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The Coercion-Manipulation-Persuasion Framework: Analyzing the *Modus Operandi* of Systems of Non-State Actors

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ABSTRACT

Non-state actors conducting terrorist attacks have shown to also rely on a mosaic of tactics to advance their strategic agendas, such as misusing educational curricula, infiltrating political institutions, and providing welfare, among others. Nevertheless, when analyzing their *modus operandi*, the attention has focused on violent and illegal tactics, to the detriment of non-violent and legal tactics. In light of this, and inspired by the literature on hybrid threats, this paper introduces the Coercion-Manipulation-Persuasion framework (CMPf) to holistically analyze the *modus operandi* of such actors, conceptually labelled as Systems of Non-State Actors (SNSAs). The CMPf is an analytical framework that combines influence modes (i.e., coercion, manipulation, and persuasion) with different categories (i.e., physical/material, symbolic, institutional, and strategic) to hypothesize over the tactics that could be used by SNSAs, thus facilitating analyses and assessments on their activities and providing anticipation and understanding. To exemplify this, three cases are non-exhaustively analyzed through the CMPf: the Nordic Resistance Movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Euskadi Ta Askatasuna. This study is a first step towards exploring how studies on terrorism and hybrid threats intersect, and answers the call of the EU Security Union Strategy for mainstreaming hybrid threat considerations into all policy initiatives.

KEYWORDS

Terrorism; system of non-state actors (SNSA); *modus operandi*; tactics; hybrid threats

Background

Over the last decades, the field of terrorism studies has undergone a transformational period facilitated amongst others by increases in researchers and research budget, the establishment of research networks and collaborations, graduate and post-graduate courses on the topic, and contributions from multiple disciplines.¹ Scholars have investigated a variety of issues related to terrorism, such as the definitions of terrorism,² its causes,³ ideologies,⁴ network structures,⁵ radicalization processes,⁶ and counter-terrorism strategies.⁷ The *modus operandi* of terrorist networks has been mainly understood as the use of physically violent activities. Consequently, researchers have explored attacks, kidnappings, shootings, hijacks, hostages, and the use of explosives and non-conventional weapons.⁸ Besides, researchers have focused on activities targeting cognition, such as the use of indoctrination and propaganda.⁹ To a lesser extent, researchers have explored the activities of terrorist networks that aim at depicting a positive picture of them and legitimizing their actions, such as the use of social services,¹⁰ welfare provision and formation of political groups,¹¹ the use of transnational advocacy networks,¹² and infiltration into institutional and administrative structures.¹³

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In order to achieve their ends, organizations using terror may engage in a broad variety of tactics. Firstly, the activities that are based on “the power to hurt,” which can be understood as coercive, are exemplified by the abovementioned physically violent tactics. Secondly, the activities based on “the power to deceive,” which can be understood as manipulative, are exemplified by the tactics targeting cognition. Thirdly, activities based on “the power to convince,” which can be understood as persuasive, are exemplified by the abovementioned seemingly positive tactics. While not all non-state actors use coercive, manipulative, and persuasive tactics, analytically prioritizing the first to the detriment of the other two may lead to incomplete threat and situational assessments, and leave unaddressed potential threats to security. On the contrary, approaching the threat of such organizations from a holistic perspective, including the analysis of coercive, manipulative, and persuasive tactics, can help to improve threat assessment, situational awareness, and counter-terrorism strategies.

This study is inspired by pieces of evidence of multiple tactics used coordinately by terrorist organizations and their so-called collaborators, wings, branches, or milieus; and thus, the need of analyzing them as a whole. So far, the analysis of *modus operandi* has prioritized the most visible coercive tactics over the rest, and has often approached them in silos, partially missing their potential interconnections and cascading effects. For this reason, in order to facilitate the holistic analysis of a *modus operandi*, this study introduces the Coercion-Manipulation-Persuasion framework (CMPf). The CMPf is an analytical framework that combines three different influence modes (i.e., coercion, manipulation, and persuasion) with four categories (i.e., physical/material, symbolic, institutional, and strategic) to facilitate the elaboration of hypotheses on the tactics that could be used, and to guide their analysis.

The present paper is structured as follows: firstly, the CMPf is introduced and explained; secondly, three cases are non-exhaustively analyzed the approach of the CMPf to exemplify how the CMPf could be applied: the Nordic Resistance Movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Euskadi Ta Askatasuna; and, finally, the CMPf is discussed within the current security paradigm.

The Coercion-Manipulation-Persuasion (CMP) framework

Inspired by previous studies in knowledge and no-knowledge, the former US Secretary for Defense Donald Rumsfeld popularized in 2002 the distinction between the known knowns (things we know that we know), the known unknowns (things we know that we do not know), and the unknown unknowns (things we do not know that we do not know). An additional category was added later, namely the unknown knowns (the things we do not know we know). Unknown knowns have been argued to be the most intriguing category of uncertainty, an “uncomfortable knowledge” that must be included in policy debates, especially when this knowledge is crucial to understand a problem but is excluded from the accepted version of such problem.¹⁴ In the field of international security, Daase and Kessler described the unknown knowns as “situations in which factual knowledge is available in principle, but not used because it is ignored or repressed.”¹⁵ This is particularly relevant for the current study because while there is evidence of manipulative and persuasive tactics being used by terrorist networks, they are seldomly considered as part of their overall *modus operandi*. This disregard may consequently depict an incomplete picture of their *modus operandi* and, in turn, become a threat to security.

