



Hybrid Hysteria

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Is “hybrid” about to replace “comprehensive” as the favourite container notion of the Brussels foreign policy community? They might not be so different, in fact. Both a hybrid and a comprehensive approach mean the integrated use of a broad range of instruments of external action towards the achievement of a foreign policy objective. It’s just that the hybrid approach put into practice by Russia today seeks to achieve rather less friendly aims than the EU’s own comprehensive approach. The hybrid approach is the comprehensive approach gone over to the dark side of the force.

Before we get all hysterical over so-called *hybrid threats*, it is essential that we define what we are talking about. Only then can we decide if and how our strategy needs to be adapted.

The most eye-catching hybrid approach is *hybrid warfare* as practiced by Russia in Ukraine: fomenting armed rebellion by covert (or at least officially denied) arms deliveries, troop contributions and military operations, propping up friendly local leaders, propaganda, promises of economic benefits and threats of economic reprisals. The aim can be regime

change or secession of part of the territory (which can then quickly become a puppet state). Whether the method (the warfare) be hybrid or covert or not: the key thing is that this is war.

One step down from war is *subversion*, which is what many fear is happening in the Baltic states: fomenting political unrest by all means short of military action on the ground, but including for example cyber attacks, incursions into national airspace and territorial waters, espionage, corrupting politicians and other opinion-makers, propaganda, and economic sticks and carrots. The aim is to turn part of the population against the regime so as to weaken it and render it less able to exercise its sovereignty, including in foreign policy. Staying below the threshold of clear armed aggression, subversion blurs the boundaries of what constitutes an attack that would trigger an armed response or the activation of a collective defence commitment such as NATO’s Article 5. Thus the target government and its allies are kept off-balance.

Covert wars and active subversion are obviously violations of national sovereignty and therefore illegal under international law. Because today this is happening in Europe, it makes us nervous, but we seem to have

forgotten to which extent we have engaged in this ourselves in other parts of the world. Many regimes in Latin America, Africa and Asia were subverted or brought down and replaced by a leader judged more amenable by the West during the Cold War and – let’s not kid ourselves – even afterwards. This is not to justify Russia’s actions in any way, but to put them into perspective. These are not dark new powers that Russia is displaying, but time-honed tactics. Alarmism is not just unnecessary; it is also singularly unhelpful.

For one, it has led commentators to apply the adjective “hybrid” far too widely, to any action aimed at *gaining influence* within the EU and NATO. Attempting to play off one Member State against another, sponsoring Euro-sceptic and Russia-friendly political parties and NGOs, buying space to spread their message in the media, investing in critical infrastructure, promising financial aid to vulnerable governments, instrumentalizing the energy trade, even military posturing: we may not like it when Russia does this, but these are normal instruments of statecraft. Some of their uses may be reprehensible, but they are certainly not illegal. Are we not regularly using the same levers of power? Europe funds and supports political dissidents and human rights activists across the world, promotes democratization (which in many countries really means regime change), and instrumentalizes its economic power through political conditionality. Of course, our objectives are not as malicious as those of Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine, at least not in our own mind. How they are perceived by some in the target states is another matter. We are just no longer used, since the Cold War ended, to be on the receiving end ourselves.

Furthermore, hybrid warfare, subversion and gaining influence are all instruments of statecraft, just like – for good or for bad – terrorism, aerial bombardment and invasion are instruments. And one does not adopt strategies aimed exclusively at an instrument –

one makes strategies tailored to the actors that might use those instruments. A strategy against hybrid threats is as meaningless as a grand strategy therefore as declaring war on terrorism is, if not more so, given the range of activities that hybrid threats can cover. Some general counter-measures must of course be taken: if one fears aerial bombardment, one invests in air defences and shelters; if cyber attacks are a likely threat, then one builds up one’s cyber defences. But this reactive component ought not to be the main part of our strategy. The major, proactive part of strategy ought to aim at changing the behaviour of the actor that might undertake bombardment or cyber attacks. Who that actor is determines how and when these instruments may be used against us and how likely that is.

WHICH MEASURES SHOULD EUROPE THEN TAKE?

