

A Coordinated European Response to Hybrid Threats

WRITTEN BY CHIARA PALUMBO

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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.

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