During the last decades, several theories and labels have been developed to describe the changing nature of warfare.¹⁶ These approaches acknowledge that manpower and military equipment are not the only ways used by state and non-state actors to exert influence; instead, activities such as disinformation, manipulation of education, engagement of diasporas, and direct investment, among others, have become important and have enabled actors to remain under the legal threshold and hinder attribution. Drawing from these lines of thought, the European Union has introduced the hybrid threats perspective,¹⁷ which argues that state and non-state actors seek to exploit systemic vulnerabilities of societies through a broad variety of conventional and non-conventional tools in order to achieve their strategic goals, which attempt against human rights and democratic values and

institutions. While the perspective of hybrid threats has been applied to understand and analyze the behavior of state actors, non-state actors still remain comparatively under-researched and have been mainly approached as proxies of state actors.¹⁸

Inspired by the literature on hybrid threats, particularly its approach to understanding the *modus operandi* of hostile actors, the Coercion-Manipulation-Persuasion framework (CMPf) is introduced. The CMPf is an analytical framework developed to approach the *modus operandi* of a System of Non-State Actors (SNSA) from a holistic perspective. It combines influence modes (i.e., coercion, manipulation, and persuasion) with different categories (i.e., physical/material, symbolic, institutional, and strategic) to facilitate the elaboration of hypotheses on the tactics that could be used, and to guide their analysis. The need for this framework lies on the fact that physically violent activities are normally the immediate focus of attention given the visible immediate damage they can create. Meanwhile, non-physically violent activities often remain overlooked, as also proxies can be used to hinder attribution and hide connections to illegal activities, enabling actors to remain under the legal threshold. As Galtung argued, “[t]radition has been to think about violence as personal [direct] violence only, with one important subdivision in terms of ‘violence vs. the threat of violence’, another in terms of ‘physical vs. psychological war’, still another (important in ethical and legal thinking) about ‘intended vs. unintended’, and so on.”¹⁹ However, he sustains, “violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations.”²⁰ Violence is thus broader than the direct visible damage, and tactics of a very different nature can contribute to the achievement of the same strategic objectives and, combined, pose a threat to security.

The CMPf enables to assess as *modus operandi* tactics that range from terrorist attacks (physical coercion) and the enforcement of cultural elements, including language or religion (symbolic coercion), to the use of front organizations (institutional manipulation) and the provision of welfare (material persuasion). For this reason, the entities directly responsible for each of those actions might not be the same, even when they behave in a coordinated manner and/or under the same leadership (e.g., armed commandos, a front company, and an NGO, respectively). Therefore, when holistically analyzing the *modus operandi* of an actor through the CMPf, we might not only be looking at a ‘single’ non-state actor but, instead, at a coordinated system of non-state actors (some of which might be legally considered terrorist organizations, while others might exploit legal grey areas or even be considered legal). Consequently, the basic unit of analysis whose *modus operandi* is analyzed through the CMPf is labelled as “System of Non-State Actors” (SNSA). By approaching these actors as a SNSA it is possible to include in the same analytical unit different types of non-state actors who share a specific ideology and political strategic objectives, and whose leadership works towards them with some degree of coordination and/or collaboration (e.g., a terrorist branch, a political group, a business, and an NGO), while acknowledging that not all may be incurring in a legally prosecuted crime with their activities. Thus, important to highlight is that, despite being analytically approached as SNSAs, this label does not substitute their eventual consideration as terrorist organizations.

Key premises of the CMPf

The CMPf is based on two key premises: (1) the *modus operandi* shall be approached from a holistic perspective, understood as a “method of procedure” and not restricted to criminal activities; and (2) the label terrorist organization may not be suited for acquiring a complete analytical understanding of these actors for assessment and anticipation purposes, and a neutral-value label, i.e., System of Non-State Actors (SNSA), should be used instead.

The *modus operandi* as a method of procedure

The CMPf is inspired by several pieces of research that evidence the engagement of SNSAs in persuasive tactics, including legal activities. Thus, understanding the *modus operandi* in its broadest meaning as a “method of procedure”²¹ is essential. Other definitions of *modus operandi* depend on the perpetration of criminal offences, but they are too narrow for the CMPf approach. Considering the

modus operandi as a “method of procedure” enables looking at the different tactics that SNSAs can use to advance their agendas, including different types of influence and different types of legalities. For instance, while terrorist attacks clearly cause tremendous damage to society, tactics that aim to influence society by creating an immediate seemingly-positive impact may become a threat to security in the mid-to-long term. In this line, Ly argued that “charitable investments by terrorist groups [are] a way for them to advertise their ideals among potential sympathizers. Indeed, charities not only provide a conduit for money laundering, but they also truly benefit people in need. As a result, those who at least partly share the goals of the terrorist group are likely to be more willing to make their contribution to the fight.”²² Differentiating between the relevance of influence modes has been argued to be counterproductive. For instance, Levitt criticized the European Union for drawing “a fallacious distinction between the nonviolent and violent activities of terrorist groups. For example, by distinguishing between the terrorist and welfare wings of Hamas, the EU lends legitimacy to the activities of charitable organizations that facilitate terrorist operations.”²³

Recently, some authors have highlighted the use of legal tactics by terrorist organizations as a strategic choice to operate within the EU territory. About the pan-European network of the Muslim Brotherhood, Vidino and Altuna argued that “[t]he movement has generally understood that being seen as a moderate and reliable interlocutor of European establishment is the best tactic to further its aims.”²⁴ Similarly, Bjørge and Ravndal concluded that the “[Nordic Revolutionary Movement (NRM)] leadership does not at least in principle have any moral restraints against political violence, including mass murder, and that the main reason why the NRM refrains from using terrorist methods is strategic calculation: such methods are perceived as counter-productive and likely to undermine the NRM’s prospects of gaining popular support and opportunities to propagate its political views via public and legal channels.”²⁵ Because of this, it is important to analyze these actors holistically, including their ideology, strategic goals, and their whole *modus operandi*, and not only their eventual use of coercive and/or illegal tactics. SNSAs can change their *modus operandi* over time in order to adapt themselves to new contexts and use more efficient tactics to advance their agendas. As Busher et al. argued, several logics can lead militants to limit their own use of violence, among which is included the strategic logic, in which violence is considered counterproductive in specific circumstances.²⁶ Besides, low intensity and legal tactics can be used to influence and interfere with society leveraging grey areas and systemic vulnerabilities, potentially posing a threat in the mid- to long-term.²⁷

