

Mark Galeotti

Solidarity, Securitisation, and Europe in an Age of Hybrid Threats

Introduction

At present, Europe is grappling with a very real – even if often exaggerated and mythologised – series of threats from Russia. Vladimir Putin’s regime is determined to restore what it feels as Russia’s rightful status as a ‘great power’ and is considering this in positively nineteenth-century terms, not expressed through economic dynamism and soft power, but a voice and veto in global discussions and a sphere of influence enforced by military muscle if need be. Meanwhile, Europe is committed, however imperfectly at times, to a values-based foreign policy and the maintenance of the post-1945 world order, not least its notion that state sovereignty is a right, indivisible, and independent of the size of that state and the firepower of its armies. Ukraine is the obvious battleground where these two visions collide, but just as valid would be Western support for investigative journalists and anti-corruption movements inside Russia. To the West, these are simply expressions of those values; to Putin a deliberate and cynical ploy to undermine his regime.

The Guerrilla Geopolitics Threat

Russia is, however, weak in most of the indices of conventional power, especially in comparison with Europe and NATO. As a result, Putin has embarked on a campaign of ‘guerrilla geopolitics,’ an asymmetric political struggle bypassing Europe’s strengths and instead seeking to apply pressure on its weak points.¹

The main elements of this threat – essentially, ‘political war’ – are three, or maybe three and a half: disinformation, active measures and political manipulation, espionage, and if not the likelihood of military force – it is highly unlikely we will see Crimean-style ‘little green men’ in Estonia, let alone Poland or Hungary – then the threat of its use as a particularly undiplomatic diplomatic instrument.² Disinformation is certainly the terror of the hour, with a European Parliament resolution arguing “that Russian strategic communication is part of a larger subversive campaign to weaken EU cooperation and the sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity of the Union and its Member States.”³ However, this is most effective when coupled with the active use of Russia’s extensive and aggressive intelligence agencies to gather information, put pressure on political systems, and even covertly support divisive movements and parties.

Admittedly, it is distinctly harder to be able to demonstrate these methods are especially effective. The Russians backed Brexit through assiduous propaganda on their English-language platforms, the RT TV channel and Sputnik news site, to be sure, but they also backed Scottish independence, which failed.⁴ Likewise, it is hard to demonstrate that their financial and moral support played much of a role in the election of Miloš Zeman as Czech president, or changed his opinions. Where the Russians do seem to have some success is when they are able to capitalise upon and widen existing cracks and fissures in national and regional social and political structures, whether the anti-EU groundswell behind Brexit or the fears of migration Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban mobilised in a referendum that also resanctified his rule.⁵ To put it bluntly, the Russians succeed only when and where Europe fails.

The Flaws in the European Project as a Security Issue

It is therefore inescapable that the political and social weaknesses of European polities, and the European Union as a whole, are in and of themselves security challenges. They create vulnerabilities which Russia can and does exploit to undermine Europe's unity and capacity to act, whether to resist Putin's imperialism in his self-defined sphere of influence, or even to protect itself against subversion and manipulation.

This has been given a particular new urgency by the election to the US presidency of Donald Trump. Although as of writing, before his inauguration, it remains to be seen how much of his campaign rhetoric will be translated into policy, he is clearly no fan of America's entangling alliances and eager to ensure its relationships with other nations and blocs work to its advantage. He is unlikely to be especially interested in the USA's traditional role as guarantor of Europe's security and at the very least will expect America's allies to shoulder a greater share of the burden. As he put it, "if we cannot be properly reimbursed for the tremendous cost of our military protecting other countries... then yes, I would be absolutely prepared to tell those countries, 'Congratulations, you will be defending yourself.'"⁶

In the short term, this is a source of concern for Europe (and doubly so for Ukraine and Georgia, within Russia's self-identified sphere of influence yet outside NATO's protective guarantees). However, in some ways it can also be seen as a perverse opportunity, forcing the European Union to take its security interests all the more seriously. This is a process which is already under way, with High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini unveiling an Implementation Plan on Security and Defence which, in turn, led to the adoption of the European Defence Action Plan in November 2016.⁷ However, much of this work has been more conceptual and declaratory than practical, and concentrating on supporting research and other long-term goals. Still only four European Union nations (Estonia, Greece, Poland and the UK) spend the 2% on GDP that NATO considers the absolute minimum.

