

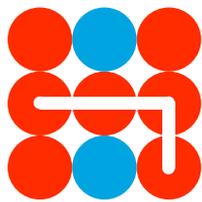
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Working Paper • April 2018

**From Nudge to Novichok:  
The response to the Skripal  
nerve agent attack holds lessons  
for countering hybrid threats**

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# From Nudge to Novichok: The response to the Skripal nerve agent attack holds lessons for countering hybrid threats

## Summary

*The attempted murder of former Russian military intelligence officer and agent of the British Secret Service, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter Yulia using a military grade nerve agent known as a novichok is an extreme manifestation of an 'active measure' of a type for which the Russian state has been responsible in the past. The combination of the known Russian association with the development of the novichok nerve agent, Russia's likely motive (as stated publicly) to punish those the Russian state regards as traitors, and the fact that a poisoning of a former FSB defector using radioactive Polonium 210 had previously been carried out in the UK in 2006 led not just the British government but the US and other NATO allies and EU member states to declare publicly that there is no alternative conclusion other than that the Russian State was culpable for the attempted murder of the Skripals and for using an internationally banned nerve agent to do so.*

*That unprecedented response from democratic nations around the world was followed by actions designed both to express solidarity with the UK and to hinder the activities of the Russian intelligence agencies in their countries, including the expulsion*

*of over 120 identified Russian intelligence officers.*

*Vladimir Putin and Russian officials were quick to deny any involvement. A Russian state media and Internet propaganda counter-attack quickly followed on familiar lines, including injecting 'fake news' stories into conventional and social media to distract and confuse. The pattern is a familiar one from the way Moscow has responded to other accusations, such as the shooting down of the MH17 airliner over Ukraine, deploying denials, counter-accusations, and 'alternative facts' to promote conspiracy theories in order to leave the impression that there is no truth that can be found. In the Skripal case the Russian authorities also showed themselves able quickly to adapt their main lines of counter-attack to exploit loose use of language in UK media interviews, illustrating the extreme care needed in any public statement during such propaganda battles. There is little evidence, however, that the Russian propaganda tactics have worked with Western politicians and publics, largely due to the international NATO/EU solidarity shown through the words and deeds of so many democratic nations, encouraging journalists to expose the nature of the Russian propaganda response.*



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## 'No plausible alternative explanation'

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In her statement to Parliament in London on 14 March 2018 ten days after the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the ancient English cathedral city of Salisbury, Prime Minister Theresa May expressed her horror and revulsion at the use of a nerve agent on British soil. She informed Parliament that the substance used to poison the Skripals had been identified as an advanced fourth generation nerve agent of a type developed by the Soviet Union and known by the term novichok, designed to play havoc with the central nervous system and inflict a lingering death. The Russian Ambassador in London had been summoned two days earlier and given 36 hours to inform the UK if any of the past stocks of this nerve agent had somehow gone missing. The Prime Minister regretted that the deadline had passed without a response from the Kremlin. Russia had provided no explanation as to how this novichok nerve agent could have come to be used in Salisbury in the heart of rural England. As the Prime Minister explained "There is no alternative conclusion other than that the Russian State was culpable for the attempted murder of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, which was an unlawful use of force by the Russian State against the UK". The UK described this as an indiscriminate and reckless attack against the United Kingdom putting the lives of innocent civilians at risk, with the first police officer giving aid on the scene having to be hospitalised and 39 civilians having had to seek urgent medical treatment.

Later that day, the UK confirmed to the NATO Council in Brussels that there had been a positive and certain identification by scientists at the Porton Down defence research establishment of the chemical agent used as part of the novichok group of military grade nerve agents, developed by the Soviet Union but banned under the Chemical Weapons Convention.