An analytical label for an analytical framework: System of Non-State Actors (SNSA)

The terrorist organization label can be extremely useful in legal prosecution, counter-terrorism operations, and policy-making. However, when used for analytical purposes, two key weaknesses arise: its definitional issues and the intrinsic limits of the concept. On the one hand, terrorism has become an umbrella term for an overly-defined phenomenon. For decades, scholars have maintained an ongoing debate on the definitions of terrorism, leading to over a hundred academic definitions and different approaches to potential solutions.²⁸ Besides, national and international legal frameworks have developed their own definitions in order to count with mechanisms to prosecute these crimes.²⁹ Thus, while the concept of terrorism is widely used, there is no consensus on what a terrorist organization is.

On the other hand, when used for analytical purposes, the concept of terrorist organization may reproduce anchoring and confirmation biases.³⁰ The anchoring bias is a heuristic in which the selection of a starting point (anchor) is adapted gradually to fit new information as it is received, influencing the outcome of the analysis.³¹ The label terrorist organization is intrinsically based upon selecting a tactic, a terrorist attack, which is then used to characterize an organization as a whole. Terrorist attacks thus may become the anchor of the analysis and guide the attention towards physically violent activities. Furthermore, this may be reinforced by confirmation bias, as “people often tend to seek only, or primarily, information that will

support that hypothesis or belief in a particular way.”³² Once the focus is located on physically violent activities, it is easier to look for other physically violent activities than for new non-physically violent ones, thus reinforcing the focus on the first ones.

Calls for using value-neutral labels such as violent non-state actors (VNSAs)³³ and non-state armed groups (NSAGs)³⁴ have already been done. Nevertheless, although these new labels are argued to “not highlight the use of one tactic over another,”³⁵ far from adopting a value-neutral approach, they continue reproducing biases towards physically violent activities. Labels that grasp the hybridity of tactics have also been introduced. For instance, Ganor’s hybrid terrorist organization referred to the classic terrorist organization that, in addition, has a political branch and/or a social welfare branch.³⁶ Nevertheless, his approach is based on the premise that there is, indeed, a classic terrorist organization. These labels thus do not suit the CMPf approach, as they mirror the *modus operandi* used by the actors, and do not reflect the complexity of interconnected actors, as they often refer to one single entity. Thus, when analyzed through the CMPf, the System of Non-State Actors (SNSA) label is chosen instead.

A SNSA is understood as a set of entities (persons and/or organizations) that share specific ideology and political strategic objectives, and whose leadership works towards them with some degree of coordination and/or collaboration. A SNSA can pose a security threat when its ideology and strategic goals attempt against human rights and/or seek to undermine democratic values and institutions. While SNSAs can potentially engage in physically violent activities, the absence of materialization of violent actions does not necessarily make them less threatening: they may exploit systemic vulnerabilities of societies, coordinately use several tactics as force multipliers to create cascading effects, and remain under the legal threshold to avoid attribution. Thus, their activities, both legal and illegal, can all together pose a threat to security when used strategically. For example, when analyzing a SNSA, part of its involved actors can use coercive tactics like terrorist attacks, while another part uses persuasive tactics like the provision of social services. As both are coordinately working towards the same strategic objectives, not only the tactics that incur terrorist or criminal offences pose a threat to security. On the contrary, the tactics which do not, provide SNSAs a way of performing with plausible deniability and hindering attribution and prosecution. Therefore, far from criminalizing non-violent movements, or civil society protest against authoritarian drifts of governments, the CMPf acknowledges that non-violent activities, even while being legal, can pose a security threat when their responsible leaders’ ideology and strategic objectives ultimately attempt against human rights and/or democratic values and institutions, or when they contribute to a broader system whose ideology and strategic objectives does. Thus, such actors and tactics must be also considered when analyzing the *modus operandi* of a SNSA.

Although a SNSA is composed of several coordinated and/or collaborating entities, it is understood as an interconnected whole and not only the sum of these entities. Thus, drawing from the literatures on organizational theory³⁷ and on complex systems³⁸ enables the understanding of a SNSA and its *modus operandi* in its entirety. In this way, its internal dynamics, structures, and performance, can be assessed as a whole, facilitating the detection of internal feedback loops and cascading effects that could show unnoticed leverage points and unknown knowns.

The dimensions of CMPf

The CMPf is composed of two dimensions: influence modes (i.e., coercion, manipulation, and persuasion) and categories (i.e., physical/material, symbolic, institutional, and strategic). Combining them can facilitate detecting potential tactics used by SNSAs, by elaborating questions such as “what tactics of symbolic coercion could be used?” and “what tactics of institutional persuasion could be used?” Nevertheless, given the complexity of the tactics and the different shapes they can take in reality, the limits between categories are blurred and only orientational. [Table 1](#) provides a non-exhaustive example list of possible tactics resulting from these combinations.

