption, increasing foreign direct investment in Ukraine, negotiating a gas transit deal with Russia, and ending the war in the East), Russian CSOs have been aspiring to achieve the inverse. Russian for-profit and nonprofit media outlets owned by the Ukrainian oligarch and Opposition Bloc leader, Viktor Medvedchuk, have begun a media campaign in support of pro-Russian initiatives and have began performing broadcasts in Russian, which is a subtle way of combatting recent Ukrainian language and education laws proposed by anti-Russia hardliner and ex-president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko. These news sources include Newsone and 112 Ukraina (Freedom House).

The ultimate Russian nonprofit, the Russian Orthodox Church, has also been undercutting the newly recognized Ukrainian Orthodox Church with the use of Russian state funding. The ROC has actively tried to undermine the recent decision by the Ecumenical Patriarch Barthelme in Istanbul to recognize the UOC, an act which gives the Ukrainian church autocephaly-autonomy of sorts-from the ROC, and when this could not be achieved, the ROC broke away from the Ecumenical Patriarch and began an initiative to make the Russian Federation the new seat of the Orthodox world. A policy which would greatly benefit both Russian foreign and domestic politics as the ROC and Russian Federation seeks to slowly
capture the cultural and religious heart of Eastern European believers and expand its influence through Greater Eurasia under President Putin and the United Russia Party, who actively use religious messaging to garner domestic support.

Next, there is the last piece of the soft coercion puzzle that solidifies Russia’s civil society-driven foreign policy—and thus, hybrid warfare of the Russian Petri Dish—in Ukraine, and that is Russia itself. Within the Russian Federation there is a litany of CSOs which fit the categories of Russian civil society that we have already impressed upon—state think tanks, NCOs, and GONGOs. These organizations effect the media, such as the infamous Russian “troll farm” in the Olgino district of St. Petersburg, known as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), directed by Viacheslav Volodin and funded by Kremlin-connected businessman Yevgeny
Prigozhin, owner of Concord Management and Consulting from the physical and legal safety of Russian space but manipulating Ukrainian info space (Human Rights Watch). Following this, there are youth organizations that aim to perform “outreach” events and russification of occupied Crimea and Russian controlled Donbas (Luhansk and Donetsk). These include Federation Council Committee for Social Policy, Russian Youth Union and Russian Federal Youth Agency, which perform regional propaganda campaigns and distribute Russian biased educational material in these regions (Ukrainian Pravda).

To conclude, U.S. foreign policy in Ukraine is driven by the Chief Diplomat—POTUS and his delegated staff, those who work at the Ukraine Desk of the U.S. Department of State in Washington D.C which is executed by the numerous staff that incorporate these policies and report on Ukrainian events from the U.S. embassy in Kyiv. U.S. civil society is only a partner in this process, realizing human rights missions and monitoring in the East, helping direct foreign investment in key Ukrainian economic sectors, and helping uproot institutionalized corruption in order to help Ukrainian goals of joining NATO and the E.U. Subsequently making American civil society in Ukraine a ‘partner’ of U.S. policy and not a ‘pawn’ in its implementation of foreign policy objectives.

However, the same cannot be stated for Russian foreign policy in Ukraine. Since the end of warming ties and the shimmering vision of ‘Greater Europe’ collapsed in the aftermath of the 2008 NATO expansion into Eastern Europe, Russian invasion of Georgia, and to a larger extent, Russian invasion of Ukraine following the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution. Russia has cooped its civil society organizations on an institutional level and utilized them to carry out the soft power portion of its hybrid warfare in Donbas and Crimea. These CSOs operate within the physical borders of Ukraine as well its digital borders, exacerbating religious, linguistic, and
ethnic schisms within the country. If left unchecked or unresolved by western powers, the case of Ukraine and the other experiments in the Russian Petri Dish will be further engineered to implement Russia’s vision of ‘Greater Eurasia’ and satisfy its mission to accomplish global multipolarity and Russian Eurasian hegemony.

Congressman Adam Kitzinger may have been right, the Russian Federation is weak, aging, and poses minimal threat to the United States—in a conventional analysis of its hard power. However, in analyzing Russian use of civil society as a ‘pawn’ and juxtaposing it to America’s use of civil society as a ‘partner’ in foreign policy to support foreign policy objectives when possible. One realizes that Russian power cannot be measured conventionally, and upon examining the effect that this soft power portion of the Russian hybrid warfare strategy in the Russian Petri Dish (i.e. The Republic of Georgia and Ukraine), one notices that the Russian
Federation indeed poses a great threat as it implements these mixed policies in the pursuit of its Greater Eurasia foreign policy direction and ambition to achieve global multipolarity and regional hegemony in Eurasia. The successful result of which will forge a new era where civil society equates to ‘civil warfare.’
Works Cited