This chemical analysis was later formally confirmed by independent laboratories acting for the international Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

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**Since its entry into force in 1997, the Chemical Weapons Convention has become one of the pillars of the global non-proliferation regime. The Convention prohibits the development, transfer and use of chemical weapons. States Parties to the Convention take on a duty to uphold and enforce its fundamental tenets. States Parties commit not to develop, produce or otherwise acquire, stockpile or retain chemical weapons, nor to transfer, directly or indirectly, chemical weapons to anyone. States Parties also undertake not to engage in any military preparations to use chemical weapons, nor to commit to assist, encourage or induce anyone to engage in prohibited activity.**

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The NATO Council agreed "... with the United Kingdom government's assessment that it is highly likely that the Russian Federation is responsible and that there is no plausible alternative explanation... Allies expressed deep concern at the first offensive use of a nerve agent on Alliance territory since NATO's foundation. Allies expressed solidarity with the UK, offered their support in the conduct of the ongoing investigation. Allies agreed that the attack was a clear breach of international norms and agreements". A few days later Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO Secretary General,

declared to the world's media "Russia's response so far has demonstrated a clear disregard for international peace and security, we continue to call on Russia to provide complete disclosure of the novichok programme to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. And we welcome the UK's co-operation with the OPCW in the investigation of this horrendous attack."

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### International collective action

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On 22 March the leaders of the UK, France and Germany met to be updated by the UK on the basis of its attribution of the attack to the Russian state: its knowledge of previous production by Russia of this advanced nerve agent; Russia's record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations; and the UK's assessment that Russia views some defectors as legitimate targets for assassinations. At the end of the meeting the three leaders reaffirmed that there is no plausible explanation other than that the Russian state was responsible. That conclusion was echoed later that day by all EU nations in their declaration:

**"The European Council condemns in the strongest possible terms the recent attack in Salisbury, expresses its deepest sympathies to all whose lives have been threatened and lends its support to the ongoing investigation. It agrees with the United Kingdom government's assessment that it is highly likely that the Russian Federation is responsible and that there is no plausible alternative explanation. We stand in unqualified solidarity with the United Kingdom in the face of this grave challenge to our shared security."**

**That unprecedented public response from the UK's allies and partners was followed by actions designed both to express solidarity with the UK and to hinder the activities of the Russian intelligence agencies in their countries.**

The UK government announced on 14 March that it would expel 23 Russian diplomats identified as undeclared intelligence officers, would propose new legislative powers to harden defences against Hostile State Activity and would ensure those seeking to carry out such activity could not enter the UK, and would suspend all planned high-level contacts between the UK and Russia.

This step was quickly followed by action against Russian intelligence officers taken by Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Netherland, Poland, Romania, Spain and Sweden. Non-EU countries joined in with expulsions from Albania, Australia, Canada, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Norway and Ukraine, and not least the United States that would expel no less than 60 Russian diplomats (including 12 posted in the new York with the United Nations) and shutter the Russian Consulate in Seattle. NATO announced a cut in the size of its Russian mission by a third, removing accreditation from seven Russian staff and rejecting three other pending applications.

**The NATO secretary general announced that the permanent size of the Russian mission to NATO would be cut from 30 to 20 people, adding that the step was intended as "a clear and very strong message that there was a cost to Russia's reckless actions"**

All these countries took the risk of kicking out Russian diplomats and others connected to Russian intelligence whose presence they deemed to be no longer conducive to the public good. A 150 in total from 30 countries making the response the biggest collective expulsion of alleged Russian intelligence officers in history. Other countries chose to act in complementary ways such as issuing powerful statements or downgrading their national representation at the World Cup.

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### **The link to hybrid threats**

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**The unprecedented message those democratic nations intend to send to Russia goes beyond the attempted murders themselves, shocking as they were. The message goes to the heart of the anxieties of the democracies over the hybrid threats they face from Russia under President Putin.**

Why so many nations joined to act in unison in NATO and the EU was the result of a powerful combination of motives. There is evident solidarity with the UK as a friendly country that had become the victim of attack, deep revulsion at the indiscriminate nature of the attack with its risks to public health, outrage at the use of a chemical nerve agent weapon on Alliance and European soil, all compounded by the brazen nature of the Russian denials and the spreading of ‘fake news’ stories about the attack to try to cause the maximum confusion.