Table 1. The CMPf and a non-exhaustive list of examples of tactics clustered according to influence modes and categories

		INFLUENCE MODES		
		COERCION “the power to hurt”	MANIPULATION “the power to deceive”	PERSUASION “the power to convince”
CATEGORIES	PHYSICAL/ MATERIAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terrorist attack • Physical/cyber attacks • Sabotage • Kidnapping • Provocations of social unrest and agent <i>provocateur</i> • Financial extortion • Forced relocation and/or restriction of movement • Privation of resources and/or opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stratagem, denial and deception • Money laundering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of welfare • Provision of medical healthcare • Provision of educative material • Provision of employment • Economic support • (Foreign) direct investment
	SYMBOLIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Destruction of cultural heritage • Enforcement/prohibition of religion/culture • Enforcement /prohibition of language usage • Symbolic representation • Hate speech and threats of harassment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Propaganda, disinformation and misinformation • Indoctrination and/or (mis)use of academic curriculum • Reinterpretation of history/religion • (Mis)use and of identity elements • Politicization of language • Social engineering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of material and immaterial cultural heritage • Use of narratives • Symbolic representation • Activism • Engagement in diasporas • Protests and demonstrations • Community engagement
	INSTITUTIONAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legalization or illegalization of specific actions • Infiltration and exploitation of institutional powers (i.e., executive, administrative, and legislative) • Use of companies as headquarters • Support to/from institutions • Boycott 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inference in electoral processes • (Mis)use of political agendas • (Mis)use of census and/or scientific knowledge • (Mis)use of the legal system and/or exploitation of legal thresholds • Use of front organizations • Creation of media companies/channels for echoing their own narratives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of NGOs, charities • Use of educative institutions • Use of welfare institutions • Use of legal institutions • Use of public institutions
	STRATEGIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alliances with non-state actors • Alliances with state actors • Illegal operations and financing • Intelligence operations • Recruitment strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploitation of legal thresholds • Changing names of individuals and organizations (to avoid prosecution and increase confusion) • Infiltration into existing milieus/sectors • Transformation/scission into a political organization (without rejecting violence nor collaborating with law enforcement units) • Recruitment strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alliances with state actors • Establishment of legal proxies (e.g., businesses, NGOs, NPOs, etc.) • Involvement in national/regional/local politics • Use of bargaining chips (e.g., in national politics) • Recruitment strategies

Influence modes are the first dimension of CMPf. Influence is understood as “the power to have an effect on people or things.”³⁹ The definition is purposefully wide enough to include coercion, manipulation, and persuasion. In the current study, influence is considered a continuum that goes from coercion to persuasion, with manipulation located between them, as inspired by Sorlin’s manipulative spectrum.⁴⁰ On it, while overtness characterizes both sides, coercion obligates the target to comply and persuasion leaves them the freedom to counter-argue. Meanwhile, manipulation is

conceived as covert and is characterized by the purposeful distortion of facts that leads targets to change their beliefs and ideas, and act against their own interests.

On the one hand, coercion is based on “the power to hurt” which is often “communicated by some performance of it.”⁴¹ In Schelling’s taxonomy, coercion encompasses both deterrence and compellence. Deterrence refers to a threat intended to prevent the target from doing something by fear of consequences, in which punishment will be imposed if the target acts; in contrast, compellence refers to a threat intended to make a target do something, in which punishment is imposed until the target acts. A key characteristic of both deterrence and compellence is that, ultimately, they depend on the cooperation of the target of the threat, which is “by no means friendly cooperation, but it is cooperation nonetheless.”⁴² In contrast to coercion, Schelling argues that “brute force can only accomplish what requires no collaboration.”⁴³ The distinguishing element between the use of brute force and coercive tactics is their strategic purpose. “Terror campaigns are coercive in that any given terrorist act (and the destruction it produces) is less important than the fear it raises about repeat (and perhaps escalated) acts.”⁴⁴ Whereas a tactic may rely on brute force, it becomes coercive when its strategic purpose is more important for the perpetrator than the immediate damage it causes. For the purpose of facilitating the application of the CMPf, coercive tactics include both deterrence and compellence.

On the other hand, persuasion is based on the power to convince, “a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their own attitudes or behaviors regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere of free choice.”⁴⁵ Thus, while coercive activities depend on the unwilling cooperation of the party receiving the threat, persuasive activities depend on the seemingly free choice of the targeted party. Thus, the target will act, believe or think in a certain way because it has been convinced to do so. Most theories on persuasion focus on tactics of linguistic nature, such as the construction of messages or arguments to convince an audience. However, persuasion is here understood in a broader sense, including tactics of different natures. This is inspired by Watzlawick’s human communication theory, which argues that “one cannot not communicate” as even silence communicates.⁴⁶ Tactics like the provision of financial aid or healthcare do not only send very specific messages depicting a positive picture of SNSAs, but also support them with facts that can be used to gain legitimacy and justify other types of activities.

Located in between coercion and persuasion, manipulation is based on the power to deceive, a process in which facts are purposefully distorted to serve the sender’s interests to the detriment of the receivers. Such process is often developed with low but increasing intensity over time, facilitating the adoption of distorted facts as factual truths by the target audience. Practices such as denial, the withhold of accurate information, and deception, the provision of misleading information respectively, have been widely used to gain advantage over a target. Often combined, they are used to misdirect or mislead a target about the deceiver.⁴⁷ Besides, manipulation does not consist of the direct imposition of somebody’s will onto a target, but rather of transferring the target the basis for concluding that somebody’s will is the correct decision to take.⁴⁸ Ultimately, the individual manipulating a target would gain over this person what Lefebvre theorized as *reflexive control*.⁴⁹ Given that manipulative tactics aim to shift the perception of the target audience, they are primarily symbolic, institutional, and strategic in nature.

The second dimension of the CMPf is the category of the tactics. By category, it is meant the essence of the actions, whether physical action, using material resources or economic elements, symbols, written or oral text, using institutions and organizations, decision-making, etc. In the CMPf, this dimension is subdivided into the following types: physical/material, meaning any action that involves a physical interaction facilitated by brute force and/or a material resource (e.g., physical attacks, money laundry, and the provision of welfare); symbolic, meaning any action that involves the use, exploitation, or resignification of symbols (e.g., the destruction of cultural heritage, propaganda, and symbolic representation); institutional, meaning any action that involves the use or misuse of private entities, or public powers and institutions (e.g., legalization or illegalization of specific actions, inference in electoral processes, and use of existing institutions); and strategic, meaning any action

that involves a strategic decision (e.g., alliances with criminal organizations, continuous exploitation of legal thresholds, and establishments of legal proxies).

