

# A Coordinated European Response to Hybrid Threats

WRITTEN BY CHIARA PALUMBO

<https://unsplash.com/photos/J5yoGZLdpSI>



```
11 height: 100%;  
12 }  
13  
14 .block {  
15 width: 100%;  
16 height: 500px;  
17 margin: 0 auto !important;  
18 padding: 0 auto;  
19 line-height: 0;  
20 }  
21  
22 h2 {  
23 font-family: 'Montserrat', sans-serif;  
24 font-weight: 900;  
25 text-align: left;  
26 font-size: 300%;  
27 z-index: 1;  
28 transform: scale(-1, 1);  
29 }  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
61  
62  
63  
64  
65  
66  
67  
68  
69  
70  
71  
72  
73  
74  
75  
76  
77  
78  
79  
80  
81  
82  
83  
84  
85  
86  
87  
88  
89  
90  
91  
92  
93  
94  
95  
96  
97  
98  
99  
100  
101  
102  
103  
104  
105  
106  
107  
108  
109  
110  
111  
112  
113  
114  
115  
116  
117  
118  
119  
120  
121  
122  
123  
124  
125  
126  
127  
128  
129  
130  
131  
132  
133  
134  
135  
136  
137  
138  
139  
140  
141  
142  
143  
144  
145  
146  
147  
148  
149  
150  
151  
152  
153  
154  
155  
156  
157  
158  
159  
160  
161  
162  
163  
164  
165  
166  
167  
168  
169  
170  
171  
172  
173  
174  
175  
176  
177  
178  
179  
180  
181  
182  
183  
184  
185  
186  
187  
188  
189  
190  
191  
192  
193  
194  
195  
196  
197  
198  
199  
200  
201  
202  
203  
204  
205  
206  
207  
208  
209  
210  
211  
212  
213  
214  
215  
216  
217  
218  
219  
220  
221  
222  
223  
224  
225  
226  
227  
228  
229  
230  
231  
232  
233  
234  
235  
236  
237  
238  
239  
240  
241  
242  
243  
244  
245  
246  
247  
248  
249  
250  
251  
252  
253  
254  
255  
256  
257  
258  
259  
260  
261  
262  
263  
264  
265  
266  
267  
268  
269  
270  
271  
272  
273  
274  
275  
276  
277  
278  
279  
280  
281  
282  
283  
284  
285  
286  
287  
288  
289  
290  
291  
292  
293  
294  
295  
296  
297  
298  
299  
300  
301  
302  
303  
304  
305  
306  
307  
308  
309  
310  
311  
312  
313  
314  
315  
316  
317  
318  
319  
320  
321  
322  
323  
324  
325  
326  
327  
328  
329  
330  
331  
332  
333  
334  
335  
336  
337  
338  
339  
340  
341  
342  
343  
344  
345  
346  
347  
348  
349  
350  
351  
352  
353  
354  
355  
356  
357  
358  
359  
360  
361  
362  
363  
364  
365  
366  
367  
368  
369  
370  
371  
372  
373  
374  
375  
376  
377  
378  
379  
380  
381  
382  
383  
384  
385  
386  
387  
388  
389  
390  
391  
392  
393  
394  
395  
396  
397  
398  
399  
400  
401  
402  
403  
404  
405  
406  
407  
408  
409  
410  
411  
412  
413  
414  
415  
416  
417  
418  
419  
420  
421  
422  
423  
424  
425  
426  
427  
428  
429  
430  
431  
432  
433  
434  
435  
436  
437  
438  
439  
440  
441  
442  
443  
444  
445  
446  
447  
448  
449  
450  
451  
452  
453  
454  
455  
456  
457  
458  
459  
460  
461  
462  
463  
464  
465  
466  
467  
468  
469  
470  
471  
472  
473  
474  
475  
476  
477  
478  
479  
480  
481  
482  
483  
484  
485  
486  
487  
488  
489  
