How to boost the Western response to Russian hostile influence operations

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Abstract
The Russian Federation has become a rogue state in international relations, invading and occupying the territories of three European countries (Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine), waging war in the Ukrainian territory, producing massive disinformation campaigns against the West, threatening the Baltic republics, and interfering in various elections and referendums. Despite Russia’s aggressive behaviour, the West’s response to it has been significantly limited, particularly when it comes to non-military deterrence by Continental Europe. The US and the UK are leading the punishment of Russia’s aggression, while many countries, mainly in Western and Southern Europe, are hesitant to respond to this threat. This article makes recommendations as to what should be done in practical terms to boost the European portion of the Western response to Russian aggression from the political and policy points of view.

Keywords
Russia, Disinformation, Subversion, Deterrence, EU, NATO, Elections

Introduction
In the early to mid-2000s, Russia watchers started to argue that the revanchism led by President Vladimir Putin and his closest advisers was something the West should take seriously. Most of the countries in the democratic West had essentially ignored the internal developments in Russia and were then surprised by the actions taken by the Russian state. Russia’s military occupation of parts of Moldova was basically considered a non-issue. When Russia invaded Georgian territory in 2008, the West decided not to take major punishment and deterrence measures. However, in 2014 Russia invaded
Ukraine and even the most hesitant Western political leaders had to take notice and, later, action. Flash forward to 2018, and arguably the Russian Federation has become a disruptor of international relations, invading and occupying the territories of three European countries (Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine), waging war in the Ukrainian territory, producing massive disinformation campaigns against the West, threatening the Baltic republics, and interfering in various elections and referendums. The West’s response to this aggressive behaviour has been significantly limited, particularly when it comes to non-military deterrence by Continental Europe. The US and the UK are leading the punishment of Russian aggression, while many countries, mainly in Western and Southern Europe, are hesitant to respond to this threat. This article makes recommendations as to what should be done in practical terms to boost the European part of the Western response to Russian aggression. The following text is divided into three parts. First, Russia’s hostile activities in Europe are described and categorised. Second, the major trends in the Western response to these hostile activities are highlighted. In the third part of this article, specific recommendations are proposed which would boost the response to Russia’s hostility.

**Russia’s hostile activities in Europe**

Let us sum up what is meant when speaking about ‘Russian aggression’. The European Values think tank (Richter 2018) suggests that Russia’s hostile actions in Europe can be grouped into five broad categories.

1. **Military aggression and revanchism.** Russia invades, occupies and destabilises countries near its borders that seek to align themselves with the West and creates frozen conflicts to maintain control over these countries; as a result, conventional war in Europe is no longer merely theoretical.

2. **Support for political extremism (far-left and far-right).** In pursuit of its goal to destabilise liberal democracy, Russia fuels and abets extremist sentiments and political movements in Europe on both the far left and the far right by providing funding, supporting disinformation campaigns and legitimising extremist voices through its own media.

3. **Offensive cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns.** Russian cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns against Western states are growing increasingly audacious and belligerent, designed to undermine trust in democratic institutions and civic cohesion, as well as destabilise state infrastructure, democratic processes (that is, elections and referenda) and other key public services.

4. **Using energy as a ‘wedge strategy’ against energy-dependent states.** Russia uses its energy resources to increase its strategic influence in the EU and the shared neighbourhood, exploiting the energy dependence of states in these spaces via political and economic blackmail to further its geostrategic interests and coerce compliance. It also seeks to establish new means of energy dominance in Europe
(such as the planned Nord Stream 2 pipeline) to ‘divide and conquer’ and undermine EU solidarity.

5. **Exportation of weaponised corruption.** Russia uses financial dealings with political strings attached to exert political and business pressure on other states, including providing funding for pro-Kremlin political parties or individuals in Europe that comes from clandestine sources. Russian pro-Kremlin oligarchs also use Western financial havens to protect their assets, investing abroad to avoid taxes in Russia.

Despite the ongoing Russian aggression, the Western response is lacking in comprehensiveness and intensity. The EU and the US imposed economic sanctions on parts of the Russian economy and selected individuals after 2014, but the only states which have effectively stepped up their sanctions against escalating Russian aggression have been the US, after the Russian interference in the 2016 presidential elections, and, to a lesser degree, the UK, following the Skripal poisoning incident in the spring of 2018. The European Values think tank has also assessed the responses of the EU member states to Russian subversion efforts on a year-to-year basis (Kremlin Watch 2018). On the one hand, positive political and policy developments (meaning increasing resistance to this threat) from 2017 to 2018 can be spotted in Sweden, the UK, Denmark, France, Slovakia and Croatia. On the other hand, negative political and policy developments from 2017 to 2018 (meaning decreasing resistance to this threat) can be spotted in the Czech Republic, Austria, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Germany and Italy.

**Major trends in the Western response to Russian aggression**

After studying the Western reaction to the above-mentioned aggressive activities of the Russian Federation, there are five major trends which can be observed, as outlined below.

