

# **Russian Subversion and the Challenge to European Democracies**

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## Introduction

In 1984, Yuri Bezmenov—a former KGB officer who defected to the United States—gave a widely discussed interview outlining the concept of ideological subversion. Drawing on his experience within one of the most formidable intelligence services of the twentieth century, Bezmenov argued that Soviet efforts to undermine rival societies unfolded through four successive stages. According to his account, operatives working abroad, including in the United States, aimed to gradually destabilize and ultimately weaken the political order of their adversaries (Griffin, 1984).

His testimony fed into a broader Western understanding of Soviet “active measures” (*aktyvnye meropriyatiya*): covert operations intended to shape the political environment and policy decisions of foreign states, distinct from traditional espionage or counterintelligence. These measures encompassed disinformation campaigns, infiltration and manipulation of foreign media, blackmail, and other forms of influence. As outlined in the U.S. Department of State Special Report No. 88: *Soviet Active Measures* (1981), such operations were designed to influence perceptions and decision-making processes within targeted societies.

Much has changed since that interview. The Cold War has ended, the Soviet Union has dissolved, and the KGB no longer exists. Yet the challenge of active measures—and particularly the practice of subversion—remains highly relevant in today’s international environment.

This article argues that contemporary Russian subversion represents a direct continuation of the Soviet model of active measures, adapted to new technological conditions but driven by comparable strategic objectives. While the geopolitical context has evolved, the underlying aims have remained largely consistent.

To explore this argument, the article first defines active measures and examines their impact on democratic societies. It then turns to the contemporary context, assessing the effects of Russian operations in Europe. Finally, it analyses Europe's recognition of this threat and the responses developed to address it.

## **Subversion**

Subversion can be understood as the deliberate attempt to gain an advantage by directly influencing the domestic politics of another state against its will. By shaping events within a foreign country's borders, the actor engaging in subversion seeks either to alter the policy orientation of an existing regime or to replace the regime itself (Kastner & Wohlforth, 2021).

One framework often cited to describe how such processes unfold is the so-called Yuri Bezmenov model, which outlines four progressive stages of ideological subversion.

The first stage is demoralization, which targets the structures of everyday life within a society and typically requires between ten and fifteen years to unfold. During this phase, cultural, educational, and informational channels are gradually influenced in ways that weaken societal confidence in existing institutions and values.

The second stage is destabilization, which builds upon the effects of demoralization and intensifies them through protests, political agitation, and coordinated campaigns over a period of at least five years. At this point, pressure increasingly focuses on key pillars of the state, such as the economy, political institutions, and social cohesion.

The third stage is crisis, during which the previously weakened and destabilized environment allows sleeper cells or aligned actors to move decisively in order to seize power. This phase unfolds rapidly, often lasting no more than six weeks.

Finally comes normalization, when the targeted state is effectively subdued and the new political reality becomes consolidated.

Although Bezmenov presented this framework in the context of Cold War ideological conflict, the underlying logic it describes is far from new in the history of international politics. As Omand (2018) argues, while the tools and channels through which subversion operates may evolve, the fundamental dynamics of sedition and political manipulation have remained remarkably consistent over the centuries.

Central to these dynamics are information campaigns, which serve as one of the primary instruments of subversion. Such campaigns can rely on different types of information: black information, consisting of false or fabricated material, and white information, which is factually accurate but selectively presented to promote a particular narrative. Between these two poles lie various shades of grey, where information may be partially accurate but framed in a misleading manner (Omand, 2018).

In the contemporary environment, these long-standing practices have not disappeared; rather, they have been adapted to new technological conditions. The disinformation campaigns employed by Russia against European countries reflect the same strategic logic of subversion described above. What distinguishes the present context is not the objective of influencing political stability, but the means through which such influence is exercised.

### **Russian Subversion and Europe**

Before examining how Russian subversion operates, it is important to consider the motivations behind these actions. Why is Moscow so eager to undermine European countries?

