

Russia Eyes Europe's Vulnerable Edges

Editor's Note:

As tension between Russia and the West has mounted in recent years, Moscow has increasingly turned to hybrid warfare to gain and hold ground in their contest for power and clout. This is the third installment of a five-part series exploring the geopolitical context, targets and tools of that strategy, as well as the steps Russia's adversaries are taking to counter it.

The shadow of a great power looms largest over its neighbors. But that doesn't mean countries nearby don't feel its presence, too. The nations along Europe's periphery — the Baltics, the Balkans and Central and Southern Europe — are acutely aware of this reality. At the fringes of the Continental core, these states are ripe for manipulation as Russia seeks to prevent the expansion of, and sow discord within, the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization — particularly over issues such as sanctions and military buildups.

Unlike the states in Russia's own backyard, the European periphery has little to fear from Moscow's conventional military. Though a Russian invasion of the region isn't impossible, it is unlikely, since the states within it are either NATO members (the Baltics), fairly far from Russia (the Balkans), or both (Central and Southern Europe). Troops are not the only tool in Moscow's arsenal, though. And some tactics of hybrid warfare, including political manipulation, punitive energy and economic measures, cyberattacks, subversion and propaganda and disinformation campaigns, pose a particular threat to the countries on Europe's edges.

The Baltics: Waging a War of Perception

Among the states in the second tier of Russia's hybrid warfare target set, the Baltics have proved the most vulnerable to Moscow's methods. This is explained in part by their large ethnic Russian communities, which account for 24 percent of Estonia's population, 27 percent of Latvia's and 6 percent of Lithuania's. Political parties that cater to these segments of society have made strong showings in their respective countries' parliamentary elections, granting Moscow

a certain level of influence over their governments in the process.

Still, the Kremlin's reach has been contained by the limited appeal of pro-Russia parties beyond ethnic Russian communities. Coupled with popular support for EU and NATO membership in the region, this has made it tough for Moscow to pull Baltic states away from the West or foment widespread unrest, as it did in eastern Ukraine. Instead the Kremlin has resorted to other means of undermining their governments, such as clamping down on energy exports. In 2006, Russia cut off its oil supplies to Lithuania and charged the Baltic states the highest prices in Europe for its natural gas. Eight years later, Moscow slapped import restrictions on agricultural products sent from the Baltics, a response to the region's backing of EU sanctions against Russia for its role in the Ukrainian conflict.

Along with these economic measures, the Kremlin has waged an aggressive cyber and information war against the Baltics. Russian "hacktivists" launched massive cyberattacks against Estonia's banks, ministries and parliament in 2007. Hoping to discredit NATO, Moscow also circulated a false report in February that German soldiers stationed in Lithuania had raped a teenage girl. A report on Russian-language news site Vesti.lv, meanwhile, claimed that Canada's military is staffed with homosexual troops and that its contingent in Latvia cannot be trusted. With stories like these, Russia is angling to erode the Baltic peoples' trust in the Western alliance as Moscow builds up its own military presence on their borders.

Central and Southern Europe: Splitting the Continent in Half

Though countries in Central and Southern Europe lack the sizable ethnic Russian communities of the Baltic states, their distance from Russia gives Moscow more room to politically maneuver within their borders. Most depend heavily on Russian energy and have no territorial disputes with Russia, which has subdued any fears of overt invasion by the Kremlin's troops. With the exception of Poland (which borders the Kaliningrad exclave) and Romania (which competes with Russia for influence in Moldova), Central and Southern European countries tend to take a pragmatic stance toward ties with Moscow.

Moscow, in turn, has tried to use these states' practicality to drive a wedge between EU members on a number of issues, including the bloc's sanctions against Russia. The Kremlin has used the promise of building pipelines such as South Stream and Nord Stream II, which run through Europe, to show that it still has allies on the Continent, adding to the support it has already received from

friendly governments in Hungary, Greece and Italy that have called for the sanctions against Russia to be lifted. Those calls have gone unanswered, however, because the United States and Germany keep pressure on the Continental bloc to maintain its united front against Russia.

But doing so may be difficult as Moscow props up anti-EU and far-right entities in Central and Southern Europe. Parties including Italy's Five Star Movement, Hungary's Jobbik party and Poland's Change party routinely challenge the status quo when it comes to Western institutions, and Russia eagerly encourages their behavior, regardless of whether they rise to power or not. Meanwhile, Moscow continues to launch cyberattacks against what it perceives to be unfriendly governments in the region — a recent attack targeted the Polish Foreign Ministry. Furthermore, dozens of Russia-leaning outlets have published propaganda blaming the United States for the Syrian civil war and the European refugee crisis.

The Balkans: Offering Carrots and Sticks

The Balkans present Russia with a good opportunity to widen rifts in the West, too. In certain countries, Moscow has taken a more amicable approach, granting concessions, economic aid and energy discounts to friendlier states such as Serbia. Moscow has even established closer military cooperation with Belgrade by supplying weapons and setting up a joint “humanitarian center,” which many believe to be an outpost for Russian spies. The Kremlin plans to build a similar center in Bosnia's Republika Srpska.

Russia's relationships with EU and NATO members in the Balkans — or countries hoping to someday become them — have not been nearly so chummy. For instance, before Montenegro finalized its NATO ascension last year, Russia reportedly planned and backed a coup attempt against the government in Podgorica in a last-ditch effort to block the integration process. Moscow has likewise given tacit support to anti-Albanian movements in Macedonia — another NATO hopeful — and has spread rumors intended to deepen suspicions of NATO members' intentions within and outside of the alliance.

Source: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-eyes-europes-vulnerable-edges>

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