

Jakub Eberle, Jan Daniel: Politics of Hybrid Warfare: The Remaking of Security in Czechia after 2014

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If the other is seen as a “Russian fifth column”, uneducated “patryot” or a mere “cockroach”, there is little space to take their grievances seriously and accept them as legitimate subjects of a political conversation (p. 208).

The central argument of this book is that the concept of ‘hybrid warfare’ (HW) is not only ill-suited to address the threat posed by Russia, but also introduces the logics of geopolitics and war into unrelated societal debates, polarising society and making democratic consensus more difficult to achieve. The book is highly normative and personal. The authors are themselves part of the phenomenon they are analysing – they are based at the Institute of International Relations Prague, and they have previously intervened in both the academic and Czech public debates on HW (DANIEL – EBERLE 2018, 2022; EBERLE – DANIEL 2021).¹ Worried about the state of democratic debates in Czechia, Jakub Eberle and Jan Daniel aim “to disrupt the normality of the HW discourse in Czechia and beyond” (p. 3), decouple societal debates from geopolitical tensions, and create space for different ways to deal with challenges in Czech society.

Plenty of criticism has already been voiced against the concept of HW over the past years, most of which has focused on its lack of conceptual clarity or inadequateness to capture Russian actions and interests (ESPECIAL-LY RENZ 2016; LIBISELLER 2023; FRIDMAN 2018; STOKER – WHITESIDE 2020). But discourses have power and serve interests; vagueness can be productive. For example, the impact of another prominent security discourse, the ‘war on terror’, is well established: especially in the United States, it has led to a ‘forever war’ in which remote warfare and targeted killing have been normalised internationally, and torture, racial profiling, heightened security measures and extended war powers internally. Yet, few studies have looked at the productive power of the HW discourse (AN IMPORTANT EXCEPTION IS MÄLKSOO 2018). Eberle and Daniel’s book fills this gap.

Before engaging with the contents of the book, a short primer on the HW concept is necessary. The concept was originally developed in the United States around 2007, when it referred to the blending of several modes of war on the operational level, including “conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate

violence and coercion, and criminal disorder" (HOFFMAN 2007: 14). The concept became known to a broad, non-military audience only when NATO, the EU, and some of their member states started using the term to characterise Russia's annexation of Crimea and involvement in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. In the following years, the term was broadened and soon used primarily to refer to disinformation. In the same step, it was detached from Ukraine and applied to Russian behaviour towards Europe and the West more generally. Conceptual clarity was sacrificed for the concept's utility as a marketing device to attract attention to Russia's revived assertiveness and mobilise states' resources (CALISKAN – LIEGÉOIS 2021; LIBISELLER 2023).

In their book, Eberle and Daniel trace the HW discourse in Czechia from 2014 onwards, showing that several HW narratives now co-exist there. The shared assumption of these narratives is that Russia is shaping public opinion and influencing election results through disinformation campaigns and support to local actors. It is thus supposedly Russia that is behind the societal polarisation, democratic decline, and decreasing trust in political institutions. Eberle and Daniel challenge this assumption, arguing that deeming the clash of differing views as part of an external influence campaign means that these views are not taken seriously and actual flaws in democratic processes remain invisible and unaddressed. This argument is expressed most clearly in the introduction of the book, which provides an excellent outline of why the authors believe HW to be ill-suited to characterise Russian activities in Czechia and how the HW discourse has negatively affected debates on issues that are arguably not related to Russia. It is a very powerful and accessible summary of the main arguments of the book that is relevant far beyond Czechia, which is why I would recommend it as required reading for any course on HW. The remainder of the book investigates different aspects of the HW discourse in Czechia – its context, promoters, and content – and is structured as a 'series of interventions' rather than a comprehensive narrative on the development of the discourse. Each chapter leverages different concepts from International Political Sociology, Critical Security Studies and Critical Geopolitics to open up a different lens on this discourse. This approach is both a strength and a weakness of the book – it offers an interdisciplinary engagement with the topic, but sometimes lacks depth.