490  
491  
492  
493  
494  
495  
496  
497  
498  
499  
500  
501  
502  
503  
504  
505  
506  
507  
508  
509  
510  
511  
512  
513  
514  
515  
516  
517  
518  
519  
520  
521  
522  
523  
524  
525  
526  
527  
528  
529  
530  
531  
532  
533  
534  
535  
536  
537  
538  
539  
540  
541  
542  
543  
544  
545  
546  
547  
548  
549  
550  
551  
552  
553  
554  
555  
556  
557  
558  
559  
560  
561  
562  
563  
564  
565  
566  
567  
568  
569  
570  
571  
572  
573  
574  
575  
576  
577  
578  
579  
580  
581  
582  
583  
584  
585  
586  
587  
588  
589  
590  
591  
592  
593  
594  
595  
596  
597  
598  
599  
600  
601  
602  
603  
604  
605  
606  
607  
608  
609  
610  
611  
612  
613  
614  
615  
616  
617  
618  
619  
620  
621  
622  
623  
624  
625  
626  
627  
628  
629  
630  
631  
632  
633  
634  
635  
636  
637  
638  
639  
640  
641  
642  
643  
644  
645  
646  
647  
648  
649  
650  
651  
652  
653  
654  
655  
656  
657  
658  
659  
660  
661  
662  
663  
664  
665  
666  
667  
668  
669  
670  
671  
672  
673  
674  
675  
676  
677  
678  
679  
680  
681  
682  
683  
684  
685  
686  
687  
688  
689  
690  
691  
692  
693  
694  
695  
696  
697  
698  
699  
700  
701  
702  
703  
704  
705  
706  
707  
708  
709  
710  
711  
712  
713  
714  
715  
716  
717  
718  
719  
720  
721  
722  
723  
724  
725  
726  
727  
728  
729  
730  
731  
732  
733  
734  
735  
736  
737  
738  
739  
740  
741  
742  
743  
744  
745  
746  
747  
748  
749  
750  
751  
752  
753  
754  
755  
756  
757  
758  
759  
760  
761  
762  
763  
764  
765  
766  
767  
768  
769  
770  
771  
772  
773  
774  
775  
776  
777  
778  
779  
780  
781  
782  
783  
784  
785  
786  
787  
788  
789  
790  
791  
792  
793  
794  
795  
796  
797  
798  
799  
800  
801  
802  
803  
804  
805  
806  
807  
808  
809  
810  
811  
812  
813  
814  
815  
816  
817  
818  
819  
820  
821  
822  
823  
824  
825  
826  
827  
828  
829  
830  
831  
832  
833  
834  
835  
836  
837  
838  
839  
840  
841  
842  
843  
844  
845  
846  
847  
848  
849  
850  
851  
852  
853  
854  
855  
856  
857  
858  
859  
860  
861  
862  
863  
864  
865  
866  
867  
868  
869  
870  
871  
872  
873  
874  
875  
876  
877  
878  
879  
880  
881  
882  
883  
884  
885  
886  
887  
888  
889  
890  
891  
892  
893  
894  
895  
896  
897  
898  
899  
900  
901  
902  
903  
904  
905  
906  
907  
908  
909  
910  
911  
912  
913  
914  
915  
916  
917  
918  
919  
920  
921  
922  
923  
924  
925  
926  
927  
928  
929  
930  
931  
932  
933  
934  
935  
936  
937  
938  
939  
940  
941  
942  
943  
944  
945  
946  
947  
948  
949  
950  
951  
952  
953  
954  
955  
956  
957  
958  
959  
960  
961  
962  
963  
964  
965  
966  
967  
968  
969  
970  
971  
972  
973  
974  
975  
976  
977  
978  
979  
980  
981  
982  
983  
984  
985  
986  
987  
988  
989  
990  
991  
992  
993  
994  
995  
996  
997  
998  
999  
1000
```

