



Everything may become an instrument of hybrid warfare. And electoral processes are no exception. It is well-known that Russia interfered in the Ukrainian election in 2004 which finally led to the Orange revolution. The Russian strategy in Ukraine in 2004 failed and back-fired. But it did not stop the further search for methods of election meddling. It took more than 10 years to create a more sophisticated strategy and tactics, as the article on the next page reviews.

THE PRECONDITIONS AND REASONS FOR THE USE OF HYBRID ELECTORAL WEAPON BY RUSSIA

The key feature of hybrid aggression is that it is outside legal control. It is difficult to determine the exact date or source (or even period) of the start of aggressive action. Several options are possible for Ukraine, for example - the beginning of the 1990s, 2006 (the first "gas war"), the election of Viktor Yanukovich (2010), summer 2013 (trade wars), Euromaidan (Nov-Dec 2013) and February 2014. The irreversible consequences for Ukraine were events on February 20, 2014 (the appearance and subsequent actions of "green men" in the Crimea). It is even harder to define the starting point within the EU.

Hybrid warfare and hybrid aggression have existed in the international community for five years at least, adversely affecting relations and threatening nations' sovereignty. There is already a wide range of instruments of hybrid aggression. Despite this Russia is constantly searching for new forms of hybrid influence. Election meddling has become one of the most determinative because of its flexibility. The key factor that makes electoral procedures a target of hybrid aggression is their importance. Elections are the valuable democratic procedure and every politician in Europe is dependent on their results. Affecting one of the most important European procedures, which is the personification of democracy, is very efficient.

Election meddling is cheaper than other types of aggression, especially when compared with the military operation or economic sanctions. RT, Sputnik, internet bots and trolls create a system of promotion of information and they cost less than bombs. Election meddling can help to optimize resources which are becoming more and more limited. Election procedures are diverse even within one state (the USA for example) and, moreover, within such a widespread entity as the EU. That is why the instruments of influence may differ.

Election cycles allow time to upgrade the instruments of influence by the next one. The problems with countering the potential interference in elections are obvious. But it is very often very hard to prove even obvious things. And it is very hard to prove Russia's election meddling in most of the cases, nor is there effective legislation in place. Sanctions as an answer is doubtful (at least for now, given the need for US support), so, the experiments may continue. An adequate response is yet to be found.

Election meddling could be an effective way of destabilization in one country with the possibility to broadcast the results of the influence to another country, EU.

Election meddling is a perfect way of undermining trust in democratic values. And undermining the value system of Western democracies, which makes them sustainable and legal, is one of Putin's key ambitions. Election meddling is a demonstrable challenge to Western democracy. 2019 has already provided two great cases of the Russian election meddling – Ukraine and EU parliament election. Post-Soviet states as a transition states are in constant focus of Russia's attention. And this fact is independent on Russia's political system.

Russian interference in the elections in Ukraine have their own peculiarities. We have already mentioned failure in 2004, which led to the Orange revolution, but the Russian discourse, technologies and methods dominated in the Ukrainian election from 1994 till 2012. It may be explained by three centuries of coexistence of Ukrainians and Russians within one state – first within the Russian empire and the Soviet Union after that. These three centuries of stateless national existence have long term aftereffects on Ukrainians.

For example, it is one of the reasons for the desacralization of state power, which commonly was anti-Ukrainian. When state power became Ukrainian, after Ukraine got independence in 1991, this power could not build effective strategic communications with society. Russian hybrid

aggression did not change this situation, unfortunately. Misunderstanding between state and society is not what can be afforded in times of war and reforms. And Ukraine faces and is going to face both challenges. The result is obvious – if Ukrainian authorities can't explain what and why is happening, rivals would do. For many Ukrainians, Russian aggression is a faraway puzzle and Russia is not an enemy. The state failed to explain how ingenious, sophisticated and dangerous hybrid aggression could be and what it means for each family. Moreover, the active part of Ukrainian society is under constant stress as a result of the Russian hybrid aggression. They are tired and exhausted of countering hybrid aggression on the levels where the state is weak – history, books, films etc. So, Russia's goal was the effective destabilization of the country during the 2019 elections, with the possibility to using the results to influence other countries,

THE EU PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION CASE

The instruments of interference obviously differ according to the electoral system and the state.