At first glance, the answer may appear closely linked to the war in Ukraine. European countries provide a substantial share of the military, economic, and political support sustaining Kyiv. According to the Council of the European Union, total support to Ukraine to date amounts to approximately €194 billion (Council of the European Union, n.d.). Ukrainians have demonstrated remarkable resilience, skill, and courage, but European assistance remains vital

to their ability to resist the Russian invasion. A significant reduction in this support would quickly create serious challenges for Ukraine's war effort.

From this perspective, undermining Europe serves a clear strategic purpose for Russia: weakening European cohesion and political stability may ultimately reduce support for Ukraine itself.

However, Russian subversion efforts did not begin with the full-scale invasion of February 2022. Moscow has been engaged in influence operations for many years, and several major political events may have been affected by such activities. These include the Brexit referendum, the Catalan independence crisis, the rise of far-right parties across Western Europe, and the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018).

If these efforts predate the war in Ukraine, the question becomes broader: why does Russia pursue such strategies at all?

The answer lies in the wider geopolitical competition between the West and alternative centres of power, particularly Russia and China. Both states appear to view the weakening of democratic institutions as a means of accelerating the decline of Western influence and advancing their own geopolitical objectives (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018).

Europe, together with the United States, represents one of the world's most significant centres of democratic power economically, politically, and demographically. For this reason, it constitutes a key target for influence and subversion campaigns.

What Moscow is attempting in Europe, particularly against the European Union, is to amplify the narratives of illiberal populists and anti-EU forces while portraying them as patriotic defenders of national sovereignty. The support provided to Viktor Orbán in Hungary, as well as the links connecting Italian populist parties such as The League to Moscow, are clear examples of this dynamic. Russia has actively fuelled nationalist sentiments against EU integration, including alleged interference in support of Brexit and Catalan independence, in

order to magnify European divisions and weaken the EU's political cohesion (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018).

In this context, digital technologies represent a critical evolution of these long-standing practices. Rather than replacing traditional methods, they significantly enhance their reach and effectiveness. The internet enables the rapid, large-scale dissemination of news, propaganda, and misleading content across borders, while social media platforms provide powerful tools for shaping public opinion and mobilizing audiences through network effects and algorithmic amplification. As a result, contemporary digital environments have become a central arena in which subversive strategies are executed with unprecedented speed, scale, and precision.

Meanwhile, the number of alleged sabotage operations attributed to Moscow has increased significantly. In addition, alleged assassination plots against prominent industrial leaders have recently made front-page news, including the case of Armin Papperger, CEO of the German arms company Rheinmetall (Lillis et al., 2024; Edwards, 2025).

The main objective of these operations is to undermine citizens' trust in governments and institutions by creating instability, confusion, and frustration in everyday life. More importantly, they aim to fuel distrust, fear, and anger, making citizens more vulnerable to manipulation.

In this context, the question becomes whether European countries are fully aware of the scale of this threat and whether their responses are sufficient to counter it.

### **Is Europe Aware?**

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a profound rupture has emerged between Russia and most European countries. Moscow has once again become the primary threat to European security, and—amid growing uncertainty surrounding relations with the United States—European governments increasingly acknowledge the need to strengthen their defensive capacities. This has translated into higher defence spending, the expansion of armed forces, and

investments in advanced military technologies such as drones and missile systems (Reuters, 2026). Yet conventional military capabilities remain ill-suited to countering subversion and hybrid threats. Addressing these challenges instead requires enhanced intelligence coordination, stronger societal resilience, and more effective strategic communication.

One of the earliest and most visible responses came in 2022–2023, when European states expelled large numbers of Russian intelligence officers affiliated with the FSB, GRU, and SVR. This unprecedented wave of expulsions significantly reduced Moscow’s ability to operate through diplomatic cover and formal intelligence networks across Europe. In response, Russian operations appear to have shifted toward more decentralized and deniable methods, relying on proxy actors such as criminal networks, radical activists, and other vulnerable individuals recruited via online platforms and encrypted messaging services. This evolution allows Russian intelligence services to maintain operational distance and plausible deniability while continuing activities such as sabotage and disinformation (Soldatov & Borogan, 2025; Quinn, 2025; Yaffa, 2026). While these countermeasures have constrained traditional intelligence operations, they have not eliminated the threat, which has instead adapted into more diffuse and harder-to-attribute forms.