**For those nations the hybrid threat context is clear, linked directly to their exasperation and concern over**

**the lawless and reckless behaviour over many years of the Russian state under President Putin. In other words, years of vexation and provocation by Russia had worn the collective patience to breaking point, enough is enough.**

There are now many countries who have felt the disruptive behaviour of the Russian state: the illegal annexation of the Crimea, violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Ukraine, Russia’s continued efforts to destabilise Eastern Ukraine with the intervention in the Donbas, the downing of MH17, the constant pressure of cyberattacks, the attempted coup in Montenegro, the concealing of chemical weapon attacks in Syria, the interference in democratic and political processes, the hacking of the Bundestag and undermining of democratic institutions, the glorification of new Russian nuclear weapons systems, the intrusions into NATO airspace, all accompanied by the constant drumbeat of hostile propaganda.

As the British Foreign Secretary concluded “This matter goes far beyond a bilateral dispute. If the Russian state is prepared to deploy a banned weapon in a British city – amounting to the unlawful use of force against the United Kingdom – then the Kremlin is clearly willing to act without restraint. The bleak truth is that what happened in Salisbury could have happened anywhere”. Russia’s record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations is well-known as are Russian attitudes to defectors as legitimate targets for assassinations. The murder by Russian agents in October 2006 of the former FSB officer and exile in London Alexander Litvinenko is an ugly precedent. In his case the extraordinary method chosen to kill him was to introduce the rare radioactive

substance Polonium 210 (a substance only producible by a nation with a sophisticated nuclear programme) into his tea at a leading London hotel, leading to a slow and agonising death. An intensive investigation led Scotland Yard to accuse the two Russian FSB agents he had met at the hotel, Andrey Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun, of his murder. The clear radioactive traces they had left on their seats on the airliner from Moscow was just part of the damning evidence. A statutory public coroner's inquest into the killing concluded that it was an FSB operation and furthermore that President Putin probably approved it. The UK indicted Lugovoi and Kovtun but Russia refused to extradite them to face justice. Lugovoi is now a Deputy in the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian Parliament, and he had the nerve to appear on Russian state TV to denounce the UK over its attribution to Russia of the attempted murder of Andrei Skripal. Inquiries are now being reopened into other deaths of Russian emigres in the UK.

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### The nature of the hybrid threat

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Intimidation, propagandistic narratives and dirty tricks or 'active measures' made up the repertoire of Soviet subversive activity. The same components appear to be still present in current Russian doctrine. The obvious Russian-ness of the weapon used on the Skripals, a novichok nerve agent, must have been chosen by the perpetrators precisely so that the attack could be attributed back to the Russian state. In that way the attack could fulfill the twin purposes of intimidating Russian emigres in the UK and deterring any serving Russian official, especially in the secret intelligence world, from assisting the West. The parallel with the murder of

Alexander Litvinenko in London is striking. The only plausible explanation for such complicated and dangerous methods of assassination is that both were designed to send a message to anyone pondering dissent amid the intensifying repression of President Putin's Russia that those it considers its enemies will be hunted down, located wherever they are and unpleasantly killed. Although Russia will at the same time strongly deny responsibility, the world is intended to infer that Russia was responsible. A policy of deliberately implausible deniability.