Applying the CMPf

The Coercion-Manipulation-Persuasion framework (CMPf) is an analytical framework that can be used to maintain a holistic approach towards the *modus operandi* of a System of Non-State Actors (SNSAs) and detect the tactics used by elaborating questions such as “what tactics of symbolic coercion could be used?” and “what tactics of institutional persuasion could be used?” To exemplify this, the CMPf has been applied to non-exhaustively analyze the *modus operandi* of the Nordic Resistance Movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Euskadi ta Askatasuna. The first two have been selected because there is no consensus on whether or not they are terrorist organizations; the third one, because despite having the terrorist organization been recently officially dissolved, its former militants and collaborators continue to promote its agenda exploiting legal thresholds. When referring to the broad System of Non-State Actors, the nomenclature used is SNSA^{ORGANIZATION}: i.e., SNSA_{NRM}, SNSA_{MB}, and SNSA_{ETA}; when the organization is mentioned alone (e.g., NRM), the organization itself and formal members are referred to, excluding collaborating entities.

Nordic Resistance Movement

The Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) is a transnational organization of a neo-Nazi ideology that aims to establish a national socialist state in the Nordic region, overthrowing the democratic order.⁵⁰ It originated in 1997 from the Swedish Resistance Movement, an elitist organization whose leaders decided to focus on the “long-term ambition of radicalizing people through steadfast propaganda and street activism,”⁵¹ as this was considered to be more effective than using extreme tactics like terrorism. Nevertheless, far from being rejected, the use of violence has thus far been essential. The NRM’s handbook for activists states that “[t]he Resistance Movement is not pacifist. We are aware that we can only be victorious through physical struggle. [...] In the future our weapons will be decisive on the battlefield, but at present, as long as we can act legally, there is no reason for the Resistance movement to arm itself with guns or explosives.”⁵²

The NRM has official branches in Sweden, Finland, and Norway, and a notable support in Denmark, and Iceland.⁵³ Among these countries, the NRM has only been proscribed by Finland, as the other countries lack of mechanisms for proscribing organizations.⁵⁴ The official number of members of the NRM is relatively small, with less than 1,000 core members in 2015—although it should be considered that, until 2016, they consciously chose to build “an inner core of fanatic activists who can increasingly bring the national message out to the masses” instead of recruiting “as many [individuals] as possible.”⁵⁵ However, the SNSA_{NRM} has been capable of mobilizing hundreds of sympathizers in demonstrations, and has been able to reach an online audience of about 300,000–400,000 per month, according to their numbers.⁵⁶

Coercive tactics

Regardless of considering the physical struggle to be essential, the NRM has a strict policy against extreme violence written on its handbook for activists. Bjørgo and Ravndal argue that NRM’s restraint in using physical violence is mainly due to considering violence as counterproductive in the present circumstances (i.e., a strategic logic) and, to a lesser extent, due to considering themselves as a non-violent organization (i.e., the logic of ego maintenance) which evolves in ways that undermine the logics of violent escalation (i.e., organizational logic).⁵⁷ Nevertheless, some NRM activists have carried out severe offensive violent actions, assassinations, and bombings (tactics of physical/material coercion); and, by 2018, the Swedish Security Police believed the NRM to have a large capacity for violence.⁵⁸ Besides, they have eventually threatened Nordic governments to turn into terrorism should

they be banned and have intimidated politicians into silence⁵⁹ (tactics of symbolic coercion), and have supported other affine Nazi groups, and even the terrorist organization Hamas for being willing to destroy Israel⁶⁰ (tactics of strategic coercion).

Manipulative tactics

Since the 2000s, the SNSA_{NRM} has included a wide network of websites, magazines, online stores, digital communication channels, media channels on social media, several radio and web TV initiatives, and a publishing house and bookstore. They aimed at reaching out politically, normalizing the NRM and projecting its reputation internationally⁶¹ (tactics of institutional persuasion and institutional manipulation, respectively). According to the NRM leader Simon Lindberg, the objective was to continuously broadcast in radio and TV channels in order to create a “Nordic unity mindset”⁶² (tactics of symbolic manipulation). Thus, the SNSA_{NRM} adopted several normalization strategies in order to frame their ideology in a way that is protected from direct public condemnation. Among others, they maintain a “borderline discourse,’ merging uncivil (hate speech, antisemitism, and unmitigated racism) with civil discourse borrowed from the ideas of right-wing populism”⁶³ and have tried to rebrand and clean up neo-Nazism, promoting anti-democracy and extremism without making explicit references to violence to remain within legality.⁶⁴ In addition, the SNSA_{NRM} has systematically used Nazi, Norse, and Viking iconography, and has revised history through Holocaust denialism and re-signification of specific dates and meanings.⁶⁵ Their content is carefully edited to avoid stepping out of legality and being censored or removed⁶⁶ (tactics of symbolic manipulation).

Persuasive tactics

The SNSA_{NRM} has leveraged legal frameworks to promote their ideals within existing political systems. In addition to its broad network of media and cultural production channels, the SNSA_{NRM} has also established political parties (tactics of institutional/strategic persuasion). In Sweden, a political party was created in 2014, entered several local governments between 2014–2018, and participated in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament, although with poor results.⁶⁷ In Finland, in light of the upcoming banning of the Finish branch of NRM, its militants created in 2018 another political party called Kansan Yhtenäisyys, and formed numerous new associations.⁶⁸ Despite this preventive move, the proscription of the NRM-Finland did not cover every association registered as member of the NRM, which enabled some of them to continue operating.⁶⁹ Besides, the SNSA_{NRM} has also explored the use of NGOs to attract new member and voters, such as through establishing the Finish charity Suomalaisapu⁷⁰ (tactics of physical/material persuasion).

Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is a transnational Sunni organization that was founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al Banna. Fleeing prosecution in their home countries, several members established themselves in Europe between the 1960s and 1980s. Over time, they consolidated a formal pan-European structure with networks in every major European country. Vidino and Altuna argue that the MB decided to create a binary structure (non-public/secret and public) to be “more effective at conducting engagement with Muslim communities and European societies.”⁷¹ While the non-public/secret part includes the Pure Brothers, rigorously recruited and sworn members, the public structure includes a web of organizations devoted to a broad range of activities that often deny having ties with the Brotherhood, but some of whose members have extensive organizational and personal ties with the Brotherhood. In Europe, although the number of Pure Brothers is quite small, they exert their influence by controlling a series of satellite entities whose members are not directly related to the MB nor even genuinely know about MB’s influence and, who, in turn, enable and sustain their secrecy.⁷²

The objectives of the SNSA_{MB} are adjusted on a country bases, depending on whether they perform in non-Muslim majority societies in Europe or the Arab world. In Europe, they pursue their vision for a “fully Islamised Europe in a distant future” and have shown a pattern of “highly problematic (anti-integration, anti-Semitic, homophobic, misogynistic . . .) views consistently expressed by the upper echelons of the movements.”⁷³ Within the European Union, Austria has been the only country to ban the Muslim Brotherhood through its anti-terrorism law.

Coercive tactics

The SNSA_{MB} active in Europe does not engage in terrorist activities inside the continent. However, it has supported the EU designated terrorist organizations such as Hamas⁷⁴ and other violent groups that operate outside Europe.⁷⁵ In the Muslim Brotherhood’s official English website, they state that “[t]o confront the Western and US domination, the Muslim Brotherhood thinks that fighting domination requires adopting several factors, including: 1- Spreading Islamic concepts that reject submission to humiliation, and incite to fighting it, and to be on to rise to support the oppressed [. . .]”⁷⁶ (tactics of physical/material and strategic coercion, respectively). Narratives and elements of hostile nature have been expressed by different entities. For instance, the ECFR (a SNSA_{MB}’s jurisprudential body) has stated that “jihad with its conditions, rulings and restrictions cannot be incorporated in the framework of what is called today ‘terrorism’” legitimizing the armed jihad as lawful means⁷⁷ (tactics of symbolic/institutional coercion). Although they, in general, do not directly call for terrorist actions and are open to dialogue, Baran has argued that considering them a ‘moderate’ organization seems to disregard its ideology, history, and strategy [. . .] [and] the Brotherhood’s own statements.”⁷⁸

Manipulative tactics

The SNSA_{MB} has been argued to be “engaged in a long-term social engineering project, whereby they hope to lead Muslims to reject Western norms of pluralism, individual rights, and the rule of law.”⁷⁹ Since the last century, the worldview of Brotherhood ideologues such as Hassan al Banna and Sayyid Qutb has had a huge influence in religious extremism. Their thoughts and reinterpretation of the Quran and Muslim concepts such as the da’wah, the jihad, and the Jahiliya, consolidated narratives prone to radicalization.⁸⁰ Al-Anani has argued that, knowingly or unknowingly, al Banna created the cognitive system that guided MB members in everyday life, which still plays a pivotal role in constructing their identities and behaviours.⁸¹ Currently, the SNSA_{MB}’s entities active in Europe are said to use a “deceptive double discourse,” showing a moderate position within Europe, and supporting different views to internal and more conservative audiences⁸² (tactics of symbolic manipulation). For instance, while the European leadership of the SNSA_{MB} has engaged in interreligious dialogues with other religious groups, they have also expressed antagonistic views towards them.

Persuasive tactics

In European countries, “the movement has generally understood that being seen as a moderate and reliable interlocutor of European establishment is the best tactic to further its aims.”⁸³ The SNSA_{MB} includes legal institutions established in Europe, such as the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (currently the Council of European Muslims), which has created several specialized entities, including the FEMYSO (youth and student organization), the IESH (network of religious schools devoted to train imams), the ECFR (a jurisprudential body), and Europe Trust (for financial activities) (tactics of institutional/strategic persuasion). In addition, humanitarian and development work is conducted through the Islamic Relief Worldwide⁸⁴ (tactics of material persuasion). While these entities may genuinely provide for people in legal ways, they are run by and respond to the Pure Brothers’ strategy who, ultimately, pursue in the long term the establishment of a Sharia-based state. In the cases of supposedly non-violent extremist leaders, like those of the MB, Schmid has argued that “official collaboration with them only provides them with respectability and legitimacy,”⁸⁵ which can be problematic, as “[t]he idea that one can hold extremist beliefs without being inclining to use

extremist methods to realise them when the opportunity presents itself—something attributed to non-violent extremists - is naïve and dangerous.”⁸⁶