In the Trump era, Europe will have to take its own security more seriously – and also have to demonstrate this all the more assiduously and visibly, both to deter Moscow and reassure Washington. This will certainly have its challenges, political and economic, but may also be an opportunity to address the security of the continent, but also consider the true and enduring role within it of the EU.

“Fixing the Roof”

In academic discourse, 'securitisation' – framing something as a security problem – is often presented as a problem, as a political gimmick that gives one issue an artificial priority over another.⁸ The classic example is terrorism compared with road accidents or obesity-related health issues, both of which cause far more deaths, and yet which tend to receive much less attention. However, this also opens up scope for considering securitisation as a potential instrument precisely to direct publics' and policy-makers' attention to pressing and salient needs of the moment. To put it another way, given that a variety of essentially populist, opportunistic and negative actors are eagerly securitising issues from migration to religion within Europe in order to divide and undermine, this can also be a process of contesting not just the basic notions of the security threats facing Europe but also the solutions they demand. Harnessing the power of 'securitisation' for more positive and creative ends, rather than allowing it to be monopolised by those advocating a return to mono-cultural nation-states and an end to the European Union as a project.

The issue is therefore not just that Europe collectively needs to have military forces sufficient to deter or repel conceivable invasion and also to conduct such out-of-area interventions as seems likely and necessary, whether for humanitarian or other purposes. It also

needs to address explicitly and directly the non-kinetic, social, political and informational threats manifesting in the twenty-first century and develop the capacities to deal with them.

The former is conceptually simple, even if politically difficult. The nations of Europe need to spend more on defence, and to make attaining NATO's 2% target – not just a symbolic but also a practical figure – an urgent priority. Many have commitments to reaching it; at the 2015 NATO Summit in Wales, member states agreed to seek to reach this within a decade. Well beyond the likely political incumbency of any of the leaders there, and still presented as an aspiration, this is a relatively weak commitment. Instead, European countries – not only those within NATO – need to accept the need to accelerate this process, which will mean painful fiscal choices and a sustained campaign to convince electorates of the need and broker consensus between political parties.

Addressing the non-kinetic side of the threat is more complex, but offers a unique opportunity for the EU. The nature of Russia's political war is precisely that it manifests itself in a constant, small-scale and often opportunistic and even contradictory barrage of propaganda, subversion and division. Most fail to have any substantive impact. Yet some happen to hit some internal weakness, chime with some existing sentiment or otherwise capitalise on a failure of governance and legitimacy within the target state and exacerbate it. It is impossible to rebut every "fake news" story, watch every Russian spy, spot every overture to some populist of left or right. Instead of trying to catch every raindrop, the best response is to fix the roof instead, to address those deficits in capacity, governance and legitimacy which the Russians are exploiting.

The EU Response

This creates an opportunity for the European Union, which has long been more interested in governance than war.⁹ The most powerful ways of "target hardening" against Russian political war are, after all, social cohesion, effective law enforcement, an independent and responsible media, and legitimate, transparent and effective governance. A more strategic and urgent approach to ensuring these are found throughout the European Union is thus a security necessity and not just a public good. Member states need to be imaginative and flexible when they consider the challenges they face and how best they can be resisted. A simple increase in the defence budget alone may not be the most appropriate response. For example, maybe it needs forensic accountants, media analysts, or language teachers' more than additional soldiers. It is, however, through such "hybrid defence" that the challenge from the Kremlin will best be neutralised.

