

Independent.ie

[News](#) [Opinion](#) [Business](#) [Sport](#) [Life](#) [Style](#) [Entertainment](#) [Travel](#) [Sections](#)

[Letters](#) [Editorial](#) [Comment](#) [Journalists](#)

Premium 

Russia doesn't need to get stronger: all it needs to do is make us look weaker

Colin Murphy



Putin is waging a 'grey war' on the West, and Irish cyber weaknesses are now in his sights



Russia presents a serious hack threat

April 03 2022 02:30 AM



In the belle époque of January, the country rallied to its favourite sport: cheering on the underdog. A fleet of Irish fishermen was preparing to sail to confront the Russian navy, who were planning live-fire exercises in Irish fishing waters off the south-west coast. "We're not averse to danger in our industry — we're no shrinking violets," Patrick Murphy, head of the Irish South & West Fish Producers Organisation, told the US news channel MSNBC.

More On Ukraine



MEP Clare Daly criticises EU sanctions against Russia and claims it is a 'tool' of NATO



Russian bombardment continues against Ukraine cities as Zelensky...

 Privacy

Filatov told an Oireachtas committee the decision was made “on humanitarian grounds” to avoid “unnecessary hardship” for Ireland’s fishing industry. “Irish fishermen stare down Putin’s navy and won,” proclaimed MSNBC.

It was a heartwarming tale, from a more innocent age. And, as we now know, it was nonsense. For four weeks now, Russia has been failing to honour promises to establish humanitarian corridors to allow civilians to escape from the besieged city of Mariupol in Ukraine; they did not relocate a naval drill out of humanitarian concern for Irish fishermen, honourable though the intervention of those fishermen may have been.

The Irish media and politicians fell hook, line and sinker for the yarn that Filatov spun. It took the former chief of staff of the Defence Forces, Mark Mellett, to point out what had actually happened. The incident was a classic example of “hybrid tactics”, he said.

“What they [the Russians] did was give the impression that it was fishermen who sorted it, not the Government. And that portrays the Government as being weak,” he told the *Irish Times*. “That’s what ‘hybrid’ is all about. Russia doesn’t need to get stronger. All it needs to do is make the member states of the European Union look weaker.”

This kind of “hybrid” activity exists in what is known as the “Grey Zone”, which is interstate conflict below the level of war. Other hybrid elements include coercive diplomacy, propaganda, information operations, cyber attacks, military manoeuvres, and implied nuclear and other threats, as Cian Fitzgerald, a researcher at the Institute of International and European Affairs, explained in an article last week.

The entire naval exercise may have been a hybrid exercise from the start, he suggested, with Russia’s intention being to “instrumentalise” Ireland’s security deficits and send “a message to the EU and to Nato that Europe’s western flank is vulnerable”.

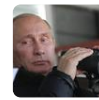
“Kremlin homes in on EU’s weak link,” was the headline in the London *Times*. Mission achieved.

On Wednesday, the director of Ireland’s National Cyber Security Centre, Richard Browne, told an Oireachtas committee that the threat of a direct cyber attack against the State or state agencies was “low”.

Daily Digest Newsletter

Get ahead of the day with the morning headlines at 7.30am and Fionnán Sheahan's exclusive take on the day's news every afternoon, with our free daily newsletter.

politicians



British security guard at embassy in Germany extradited on suspicion of spying for Russia



‘We tried to stop him going back to Ukraine’ – friends and family devastated as former Dublin store manager is killed in fighting



Five things we learned from Ukrainian President Zelenskyy’s address to Oireachtas

Most Watched



MEP Clare Daly says EU sanctions against Russia make her 'sick'



NHS ambulance donated to Ukraine is blown up by Russia in CCTV footage



Barack Obama pranks Joe Biden during return visit to White House

Read More

- Colm McCarthy:
“Freeloaders in the leafy suburbs: do you think they'd mind paying for their road use?”
- Joe Brolly:
“Supremacists are quite happy to respect the outcome of the popular vote — until they lose
- Luke O'Neill:
“Our 2000km trip through blizzards in a cramped van to get aid to Ukraine

This could change quickly, he noted. On Thursday, it appeared to be changing: the director of the UK's Intelligence, Cyber and Security Agency, Jeremy Fleming, said the agency had intelligence that “Russia's cyber actors are looking for targets in the countries that oppose their actions”.

Ireland has clearly identified itself as being among those countries; indeed, Ambassador Filatov told Russian state television last month that Ireland was “hostile to Russia and everything Russian”.

Stuart Madnick, a professor of internet technology at MIT, wrote recently that Ukraine had likely been used by Russia as “a live testing ground for its next generation of cyber weapons” and that, should cyber warfare break out, the US and EU could be targeted, given their support for Ukraine.

Nuanced debate here about the nature of Irish neutrality is unlikely to be appreciated by a Russia that believes it is at war — in all but name — with the West as a whole.