Euskadi Ta Askatasuna

Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) was founded in 1958 by a group of university students that pursued the independence of their so-called Euskal Herria, a territory composed of Spanish and French provinces. ETA assassinated 829 people according to official numbers⁸⁷—although the numbers have been argued to be higher.⁸⁸ Since the early 1970s, in the light of the democratic transition, ETA followed their so-called splitting strategy (“desdoblamiento,” in Spanish), and purposefully created legal organizations that performed following its leadership. ETA strategically decided to separate the covert and illegal tactics from the public and legal ones;⁸⁹ in this way, terrorism and violence were used to coerce the government and society, and legal entities were used to advance the agenda within the existing legal framework. Ultimately, they aimed to mobilize and coordinate society towards creating a parallel alternative system.⁹⁰ Throughout the years, ETA consolidated what was named the “civil plot” of ETA, a broad system of political parties, social associations, civil associations, NGOs, educative institutions, media production channels, companies, and international groups, which behaved under the leadership of the legally considered terrorist organization ETA.⁹¹ Since the 1990s, several large court trials were conducted against the organizations that collaborated with ETA, which led to the illegalization and cease of many of them—although they continued their activities under new names and organizations. ETA officially said to stop the armed fight in 2011 and formally disbanded in 2018. However, Spain has continued to be the scenario of tributes and acts of public support to ETA prosecuted terrorists,⁹² often justified under the right of freedom of speech. Besides, former ETA prosecuted terrorists, even some with blood crimes, have joined the lists of political parties,⁹³ and through the political coalition EH Bildu, whose leader was imprisoned for kidnapping for ETA, have reached the Spanish national politics, using their position as a bargaining chip.

Coercive tactics

Since its early years, ETA considered the use of violence as a key tactic of its repertory, and terrorism was consistently used.⁹⁴ During its active period, ETA carried out over 3,000 attacks in Spain (and abroad, to a much lesser extent), and attempted an unknown number of unsuccessful attacks. Among others, they committed terrorist attacks, kidnapped as a financing method, engaged in urban violence through the *kale borroka*, forced people to contribute financially with their so-called ‘revolutionary tax,’ and threatened opposers and the families of their targets through letters and communications⁹⁵ (tactics of physical/material and, the last, symbolic coercion). Besides, they used the public space as a symbolic battlefield, promoting the passive occupation of the urban environment through unregulated actions such as graffiti, murals, and panels, which served to echo their ideology and symbolically occupy the streets⁹⁶ (tactics of symbolic coercion). In this way, the SNSA_{ETA} used fear as a consistent strategy to condition the population’s behaviour.⁹⁷ They created the so-called ‘spiral of silence’ in which those who opposed their ideals, mainly in the Basque provinces and Navarra, were not able to express their thoughts freely nor show Spanish-like identity/cultural elements, as they were considered a hostile act against SNSA_{ETA}’s interpretation of the Basque.⁹⁸ In addition, in order to justify assassinations or attacks, colloquial expressions such as “they must have done something” were spread in the civil society (tactics of symbolic coercion). As a result of their use of terror and violence, between 60,000 and 200,000 people, without including their families, were forced to relocate outside the Basque provinces and Navarra, although the numbers vary⁹⁹ (tactics of physical/material coercion).

Manipulative tactics

For decades, the SNSA_{ETA} established front companies to funnel finances, and constantly changed the names of their institutions to avoid prosecution. They used the strategy of the ‘double militancy,’ in

which militants of the terrorist organization ETA and its administrative organ KAS-EKIN were positioned in the leadership of legal entities in order to direct their activities (tactics of institutional manipulation). Since its inception, the SNSA_{ETA} consistently spread narratives to justify their violence, such as depicting ETA as a pro-democratic movement created during the dictatorship, although the vast majority of assassinations took place once the democracy was installed in Spain. Since the 1990s, they followed what was called the ‘socialization of suffering,’ a tactical approach through which everyone became a legit target of terrorist attacks. The ‘socialization of suffering’ was used to dehumanize victims and re-signify them as a political objective, promoting in ETA militants the vision of an existing war in which all opposers are the enemy¹⁰⁰ (symbolic manipulation). After the official disband of the terrorist organization ETA in 2018, the battle for the narratives and reinterpretation of the historical memory has been vivid in the Spanish political arena. The fact that the terrorist network disappeared from the SNSA_{ETA} has been used as an argument to negate any possible threat to security, while their supporters have engaged in hundreds of tributes and public acts of support yearly. Disinformation narratives have been spread to the extent in which these recent acts of support to ETA and prosecuted ETA terrorists, including those with blood crimes, are argued to be covered under the right to freedom of expression and not be incitement of terrorism¹⁰¹ (tactics of institutional and strategic manipulation).

Persuasive tactics

Since the beginning of the Spanish democracy, the SNSA_{ETA} has been strategically formed by a broad mosaic of entities. As Portero¹⁰² argues, these entities can be classified as follows: entities of a political character, including but not restricted to, KAS, EKIN, Herri Batasuna, Euskal Herritarrok, Batasuna, Udaltzuzen, PCTV and ANV; entities focused on communication and culture, like Egin, Egunkaria, and AEK; entities of an international profile who helped ETA militants and their families abroad, such as KHK, KEA, and XAKI; entities committed to social and labour activities, like ASK, the Foundation Joxemi Zumalabe, Jarrai-Haika-Segi, Gestoras Pro-Amnistía, Askatasuna, and the trade union Lab; and entities dedicated to finances, like the herriko tabernas and front companies. During the trials against the ETA’s “civil plot” of the 1990s and 2000s, most of these entities were either declared illegal or suspended for having ties with the terrorist organization ETA. However, some of them had managed to operate legally for over 20 years before investigations started. Currently, entities like EH Bildu and Etxerat engage in activism for the imprisoned terrorists (who they call ‘political prisoners’), and continue to pursue the objectives of SNSA_{ETA} without rejecting nor condemning ETA’s violence, nor collaborating with law enforcement to clarify the crimes of ETA that remain unsolved.