The EU's Joint Framework to Counter Hybrid Threats, adopted in April 2016, is envisaged as offering "a comprehensive approach to improve the common response to the challenges posed by hybrid threats to Member States, citizens and the collective security of Europe" by uniting existing policies with 22 proposed new measures.¹⁰ Much of this is about exchanging information and raising awareness, but it also addresses the need to build resilience in critical and strategic infrastructure, from the financial system to utilities, and countering extremism. Potentially especially important is the commitment to exploring the potential use of the Solidarity Clause (Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union) and the mutual defence clause (Art. 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union) in case of "a wide-ranging and serious hybrid attack."

This immediately places the emphasis on an evident non-kinetic incident of war-like status, such as a massive cyberattack on critical infrastructure. The Solidarity Fund – the expression of the eponymous clause – is there to help member states recover from terrorist attacks or natural or man-made disasters, for example. It begs the question of how best to respond to the slow, cumulative impact of subversion and lies. At present, such initiatives as

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the External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force (which monitors and counters Russian disinformation) suggest an approach which is centralised and reactive.

However, the real need is to recognise that – just as will conventional military capabilities – the nation states will remain the fundamental sources of non-kinetic defence. There is no single response, no one-size-fits-all model precisely because Moscow is seeking to exploit the specific challenges and circumstances of each target state. Furthermore, this cannot be a process imposed or even open to being interpreted as imposed by Brussels. A reaction to what is considered the overreach of the European Commission in particular is part of the problem or, to put it another way, precisely a perception the Russians encourage and exploit. Just as the EU strategically invests and provides encouragement and expertise to uplift economically-struggling regions and improve infrastructures uniting the continent, so too there is scope to provide analogous support for those gaps which create hybrid war vulnerabilities. This could be anything from the lack of adequate counter-intelligence services with the powers, budgets, and skills to identify and turn, convict, or expel agents, provocateurs, political operators, and those who would fund and stir up divisive local movements, through to measures to improve social outreach and the inclusion of alienated minorities.

It means proper controls on the flows of money from Russia, even if laundered through thinly-veiled front companies in third-party jurisdictions. This money otherwise can be used to buy influence, support local political movements intended to stir up trouble, and take over strategic business sectors. No country likes turning away business, but in the modern world, money is weaponised, and Moscow understands this well. None of these issues are new and all are being tackled to greater or lesser extent by all Europe's frontline states. However, they are rarely considered as part of a comprehensive national security strategy, and supported through the actions and resources of the EU.

Solidarity is Security

Solidarity is also more than just a question of disaster relief. Moscow has assiduously encouraged divisions between member states, not least on sanctions, but also relies on the relative weakness of the smaller one. While both NATO's Article Five¹¹ and the EU's mutual defence clause provide reassurance in the face of overt aggression and even the more egregious non-kinetic attacks, they offer nothing meaningful about the kind of small-scale pressures which represents the essence of Russia's political war. Likewise, while it has been possible to broker consensus within the EU over major issues, such as the sanctions over aggression in Ukraine, this is often a fragile and lengthy process. Instead, there needs to be a stronger sense that the Union as a whole will stand behind its members when they take unilateral defensive action. The classic example is when expelling Russian spies under diplomatic cover. Despite President Putin's uncharacteristically low-key response to the December 2016 expulsion of 35 alleged spies from the USA, Moscow's usual response is tit-for-tat retaliation, and often additional punitive measures.

Nonetheless, it is evident that the real threat is from numerous smaller-scale political challenges, and these will likely only become more significant in 2017 in the lead-up to a series of pivotal elections: German presidential elections in February, Dutch general elections in March, French presidential elections in April-May and legislative ones in June, and Czech general elections in October. Already, Hans-Georg Maassen, head of Germany's domestic security service, has said warned that "the indicators that there will be attempts to influence the federal elections next year are intensifying" and Guillaume Poupard, director-general of France's National Agency for the Security of Information Systems, sees further "development of a digital threat for political ends and for destabilisation."¹² Likewise, the latest report from