It may be to discredit some candidates, reduce the voting turnout, manipulate with sociological data, promote the candidate with pro-Russian rhetoric or pro-Russian narrative. Each of the instruments of election meddling in EU during the May 2019 parliamentary campaign deserves attention. Several reports have been already published and will be published in future.

For example, special SafeGuard Cyber's report was devoted to Russian activity in social media. The report claimed that Russian "bad actors" were "increasingly pouring misinformation through social media channels with a clear goal to influence the upcoming European Parliamentary elections". Over a ten-day period in March, researchers identified 6,700 "bad actors" who posted and amplified enough divisive digital content to reach over 241 million users, nearly half the population of the EU. The evidence, provided by SafeGuard Cyber 's report is very convincing. The key message spread in social media is that Europe is collapsing, that the elites aren't paying attention to ordinary people, and that Europe's values and identities are under threat. The rhetoric was anti-EU, populist, and anti-establishment. The key targeted social group in 2019 was youth.

Social media is not the only instrument. Broadcaster RT and the Sputnik news agency are not going to disappear. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/09/european-parliament-magazine-filled-with-pro-russia-content>

Although not very popular among Europeans, they are not the only target. The fact of the presence is important by itself. Cyberattacks are a good weapon in interfering too. Microsoft registered cyberattacks targeting think tanks and non-profit organizations working on topics related to democracy, electoral integrity, and public policy, that are often in contact with government officials, in winter 2018-19. The possible origin of the attacks is a group called Strontium, also known as APT 28 or Fancy Bear – which is believed to be associated with Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU.

Another popular and effective instrument is financial support for politicians and political parties. Most of the populist parties in the EU get financial or other support from Russia. Sometimes the ties are not even hidden. Marine Le Pen's nationalist party is a perfect example. Getting financial support from Russia may not even be a crime as far as there is no common European rules on party funding. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, four out of the 28 European countries do not have any restrictions on foreign donations to political parties. They are Belgium, Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands. Eleven other countries have partial restrictions on foreign donations. And only 13 have full bans in place.

The instruments and tactics may differ, but there are some things in common.

First, it is hard to fix the FACT of the interference. The date of the election is known in advance. So, it is possible to plan and manage a campaign and make interference multi-pronged and cross-border. And the interference may continue even after the election – it has no time limits.

Second, the Kremlin's goal is not only to win the election. Local destabilization would be enough. And it may take time to find out what was Russia's target and instrument this time and what damage may be caused.

Third, the instruments and tactics have been changing, became more sophisticated and less visible, more legal and better targeted.

WAYS OF COUNTERING THE ELECTORAL WEAPON

The ways of countering the hybrid aggression may and should differ according to state and local election system. But key elements could be:

- * Information campaign involving public opinion leaders in order to prevent voter bribery

- * Dissemination of information about possible intervention technologies

- * Promoting public recognition of the elections as open and transparent by all stakeholders

- * Effective interaction between police and the public to keep up with public order during the electoral process

- * Rapid public response to attempts to interfere in the elections

The key conclusion is that democracy is a target, and it is being attacked by some who seek to overthrow it.

This may become one of the key challenges for democratic nations for the forthcoming years. As Gabriele Zimmer, a member of the European Parliament, said: "The main point should be: We should stand for ourselves and our countries ... And to say the Russians are interfering...". The European Parliament has recently started to act : see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/10/brexit-party-meps-vote-against-measure-to-combat-russian-propaganda>

European democracies and others are facing huge, powerful and increasingly dangerous challenges. Concerted action - in advance - is needed. Just the statement of fact about Russian manipulation is insufficient. Ukraine, the main object of Russian malignant influence, can contribute its experience of confronting such aggression. The future is not yet bleak, but it may become a greater challenge if the issue is ducked.

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