



Wilton Park



Report

**Challenges to European security: parliamentary perspectives and responses**

Monday 15 – Wednesday 17 February 2016 | WP1441



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Organised in collaboration with the British Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, this Wilton Park conference addressed some of the key challenges to European security today. These challenges stem in part from the increasingly uncertain political outlook and volatile economic conditions in the Euro-Atlantic area. The meeting programme consequently reflected a holistic view of security by going beyond military and defence issues and incorporating economic, social and political factors as well.

The value of the discussion featuring inter-parliamentary perspectives resulted in widespread interest in continuing such a dialogue. The conversations during the event introduced domestic and regional views and examined how institutions such as the EU, NATO, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Council of Europe (CoE) can contribute to and aid the work of national parliaments. In particular, the dialogue at Wilton Park identified important ways in which parliaments can improve national resilience.

### Summary of key points

- The concept of security, which used to be closely tied to that of defence, has been stretched considerably to include many elements of domestic policymaking in areas related to national political and social resilience. Globalisation and technological advancement have also contributed to the 'expansion' of the concept of security; as a result national authorities today have to devise and implement multi-dimensional approaches to protecting the public from domestic and international threats.
- Internationally, the most critical issues are Russia's increasingly assertive behaviour utilising hybrid techniques, the migration crisis and the terrorist threat, exacerbated by the conflicts in the Middle East. Domestically, the frustration with the failures of mainstream politics has given prominence to fringe political parties and movements. This frustration and the continuing uncertainty of economic prospects in much of Europe pose the most serious threat to parliamentary democracies across the continent.
- All of these issues have featured in the European political environment over the last decade. However, they are now more acutely pronounced than ever before due to the interconnectedness of globalised societies. The intricacy and diversity of threats create an enormous strain on governments, parliaments and institutions, all of which need to focus on building national resilience.
- As constituent parts of the political leadership and wielders of legislative power, parliaments have an important role to play in the system of checks and balances of power, particularly with regard to delivering security.
- Parliamentarians need to bridge the gap between leadership and electorate, and

foster support for responsible political perspectives that attempt to offer real solutions to contemporary security challenges rather than the chimerical ones contained in the rhetoric of so-called 'strong' leaders. Parliamentarians have access to the work of ministries on the one hand and directly engage with their constituencies on the other. Furthermore, they are not constrained by public opinion in the same ways as government ministers, and can keep communication channels open with 'unpopular' counterparts at home and abroad.

- Parliaments and parliamentarians need to use these capabilities to promote the holistic view of security that is needed in today's environment, combining military and civilian elements. Through hearings, briefings or courses, as is done in Finland, governments should try to ensure that parliamentarians have a strong shared understanding of security challenges. Whenever possible, parliaments should draw on independent expertise in the drafting and review of legislation.
- Parliaments should adopt a multidimensional approach that focuses on several crucial areas of civic engagement: promoting political stability and countering hybrid threats by educating societies; fighting corruption and promoting good governance; countering nationalist movements; supporting minorities; and investing in strategic communications. These areas all constitute key focal points for enhancing national resilience against security threats.
- A greater degree of cross parliamentary discussions to exchange lessons and share best practice on all of these issues could be helpful in supporting a more robust and effective security policy role for parliaments.

## **The European security environment**

### **What are key sources of insecurity?**

1. The two key external sources of insecurity and instability in Europe are a 'resurgent' Russia and the migration crisis that has placed great stress on the social systems in many European states. Even though the scope and effects of these crises may not have been predictable, Europe's failures were manifested in its unpreparedness to react in a timely fashion and its subsequent struggle to devise an adequate strategic response vis-à-vis either of these two security challenges.
2. With regard to the military aspects of the crisis in the Russia-West relationship, the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent conflict in Eastern Ukraine are not only indicators of the changed security environment in Europe but are two examples of hybrid conflict as well. Moscow's grand strategy is to restore Russia's status as a great power. In order to achieve this goal it is constantly examining and trying to exploit Western vulnerabilities, including by fanning the flames of wedge issues.
3. First employed in the 1990s and the 2000s, hybrid techniques have now crystallised in Russia's recent actions in its neighbourhood. In addition to conventional as well as unconventional military threats and pressure, these techniques include economic coercion, attempting to leverage ethnic Russian minorities in other European countries to foster political instability, and the use of cyber-attacks, propaganda, and disinformation to create confusion and distrust.
4. In sum, Russia is using hybrid methods, blending military and civilian capabilities, for the purpose of undermining European political stability, values and norms, including faith in democracy and the institutions that underpin it. Cultural differences, economic levers and political confrontations are fostered or stimulated in order to exercise influence and project an alternative to the status quo. Further, limited military action is deemed an acceptable escalatory measure for gaining the advantage in negotiations. Moscow also appears to believe in 'de-escalation through escalation' to nuclear threats as a means of consolidating conventional military advantage. These considerations now characterise the more aggressive Russian military posture.

