

How Russia's Blunders Abroad Have Galvanized Europe (Op-ed)

The Kremlin's attempts to splinter Europe have only made it stronger.

By [William Courtney and Michael Haltzel](#)

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Bai Xueqi / Zuma / TASS

On the eve of his visit to Washington, French President Emmanuel Macron sent a strong signal to the Kremlin. He [told](#) Fox News, “We should never be weak with Russian President Vladimir Putin. When you are weak, he uses it.” But at its peril, the Kremlin often seems hard of hearing when it comes to listening to Europeans.

Speaking on March 27 about the expulsion of Russian diplomats by European countries in protest against the chemical weapons attack on British soil against former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov dismissed the reactions as the

result of U.S. “colossal blackmail.” Aside from insulting the Europeans, Moscow underestimated their independence and will.

Perhaps because of the character of its own power, Russia overrates the efficacy of the military and underrates the value of political and economic assets. Seen through this outdated prism, Europe appears to the Kremlin as America’s weak sister. This miscalculation has led Russia repeatedly to err, as shown by decades of frustrated efforts to divide Europeans and split them from the United States.

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In the early 1980s, Moscow saw U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s call for a more muscular policy toward the Soviet Union as an opportunity to alienate Europeans from America. The Kremlin unleashed a scare campaign aimed at dissuading five NATO European countries from deploying intermediate-range Pershing and ground-launched cruise missiles to counter new SS-20 Soviet missiles of similar range.

Tens of thousands of Europeans protested in the streets against the NATO plans, but the alliance maintained consensus. All five basing countries deployed the NATO weapons. Without European steadfastness, the treaty signed in 1987 to destroy all such missiles on both sides would not have been possible.

In the 1990s, Moscow sought to frighten Europe from enlarging NATO’s membership to take in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary — all former members of the Warsaw Pact communist alliance. Despite bellicose Kremlin rhetoric, Europeans remained firm.

Enlargement proceeded in 1999 and continued in several more stages, thereby guaranteeing security to more than 100 million people in the newly democratic Central and East European countries. The value of this security was made clear when in 2014 Russia invaded Ukraine.

In 2016 amid debate in Germany about its acceptance of one million refugees, Russian propagandists falsely claimed that a 13-year-old Russian-German girl had been raped by migrants. Even after German police proved the story to be fake, the Kremlin disinformation did not let up. Resentment of such tactics by Moscow has contributed to a decline in Russia’s, and Putin’s, image in Germany.

Last year the Kremlin openly backed nationalist Marine Le Pen in the French presidential election and conducted cyber-attacks against her opponent, Macron. Undaunted, Putin traveled to Versailles evidently expecting a warm reception. After the two leaders talked, however, the French president emphasized “disagreements” and called the exchange of views “frank,” which, translated from diplomatic-speak, really means contentious.

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In January this year Vladimir Chizhov, Russia’s representative to the European Union, warned

that Europe would “bear responsibility” if it failed to dispense “dozens of billions” of euros to rebuild Syria. This remarkable arrogance by a country that has helped destroy Syria can only set back Moscow’s hopes of garnering EU support.

Enveloped by a cocoon of anti-Western propaganda, Russian decision-makers may have difficulty separating fact from fiction. Often possessed by a Soviet, zero-sum mindset, they seem to understand Europe poorly. Putin’s only extended exposure to Europe was as a KGB agent in communist East Germany, a place far from representative of today’s Germany.

These mistakes help European governments maintain unity of purpose in dealing with Russia. In 2014 after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and its onslaught in eastern Ukraine, some worried the EU consensus on sanctions, which must be renewed every six months, might falter.

Four years later the sanctions not only remain in force but have been strengthened. NATO has reinforced its troop rotations in Poland and the Baltic states, and militarily non-aligned Sweden and Finland, worried by Russian bellicosity, have concluded close partnerships with the North Atlantic alliance.

Meanwhile, the struggle for hearts and minds continues. In both Western and Central Europe, support for Putin’s authoritarian rule persists among populists of both the Right and Left. The outcome of recent elections in Italy is particularly troubling. Moreover, Moscow is actively trying to undermine struggling new democracies in the Balkans, hoping to prevent their joining the Euro-Atlantic community.

Overall, however, Russia's foreign policy has stiffened Europe’s will. As in the Soviet period, Europeans and Americans can thank the Kremlin for shoring up Western resolve.

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