True, until recently the idea of war, hybrid or otherwise, against an EU/NATO Member State was simply unimaginable. That is no longer so, but still the risk remains very small. Because of our nuclear and conventional deterrence, which is assured thanks to our alliance with the US, any potential aggressor state knows that the cost of an attack will be unacceptably high. An additional reason why Russia’s covert war against Ukraine specifically should not be seen as the prelude to similar operations against an EU/NATO Member State is that for Moscow, the Ukrainian crisis is almost akin to a domestic issue. That view is not acceptable to us, of course, but it does explain both why Russia is willing to take heavy economic and diplomatic punishment over Ukraine and why Russia will not aggress the Baltics next. Unless, perhaps, we ourselves choose to escalate the Ukrainian crisis, in which case Russia may choose to act in another theatre by way of countermeasure. In spite of the small risk, Europeans do have to upgrade their forces though, for deterrence relies far too much on the US.

What about subversion? For an outside actor to subvert part of a population of a state there have to be pre-existing grievances of sufficient severity against that state, as well as an affinity (cultural, linguistic, historical, political) with the external actor, which has to offer a credible and attractive alternative project. In other words, before subversion is possible, there has to be a domestic political failure. These conditions are clearly present in Ukraine, which has been divided for years between a European and a Russian-oriented public, and where the government has not managed to provide equally for the security, freedom and prosperity of all citizens. Why would anyone think similar Russian subversion would be feasible anywhere else in the EU? What attractive narrative could Russia possibly offer to an EU citizen – as long as the EU and its Member States uphold our social model that ensures that everybody does indeed feel respected, and provided for, as a citizen? The only exception could be the Russian minorities in the Baltic states, which is why the EU should help these three governments to fully integrate all of their citizens in the polity, politically, socially and economically.

A much greater threat, which has already materialized, is subversion by jihadist extremists, who convince EU citizens to join their ranks and go and fight in Iraq and Syria, and to commit acts of terrorism in their home countries in Europe. This has been possible precisely because sizeable proportions of our citizens with an immigrant background feel greatly disenchanted with our society, which it is felt has relegated them to the margins. The greater their despair with their future in Europe, the more attractive the IS narrative becomes, offering adventure, prosperity or salvation – whatever the prospective recruit is most longing for.¹ The only safeguard against such subversion is to make sure that our social model does not leave anybody behind, and to ensure that all citizens' security is protected,

their voice heard in democratic decision-making, their human rights respected, their equal treatment before the law guaranteed, and, most importantly, that all citizens can enjoy what they perceive as a fair share of the prosperity that our societies produce. The first line of defence against subversion could be said to be Juncker's investment plan therefore.

Finally, we can take measures to reduce our vulnerability and to prevent outside actors from gaining undue political influence inside the EU. Obvious measures include increasing cyber defences and the security of critical infrastructure. Another set of measures that is already in the making concerns diversifying our energy supply while integrating our energy markets, thus reducing the opportunity for energy blackmail. A new area in which EU policy is called for is oversight of foreign investment in sensitive sectors (such as banking, energy, transport, telecommunications, and, very importantly, the media). While there is no harm in a company from one EU Member State controlling major shares of such sectors in another, the EU ought to adopt legislation to limit the degree of control that can be exercised by any foreign actor (private or public), from Russia, China, or elsewhere.² A fourth area is anti-corruption, at the European and national level. Has the time not come for a harmonization across the EU of the rules that govern the funding of political parties?

An area in which the EU should not venture, is propaganda. So-called strategic communications are important: governments must explain to their own citizens what they are doing and why. When they intervene in another country (diplomatically, economically, militarily) they should communicate with citizens there as well. If a certain population is specifically targeted by a propaganda campaign by a foreign actor, or a foreign-funded internal actor, a specific counter-narrative can be

developed and a public diplomacy campaign launched. But all of this is something else than propaganda, because a democracy ultimately deserves truth. That is why if the EU does what it should do and does it well, free media will convey that much more effectively and credibly than any government-owned media outlet will ever be able to.

A European Union that would consolidate its internal cohesion and reduce its vulnerability to malevolent external actors through what, if one wants, can be called a “counter-hybrid” strategy, would be much better placed to design and implement the external strategies that it really

needs: a Russia strategy, a Middle East strategy etc. Ultimately, one cannot make strategy against an adjective.

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Endnotes

¹ Rik Coolsaet, *What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian Case*. Egmont Paper No. 75. Brussels: Egmont Institute, 2015. See: http://www.egmontinstitute.be/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/egmont-papers-75_16x24_v2.pdf.

²In the case of the media, one is tempted to explicitly mention Australia.