First, Europe lacks non-military forms of deterrence and is a constant target. The point of deterrence is to stop the adversary from attacking again by raising the expected costs of such an activity (Freedman 2009). In military terms, the West has so far deterred Russia from attacking a NATO member state, although the Russian military has been actively provoking the Baltic republics. However in non-military terms, it is clear that the West and, more specifically, EU member states are failing to come up with meaningful forms of deterrence. This is clear from the fact that Russian aggression is escalating and does not show any signs of stopping. Just a few examples include Russian interference in the 2016 Dutch EU–Ukraine Association Agreement referendum, the 2016 Brexit referendum, the 2016 Italian constitutional referendum, the 2017 French presidential elections, the 2017 Catalonia crisis and the 2017 German parliamentary elections (Noack 2018). The West has not punished Russia for any of these hostile acts. There have been no meaningful sanctions imposed on Russia, only diplomatic talk and negative media coverage. If we ask the question, ‘Does the Kremlin see European counteractions as
strong and does the Russian government fear the European reaction when it interferes in European domestic affairs?’, the answer is clearly no. Russia has no incentive to stop its hostile influence activities in Europe because it does not fear strong retaliation.

Second, only the US (and to some extent the UK) is willing to escalate defensive sanctions and deterrence measures. If we take a big-picture look at the West, there is a major difference between the actions of Continental Europe and those of the US, accompanied by the UK. While Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election caused the strategic awakening of a large portion of the American political establishment to the Russian threat (with the exception of the president), Europeans seem to be much more submissive and unwilling to take even defensive action to stop the aggressor. In practical terms, Washington has put in place extensive and escalating sanctions against Russian behaviour and has invested large sums in countering Russian influence and disinformation in Europe too (Harris 2018). In contrast most of the Western European political establishment has been rhetorically defensive on this issue, but has failed to implement practical policy measures. The UK has experienced two stages of awakening: one following the Russian chemical attack on UK soil in spring 2018 (the Skripal poisoning case) (BBC News 2018) and the second as a ramification of ongoing investigations into Russian influence in the 2016 Brexit vote (UK Parliament, Digital Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2018). It is no surprise that special parliamentary enquiries into Russian interference in their respective domestic elections are only ongoing in Washington (VOA 2017) and London (UK Parliament, Digital Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2018), and not on the Continent. Russia can keep buying political influence in Western Europe because there is no resistance to it. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron has been vocal on the issue of Russian disinformation and his administration’s plans to propose legislation on disinformation (France 24 2018), but there has been no visible effort to counter the Russian influence in French politics. Very recently, political parties with direct institutional links to Russian entities have even entered governments within the EU—in Italy and Austria.

Third, the Western map of approaches to the Russian threat has been drawn up, with no major changes expected in the coming years. The coalition of EU member states confronting the Russian threat is stable, yet weak. It consists of 10–12 member states (Kremlin Watch 2018), comprising most of the states from Central and Eastern Europe, plus the UK. Since 2014 there have been no major shifts in the alliance. While some Western European EU member states have experienced awakenings and public debate about the issue following major Russian interference incidents (e.g. Spain, the UK, Germany, France and the Netherlands), there has been no strategic shift that has changed the balance of power in terms of countering this threat from within the EU. It is therefore likely that no major shifts can be expected in the coming years, given the fact that escalating Russian aggression has not been a game-changer. Two negative developments are already on the horizon. First, Brexit will mean that not only will the UK voice and vote be missed in the various EU formats, but the experience and expertise of British civil servants will also disappear from the EU institutions. The effect of this might not be felt instantly, but the strategic impact of such a withdrawal will have to be assessed over
time. Second, the new Italian government, which entered office in the summer of 2018, will make it even harder for the EU to keep the existing sanctions in place, as they have to be renewed by unanimous decision. It can be expected that Rome will keep threatening to unilaterally block the future extension of EU sanctions in order to add leverage to its negotiations with other member states regarding budgets and migration.

Fourth, Germany has not taken a leading role in stopping Russian aggression. While Germany is considered to have the most influence on essentially any EU decision, it is clear that its political establishment is unwilling to take a leading role in countering this threat. Chancellor Angela Merkel has been the driving force behind EU sanctions against Russia and is probably the main reason why they still hold, but the sanctions are essentially basic and there is no political will among the EU member states to boost them. The German political establishment is also determined to push the Nord Stream 2 project through, despite the objections of its allies and the arguments of security experts (European Values 2018). This selfishness and unwillingness to take the lead in punishing Russia for its numerous atrocities and other hostile actions effectively means that there can be no expectation that Berlin could be the leading principled power. Russia can have no major fear that Germany might step up the Western response to its aggressive activities.

