

## Abstract

This dissertation examines Russia's contemporary grand strategy, focusing on its integration of information confrontation and unconventional means in the Nordic region between 2014 and 2024. In the grand strategy literature, a disproportionate amount of contemporary work focuses on the United States and, in terms of available state tools, on traditional diplomatic, military, and economic power levers. Surprisingly few contributions have explored the role of information tools. Additionally, Russia's use of unconventional tools, including information, remains understudied in the context of Russia's strategy toward smaller neighboring states that are part of the West but outside Russia's proclaimed sphere of influence. Thus, to fill these gaps, this thesis addresses the following overarching research questions: *What is the role of information confrontation, and how is it featured in Russia's grand strategy? How can Russia's use of unconventional means in the Nordic region between 2014 and 2024 be explained?*

The thesis answers the questions by systematically and empirically exploring the information domain as a central component of Russia's grand strategy, focusing on how Russia addresses information confrontation and unconventional tools in its strategy documents, how it is institutionalized in the broader Russian system, and how it is reflected in Russia's strategic behavior. The dissertation uses a qualitative mixed-methods approach that includes interviews, case studies, extensive use of textual sources, quantitative indicators, and a Nordic case study.

In addressing the first research question, the dissertation finds that information confrontation is deeply embedded across Russian grand strategic plans, principles, and behavior. Russian policymakers view information as an asymmetric and indirect measure set to bolster Russia's power, coined in this dissertation as a "strategy for the weak." The overarching purpose of information confrontation is best characterized as "information manipulation." This comprehensive approach demonstrates how Russia uses the information domain to deter, weaken, and destabilize adversaries and shape the narrative to advance strategic goals without direct military confrontation. As relations worsen and Russia finds itself at war, Russia activates the more destructive part of its information confrontation toolkit to seek information superiority. In this thesis, the destructive part is called *information war(fare)*, reflecting a conceptual distinction often only superficially addressed in the Western debate. *Information confrontation*

better encapsulates Russia's current advances toward the West; *information war* is reserved for Russian destructive activities in countries such as Ukraine.

In addressing the second research question, the thesis finds that, as Russia's influence in the Nordic region diminishes across other spheres, a more prominent role is assigned to using the information domain. Similarly, Russia increases its use of unconventional means despite limited influence and failure to meet its strategic objectives. Furthermore, intelligence operations form part of Russia's communications repertoire and play a more prominent role in Russia's broader approach toward the West, including the Nordic region. In addressing both the first and second research questions, the thesis also explores the coercive potential of unconventional means. This is not coercion in the classical sense but a form of manipulation wherein the coercion potential is established for strategic gain, but not necessarily immediate concessions.

This study advances the theoretical and empirical understanding of grand strategy, with a particular focus on the role of information confrontation in modern strategic competition. It provides a nuanced framework for analyzing Russia's asymmetric methods and their regional and global security implications. Additionally, this research highlights the importance of the Nordic region as a microcosm for studying Russia's grand strategic objectives and its ability to adapt to shifting power dynamics.

For policymakers, the findings emphasize the urgent need for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Western allies to address Russia's integrative use of unconventional and conventional means by fostering cross-border coordination, enhancing societal resilience, and strengthening civil-military collaboration. By bridging theoretical and practical insights, this dissertation provides a comprehensive understanding of Russia's grand strategy, the role of information confrontation in this strategy, and its implications for the evolving security landscape in the Nordic region and Europe more broadly.