



RUSSIAN OPERATION GAMES IN EUROPE

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It has been just over two years since Russia [forcibly](#) annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine and supported Eastern Ukrainian separatists in March 2014. Through coordinated operations, Russia has engaged in a series of “games” to put pressure on NATO and scare its former Soviet republic.

MILITARY:

Since Ukraine, Eastern Europe has been noticeably on edge over the possibility of Russia using “[little green men](#),” to press its influence in other ethnic Russian enclaves. In the past few months, Russian aircraft have been involved in dangerous [interceptions](#) of U.S. spy planes, a [simulated attack](#) against a U.S. destroyer in the Baltic Sea, and [repeated](#) Russian [violations](#) of allied NATO members airspace.

NATO military exercises in Eastern Europe have steadily increased and U.S. officials have expressed concern that additional units may be necessary in the Baltic States. Russian defense officials have [denounced](#) additional troops to the Baltic States and Poland, and in May 2016 warned that such action “would require certain retaliatory measures, which the Russian Defence Ministry is already talking about.” In light of the rise of Russia, Germany announced in May 2016 that it will [increase](#) the size of its military and defense budget. Russia has also [criticized](#) plans to increase missile defense deployments in Eastern Europe, most recently in [Romania](#), calling the site “a direct threat to us.” More worryingly, Russian FSB agents abducted Estonian Security Police officer [Eston Kohver](#) in September 2014 from Estonian territory (a day after President Obama visited Tallinn), tried him for espionage, and later released him as part of an exchange for an accused Russian spy.

Russian officials have repeatedly warned Sweden and other non-NATO countries from increasing their role in the U.S.-centric alliance. A few weeks ago, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [warned](#) that “one must understand that if military infrastructure approaches Russia's borders, we would of course have to take the necessary military-technical action.” This warning comes in the aftermath of a 2013 simulated nuclear attack by Russia against the Swedish island of Gotland. In February 2016, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg wrote in the alliance's 2015 [annual report](#) that, “over the past three years, Russia has conducted at least 18 large-scale snap exercises, some of which have involved more than 100,000 troops.” Moreover, in June 2014, the Russian military [conducted](#) a simulated nuclear attack on the Danish island of Bornholm, as the entire country's political apparatus celebrated an annual festival.

POLITICAL:

Despite sanctions crippling the Russian economy and its currency in tailspin, the Russian government has increased monetary support for politicians throughout Europe. Russia has reportedly spent millions of euros to influence elections in Europe and in January 2016, U.S. intelligence officials [warned](#) that Russian influence operations were being run in France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Austria, and the Czech



Republic. Russia has reportedly also given funding to far-right groups, including Golden Dawn in Greece, Jobbik in Hungary, and the National Front in France. Russian state media has often backed causes furthering its interests, including supporting [Scottish independence](#) in 2015, a possible [British exit](#) of the EU, and supporting [politicians](#) perceived to be friendly to the Russian government.

CYBER:

Against this backdrop, there has been an increase in Russian intelligence activities across Europe and the United States. In counterintelligence reports several European nations have warned that they are vulnerable to Russian cyberespionage. A November 2015 [risk assessment](#) by the Danish Defence Intelligence Service warned that in addition to threats from ISIS, “the situation in Russia and the threat of cyber espionage make up the most significant security policy challenges for Denmark.” Dutch intelligence officials have also [described](#) the country’s cybersecurity as “naïve” with the country facing significant cyber threats from Russian hackers.

These cyberattack capabilities have increased and have been used to promote Russian interests in Eastern Europe. Beginning in 2007, Russian-based hackers breached and shutdown several [Estonian](#) government, financial, and other websites during a period of increased tensions between the two countries. This has been followed by cyberattacks against [Lithuania](#), as well as cyberattacks against [Georgia](#) during the 2008 Russo-Georgian. In January 2016, Russian-based hackers were implicated in [cyberattacks](#) against the Ukrainian power grid that left tens of thousands without power on December 23, 2015. The Finnish cybersecurity firm, F-Secure, has [claimed](#) that Russian-state sponsored cyber spies (identified as “the Dukes”) have been active in Europe, the U.S., and Asia since 2008. Another group, [“Pawn Strom”](#) have been active for the last decade and beginning in April 2016 targeted German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union Party as well as Russian opposition parties and military, defense companies, and media in NATO and other Eastern European countries.

