

Confuse, Divide and Rule - How Russia Drives Europe Apart

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Introduction

At this year's Munich Security Conference, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, claimed that Russia and the West have slid into a "new Cold War."¹ By reconnecting with the old "Iron Curtain" rhetoric, Medvedev deliberately decided to omit that the current situation is largely attributable to a series of recent choices made by the Kremlin. When looking at the underlying factors that contributed to the East-West standoff, different views on regional integration in Eurasia between the European Union (EU) and Russia appear to have played a major role. Whereas Brussels has typically portrayed regional integration as a vehicle for positive change, Moscow has repeatedly dismissed efforts at fostering a partnership with Ukraine as a threat to its security – and does its utmost to portray European integration as a malign force. Ignoring that Ukraine is a sovereign nation and thus has the right to determine its own future is a remarkable omission, one that epitomises well the EU's and Russia's competing narratives on the virtues and pitfalls of European integration.²

These competing narratives are symptomatic of the way in which Russia and the EU interact with one another. Whereas the European Commission prefers to engage multilaterally with Russia, as a Union of 28, the Kremlin and powerful EU member states prefer to dialogue primarily on a bilateral basis. The effect is that Moscow, where possible, employs a tactic of 'divide and rule' whereby it either aims at weakening the centre (Brussels) by playing off Member States against one another, or undermine EU cohesion and coherence as a whole. To do that, it supports a wide range of actors that oppose what the EU stands for, not least through the articulation of powerful counter-narratives about European integration. This Policy Brief aims to shed more light on this approach by analysing: (i) how Russia engages in patterns of information and disinformation to spin certain narratives about Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas imports, which can in turn undermine the EU's efforts to create an Energy Union, and (ii) how the Kremlin draws on Eurosceptic political parties and stakeholders in support of certain narratives that advance its political goals of undermining the EU's cohesion and coherence.

Whereas the EU typically views regional integration as a vehicle for positive change, Russia has repeatedly tried to portray European integration as a malign force. Whereas the European Commission prefers to operate as a Union of 28 states, Russia by contrast, prefers to employ a tactic of 'divide and rule' whereby it either aims at weakening the centre (Brussels) by playing off one Member State against the other, or undermine EU cohesion and coherence as a whole. This Policy Brief analyses two domains where these competing narratives meet in closer detail: (i) how Russia engages in patterns of information and disinformation to spin certain narratives about Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas imports, which can in turn undermine the EU's efforts to create an Energy Union, and (ii) how the Kremlin draws on Eurosceptic political parties and stakeholders in support of certain narratives that advance its political goals of undermining the EU's cohesion and coherence.

From Russia with Gas

Considering that Europe imports roughly a third of its natural gas from Russia,³ the ways in which Russia frames its discourse on the EU's Energy Union is no mere issue of semantic disquisition. Overall, Russia uses two main disinformation

techniques. On the one hand, it predates the EU's deceptions. On the other, it uses different bilateral channels to deploy information asymmetrically to its own advantage. Two recent examples thereof are the planned extension of the Nord Stream pipeline and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between Edison and DEPA on Russian gas exports to Italy and Greece.

Due to several incidents between Russia and Ukraine, the European Commission pledges to reduce dependence on Russian gas and enhance the resilience of the EU internal energy market. A cornerstone of this policy is the creation of the "Energy Union"; an attempt at closer integration of the EU's energy market based on security of supply, sustainability and competitiveness. An overarching aim of the Energy Union is to limit the ability for external suppliers to drive a wedge between individual member states by offering lucrative deals that run counter to what is agreed upon at EU level. Instrumental in making this a success is to reduce the EU's dependence on external sources of energy.