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the Czech Republic's BIS security service has warned not just of the scale of Russian intelligence operations there, but their active use in trying to exert political influence there.¹³ Yet in the words of one Czech counter-intelligence officer, when pressed as to why the government seems to do little to address this, "the Russians would retaliate. While NATO has its Article Five to respond to military attacks, we would be on our own when Moscow hits us diplomatically and politically."¹⁴ Solidarity should also mean an open, proactive willingness to stand behind member states with more than supportive words to encourage them to play their fullest role in resisting Russian political warfare. Were the European Union to play a stronger role supporting member states as they "fix their own roofs" and also stand between them and any attempts to bully and intimidate them when they did, not only would it perform a valuable security role that only it can provide – NATO can hardly get into the societal security business – but also it would demonstrate that it is not the EU of negative propaganda, but rather a structure to empower and encourage all its members.

Notes

¹I first used the term 'guerrilla geopolitics' in Galeotti, Mark 2015 'Putin, Ukraine, and asymmetric politics,' *IntelliNews Business New Europe*, 14 April 2015 <

<http://www.intellinews.com/comment-putin-ukraine-and-asymmetric-politics-500399277/>> and explore it in further depth in Galeotti, Mark 2016. "Hybrid War or Gibrinaya Voina? Getting Russian's non-linear military challenge right" (Mayak, 2016)

²See 'Heavy Metal Diplomacy: Russia's Political Use of its Military in Europe since 2014,' *ECFR Policy Brief*, 19 December 2016 <

http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/heavy_metal_diplomacy_russias_political_use_of_its_military_in_europe_since?

³European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties (2016/2030(INI))' <

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2016/2030\(INI\)>](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2016/2030(INI)>)

⁴'Why Putin Is Meddling in Britain's Brexit Vote,' *The Daily Beast*, 8 June 2016 <

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/06/08/why-putin-is-meddling-in-britain-s-brexit-vote.html>>; 'Pro-Kremlin bloggers throw weight behind Scottish independence,' *Telegraph*, 10 September 2014 < <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11087449/Pro-Kremlin-bloggers-throw-weight-behind-Scottish-independence.html>>

⁵Fredrik Wesslau, 'Putin's friends in Europe' *ECFR Commentary*, 19 October 2016 <http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_putins_friends_in_europe7153>

⁶Transcript: Donald Trump on NATO, Turkey's Coup Attempt and the World,' *New York Times*, 21 July 2016 < <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy-interview.html>>

⁷European Commission, 'Mogherini unveils European Defence Action Plan,' 30 November 2016 <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/16165/mogherini-unveils-european-defence-action-plan_en>

⁸See, for example, Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver & Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998); Michael C. Williams, 'Words, Images, Enemies, Securitization and International Politics,' *International Studies Quarterly* 47, 4 (2003); Matt McDonald, 'Securitization and the Construction of Security,' *European Journal of International Relations* 14, 4 (2008).

⁹This paragraph draws on my "Time to think about "hybrid defence", *War On The Rocks*, 30 July 2015 < <https://warontherocks.com/2015/07/time-to-think-about-hybrid-defense/>>

¹⁰European Commission, 'Security: EU strengthens response to hybrid threats,' 6 April 2016 http://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/about/ip-16-1227_en.pdf. For the full text of the Joint Communication, see <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52016JC0018>.

¹¹ Article Four of the North Atlantic Treaty does permit a member state to raise any issue of concern, but this is a largely neglected mechanism.

¹²DW, 'Will Russian disinformation influence German elections?,' 8 December 2016 < <http://www.dw.com/en/will-russian-disinformation-influence-german-elections/a-36693083>>;

Le Monde, 'Berlin et Paris redoutent des cyberattaques de l'étranger, à l'approche de scrutins majeurs,'
1 December 2016 <

<http://www.lemonde.fr/acces-restreint/europe/article/2016/12/01/17>

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¹³BIS, *Annual Report of the Security and Information Service for 2015* (BIS, 2016) <

<https://www.bis.cz/vyrocn-zpravaEN890a.html?ArticleID=1104>>

¹⁴Off-the-record conversation, December 2016