How vulnerable are we to cyber attack? The report on the Conti cyber attack on the HSE, commissioned by the HSE from the consultancy PwC, makes for grimly compelling reading.

That attack cost €600m to repair and, as with any severe disruption to acute care, must have cost lives. And, as PwC say, it could easily have been much worse: the attack was relatively straightforward, the attackers did not maximise the damage, and they provided the decryption key without the ransom being paid.

PwC praise the staff of the HSE and hospitals for going “above and beyond” in their response to the attack; in every other respect, though, the report is a litany of failures.

The HSE has a “frail IT estate”. Its resources in critical IT functions are “significantly lower than we would expect for an organisation of this size”. It did not conduct appropriate contingency planning for a cyber attack. It had just 15 staff in cyber security, who “did not possess the expertise and experience” required.

PwC noted that the HSE's vulnerabilities were not unique to the HSE; it seems likely that many of them would be replicated across state agencies. Accordingly, in the UN's Global Cybersecurity Index for 2020, Ireland ranked 46th, between Tunisia and Nigeria, and ranked 28th in Europe.



Roastie with dog struck by car in heart-warming footage



Putin's daughter, Katerina Tikhonova, filmed during boogie woogie

Latest Comment

dance competition

- Senan Molony
“Volodymyr Zelensky held the Dáil in thrall as he outlined the carnage in his country
- Ben Wright
“Europe must turn off Russian gas taps to starve Putin's brutal war machine
- Antonio Guterres
“Major cities will be submerged if we don't act now
- Lorraine Courtney
“Don't mention the 'C-word' – I said it once, but thankfully I just about got away with it
- Eilis O'Hanlon
“Oscars slap is another blow to toxic woke culture

Most Read

- 1 Philip Ryan
“Leo Varadkar unsettled as party rebels and opposition agree
- 2 Ian O'Doherty
“Putin doesn't have to deal with that messy, pesky, cumbersome thing called democracy



It might seem ironic that the country would be under-resourced in public sector cyber security, but indeed it's entirely consistent with the history of the Irish State: the State's development model has, since its foundation, relied on subcontracting services to the private sector (including in that the churches and charities): education, health and increasingly, in the neoliberal model of recent decades, social and corporate services.

Accordingly, there are more than 6,500 people employed in cyber security in Ireland, and just 30 of them are employed in the National Cyber Security Centre — fewer than in many large companies, a cyber expert told me last week. (The NCSC aims to recruit 20 more this year and expand to 70 staff by 2024.)

Pat Larkin, CEO of Ward Solutions, a cyber security business, himself a former Defence Forces officer, has described this model as Ireland subcontracting its protection to “a cyber-militia of own-company resources and cyber provider companies”.

The annual spend on cyber security by the Department of Communications (parent body of the NCSC) is €7.6m. Pat Larkin believes it should be €50m, benchmarked against our European neighbours. (The UK has committed to spending £2.6bn, equal to €3.1bn, on “cyber and legacy IT” over the next three years.)

Ireland is “nowhere near the levels of protection required for this decade and the rate at which the threats are developing”, he told the Oireachtas committee last week.

Counterintuitively, the Defence Forces has no role here: its cyber security mandate is restricted to protecting its own networks. Even for that, its resources are inadequate, as the recent Commission on the Defence Forces found, with severe staffing shortages in the Communication and Information Services Corps.

In an awkwardly worded but damning assessment, the Commission noted: “the actual specification of key capabilities for military cyber defence, and related counter hybrid warfare aspects is in fact low to negligible in extant policy statements despite the regular specification of cyber risks and hybrid threats”.

One intriguing solution, which Mark Mellett described to me when I interviewed him in 2019, could be to create a cyber unit in the Army Reserve (along the lines of one in the US) which would recruit reservists from the wealth of private-sector cyber expertise here, rewarding them for their time and commitment with experience and challenges they would not get in the private sector.

From courting fishermen to election interference to cyber, Russia has proven itself to be extraordinarily creative in the Grey Zone.

Ireland will need not merely resources and resolve, but imagination and foresight, if we are not to be exposed again as a weak link in European security.

pains but to live to be old is a privilege that has its own joys

4 Sinead Ryan

“ I am unable to vote for a senator – and yet I was asked to run for the Seanad

5 Senan Molony

“ Volodymyr Zelensky held the Dáil in thrall as he outlined the carnage in his country

Latest

[More >](#)

• 1 hour ago

Mayo see off Galway in low-scoring Connacht U20 Championship quarter-final

• 2 hours ago

Who are Vladimir Putin's daughters? Maria Vorontsova and Katerina Tikhonov sanctioned by the US

• 2 hours ago

Man (40) arrested after ‘terrified’ woman rings 999 for a pizza delivery

• 2 hours ago

Alicia Vikander opens up about her and husband Michael Fassbender's pregnancy struggle

• 2 hours ago

Justin Thomas looks ready but Shane Lowry can win wide open Masters