Parallel efforts have emerged in the information domain, particularly in France. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs has stepped up its response to disinformation through the official X account *French Response*, which directly engages with hostile narratives using humour, irony, and deliberately provocative messaging (Nilsson-Julien, 2026). This approach reflects an innovative form of digital strategic communication aimed at exposing falsehoods, undermining their credibility, and reinforcing societal resilience. However, such initiatives remain relatively limited in scale and are not yet consistently replicated across Europe, which reduces their overall effectiveness.

At the level of the European Union, institutions are also rethinking their approach to disinformation. Greater emphasis is now placed on media literacy, education, and the protection

of democratic discourse. In February, the European Commission launched the European Center for Democratic Resilience, designed to coordinate member states' responses to the growing challenge of disinformation (Audureau, 2026). More broadly, Europe's strategy is shifting away from reactive measures—such as content removal or simple debunking—toward a more comprehensive, society-wide approach that actively involves citizens and draws on academic insights into how disinformation operates.

This evolving perspective was highlighted on February 26 at Université Paris-Panthéon-Assas during the fourth edition of Infox sur Seine. Bringing together public institutions, European officials, NGOs, consultants, and researchers, the conference underscored the importance of addressing the social and psychological factors that make alternative narratives appealing. Experts stressed the need to strengthen civil society through tools such as media literacy programs and robust networks of associations in order to better protect the public (Audureau, 2026).

In the Baltic states, this society-wide approach is already visible in practice. Civil society plays a central role in countering Russian propaganda, with organized groups of citizens actively monitoring social media, identifying disinformation campaigns, and responding through fact-checking and coordinated online engagement. These grassroots initiatives illustrate that resilience against subversion depends not only on state action but also on civic participation and collective awareness (Abend, 2022). At the same time, they highlight a broader reality: the effectiveness of countermeasures varies significantly across Europe, depending on levels of public awareness and the degree of institutional coordination.

## **Conclusion**

The persistence of Russian subversion in Europe shows that the strategic logic of political interference has not disappeared with the end of the Cold War. Instead, it has been reshaped by new technological tools and a transformed geopolitical landscape. What were once described

as Soviet active measures have evolved into a broader set of hybrid practices combining influence operations, digital amplification, covert networks, and, increasingly, acts of disruption.

Russia's approach appears guided by a consistent objective: to weaken political cohesion within European societies, complicate decision-making processes, and reduce the capacity of governments to sustain unified policies—particularly in areas that constrain Moscow's strategic interests, such as support for Ukraine. By exploiting existing divisions and leveraging digital infrastructures, these operations intensify polarization and create conditions in which consensus becomes more difficult to achieve.

European responses indicate a growing awareness of this challenge, but also reveal its complexity. Measures such as the expulsion of intelligence operatives, the development of new forms of strategic communication, and increased coordination at the European Union level reflect a shift toward more comprehensive counter-strategies. At the same time, the emergence of decentralized and deniable methods of subversion demonstrates the adaptive nature of the threat, which continues to evolve faster than many institutional responses.

What emerges from this analysis is that countering subversion cannot rely on a single domain of action. Military capabilities, while necessary in the current security environment, remain insufficient on their own. Effective responses depend on the interaction between state institutions, civil society, and digital platforms, as well as on sustained coordination across European countries.

Ultimately, the challenge facing Europe is structural rather than temporary. Subversion operates by targeting the openness and pluralism of democratic systems, making it difficult to counter without undermining the very principles those systems seek to protect. Addressing this tension requires long-term strategies that combine resilience, coordination, and adaptability across multiple levels of governance and society.

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