5. In focusing on the economic dimensions of Europe's security, one example of the influence Russia has exercised is the state of EU's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Ukraine. The implementation of the DCFTA with Ukraine was postponed for two years due to pressure from Russia. While Russia expressed concerns over the disruption of traditional trade flows and its economic security, Moscow's real objectives have been to stop Ukraine from integrating more closely with the West as well as to avoid competition from European goods. Russia has effectively forced Eastern European and Central Asian countries to choose between free trade agreements with the EU or membership in the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Eurasian Customs Union (ECU), whereas it might have been feasible to design compatible arrangements between the two.
6. The erosion of the relative competitiveness of Russian exports and shrinking economic relations between Russia and the EU further strengthen Moscow's desire to re-exert political and economic control over former Soviet republics that are not EU members. Despite the hopes created by Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the much-needed economic modernisation of the non-commodity sector has stalled. At the same time, Europe's dependency on Russian gas and oil poses significant risks to its security and diversification efforts have yet to produce the needed results.
7. The migration crisis constitutes the second biggest threat not only to European security but also to the existence of the Union as a whole. The core principles of solidarity and unity have been challenged on a daily basis and have arguably been largely replaced by narrow self-interest. While there is disagreement between countries over the response to the migration crisis, it could constitute an important possible area for inter-parliamentary collaboration.
8. In light of the already strained social welfare structures in most member states, the additional expenditures needed to care for the influx of refugees and some isolated incidents involving them have had a very negative impact on public attitudes. Public support and commitment for resolving the humanitarian crisis are gradually diminishing whilst criticism of political leaders is growing considerably.
9. The exponential, unregulated increase in the number of refugees has heightened public perceptions of the terrorist threat to Europe. Some of Europe's most noteworthy achievements, the free movement of goods and people, at considerable risk, and the difficulty that governments face in producing a coherent, collaborative response has been very damaging. Populist parties, by exploiting grievances over issues such as migration, reinforce fear and mistrust. By using emotionally charged arguments they prevent public debate from taking a more effective direction in tackling the threat that terrorism constitutes.

#### **Responding to the new security environment: the role of parliaments**

10. Hybrid attacks target the whole of society; responses must therefore also encompass the whole of society. Governments need to build resilience at the national level. The most important area of vulnerability is in how people think, namely the degree of confidence and trust they have in government and other national institutions.
11. It is critical to have a shared 'situational awareness' of the hybrid threat. All parliamentarians in Finland, for example, attend national defence courses as part of an effort to promote a common understanding of the threat environment. As already noted, hybrid instruments bridge military and civilian divides, but most countries have separate military and civilian intelligence analyses, which cannot give a full picture.
12. A core objective of parliaments across Europe should be to raise the public's awareness of the nature and effect of hybrid threats and to expose Russian media propaganda and disinformation. Parliamentarians can be key figures in countering hybrid threats. They can play a proactive role in helping to establish combined civil and military defences that mitigate the effects of a hybrid attack. Supporting national

defence units, investing in critical infrastructure, educating the public and fostering a strong civil society should be part of a comprehensive approach designed to build resilience. By involving all levels of political and civil leadership, Parliaments can contribute to producing national risk assessments and establishing risk categories and warning signs.

13. In the wider context of relations with Russia, dialogue should be continued and inter-parliamentary fora could provide suitable engagement platforms. However, such dialogue should be approached with the understanding that Russia is not a friendly nation but a strategic opponent.
14. Lastly, parliaments should be mindful of their limited capacity to address external issues as the executive branch mainly drives policies. Independent expertise and expert review of suggested draft bills should be encouraged despite tight deadlines and staff shortages.