## A Coordinated European Response to Hybrid Threats

*By Chiara Palumbo*

## What are Hybrid Threats?

In recent years, the topic of hybrid threats has become increasingly critical until being considered the 21st security challenge. Whereas the concept of hybrid threats may be considered new, linked to the developments of new technologies, it is not. Many of the tools of hybrid warfare are old, with the main exception being represented by the ones belonging to the cyber realm. However, the development of new technologies boosted the use of old tools, such as propaganda, by lowering their costs. Undoubtedly, the new reality in which we live increases the effectiveness of hybrid threats, because their strength lies in the possibility of combining activities and tools from different arenas. For example, the changes in the information and media landscape made the domain appealing to state and non-state actors for disinformation activities. Digitalisation and social media dramatically changed the way information is produced and spread. Information travels at a new, faster speed and the gatekeepers of it multiplied. For this reason, the information domain offers new powerful tools for hybrid campaigns.

According to the definition given by the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, “the term hybrid threat refers to an action conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine or harm a target by influencing its decision-making at the local, regional, state or institutional level”. These actions are coordinated and synchronised, deliberately target democratic states and institutions’ systemic vulnerabilities through a wide range of means. They are highly characterized by ambiguity, as actors operate between the lines of legality and illegality and use both conventional and unconventional means.

## Old and new tools belonging to different domains

Twenty-First Century hybrid threats are characterized by the simultaneous and complementary use of tools belonging to different domains. A hybrid warfare campaign can combine propaganda and disinformation (Information Domain), the use of proxies and paramilitary organisations (Military and Defence Domain) and the leverage of economic difficulties (Economic Domain).

The affirmation of the Cyber Domain made available new powerful and effective tools. Cyber activities have become increasingly employed due to their low cost and accessibility; they can serve various activities from espionage to manipulation and attack. Moreover, they are low risk and low cost but can simultaneously yield great results, making them attractive to poorer countries or those whose economic trajectory is downward (Trenton, Thvedt, Chen, Lee, McCue, 2018). Belonging to the military domain, we find proxies, unacknowledged war and paramilitary organisations, airspace violations, territorial water violation, weapons proliferation, armed forces operations and military exercises. All the tools belonging to different domains serve various activities: interference, influence, destabilisation, and coercion, which all aim at one goal: to undermine decision-making capabilities (Giannopoulos, Smith, Theocharidou, 2020). The actors can be both state or non-state actors. Noteworthy, these activities are undertaken particularly by actors with authoritarian or totalitarian views of power and mainly target democracies because they are characterised by freedom and openness.

## Some examples of modern hybrid campaigns

One of the most famous modern examples of hybrid warfare is the 2006 Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah. Hezbollah, a non-state actor whose conventional capabilities are far less developed than the Israeli ones, managed to strategically win the war using a combination of conventional tactics, guerrilla operations and information/propaganda campaigns.

Between 2013 and 2014 Russia launched an invasion and propaganda campaign in Ukraine that culminated with the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. The information and propaganda campaign was simultaneously synchronised with the military campaign and was aimed at discrediting the Ukrainian government, having as the first target people living in the Crimean Peninsula. Moving to the core of Europe, in 2017 Russia hacked and released nine gigabytes of emails stolen from Macron's campaign only two days before the elections (when it is forbidden for the candidates to speak publicly). Tens of thousands of emails were leaked along with fake documents, but France was able to react effectively and rapidly.

## The European Response

Open societies are inherently vulnerable to hybrid threats, and the tools used for hybrid campaigns are not easily detectable. The vulnerability assessment is the first step to creating an effective response toolbox and network. Already in June 2015, the European Council recalled the need to mobilise EU instruments to help counter hybrid threats. The European Council stated in June 2015 conclusions that the primary responsibility regarding the matter lies with member states as most national vulnerabilities are country specific. On the other side, it acknowledged that European countries face common threats. These, need to be addressed effectively with a coordinated response at the European level by using EU policies and instruments and creating synergies between all relevant actors (European Council Conclusions June 2015, EUCO 22/15).