The CMPf in the current security paradigm

The CMPf holistic approach to the assessment of SNSAs is supported by the current EU security paradigm. For a couple of decades, the tendency of both state and non-state actors to use physically violent and non-physically violent activities has been acknowledged and argued in the literature.¹⁰³ Currently conceptualized as hybrid threats by the European Union,¹⁰⁴ this perspective argues that actors aiming to undermine democratic values and institutions coordinately engage in a broad range of activities in order to advance their agendas. Thus, they aim at blurring decision-making processes, creating cascading effects, and combining actions as force multipliers while remaining under the legal threshold. The European Union Security Union Strategy called for “mainstreaming hybrid [threat] considerations into policy making.”¹⁰⁵ In light of this, the current study offers insights into how to mainstream hybrid threat considerations into the analysis of terrorism. Particularly, the introduction of the CMPf acknowledges that it is possible for terrorist organizations and their collaborating entities to use coercive, manipulative, and/or persuasive activities in a strategically coordinated way in order to remain under the legal threshold and yet still pose a threat to security, as seen in the three cases. In light of this, approaching terrorist organizations through a neutral-value label like SNSAs enables

flexibility to think about the tactics they can use to advance their agendas. This is particularly relevant in cases when there is an absence of consensus on the legal consideration as a terrorist organization, as in the cases of the SNSA_{NRM} and the SNSA_{MB}; and in cases when the part of the system that is in charge of terrorist attacks (e.g., terrorist cells, commandos, armed branches, etc.) is dismantled by law enforcement units or claims to have been dissolved, as in the case of the SNSA_{ETA}. In the latter case, on the one hand, the threat to national security may indeed end there, particularly in the case of a classic terrorist organization. On the other hand, this shift can be an adaptation of the *modus operandi* of the SNSA, without rejecting the use of violence eventually decides not to use violence and promotes its hostile aims with other tactics, still being a threat to security.

Using CMPf to approach SNSAs' *modus operandi*, the connection with other analytical frameworks is facilitated. For instance, the CMPf can be easily combined with the Conceptual Model on Hybrid Threats¹⁰⁶ and the Comprehensive Resilience Ecosystem (CORE),¹⁰⁷ both developed by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission (JRC) and the Hybrid Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE). Firstly, the Conceptual Model on Hybrid Threats structures the analysis of hybrid threats into four pillars: the actors and their strategic objectives, the tools used, the domains targeted, and the phases of hybrid threat activities. Currently, the Conceptual Model on Hybrid Threats proposes a non-exhaustive list of tools that could be used in hybrid threat activities; nevertheless, it does not introduce a way of detecting other tools, nor any categorization for them. Thus, the CMPf can be combined with the Hybrid Threats Conceptual Model in order to conceptually point out potential tactics, by combining various influence tactics and natures. Furthermore, in this way, the analysis of the tactics used by SNSAs can account for the domains and the phase in which they are used. For instance, tactics like community activism (material and symbolic persuasion), seen in the three cases, will most likely have an impact on the Social and/or Cultural domains, probably creating cascading effects into the Information and Political domains, but remaining in the Priming phase (low-intensity) and being often enabled by the legal frameworks. Meanwhile, a tactic like physical violence (physical coercion), used directly by the SNSA_{NRM} and SNSA_{ETA}, and supported outside Europe by the SNSA_{MB}, will directly impact the Social and Military/Defense domains, probably creating cascading effects into the Political and Information domains, most likely being used in the Destabilization and/or Coercion phase (mid- to high-intensity, up to hybrid warfare/war level). Locating the activities of SNSAs in this escalation spectrum can enable accounting for low-, mid-, and high-intensity activities, and detecting potential force multipliers or trends among them.

Secondly, the CORE Model proposes a way to analyze how the tools used by hostile actors impact society, which is understood from a comprehensive approach, including the civil, governance, and services spaces. The CORE Model enables visualizing the trajectory of the tools used while they impact society, create cascading effects, and exploit current vulnerabilities. In addition, combining the CORE Model and the CMPf, the impact trajectories of different tactics can be simultaneously visualized, accounting for the effect of coercive tactics (e.g., how and how much a society is hurt by the SNSA), manipulative tactics (e.g., how and how much a society is deceived by the SNSA), and persuasive tactics (e.g., how and how much a society is convinced by the SNSA).

Conclusions

Inspired by evidence on the use of persuasive and legal tactics by terrorist organizations, this study introduces the Coercion-Manipulation-Persuasion framework (CMPf) to facilitate the analysis of terrorist organizations by conceptualizing them as SNSAs, and understanding their *modus operandi* as a method of procedure that includes tactics resulting from the combination of influence modes (i.e., coercion, manipulation, and persuasion) and categories (i.e., physical/material, symbolic, institutional, and strategic). Analyzing a SNSA and its *modus operandi* in its entirety is crucial to assess its overall influence and the security threat it entails (e.g., from taking into account the efforts to carry on terrorist attacks, to also considering the implications that its persuasive tactics, like welfare provision, may have for society—which could in turn make benefitted communities support the narratives of the

terrorists). Such comprehensive analysis could potentially benefit the efforts on threat assessment, situational awareness, and counter-terrorism strategies, as it broadens the research scope and enables the detection of potential feedback loops and cascading effects among tactics and involved actors. Further research could explore the implications of the CMPf in this regard.

The CMPf can also enable a dialogue with current conceptual and analytical models on hybrid threats, such as the Conceptual Model on Hybrid Threats and the Comprehensive Resilience Ecosystem, both developed jointly by the JRC-Hybrid CoE. Combining the CMPf approach with these models, it is possible to elaborate hypotheses on tactics used by hostile actors, detect the impact of SNSAs into different domains and determine in which phase are these tactics being used, which could in turn facilitate the assessment of their escalation potential. Furthermore, the impact trajectory of the tactics used by SNSAs can be visualized through the CORE Model, allowing analysts to map how and where the effect of coercive, manipulative, and persuasive tactics (e.g., how and how much a society is hurt, deceived, and convinced by the SNSA, respectively) is spread. In this way, the introduction of the CMPf is also a first step in responding to the European Union Security Union Strategy call for mainstreaming hybrid threat considerations into all policy initiatives, by building bridges between the fields of hybrid threats and terrorism studies.

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