## **Curbing populism and supporting minority rights**

### **What are the challenges?**

15. External threats exacerbate existing internal problems in Europe. As a result, social divisions have become more significant and difficult to overcome. Consequently, helping to curb nationalist movements and supporting the rights of minorities who are susceptible to foreign influence (by another state or non-state actor) constitute a key role for parliaments. Combined with the problem of seeking to accommodate those who do not wish to be integrated, the difficulty of encouraging diversity and equality without compromising cohesion becomes even greater.
16. Many countries are struggling with the question of whether to treat ethnic diversity issues primarily through a security lens or through a framework that prioritises political, social and human rights. Both terrorism threats and Russia's position that it has the right to defend ethnic 'kin' within the borders of other countries have pushed governments towards a 'securitisation' of ethnic minority issues. Populist, xenophobic parties are exploiting perceived threats from minority populations to gain support.
17. A securitisation of ethnic minority issues raises the question of whether according generous rights to minorities strengthens security by integrating them and encouraging their participation in democratic politics, or weakens security by providing them with more space and resources to organise. In many European states, minority and migration issues tend to be addressed mainly through discussions on security, border or social control and as a result can at least partly lose sight of the necessary dimensions of democracy and human rights. Security is the first responsibility of the state and tends to trump other concerns when it comes into play, but it is critical not to accord secondary status to fundamental values.
18. Many politicians do not view positive discrimination (or affirmative action) as an effective tool to tackle the minority rights problem. Not only does such an approach create grievances in the rest of the population, but it also reinforces the perception that members of ethnic communities require 'different' treatment than the rest of society.
19. The encouragement of confrontation and social tension by exploiting populist sentiments and fears of minorities is an important dimension of hybrid attack, the effects of which are starkly seen in Eastern Ukraine. Manipulation of ethnic communities and artificially creating hostilities thus has the potential to constitute a substantial danger to the fabric of societies. The crisis in Ukraine has raised concerns over similar efforts by Moscow to manipulate ethnic Russian minorities in the Baltic States.
20. Another manifestation of the crisis in the EU-Russia relationship is Russia's support for populist parties in countries such as France, Hungary and Italy. The social contract that has existed for over 70 years in Europe is under great stress; a significant part of

Europe's population feels that it has indeed failed. Populist parties are exploiting this sense of loss of certainty over the future and are instilling fears that the 'strangers' are the cause of the problem. In turn, Russia is taking advantage of this crisis of identity and using the opportunity to cause rifts in European national parliaments by financially supporting nationalist and populist parties and movements.

### **What role can Parliaments play?**

21. There is general agreement that the most effective way to reduce the risks from nationalist movements and marginalised minorities is through integration, and parliaments are an essential part of this process. Alongside governments, parliaments can take part and shape the response to misinformation campaigns that feed into populist narratives or alienate minorities.
22. Reemphasising the responsibilities of minorities alongside their rights and stressing the value of multiple identities also constitute possible ways of achieving equality without eliminating diversity. The enactment of laws guaranteeing full and effective equality, which is a direct parliamentary responsibility, provides the most democratic and efficient way of supporting political stability in countries with substantial minority populations.
23. With regard to institutional cooperation, the OSCE High Commission on National Minorities and the Council of Europe constitute the two organisations with the most effective tools for protecting minority rights. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, both drawn up by the CoE, and the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights legally underpin all mechanisms for the protection and promotion of minority rights.
24. All of these documents provide critical counterpoints to approaches that would securitise and territorialise minority rights. Together with the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, these documents can be used as points of reference for all national legislative bodies. If parliaments are to pursue a more socially oriented approach to minority rights, legislation should be receptive to new methods of defining ethnic groups and their standing in society.

## **Tailoring strategic communications and messaging**

### **The new information environment**

25. Disillusionment with globalisation and economic liberalism has become widespread in democratic countries. Many people do not feel secure and do not think that political elites are delivering, calling into question government legitimacy and undermining national resilience. A significant part of public opinion blames Western governments for being too aggressive towards Russia and engaging in wrongheaded idealism by trying to force democracy on the Arab world. There is also considerable psychological sympathy towards Russia on the part of many East Germans and other Eastern Europeans, who have gone through similar dislocations.
26. This undermining of government legitimacy and elites more generally has led to a backlash against the mainstream media, now seen as part of the elite system that has not delivered, accused of being warmongers, and portrayed as focusing on 'official narratives' only. The decreased credibility of the mainstream media has opened the door to widespread conspiracy thinking. Any given information can be met with counter-information.
27. This crisis of political psychological destabilisation has been exacerbated by the existence of digital channels, which have become the key fora to express anger and frustration. Information released by the political elites can be responded to or countered in real time. Moreover, it can be accessed by various groups, distorted to support diverging interests and shared between different communities. The phenomenon of

'digitising' social life is impossible to control.