In June 2015, Gazprom announced it plans to expand the existing Nord Stream gas pipeline between Russia and Germany. At a time when the existing capacity of the first Nord Stream pipeline is not fully used and European gas demand is not expected to grow anytime soon,⁴ the economic rationale behind building a second expensive subsea route is questionable.⁵ The real reason for building Nord Stream II therefore is geopolitical: it would cement Gazprom's dominance in Europe at a time when the Energy Union aims to achieve the opposite and the pipeline would circumvent Ukraine, which Putin views as an unreliable transit state interfering with the control of its strategic markets.⁶ Suggestions by pro-Kremlin media that Nord Stream II is purely commercial are thus part of a deliberate disinformation campaign.⁷ Illustrative of the non-commercial nature of Nord Stream II is that, on 24 February, Green MEP Claude Turmes claimed the companies involved were told by Gazprom to stop sending gas through Ukraine as a condition for winning the project.⁸ A final element of Moscow's disinformation strategy worth highlighting is that Nord Stream II enables Russia to weaken German solidarity within the EU – essential for sanctions relief – and creates a substantial foreign policy discord between Brussels and Kiev by undermining Ukraine's status as a transit state.⁹

On 24 February Gazprom signed a MoU with Italy's Edison and Greece's DEPA on the delivery of Russian gas via the Black Sea, and unspecified third countries, to Italy and Greece.¹⁰ The agreement revives the Italy-Turkey-Greece-Interconnector (ITGI), a project that a few years ago lost a bid for gas from Azerbaijan. The project comes across as a *déjà-vu* of South Stream, a defunct Russian pipeline project. South Stream was a pipeline designed to bring Russian gas to Austria via Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary and Slovenia. Putin cancelled the project in December 2014 when he realised the pipeline would not comply with EU legislation. Italy, who through the energy company ENI was a major shareholder, was not amused.

Italy's frustration about the cancellation came to the fore on 15 December 2015 when Prime Minister Matteo Renzi accused Germany of applying double standards when asking Rome to comply with sanctions against Russia, yet at the same time having no problems with striking a potentially lucrative deal with Gazprom. Renzi demanded EU law should apply equally to all projects.¹¹ Although ITGI is much smaller and easier to build, the question of whether the pipeline will actually be constructed is largely irrelevant. This 'new' southern gas pipeline should really be seen as a strategic narrative to offer 'compensation' to Italy for Moscow's withdrawal from South Stream, which would then neutralise Italian criticism of Nord Stream II.¹² Interestingly, Italian government officials appear not to have been consulted about the MoU. By not informing Rome Gazprom inadvertently creates the impression that it only wanted to make it look like Italy gave its assent.¹³ This strengthens the view that the MoU is nothing more than disinformation. Given that it is unclear which states provide transit, this would also force potential candidates Turkey and Bulgaria to vie for the final shape of the pipeline route.

This tactic is simple and effective: to tempt different countries by promising to turn each of them into a 'gas hub'. This has the effect of creating confusion and division within those countries and, critically, of recruiting valuable allies within their governments and companies.¹⁴ Better yet, such discussions effectively impede the development of a common energy policy at the EU level.¹⁵

Why the Kremlin loves Eurosceptics

When Russia annexed Crimea and later stoked war in Eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin portrayed the move as the 'the will of the people' and how Russia was defending Russian-speakers from a 'fascist' government that had assumed power in Kiev.¹⁶ Ironically, Vladimir Putin has over time become the greatest supporter of Europe's populist right and its neo-fascist fringe – and the love is mutual.¹⁷ How so? Again, to understand one should look at how the Kremlin wishes to deliberately undermine EU cohesion and coherence. If Moscow views EU integration as damaging to its interests,¹⁸ it is logical that Putin targets (i.e. by lending financial, political and discursive support) those political parties that wish to weaken Brussels, or outright dismantle the Union.

