

A European Response to Russian Intelligence Activity

Russian spies do not simply gather information, but seek directly to undermine European solidarity, and require a response to match

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Intelligence is traditionally considered to be an additional source of data and insights to inform policy makers. However, in recent years it has become increasingly clear that Russia's spies have adopted – encouraged by the Kremlin – a much more aggressive and active role akin to that assumed by intelligence agencies in time of war.

Russia's several agencies involved in foreign operations, primarily the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the General Staff and Federal Security Service (FSB), overlap and vie for the favour of the Kremlin. With the open support of Vladimir Putin – a veteran of the Soviet KGB and former director of the FSB – they have received steadily increasing budgets and a virtual free hand. The aim is to divide, distract, and dismay such that the West will be willing to accept Moscow's self-proclaimed sphere of influence (including Ukraine and Georgia) and abandon efforts to encourage transparency, democratisation, and the rule of law within Russia.

Analysis: A War in the Shadows

Piecemeal evidence of this aggressive turn has been accumulating, from the cross-border kidnap of an Estonian security officer in September 2014, through October 2016's attempted coup in Montenegro, to the concerns about potential efforts to influence 2017's series of European elections. To an extent, it reflects the growing involvement in foreign operations of the FSB, primarily a domestic security agency. Used to such methods as intimidation, blackmail and coercion, with close links to organised crime, and often operating outside the intelligence *rezidenturas* within embassies, the FSB does not recognise the traditional etiquette of peacetime tradecraft. Given the essentially competitive nature of the Russian intelligence community, the other agencies have begun adopting similarly aggressive methods in response.

As a result, the intelligence Cold War in Europe has got much hotter. Cyber attacks orchestrated by the FSB and GRU are a daily occurrence. Russian organised crime networks have been mobilised to smuggle agents and raise and launder operational funds. As well as populist political parties, the Russians are assiduously cultivating armed paramilitary groups. The apparent (and probable) support of the GRU for the Serbian nationalists behind the attempted coup in Montenegro highlights Moscow's willingness to use extreme measures, even within Europe's bounds.

This is a challenge for all European states, but while size is not always a determinant of security – Estonia's Kapo Security Police, for example, have an enviable reputation – smaller ones without strong counter-intelligence structures and cultures face a particular threat. Countries such as Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, where over-sized Russian embassies house large contingents of spies, and those such as Belgium whose small services are over-stretched by the challenge of also tracking prospective terrorists are clearly unable to match Moscow's challenge.

Outlook: The New Normal

There is little prospect of any imminent improvement in the situation, at least as long as Putin is in power. He and his closest allies are convinced the West is committed to isolating Russia, diminishing its role in the world, and bringing about soft regime change. Grudgingly aware they have far less hard, soft, and economic power, they are waging an asymmetric campaign using espionage, subversion, and disinformation, to exploit the freedoms, diversity, and democracy of the West.

The problem is that in purely tactical terms, the Russians are right. The EU's distinctive status as a constellation of democracies does create opportunities for 'active measures' – political operations – intended to weaken its unity and capacity to act. This is especially true in the field of intelligence, where despite the creation of the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (EU INTCEN) in 2012, cooperation remains limited. Although every EU member state is formally committed to sharing intelligence, in practice it is often considered a commodity to be traded or a national treasure to be hoarded. As a result, this remains an area of vulnerability for the EU as an institution and European countries alike. The lack of solidarity also deters individual countries from tough responses to Russian spying, aware that Moscow will usually respond with overt tit-for-tat measures and also, if it feels it can, covert escalation.

Recommendations: Investment and Partnerships

- ◆ Just as European states are having to adapt to the new political environment and increase their defence spending, so too **counter-intelligence budgets need to grow** in response to Russia's continued commitment to expanding its intelligence activity. While the struggle against terrorism remains important, this should not be at the expense of combating foreign states' intelligence operations.
- ◆ Although INTCEN ought to be developed further, in light of the practical and political challenges, **bilateral and regional intelligence-sharing partnerships need to be developed**, especially to support smaller countries. This is also a matter of common advantage, as within the Schengen Zone, spies in more vulnerable countries can travel easily to other EU states.
- ◆ European states need to **foster a culture of solidarity** in the face of Russian intelligence operations. Both NATO and the EU provide mutual 'hard' security guarantees, and the EU also offers the promise of support in case of major terrorist attack through its Solidarity Clause. However, EU states need also to recognise that foreign intelligence operations represent a serious threat deserving of similar support, and that nations seeking to protect themselves must receive common assistance against Russian retaliation.

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