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Democracy with the Doors Wide Open

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Democracy with the Doors Wide Open

When democratic safeguards become a strategic vulnerability

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our time is to prevent those achievements from being turned into instruments of penetration by hostile powers. Defending democracy does not require abandoning democracy. It requires us to stop confusing legal prudence with strategic naivety.

There is something profoundly disturbing about the way Europe has learned to defend democracy.

We created constitutions, independent courts, procedural safeguards, fundamental rights, freedom of expression, political pluralism, protection of minorities, the presumption of innocence and dozens of mechanisms designed to prevent power from crushing the individual.

It was an extraordinary civilisational achievement.

The problem begins when we confuse **civilisation** with **naivety**.

A democracy that offers safeguards to its citizens must defend them fiercely. But a democracy that allows those very safeguards to be used by foreign powers to infiltrate, manipulate and weaken the system begins to look less like a free society and more like a house whose owner has

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And a small sign beside it:

“Please respect our democratic rules.”

Vladimir Putin does not respect those rules.

He never said he would.

He never built a regime based on them.

He has never shown any reluctance to use espionage, disinformation, sabotage, energy blackmail, cyberattacks, indirect financing, political intermediaries and influence operations to advance Russia’s strategic interests.

And yet, for far too long, Europe responded with the bureaucratic solemnity of someone who discovers a fire in the building and decides to appoint a committee to study the temperature of the flames.

Meetings.

Statements.

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Sanctions.

More meetings.

More statements.

And in the meantime, the adversary kept working.

Not merely at Europe's borders.

Inside Europe.

The war has already come through the side door

This is the real dimension of hybrid warfare that many European leaders still seem reluctant to confront fully.

The battlefield no longer begins when a tank crosses a border.

It begins in a bank account.

On a server.

In a Telegram group.

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In a source of funding whose origin nobody examines too closely.

In a politician who returns from Moscow suddenly persuaded that every Russian strategic position is perfectly reasonable.

In a former government official who unexpectedly discovers remarkable professional virtues in a company tied to Russian energy interests.

In a political movement whose message happens to coincide, point by point, with what benefits the Kremlin.

Individually, none of these situations necessarily proves a crime.

But this is precisely what intelligence services are supposed to do:

***identify the pattern before the
damage becomes irreversible.***

Not afterwards.

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This is where Europe appears to have developed a peculiar institutional illness.

Let us call it **the syndrome of infinite safeguards**.

Whenever an internal threat appears, the immediate fear is that democratic rights might somehow be touched.

Political freedom must be respected.

Correct.

The presumption of innocence must be respected.

Obviously.

The opposition must be protected.

Without question.

Political persecution must be prevented.

Absolutely.

But none of this means that a state must close its eyes when there are indications of clandestine foreign funding, suspicious contacts, influence networks or collaboration with a hostile power.

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Following financial flows is not abolishing democracy.

Examining contacts with foreign intelligence services is not establishing a dictatorship.

It is precisely what a responsible state should do.

Because there is an enormous difference between **disagreeing with European foreign policy** and secretly working for the strategic interests of another state.

The first is democracy.

The second may constitute a crime against sovereignty or national security when the facts and the applicable law establish it.

Treason has changed its clothes

And perhaps this is precisely the word Europe has become afraid to pronounce.

Treason.

It exists in criminal codes.

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Yet it seems to have been turned into a linguistic relic, reserved for ancient wars in which enemies wore uniforms and carried easily identifiable flags.

The modern traitor may not carry secret documents in a briefcase.

He may carry a narrative.

He may not receive direct orders from an intelligence service.

He may receive money through three intermediaries.

He may never advocate the military invasion of his own country.

He may simply work, decision after decision, to weaken the alliances that protect it.

It is a much more sophisticated form of aggression.

And much harder to combat.

But difficulty cannot become an excuse.

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No free society is morally obliged to facilitate its own destruction.

A democracy has the right to defend itself.

More than that.

It has the duty to do so.

Not against opinions.

Not against dissidents.

Not against citizens who think differently.

But against organisations, individuals or networks which, once evidence exists and under judicial oversight, are shown to work clandestinely for the interests of a hostile foreign power.

That distinction should be written in enormous letters at the entrance to every European institution.

Freedom to think anything.

Freedom to criticise anything.

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European sovereignty.

That is not pluralism.

It is strategic penetration.

The cheapest weapon

There is a reason Russia prefers this form of confrontation.

It is extraordinarily cheap.

A military division costs billions.

An influence campaign may cost a tiny fraction of that.

A missile can destroy a building.

A well-executed political operation can change a government.

A tank can occupy a road.

An influenced politician can change a law.

Which weapon is more powerful?

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The ballot box may remain perfectly intact

Then there is the electoral problem.

It is perfectly possible to imagine that, in the not-too-distant future, a major European democracy might democratically elect a leader whose policies are profoundly favourable to Moscow's strategic interests.

No election needs to be physically rigged.

No ballot boxes need to be replaced.

No millions of votes need to be directly falsified.

It is enough to influence the political environment for years.

Amplify genuine grievances.

Exploit real economic crises.

Turn immigration problems into permanent fury.

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Finance selected media ecosystems.

Favour certain candidates.

Destroy reputations.

Multiply false content.

And then allow citizens to vote freely.

The ballot box remains democratic.