The €9 million loan given to the French Front National is a case in point; a Kremlin bet on the future of French politics with an anti-EU signature written all over it.¹⁹ The fatal attraction between Russia's leadership and extremism in Europe reaches its peak in the case of Putin's bromance with Hungary's President Viktor Orbán. Orbán repeatedly defied Brussels by reaching out to Putin despite the general EU line not to hold bilateral summits. Not only did Orbán break this understanding, he went on referring to a general consensus among "all the countries of the EU" "that it is necessary to cooperate."²⁰ Also, Orbán's stated

aim of abandoning liberal democracy in favour of creating an 'illiberal state' is seen as inspired by how Putin governs Russia.²¹ Putin has also been a source of inspiration to Eurosceptic figures such as UKIP's leader Nigel Farage. In fact, it is only Russia's historical enmity with Poland that prevents Moscow from giving a similar 'fist bump' to Law and Justice Party's chief ideologue Jaroslaw Kaczynski.²²

Support for Euroscepticism is one thing; wholeheartedly embracing events that could rupture the Union is another. The 'Brexit' debate is a good example. If Britain decides to leave the EU, it would be harder for Europe to make its mark on the global stage as it would lose a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Already under pressure by chaos in the Middle East and on its Eastern border, Brexit will seriously weaken the EU.²³ As such, it is not surprising why Putin and pro-Kremlin media have actively embraced and promoted the idea of Brexit. Sputnik, RT and even the Russian Embassy in the UK have all been vividly running pro-Brexit coverage, ignoring the 'In' campaign, providing platforms to the most fringe Brexit spokespeople.²⁴ A similar strategy is used for the referendum on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement to be held in The Netherlands on 6 April. Arguments against ratification of the Agreement closely resemble those put forward by known Russian propaganda outlets. On 4 February, Russia's foreign ministry stated the referendum should comply with democratic procedures and that no excessive media pressure should be placed on voters.²⁵ The irony of this message coming from an administration that only 2 years earlier organised a bogus referendum in Crimea where such pressure was omnipresent was clearly not lost on twitter users around the world. Funny as this may be, the reality is that if Dutch voters vote 'no' they will hand Putin a major propaganda victory.

Embracing 'Brexit' and a 'no' vote on Ukraine serves two distinct purposes. First, it ensures that former Soviet states such as Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Belarus remain out of Brussel's sights and are relegated to an 'in between' status that Putin can tinker with if deemed necessary. Second, it may succeed in breaking up the entire Union. If there is one thing Putin did not like it was the unified manner in which the EU imposed heavier sanctions on Russia after the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight 17 in July 2014. After all, it is much easier to deal with individual states than it is to fight a union of 28 with a powerful centre.

What Europe Should do

In 2016 Europe will face a number of important political choices, which will become key subjects in the ongoing discursive battleground between the EU and Russia. The decision whether or not to strike a political deal on the Nord Stream II pipeline, the referendum on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement

in The Netherlands, and the referendum on the UK's EU membership will all – to varying degrees – offer an important entry point for Russian narratives aimed at fostering intra-EU divisions. Allowing division, means allowing oneself to be ruled. In responding to Russian pressure it is essential to stand up for the values that made the EU into what it is today. On Nord Stream II that means letting competition law be the judge of whether the pipeline is a strictly commercial undertaking and resist the temptation of striking a political deal which risks upsetting the Energy Union. This must be coupled with a deliberate communications strategy aimed at affirming the EU's market-based approach to energy policy. With respect to the April 6 referendum on Ukraine this means not abandoning the people of the Euromaidan who took it upon themselves to fight for a better future for their country. The success hereof will in no small part depend on the EU's ability to counter narratives aimed at portraying Ukraine as "corrupt and inefficient" country, or appealing to its status as a "geopolitical buffer state." A no vote would only serve to reward Russia and give the Kremlin additional "ammunition" to double down on its ongoing disinformation efforts in Ukraine and throughout Europe. On 'Brexit' this means that the people behind the 'In' campaign have a few more months to convince the British public that there are better ways to express frustration about alleged excessive influence from Brussels than to weaken Europe at a time when it is besieged by crises from all sides.

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