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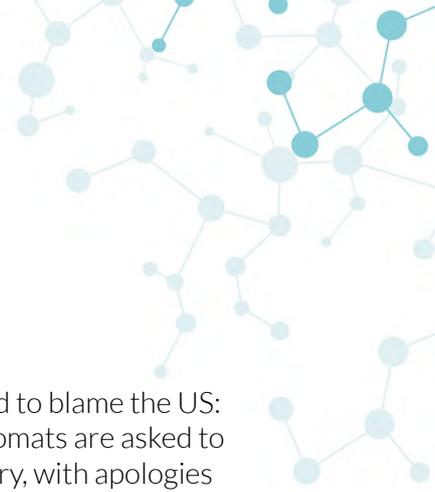
### The pattern of Russian propaganda response

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Propaganda is an essential part of posing a hybrid threat. There are three potential audiences: the victim to be intimidated; the domestic public of the perpetrator to be reassured of the rightness of the action; and the international community to be persuaded not to intervene or impose sanctions.

**A particular feature of the Skripal case, from which much can be learned in terms of understanding the information warfare element of any hybrid threat, is the way that the Russian authorities used the full gamut of their propaganda responses.**

There was a hint of intimidation in President Putin's first public response to the news coverage of the attack in Salisbury. He naturally denied Russia's culpability while carefully injecting a note of menace. "If it was military grade agent," he said, "they would have died on the spot, obviously." He had already told state television



that traitors would “kick the bucket” and “choke” on their “pieces of silver”. The theme was later taken up by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov saying that the attack on the Skripals was not “sophisticated” and if it had been the victims would have died immediately.

The Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov declared at the beginning of the crisis “I wish to state with all possible certainty that the Soviet Union or Russia had no programmes to develop a toxic agent called novichok”. A few days later that was contradicted by Russia’s RIA Novosti state news agency that ran an interview with the head of a Moscow lab from the State Scientific Research Institute of Organic Chemistry and Technology who confirmed that the Soviet Union had indeed developed novichok agents, the programme just had a different name: foliant. Russian officials and the state media have claimed variously that ‘novichok’ never existed, then they told the media that it did exist from Soviet times but they had destroyed the stocks, then they claimed that the stocks had escaped to Sweden or the Czech Republic or Slovakia or the United States (in order it was said to destabilize the world).

A common Russian leadership theme is to assert victimhood at the hands of the West and thus reflect responsibility away from itself. In this case, Russian spokesmen went on the offensive against the UK for having dared to claim Russian involvement, accusing Theresa May and her secret agencies of a plot to undermine Russia in the eyes of the world. The Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman for example reacted to the mass expulsion of diplomats as “a conspiracy of anti-Russian solidarity imposed by the British on EU countries”. Speaking at a conference on Afghanistan in Tashkent, the Russian foreign minister,

Sergei Lavrov preferred to blame the US: “When one or two diplomats are asked to leave this or that country, with apologies being whispered into our ears, we know for certain that this is a result of colossal pressure and colossal blackmail, which is Washington’s chief instrument in the international scene.”

A Russian tactic, seen in their attempts to interfere in the 2016 US election, is the generation of “fake news” stories, the more improbable the better, that are likely to be carried on social media. The purpose of such stories is primarily distraction, to obscure the truth in a fog of disinformation and in the clash of opposing narratives and thus in this case to distract attention from the charge against Russia (such stories included accusing the UK itself of the attempted murders) and to create an atmosphere of conspiracy (suggesting for example that the death of the Skripal’s pets revealed UK complicity). The stories are intended to create such confusion over what can be considered true that the public gives up on any attempt to establish what is real.

In the days following the expulsion of Russian diplomats the Moscow media put out stories that variously Sergei Skripal took an overdose (because he was said to be addicted to novichok), that he attempted suicide and therefore presumably tried to take his daughter with him, that his attempted murder was revenge for Britain’s supposed poisoning of Ivan the Terrible, or that the UK was responsible for the attack so that they could have something to blame Russia over and thus spoil the World Cup. The stories were accompanied by warnings that given the US and UK intelligence failures in the run-up to the war in Iraq no allegation against Russia could be taken seriously. Salisbury where the Skripals were attacked is the nearest