Fifth, EU member states are not willing to defend themselves from Russian subversion, and offensive measures are (very much) out of the question. Most European efforts do not focus on stopping the aggressor, but on making attacks on the target more difficult. A review of policy countermeasures by EU member states (Kremlin Watch 2018) shows that the political will to implement structural policies to counter this threat is limited. The main reason for this is a lack of understanding of the urgency of the threat, combined with the high degree of political sensitivity to the matter which is clearly present in many Western and Southern European member states. Because of this political environment, it is unlikely that Europe will soon engage in punishing Russian behaviour and therefore in effectively trying to deter the aggressor. We are still in the phase of discussion about whether and what the states should do domestically to decrease their vulnerabilities. It is a much more politically demanding and sensitive matter to implement significant policies to deter and stop Russia. Therefore it is unlikely that European countries will engage in offensive measures, because so far they have failed to take their own defence seriously.

**Conclusion**

There have been lively expert and political debates in the West on how democratic nations should respond to this threat. The best summary of the relevant policy papers and strategies can be found on the website of the European External Action Service’s (EEAS) East STRATCOM Task Force, a European Council mandated EU body created with the aim of countering pro-Kremlin disinformation (EUvsDisinfo 2017). As well as dozens of expert and sometimes technical policy steps, the website also includes one initiative that sets seven strategic priorities. This initiative has been co-signed by 65 security experts
from 21 Western countries. The Prague Declaration, ‘How the Democratic West Should Stop Putin’ (European Values 2017), is the only document which has been signed by such a large number of Western security experts, and its seven steps serve as a solid framework for building up the Western response through practical and realistic measures. These steps are as follows.

First, political leaders must acknowledge the threat. President Putin’s Russia poses a major threat to Western democracies. The Kremlin’s use of subversive tools and tactics to exercise hostile influence over the internal affairs of democratic countries is unacceptable and must be countered with resolute defensive actions to deter further aggression. So far, any such substantial countermeasures have been non-existent. If Moscow remains undeterred, additional sanctions targeting members of the Russian elite’s inner circle should be imposed to increase pressure on the leadership. Currently, the lack of punitive measures is an invitation for the Kremlin to continue or potentially ramp up its offensive.

Second, hostile activities in the national contexts should be investigated and exposed. Beyond the ongoing stream of anti-Western disinformation narratives stemming from Russia, the Kremlin also employs temporary, intense campaigns to influence national elections and referenda in Western countries. In this context, national parliaments should form investigative panels to collect and publicise evidence of Moscow’s disinformation and influence operations. Transparency is the best tool that democracies have at their disposal: thus, full disclosure of Russia’s subversive efforts is the most effective—and also legitimate—way to inform the public about this threat.

Third, research should be carried out to establish where Russian actions are most successful. EU member states should jointly conduct targeted research (through detailed polling, for example) to obtain data about which demographic groups typically believe the Kremlin’s disinformation narratives. Only such comparative and in-depth exercises can expose the reach of Moscow’s efforts to sway public opinion.

Fourth, the EU’s only expert body in this area should be empowered. The EEAS East STRATCOM Task Force, established by EU leaders two years ago to counter Russian disinformation campaigns, remains gravely understaffed, with only three experts focusing on the crucial task of Europe’s defence against Russian hostile influence. These three experts alone—who are paid by their home states rather than by the EEAS—cannot fulfil the tasks set forth by the European Council. Accordingly, the EEAS should triple the capacity of the Task Force so that it has the resources to fulfil its mandate. Indeed, given the current staff size and budget of the EEAS, it would be reasonable to request the addition of at least seven further experts who would be paid from the EEAS budget. The EEAS East STRATCOM Task Force has established itself as a highly specialised expert pillar in Europe and is widely respected within Western intelligence and security circles. This unit should therefore be transformed from a temporary assignment into a permanent EEAS structure and receive at least one million euros for targeted research. Allied structures exist to coordinate messaging vis-à-vis the Islamic State; a similar structure should now be put in place to counter pro-Kremlin disinformation.
Fifth, the aggressor should be confronted politically. Despite the gravity of the threat, few Western political leaders have openly identified the Kremlin as the aggressor. For example, Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has spent the last two years endeavouring to avoid naming Russia as the primary source of hostile disinformation within the EU. Crucially, if Europe wants to defeat this threat, its leaders must confront the aggressor head on: the Russian leadership must hear European representatives declare that its subversive efforts will not be tolerated.

Sixth, a working group of like-minded EU and NATO member states should be set up. Although at least 12 EU member states consider the Russian hostile influence to be a serious threat, they have so far failed to work effectively as a coalition. However, this threat can only be defeated through collective action: as such, these countries must set up mechanisms such as cross-border working groups to develop and implement concrete countermeasures (e.g. in message coordination).

Seventh, understanding of the threat posed by Russia should be promoted outside the expert community. Thus far information-sharing between EU member states has been sparse. Central and Eastern European governments and civil society groups must actively deliver the lessons learned from their experiences of countering Moscow’s hostile influence operations to Western European countries, where the understanding of this threat is comparatively limited. Moreover, while an expert community on Russian influence and disinformation operations is emerging in Europe and the US, it is essential to deliver rudimentary knowledge to people beyond the specialist community about threat assessment, the modus operandi of the Kremlin and its proxies, and viable policy options. In-depth training programmes and briefings for non-specialists in government and the wider political establishment, as well as in the media and non-profit sector, are greatly needed.

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