Less than one year later, in April 2016, the Commission released the Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats – a European Union response. The Joint Framework stressed that the first step to counter hybrid threats effectively is the risk assessment. The EU invited Member States, with the Commission and High Representative's support, to launch a hybrid risk survey to identify key vulnerabilities potentially affecting national and European structures and networks. The framework contains twenty-two actionable proposals, from creating a European Hybrid Fusion Cell that allows member states to share information to improve the protection and resilience of critical infrastructures (Trementon, Thvedt, Chen, Lee, McCue, 2018).

One year later, the European Commission updated the steps taken to implement the 2016 Joint Framework. The Commission acknowledged the progress made by European countries and the improvement of awareness and information exchange between member states. The EU Hybrid Fusion Cell was created, and an "EU Playbook" was adopted, a document that details the procedure for an EU response to hybrid threats. Together with the European Aviation Safety Agency, a Computer Emergency Response Team on Aviation and a Task Force on Cyber-security have been established.

## **EU and NATO cooperation**

Cooperation between the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation is of substantial importance given that the security of the EU and NATO are strongly interconnected. On 6 December 2016, EU and NATO Councils approved a set of forty-two proposals for the implementation of the Joint Declaration signed on 8 July 2016 by the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission, together with the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. One year later, on 5 December 2017, the two Councils endorsed in parallel processes a common set of proposals consisting of thirty-two further actions for implementing the Joint Declaration, including new topics. Out of the total of seventy-four specific actions, twenty of them focused on hybrid threats. In the same year, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) was established in Helsinki. The Centre plays a significant role in facilitating cooperation, focusing on responding to hybrid threats and exchanging best practices (Olech, 2021). Again, in the 2018 Joint declaration, new importance was given to the need to strengthen responsiveness to hybrid threats and cooperation between NATO and the EU.

## **The importance of strengthening cooperation**

The danger posed by hybrid threats has become urgent. Today more than ever hybrid campaigns pose high risks to European democracies. The continuous development of technologies is making hybrid warfare one of the most threatening security challenges of the 21st century. For example, artificial intelligence will make it possible to fake someone's voice; this will soon take fake news – one of the several hybrid tools – into the realm of audio and video (Trenton, Thvedt, Chen, Lee, McCue, 2018). European countries are characterised by openness and interconnectedness, principles which they cannot renounce. At the same time, these characteristics represent the main vulnerabilities. For this reason, it is essential to focus investments and resources on networks and instruments to increase resilience and responsiveness. The strength of our Union lies in unity and solidarity. Thus, European cooperation on the matter is essential.

## Bibliography

Treventon G., Thvedt A., Chen A., Lee K., McCue M., (2018) Addressing Hybrid Threats, Swedish Defence University,

<https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Treverton-AddressingHybridThreats.pdf>

Giannopoulos G., Smith H., Theocharidou M., (2020) The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model,

<https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/the-landscape-of-hybrid-threats-a-conceptual-model/>

“Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats. A European Union response”, (2016), European Commission,

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016JC0018&from=EN>

Security and defence: Significant progress to enhance Europe’s resilience against hybrid threats – more work ahead, (2017) European Commission,

[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_17\\_2064](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_2064)

Council conclusions on a Framework for a coordinated EU response to hybrid campaigns, (2022), Council of the European Union,

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/press/press-releases/2022/06/21/council-conclusions-on-a-framework-for-a-coordinated-eu-response-to-hybrid-campaigns/>

Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation, (2018),

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/press/press-releases/2018/07/10/eu-nato-joint-declaration/>

Olech A., (2021), Cooperation between NATO and the European Union against hybrid threats with a particular emphasis on terrorism, Instytut Nowej Europy,

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350134219\\_Cooperation\\_between\\_NATO\\_and\\_the\\_European\\_Union\\_against\\_hybrid\\_threats\\_with\\_a\\_particular\\_emphasis\\_on\\_terrorism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350134219_Cooperation_between_NATO_and_the_European_Union_against_hybrid_threats_with_a_particular_emphasis_on_terrorism)