

Russia's Covert Tactics Aim to Alienate Ukraine's Western Neighbors

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Vandalized Hungarian center in Ukraine is among examples of Kremlin's efforts to inflame tensions between Kiev and its EU allies



Workers repairing the roof of the Polish consulate in Lutsk, Ukraine, after it was damaged by a grenade on March 29, 2017. Ukrainian security officials say the attack was planned and funded by a far-right activist who fled to Russia. PHOTO: DAREK DELMANOWICZ/EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

By

James Marson in Kiev, Ukraine, and

Drew Hinshaw in Krakow, Poland

May 17, 2019 9:00 a.m. ET

Russia's efforts to keep Ukraine in its orbit have included invasions, targeted assassinations and economic coercion. Less prominently, Moscow has directed a clandestine campaign of vandalism and hate crimes aimed at spoiling Ukraine's relations with its western neighbors, Ukrainian and European officials say.

An ongoing court case in Poland has shone a light on the varied cast of provocateurs that the officials say the Kremlin has employed to try to stir up ethnic passions on territories where it used to call the shots. Two Polish fascists have admitted that they took money from a supporter of Russia's causes to firebomb a Hungarian cultural center in Ukraine.

The officials say intercepted communications, witness statements and other intelligence, as well as the intermediaries' allegiance to Moscow, point to Russia's covert involvement in the efforts to alienate Kiev's European allies.

Russia blames Ukrainian fascists as it "wants people to tell their governments, 'Enough helping Ukraine. How long can we put up with it?'" said Ihor Huskov, chief of staff of the Security Service of Ukraine, the SBU.

Moscow's strategy of inflaming disputes between Ukraine and its western neighbors has yielded some success. Hungary, led by a nationalist prime minister, has [blocked high-level meetings](#) with Kiev at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization since 2017 over what Budapest calls violations of ethnic Hungarians' rights in western Ukraine. The [war in Ukraine](#), now in its sixth year, has been Russia's laboratory for methods of sowing chaos and shaping public opinion. After [seizing the Crimean peninsula](#) and sparking a separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014, Russia has fomented discord with covert tactics including assassinations and [cyberattacks](#). In Ukraine, one of Europe's poorest countries, a small wad of cash can hire bogus protesters or local muscle, including small but active far-right groups. Local media can be bribed to run fabricated stories that get repeated nationally, as well as in Russia and Europe.

The KGB used similar deception tactics during the Cold War. A 1964 Central Intelligence Agency report says Soviet spies in West Germany set synagogues afire and painted swastikas in public places, attributing the acts to locals to discredit the country.

A modern variation on that strategy occurred just after midnight on March 29, 2017, when a grenade flew into the Polish consulate in the western Ukrainian city of Lutsk. The next morning a crowd of dozens blocked the highway linking the two countries, carrying professionally printed signs that read, “No to the genocide of Poles” and “Poles are our brothers.” Ukraine’s SBU says that no ethnic Poles were in the crowd and that the attack was a provocation planned and funded by a far-right activist who later fled to Russia.

Poland, despite a history of conflicts with Ukraine, has [lobbied for its neighbor](#) inside the European Union and shares [a suspicion of the Kremlin](#).

Hungary, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has at times adopted an antagonistic stance toward Ukraine. Mr. Orbán, [an admirer](#) of Russian President Vladimir Putin, has issued thousands of passports in Ukraine, where dual citizenship is unlawful, sometimes to people with only distant claims to Hungarian ancestry. Positioning himself as a defender of Hungarians abroad, Mr. Orbán has blocked high-level meetings with Ukraine at NATO over Ukrainian language legislation that promotes using Ukrainian over Hungarian, or any other minority language, in schools and other public institutions.

The SBU says it thwarted an attack on the Society of Hungarian Culture in the western Ukrainian city of Uzhgorod in late 2017, intended as part of a planned arson wave also targeting Romanian schools. SBU officials say they also broke up a fake conference where supposed members of the Hungarian community planned to call for independence from Ukraine.

In both cases, the SBU published intercepted communications that it said showed a Russian citizen, who it identified as working for Russian security services, seeking to hire Ukrainians to carry out the attacks and attend the conference for cash payments.

Ukrainian officials say those failed plots prompted Russian agents to turn to Polish fascists. Europe’s far-right has found common cause with the Kremlin in recent years, earning recognition and, sometimes, financing as they promoted Moscow’s views on trips to Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

Polish prosecutors say Michał Propokowicz, a member of Polish fascist movement Falanga, in January last year sent a text message to his comrade Tomasz Szymkowiak offering 2,000 zlotys, or roughly \$520, “for a noble cause.”



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has blocked high-level meetings with Kiev at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization since 2017.PHOTO: EMMANUEL DUNAND/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Mr. Propokowicz said he was acting on orders to organize an attack in Uzhgorod in 2018 from Manuel Ochsenreiter, a pro-Russian opinion writer who was then an aide to a far-right member of Germany’s parliament. Mr. Ochsenreiter, a supporter of Russian military interventions in Ukraine and Syria, didn’t return requests for comment but has previously denied wrongdoing.

Polish prosecutors say Mr. Propokowicz delivered the payment, hidden in the pages of a book about the Syrian war, to Mr. Szymkowiak, who recruited another friend, Adrian Marglewski, for the operation. Mr. Marglewski was in his early 20s, unemployed and driving an old [Volkswagen](#) van.

Messrs. Szymkowiak and Marglewski sneaked into Ukraine at 1 a.m. on Feb. 3, 2018, carrying phones wiped clean except for the messaging app Telegram. They walked to the Hungarian cultural center in Uzhgorod, where Mr. Marglewski painted the number 88, associated with Hitler, and a swastika, according to Krakow court documents.

Mr. Szymkowiak, phone in hand, then filmed Marglewski tossing a Molotov cocktail that bounced off a wall. They sent the video to Mr. Propokowicz, who advised they return with a gasoline-soaked jacket and try again, which they did. It did little more than char a wall.

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Security cameras captured the events and Ukrainian law enforcers soon identified the men. "We found these guys quite fast and easily," said a Polish counterintelligence official. Within three weeks, the men were detained in Poland.

All three men have admitted to committing the acts, which they called petty vandalism. They dispute Polish charges of inciting hatred and terrorism-related acts. The trial is under way, with a verdict expected in July. If found guilty, Mr. Propokowicz faces up to 12 years in prison.

Weeks later, a homemade bomb started a larger fire, gutting the cultural center's ground floor. Two Ukrainians, now in custody, had been paid to carry out the assault, said Ukrainian officials. The attack had been ordered by a security official from a breakaway region of neighboring Moldova that is backed by Russia, who evaded arrest, the officials say.

The attack on the Hungarian cultural center was top news in some Hungarian pro-government media. Hungary's Foreign Ministry demanded a meeting with Ukraine's ambassador to Budapest. Mr. Orbán recorded a [Facebook](#) video expressing concern for Hungarians in Ukraine.

Hungary continues to block official high-level meetings with Ukraine at NATO, despite criticism from the U.S. that it is furthering a key Kremlin foreign-policy goal by impeding Kiev's integration with the military alliance.

—*Natalia Ojewska in Krakow, Poland, contributed to this article.*

Write to James Marson at james.marson@wsj.com and Drew Hinshaw at drew.hinshaw@wsj.com

Appeared in the May 18, 2019, print edition as 'Trial Reveals Plots to Mar Kiev's EU Ties.'