In terms of *context* (Chapter 2), Eberle and Daniel identify several political and economic crises that hit Czechia between 2008 and 2013. Consequently, Czech society found itself trapped in a dual liminality – between ‘East’ and ‘West’ and between war and peace – making it difficult to define its place in the world and its relationships with others, and thus to establish what the academic literature calls ‘ontological security’. The HW discourse offered a solution to this liminality. Through the geopolitisation and ‘*warification*’ (pp. 17–18) of societal debates, it provided an opportunity to redefine Czechia’s position in the world: it now saw itself as a defender of European values engaged in a war with Russia, which aims to challenge Czechia’s rapprochement with the West.

To analyse the *promoters* of the HW discourse (Chapters 3 and 4), the authors leverage the concept of ‘assemblage’, arguing that various actors temporarily attached themselves to the HW discourse. From 2014 to 2021, a network of think tanks, government institutions, NGOs, and journalists helped diffuse and institutionalise the HW discourse and, in turn, benefitted from this institutionalisation. HW was put on top of the Czech security agenda and institutionalised in ministries, the parliament, and the armed forces. More funding to tackle HW became available, allowing established organisations to grow and new actors to emerge. The authors’ effort to link the rise of the HW discourse to the actions of groups and individuals successfully challenges the objectivity of the Russian HW threat and denaturalises the HW discourse – its adoption for national security strategies was not predetermined but is the outcome of various contingencies and active promotion.

In terms of *content* (Chapters 5 and 6), Eberle and Daniel identify three different narratives on HW – a ‘defence narrative’, a ‘counterinfluence narrative’, and an ‘education narrative’. Each narrative rests on a different set of expertise and tells a different story about where the threat comes from, what is threatened, and what the response should look like. The authors’ discussion not only shows the variety and vagueness inherent in the HW discourse, but also raises important questions about how expertise is formed and established: When a new topic arises, who is considered an expert and why? What counts as relevant knowledge? How do ‘experts’ claim knowledge and when are such claims successful?

The authors' challenge to the HW discourse serves to open up space for different approaches to democratic politics. The conclusion, therefore, mobilises liminality productively to challenge existing dichotomies. Building on the works of Judith Butler and Chantal Mouffe, Eberle and Daniel suggest ways to think differently about vulnerabilities and democratic conflict. This chapter is much more than a conclusion – it seems like the argument that the authors wanted to make all along.

In sum, the authors' normative and personal analysis provides a powerful argument for dropping the HW discourse. At the same time, however, their embeddedness made them miss similar dynamics beyond Czechia. Indeed, much of what the authors outline – the fact that the HW concept has militarised and Russified, and thus externalised, current challenges in liberal democracies; the practice of dividing people, political parties, and even seemingly unrelated viewpoints into pro- and anti-Russian ones; the use of this practice as political tool; as well as the existence of different narratives around the single term – can be observed in a number of other European countries (JANIČATOVÁ – MLEJNKOVÁ 2021; LJUNGKVIST 2024). Moreover, in contrast to the authors' claim to “*a local version [of HW] that was increasingly diverging from NATO's military focus*” (p. 88), the debates in Czechia actually seem to be similar to what we witnessed on the international stage – the definition of HW in the National Security Audit report, for example, is very similar to NATO's definition. And both the NATO and Czech discourses seem to differ from official definitions of HW, as they move HW much more into the realm of non-military means and broaden their focus from Russia to China.

To be sure, linking the rise of the HW discourse to local discourses and dynamics offers an insightful account of why the HW discourse resonated in Czechia. On the other hand, these similarities across states challenge Eberle and Daniel's explanation of the rise of the HW discourse being based on Czechia's dual liminality – between East and West and between war and peace. The former they consider as a national or potentially Central and Eastern European feature that, by implication, cannot explain the rise of the HW discourse in, say, Great Britain or Sweden. The latter, according to them, is “*a general global condition [...] in which war and peace are increasingly blurred*” (p. 30). Unfortunately, this claim is established only through references to general literature which Eberle and Daniel buy into

too readily without offering evidence from the Czech case. However, as I have argued elsewhere (LIBISELLER – MILEVSKI 2021), even though the categories of war and peace are a Western invention and somewhat arbitrary, it is still possible and relevant to uphold this distinction – for the very reasons that Eberle and Daniel challenge the HW discourse: accepting the claim that we cannot distinguish between war and peace anymore simply weakens our own conceptual, legal, and democratic frameworks. It makes *warification* possible in the first place. Therefore, rather than accepting the ‘grey zone’ discourse, it needs to be denaturalised just like the HW discourse. If our distinction between war and peace is artificial, there can also not be an objective claim to the blurring of war and peace. This blurring, I would argue in contrast to the authors, is the effect of the HW and ‘grey zone’ discourses, not a permissive condition for their rise.