railway station to the UK defence research establishment Porton Down where the definitive identification of the nerve agent as a novichok took place: unsurprisingly this fact too was wound into a conspiracy theory that the British MOD had manufactured the agent and somehow it had escaped laboratory confinement to drift over Salisbury (and by coincidence target the Skripals). Russia suggested that a lack of information about Mr Skripal's pets — he is believed to have had two cats and two guinea pigs — could be regarded as suspicious and that they could provide clues to the poisoning. Sergei Lavrov, speaking in Moscow, argued that British intelligence agents could have been involved to create a distraction from Brexit. He suggested the attack was “in the interests of British special forces who are known for their abilities to act with a licence to kill.”

The Russian embassy in London was at the same time suggesting that the UK had its own stores of novichok agents and questioning why hospital staff in Salisbury happened to have an antidote to the novichok nerve agent used in the attempted murder (reality check: there is no known antidote to such an advanced nerve agent — the patients would have been treated with atropine, which is on the World Health Organisation's list of effective and safe medicines needed in a health system and used for treating insecticide poisoning and conditions such as slow heart rate). To cap it all, the Russian Embassy in London used its Twitter account to send sarcastic messages, including a photograph of Hercule Poirot, Agatha Christie's famous fictional Belgian detective with the message “In the absence of evidence, we definitely need a Poirot in Salisbury”. Asked by a journalist if the tweet was appropriate comment given the Skripals were fighting for their lives in hospital, the Ambassador replied “Did you like it?” When, thankfully, Julia Skripal had

recovered sufficiently to leave hospital for a secure location, the Russian Embassy complained that they had been denied consular access to her, and when she declined their assistance, claimed that the UK is forcibly detaining her.

The Foreign Office in London has said that in the first month after the attack it counted 24 such ludicrous fake news stories.

Moscow also was quick to exploit the perfectly proper public statement by the Director of the Porton Down research establishment that his scientists were 100% sure that a novichok agent had been used, but the evidence as to its composition did not enable them to identify from the science where it had been made. That was used to cast doubt on the original UK attribution to Russia, notwithstanding that rested on the unique combination of facts that Soviet scientists developed the novichok agents starting in the 1970s, Russia subsequently stockpiled the agents, Russia has a record of state-sponsored assassinations and Russia has a publicly avowed motive for trying to kill Sergei Skripal, all leading to the conclusion there is ‘no plausible alternative explanation’. The British Foreign Secretary had opened the jaws of this propaganda trap by not being sufficiently precise about the difference between the true statement that this was scientifically established to be a novichok agent, of the type known to be made by Russia, and the equally true statement that there was no plausible alternative explanation, for all those reasons, that the novichok used must have been made in Russia. Sadly a number of Western politicians then could not avoid falling themselves into the propaganda trap thus inadvertently baited to cast doubt on the attribution.

The cynical and brazen way in which Moscow has used its propaganda techniques

in response to a very serious allegation by the international community of state complicity in attempted murder has nevertheless had the unintended effect of undermining the Russian denial of any responsibility for the use of the novichok agent.

**It will be important for the future to make sure that Western publics are fully informed of the range of propagandistic tactics used in hybrid threats, not least those directed at sympathetic voices overseas and at the Russian public that paint Russia as the victim of Western aggression. And that all who comment officially, and journalists who report them, take every care to be precise in the use of language, even in the hurly burly of political debate.**

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### Policy responses to hybrid threats

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NATO and European nations will no doubt be looking again at their national security strategies in the light of continued Russian bellicosity and intransigence. An example is the outcome of the recent UK National Security Capability Review, published after the Skripal attack, that sets out its policies towards hybrid threats:

“The risks from state-based threats have both grown and diversified. The indiscriminate and reckless use of a military-grade nerve agent on British soil was an unlawful use of force by the Russian State. It happened against a backdrop of a well-established pattern of Russian State aggression. Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea was the first time since the Second World War

that one sovereign nation has forcibly taken territory from another in Europe. Russia has fomented conflict in the Donbas and supported the Assad regime, including when the regime deliberately ignored its obligation to stop using chemical weapons. Russia has also violated the national air-space of European countries and mounted a sustained campaign of cyber espionage and disruption, including meddling in elections....We will always respond robustly to attempts to harm the UK and destabilise the world order. It happened against a backdrop of a well established pattern of Russian State aggression. We will not tolerate the threat to life of British people and others on British soil from the Russian government. We will continue to bring all the capabilities of UK law enforcement to bear against serious criminals and corrupt elites. The expulsion of Russian diplomats will also fundamentally degrade Russian intelligence capability in the UK for years to come. These responses demonstrate a firm, defensive and proportionate approach to Russia’s continuing efforts to divide EU and NATO members”.

Of particular concern is the possibility that there may be future deniable use of nerve agents. The EU Council on 22 March concluded that “Against this background, the European Union must strengthen its resilience to Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear-related risks, including through closer cooperation between the European Union and its Member States as well as NATO. The European Union and its Member States should also continue to bolster their capabilities to address hybrid threats, including in the areas of cyber, strategic communication and counter-intelligence. The European Council invites the European Commission and the High Representative to take this work forward and report on progress by the June European Council.”

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## Conclusion

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As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia has a special obligation to uphold the rules of good international conduct. When it does the opposite and tramples upon these rules, the Kremlin threatens the very architecture of global security.

The Kremlin now knows it underestimated the strength of global feeling: they may have thought that the world had become so hardened and cynical as not to care about the use of chemical weapons in Europe, and to be indifferent to the reckless disregard for public safety and the suffering of Sergei and Yulia Skripal. The Kremlin now has their answer, that the use of chemical weapons, including the use of any toxic chemicals as weapons under any circumstances, is completely unacceptable, must be systematically and rigorously condemned and constitutes a global security threat. Perhaps too they had calculated that European nations had become so morally weakened, so dependent on hydrocarbons, so chronically risk averse and so fearful of Russia that they would not dare to respond. The Kremlin has now seen unqualified solidarity in the face of their actions.

**The international response to the Skripal poisoning carries an important lesson for the future of the value of strong NATO-EU co-operation to counter hybrid threats. It also illustrates that any challenging of unac-**

**ceptable Russian actions is likely to evoke a vigorous propaganda counter attack, of denial, obfuscation and diversion with an overtone of intimidation using both conventional and social media. Western politicians and spokespersons need to be prepared for this: every word they say will be analysed and any potential opening provided exploited as part of the propaganda onslaught.**

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*Is there a connection between Putin's indulgence of Assad's atrocities in Syria including CW use and the Russian state's evident willingness to employ a chemical weapon on British soil? How much easier does it become for a state to deploy chemical weapons when its government has already tolerated and sought to hide their use by others? Russia has made immense efforts to conceal the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in Syria. In October, an international investigation concluded that Bashar al-Assad's forces had used the nerve agent sarin against the town of Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017. Yet instead of condemning Assad, Russia covered up for him by vetoing the renewal of the international inquiry and, in effect, forcing it to shut down. In April 2018, further CW use by the Syrian regime against civilians in the town of Douma, causing many deaths of women and children, has been fiercely condemned in the UN Security Council but Russia again adopted a line of denial, challenging whether any CW attack had taken place.*

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## Author



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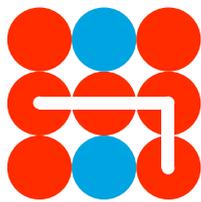
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The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats  
tel. +358 400 253800 [www.hybridcoe.fi](http://www.hybridcoe.fi)

ISBN 978-952-7282-06-9

Hybrid CoE is an international hub for practitioners and experts, building member states' and institutions' capabilities and enhancing EU-NATO cooperation in countering hybrid threats located in Helsinki, Finland

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