28. Putin has diagnosed this informational dysfunction and is exploiting it, offering positive narratives of 'managed democracy', the promise of order, traditional religious values, and a messianic view of Russian exceptionalism. Moscow is playing on self-flagellating, much polarised Western societies. It knows that most people in other European countries will not believe what Russian media outlets state; they are trying instead to sow as much doubt and confusion as possible so that populations will not believe anyone.
29. In Ukraine, past Russian disinformation campaigns in the eastern regions have attempted to promote a dominant narrative that Moscow is the only real supporter of the Ukrainian people in the Donbass region. The Kremlin believed its own propaganda and was genuinely surprised when there was no mass uprising of ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine, requiring a direct Russian military intervention in August 2014.
30. Russian information operations have also been very prominent in the Western Balkans. Serbia, which has historically close ties to Russia, has been subjected to much propaganda on the flaws of the EU and the dangers posed by European values, allegedly in conflict with Orthodox traditions and cultural practices. The closer Serbia aligns with the EU, the more exaggerated this misinformation campaign becomes. Concerns have emerged over reports that Russian politicians, the military, and energy lobbies are attempting to influence government policy and to disrupt the country's hopes of joining the EU. Unlike membership in NATO, accession to the EU remains favourably viewed by the public and provides a strong incentive for further integration with the West.
31. One of the problems for European democracies is the lack of a clear message with which to counter the Russian narrative. Visions that have been put forward in Europe have all been seen to fail. However, despite all the problems that European democracies are facing, the West remains the model, with more stability, security and prosperity than elsewhere. It is critical to put this narrative forward as well as to turn the lens back on Russia and all the flaws of the Putin regime.

#### **How can Parliaments contribute?**

32. Strategic communication and messaging have therefore become a major element in efforts to mitigate new threats and dangers. Governments must invest in strategic communication networks and services not only at the local level but on regional and global ones as well. Communication technologies and social media tools have been proven as some of the most consequential innovations of the past few decades; however, they also expose and amplify the vulnerabilities of modern societies.
33. One aspect to which Parliaments can contribute is by helping to bridge the current gap in the strategies employed by different institutions to counter Russian propaganda. The European approach aims to establish facts and truths and discredit Russian claims. However, since a core part of the Russian narrative is actually appealing to feelings, beliefs and sentiments, it cannot be easily countered or objectively contradicted. Public parliamentary enquires, independent media reporting and civil society discussions and debates should attempt to treat socio-economic problems in an open and honest way, but also emphasise the merits of democratic values and processes. There should be maximum transparency and public participation at all levels of the policy process.
34. Devising a common message together with inter-governmental and regional institutions of democratic allies and partners is another key part of improving the overall counter strategy. At the moment, publics often feel confused by the lack of a clear institutionally coordinated position on foreign policy matters. The multiple parallel messages issued by various entities are contributing to this confusion instead of helping to resolve it. The recently developed EU and NATO strategic communication centres can serve as examples of the need to institutionalise counter-propaganda processes. A significant element of NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence tasks, and the core

responsibility of EU's East StratCom Task Force, is the creation of an action plan on strategic communications to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. Their work is regularly updated to reflect the work of the other NATO and EU institutions and of their respective member states. Parliaments can contribute to establishing similar national centres that are dedicated to building national resilience with regard to disinformation and messaging.

35. The Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre provides an example of a successful tool for countering Russian misinformation attacks by establishing the facts on the ground. Formed by members of the public, the centre evolved into one of the main hubs for distributing information and providing a counter narrative, in eight languages including Ukrainian, Russian and English, to ensure as effective and accessible communications as possible. Parliaments can support and encourage more activities and invest in public broadcasting and publications that target minorities using the local languages. The recently launched Russian-language channel in Estonia also constitutes a model instrument for such investments.
36. Lastly, as previously noted, all underlying social divisions and weaknesses should be addressed in order to limit the opportunities for propaganda and other forms of hybrid attack to succeed. Without a comprehensive change in the ways that people are governed, all social groups with grievances or fears will remain weak links susceptible to external manipulation. In considering the wider strategic context, parliaments should also channel efforts into understanding the underlying causes of confrontation with other states. European politicians should seek to develop policy approaches where feasible that can attenuate the confrontation with Russia while not transgressing core democratic values and maintaining solidarity with partner states.