If the supposed dual liminality can only partially explain the rise of the HW discourse (beyond Czechia and Central and Eastern Europe), then what can fully explain it? One potentially underexplored factor in this book is the power of the HW discourse. Eberle and Daniel point out that the HW discourse rose in Czechia because it was able to provide a societal function. Yet, I would argue that the benefits of the HW discourse for its promoters went further than that. On the international and different national levels, we see that the power inherent in the HW label after its adoption by NATO and the EU encouraged many actors to hop on the HW bandwagon, but do so with different understandings of HW based on their own contexts and interests (LIBISELLER 2023). The power of the HW concept came with material benefits (such as research funding), while the vagueness of the concept allowed for flexible adaptation. The different HW narratives that Eberle and Daniel identified likely emerged from different interests for which the HW label is leveraged. By treating the Czech discourse more or less within a vacuum, Eberle and Daniel underestimate the interplay between the national and international HW discourses as well as that between HW and other militarising concepts (such as cognitive warfare). In this regard, the international dimension of the assemblage would have been an interesting aspect to explore in more detail. Eberle and Daniel point to the assemblage’s international links but assume that the assemblage emerged in Czechia and then became internationalised. Moreover, engaging with the actors and the HW narratives in separate chapters means that the two are often disconnected and the underlying interests underexplored;

arguably, to understand the relations and dynamics of the assemblage, an investigation of their discourses is necessary; similarly, for understanding the evolution of the three different narratives, a connection to the actors behind them and their (institutional) interests is vital.

Focusing on the power inherent in the HW discourse could have also helped to mobilise the full potential of the concept of assemblage to explore the relations of the Czech HW assemblage in more detail. How do assemblage members relate to each other? What are their past and current, formal and informal connections? How do they shape each other's knowledge and points of view? Did any actors aim to become part of the assemblage but fail? Did any actor exit the assemblage during the years under investigation? The failure to fully mobilise the concept might be due to the authors' "*creative appropriation*" (p. 61) of it; rather than making a theoretical contribution, their purpose is to leverage theoretical concepts to explain empirical phenomena. These concepts are, therefore, only outlined as far as is necessary to apply them to the case. Indeed, the authors show a very good grasp of the academic literature and must be applauded for their clear writing style that summarises complex concepts in an accessible manner. The debates in the literature, nuances, and limitations of the concepts are not engaged with, however. This is problematic because 'ontological security' and 'assemblage' have been used so much in International Relations in the past few years that their boundaries and meanings have become blurred. Like the HW concept, these theoretical concepts thereby spread further, and became vague and more powerful, encouraging even more scholars to adopt them. In the book at hand, the application of both 'ontological security' and 'assemblage' remains somewhat superficial, not fully engaging with the performative aspects of the former and the relational aspects of the latter. To be fair, this is a common issue in these literatures (E.G. BROWNING – JOENNIEMI 2017) and does not necessarily hamper the authors' argument. It just ironically produces an issue of the HW concept and makes unclear to the reader why the authors have chosen these concepts over others.²

Through its critical interrogation of the emergence and consequences of the HW discourse, this book offers an important contribution to (Critical)

Security Studies, Critical Geopolitics, and Strategic Studies. Especially the latter field would greatly benefit from a critical reflection on the concepts it produces and the unintended effects they may have. This book is also relevant to all those worried about democratic decline, which, throughout Europe, in one way or another, has been linked to Russian interference. Thereby, Russia's power through and control over disinformation and cyber campaigns have been heavily exaggerated, and Europe has been portrayed as a passive victim. Eberle and Daniel's book is a powerful call to move away from those Russia-centred narratives and reclaim agency to improve democratic and societal strength.

 ENDNOTES

- 1 Some chapters of the book are based on those earlier interventions.
- 2 The authors further develop the role of ontological security and anxiety in the HW discourse in Czechia in Eberle and Daniel (2022).

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