ESPIONAGE:

Beginning in 2008, Russian agents have been discovered in number of European countries. In particular these agents have sought NATO intelligence and defense-related information. Russian intelligence may be focusing on Eastern European countries, the most recent to join NATO, in order to circumvent more established counterintelligence services.

In September 2008, Estonian defense official and NATO liaison [Herman Simm](#) was arrested on charges that he provided over 2,000 classified documents to Russia beginning in 1995. This case was quickly followed by additional agents being identified in Estonia, including: Estonian Security Police counterintelligence officer [Vladimir Veitman](#) (2011), Estonian Security Police officer [Aleksei Dressen](#) (2012, later exchanged for Eston Kohver in 2015), and Estonian Security Police officer [Uno Puusepp](#) (2013).

Separately, in Lithuania, a [spy ring](#) operating on a NATO base was uncovered in December 2014 and the country identified an [FSB intelligence officer](#) in 2015. Lithuanian officials charged that the FSB officer (only identified by his initials N.F.) sought to “manipulate and influence” the highest echelons of the



Lithuanian government. Spies and Russian intelligence officers have also been discovered in [Germany](#) (2015), [Poland](#) (2014) and the [Netherlands](#) (2012, run by [German SVR illegals](#)). An SVR Illegal operation also intercepted by the FBI for targeting the financial system of the [United States](#) (2015). Russia has also repeatedly attempted to acquire U.S. military technology, including an [FSB-directed operation](#) in Houston that shipped \$50 million worth of microelectronics and other sensitive technologies to Russian military and intelligence entities between 1998 and 2012. In mid-May 2016, senior Portuguese intelligence officer [Frederico Carvalhão](#) was arrested as he met with an Illegal SVR Foreign Intelligence officer in Rome. Carvalhão was reportedly passing information related to NATO and the EU, both of which are high value to Russian intelligence. The SVR officer has not yet been identified, but since he was not operating under diplomatic immunity, the arrest is a major coup for Western intelligence.

Russian diplomats have been expelled from [Sweden](#) and other [European](#) countries for espionage activities. The [Edward Snowden](#) leaks may have also disclosed NSA and Western operations targeting Russia and have been a boon for Russian intelligence and has been described by U.S. officials of doing great harm to the national security of the U.S.

Relatedly, the Russian media has often portrayed the country as a victim of U.S. spies targeting the country and has often characterized U.S. troops in Eastern Europe as [dangerous](#). Following a 2012 law, Russia has worked to restrict the work of [international non-governmental organizations](#), branding them foreign agents, and forcing them to register as such. Human rights groups have [denounced](#) the law and 16 NGOs were forced to close. Among those charged with espionage in Russia were: [Christopher Folge](#) (2013, a U.S. Moscow Embassy worker accused of being a CIA intelligence officer); Russian Naval Reserve officer [Yevgeny Mataitis](#) (2015); a non-Estonian resident detained in St. Petersburg [Arsen Mardaleishvili](#) (2016) Ukrainian Intelligence Officer Lt. Col. [Yuri Ivanchenko](#) (2016); and Russian police officer [Roman Ushakov](#) (2013); Russian Reserve Col. [Vladimir Lazar](#) (2012); and Retired FSB Col. [Valery Mikhailov](#) (2012). Sentenced to 13 years in prison in April 2016 for spying for Lithuania, dual-citizen Mataitis, served in the strategically important city of Kaliningrad, a Russian conclave that borders both Lithuania and Poland. The level of paranoia and anti-Americanism in Russia has also had less traditional avenues, such as temporarily [closing](#) hundreds of McDonald's at a time of low relations with the U.S in October 2014.

It is Russia's military actions that have made the most news in recent months, but its intelligence, political, and cyber capabilities that may prove to be the most insidious. The number of Russian spies have been described at the [highest levels](#) since the end of the Cold War. That only a handful of Russian agents have been identified is a frightening reminder of Russian aspirations to remain a major world power. As NATO steps up military exercises, it would be good to remember that it is much more difficult to curtail foreign cyberespionage and espionage without effective counterintelligence services. It is clear that Russia has recruited high-level agents across Eastern Europe, but it is less clear whether the West has responded in kind. It is the possible peril of NATO, if the alliance continues to play catchup to rise of Russian threats and aspirations in Europe.