The environment that led people to it may no longer be.

That is the perverse brilliance of hybrid warfare.

***When it works perfectly, the victim
participates voluntarily in its own
defeat.***

And perhaps one day Europe will wake up with a government willing to abandon Ukraine, dismantle

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All approved.

All perfectly legal.

And then, inevitably, a new parliamentary committee will be created.

They will ask:

“How was this allowed to happen?”

As always.

Because all the warning signs were there.

What was missing was the courage to call them by their name.

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that their moral purity depends on their inability to defend themselves.

A mature democracy should not fear investigating political networks when objective indications of foreign interference exist.

It should do so.

With judicial authorisation.

With parliamentary oversight.

With clear legal limits.

With later transparency whenever possible.

But it should do so.

Bank accounts.

Companies.

Foundations.

Cryptocurrencies.

Travel.

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Contacts with foreign representatives.

Economic benefits.

Business relationships.

Anything capable of revealing clandestine dependence on an external power should be open to investigation when sufficient grounds exist.

It should not matter whether the suspect belongs to the far right.

The far left.

The centre.

A historic mainstream party.

A small populist movement.

Or to that respectable European club of former ministers who, after leaving government, suddenly develop a mysterious professional passion for large foreign corporations.

Counter-intelligence should not ask:

“Which party does this person belong to?”

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who does this person work for?

That is the question that matters.

Twenty-seven pieces, one adversary

And this is where Brussels needs to wake up.

The European Union built a common currency.

A common market.

Partially common borders.

Common trade policies.

Common regulation.

Common sanctions.

But it still lacks a genuine counter-intelligence architecture proportionate to the political scale of the threat it faces.

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enough.

An intermediary may live in Prague.

The company may be registered in Cyprus.

The money may pass through Vienna.

The beneficiary may operate in Paris.

The server may be in Amsterdam.

And the operation may be directed from Moscow.

Each state sees one piece.

The adversary sees the whole board.

And as long as Europe remains organised administratively while its adversary is organised strategically, the advantage will remain on the wrong side.

WHAT SHOULD BE REMEMBERED

- The EU itself recognises persistent hybrid campaigns involving sabotage, cyberattacks,

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influence networks is not the same thing as criminalising political opinions.

- Protecting democracy requires both strong judicial safeguards and effective preventive counter-intelligence.
- Fragmentation between Member States favours transnational operations designed to exploit different jurisdictions.
- Electoral security begins long before election day.

Freedom needs security

This is not an argument for repression.

It is precisely an argument for freedom.

There is something profoundly absurd about believing that protecting democratic rights requires us to provide the tools needed by those who wish to destroy them.

Democratic tolerance cannot mean tolerance of foreign subversion.

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investigation.

Pluralism does not turn clandestine financing into an opinion.

And sovereignty cannot be merely a beautiful word spoken at official ceremonies.

It must have consequences.

Europe finally needs to learn something that any minimally competent computer system learned decades ago:

an open system without security mechanisms is not free. It is vulnerable.

A computer network does not allow every user to execute every instruction merely because it believes in freedom of use.

It authenticates.

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It separates privleges.

It detects anomalous behaviour.

It blocks attacks.

It investigates intrusions.

And it remains perfectly functional.

Perhaps it is time to apply to democracy a little of the intelligence we already apply to servers.

Because at this moment there is something almost tragic about Europe.

We built one of the freest societies in human history.

And precisely because of that, some of its leaders seem terrified by the possibility of defending it firmly.

Putin does not have that problem.

Authoritarian regimes understand our vulnerabilities perfectly well.

They study them.

They exploit them.

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They have time.

The question is whether we do.

The danger of arriving correctly, but too late

Because perhaps one day we will finally discover that we are ready to defend democracy.

We will have new laws.

New services.

New financial mechanisms.

New counter-intelligence instruments.

New European protocols.

Everything carefully approved.

Everything legally impeccable.

Everything democratically supervised.

There will be only one small problem:

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And at that moment perhaps someone will look back and ask how it was possible for a civilisation so educated, so regulated, so legally sophisticated and so proud of its values to hand the adversary the key to its own front door.

The answer will be embarrassingly simple:

because it confused freedom with the absence of defence.

And while we debated one more safeguard, one more guarantee and one more institutional precaution, someone on the other side was already trying the key.

Europe, wake up

Do not abandon your rights.

Do not abandon your safeguards.

Do not abandon the rule of law.

But, for democracy's own sake, abandon your naivety.

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It may simply no longer possess genuine sovereignty.

And when it finally understands the difference, it may discover that the door is still open.

But it is no longer the one holding the key.

Editorial Note

This chronicle is an opinion piece on democratic security, hybrid warfare and foreign interference. The references document threats and cases recognised by public institutions and credible international news organisations; they do not, by themselves, prove that any individual or political party not convicted by a court acts under the direction of a foreign power.

The editorial argument is deliberately demanding: the rule of law must not criminalise ideas, but neither should it confuse procedural safeguards with passivity. Where objective indications exist of clandestine funding, coordination, espionage, sabotage or foreign

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Defending democracy means preserving two things at once, despite politics' enduring talent for turning complex problems into false binary choices: the freedom of citizens and the capacity of the democratic state to resist those who seek to weaponise that freedom against sovereignty itself.

Credible International

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