## **Fighting corruption and promoting good governance**

### **What are the main challenges to domestic stability?**

37. The primary objective for all governments in transition is fighting corruption. Defined as the abuse of power for private financial or political gain, corruption in developing states preserves the negative practices of the status quo and erodes political stability in the long-term. Societies disillusioned with the capacity of the political elite to defend the public interest are more susceptible to foreign influence as well as to crime or violence. The need for eradicating corruption is evident; however, governments must also be mindful of the immediate effect change can bring. Challenging and redefining political structures and governance systems and networks may also have a destabilising effect.
38. The parasitic nature of corruption can manifest itself at all levels of governance. Thus, pinpointing the origins and extent of corrupt practices is the first step towards its elimination. At lower levels corruption is most commonly observed in the activities of counsellors and advisers; hence, the police and prosecutors are the most suitable mechanisms for tackling it. At the middle level, fraudulent practices of civil servants are best offset with interventions by international institutions. Finally, at high levels corruption among the political elite can be responded to only with robust transparency and accountability mechanisms to discredit them.
39. Corruption is at its most severe when 'state capture' takes place, whereby private interests come to control government decision-making. Oligarchs and multinational corporations exploiting corrupt practices can undermine other institutions and create informal ones causing further damage to public trust and support. More thorough analysis is needed of how informal economies benefit from the distinction between legal, illegal and undeclared practices. The black economy encompasses illegal activities such as drug trafficking and other forms of organised crime. Its eradication requires significant resources and continuity in efforts. The grey economy, which is the result of legal but undeclared activities, affects the tax revenues state authorities should receive through the trade of goods such as tobacco and alcohol. Lastly, tax evasion



and white-collar crime feed into the corruption cycle. Even though all these forms of corrupt practices require different responses, they must be taken into account when establishing good governance practices.

40. The fight against corruption and for good governance constitutes a 'second front' of the war in Ukraine. The Poroshenko government not only needs to develop its political capacity to deliver services, reduce poverty and generally take control, but it has to do so in a democratic manner to the benefit of the entire population. The country must demonstrate that it can change and can command the confidence of investors and external stakeholders by taming systemic corruption.
41. Estonia constitutes a key example of the implementation of significant political reforms in fighting corruption, and a model for analysing national transition to a more transparent model of governance. Three key elements of this transformation were an improved legislative framework in the country for the prevention and prosecution of corruption, the creation of transparent public institutions with funding and staffing to implement the legislation, and the establishment of monitoring tools and benchmark criteria for evaluating progress.

#### **What role can Parliaments play in improving the governance process?**

42. The underlying principle of good governance is political pluralism. Parliaments should take a leading role in encouraging transparency and accountability of all three sectors of power. For this purpose, policy mechanisms and processes should be as visible as possible and feature prominently in the public information domain. Further, parliaments could devise ways of collecting feedback from the public and incorporate it into legislation, through tools such as service delivery surveys and conclusions of committee hearings.
43. Parliamentarians should also lead the way in establishing transparent governance in countries in transition. They should declare private interests and set up mechanisms with which civil servants would present financial declarations on their income and expenditure (modelled on legislation in Austria). In addition, they should grant public access to draft legislation and parliamentary debates. They would also publicise known corrupt practices following the EU's example. In 2014 the European Commission published anti-corruption reports on all member states analysing countermeasures in place, outstanding issues, policies that are working and areas that could be improved.
44. Such practice could be replicated on a national scale taking into account global interventions such as the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). The convention formulates mechanisms for the prevention and criminalisation of corruption, along with tools for coordinating interstate policies. Even though as an external body the UN cannot provide national political will nor act as a policing force, it can inform decisions and policies for locally owned change.
45. Finally, parliaments should lead a wider process of cultural change. In representing all views, opinions and interests and incorporating best practices, parliaments are well positioned to support civil engagement and stimulate public discussion. Further, they can encourage independent media and investigative reporting, as external sources of information are crucial for legislatures.

#### **Conclusions: protecting democracy**

46. Democracy is fragile and needs to be constantly nurtured. People do not feel secure economically and do not feel that political elites are delivering, weakening national resilience. Russia is leveraging multiple crises by financing journalists and spreading disinformation to muddy the waters, and financing a number of extremist political parties as well. In European democracies 'illiberal' political parties are improving their electoral strength as populations seek 'strong leaders', even though the latter do not offer real solutions to complex problems. Governments are responding to crises in

short term ways rather than thinking more strategically.

47. One critique of mainstream politicians is that they have become scared to speak honestly to their constituents. Politicians like Donald Trump have gained traction in part because they seem to be more 'authentic' and unhandicapped by 'political correctness'. The lack of strong mainstream positions and of genuine messaging that offer plausible approaches for attenuating current social and economic problems is the biggest problem facing parliamentary democracies today. Weak policies only produce weak results and this process simply reinforces the sense of disillusionment with governing structures in Europe.
48. Countries, especially those still in the process of democratic transition, need to have functioning institutions, the confidence of citizens in those institutions, and a reasonable degree of rule of law. External assistance from the EU or elsewhere will not be effective in the absence of national political will and local ownership of reform processes. The overarching role of parliaments should be to help conduct informed debates with society on these issues. More cross parliamentary discussions than are currently taking place would be useful for exchanging lessons and sharing best practice.

### **Denitsa Raynova**

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