The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Estonian Kidnap Is Russia's Latest Provocation

By Mark Galeotti

September 11, 2014



The Russian seizure — 'kidnap' is the more accurate word — of Estonian security officer Eston Kohver represents a dangerous escalation of efforts to throw the West off balance. It has succeeded, but will harm Russia in the long run.

Last week Kohver, who was engaged in an investigation of smuggling operations across the Russian border — crime rings which may well have involved corrupt Russian security officers — went to meet a supposed informant close to the border.

Instead, he was seized by armed Russian officers, who used smoke grenades and radio jamming to prevent his backup from reacting in time, and dragged across the border into Russia.

Initial suggestions that this might have been the act of a criminal gang or an unsanctioned operation by maverick Russian security officers threatened by his investigations were soon dashed when the Federal Security Service (FSB) announced his "detention" and he ended up

in Moscow, to be paraded before television cameras.

The Kremlin claims that Kohver was actually on Russian soil, and engaged in espionage activities. However, apart from the fact that the Kremlin also claimed initially that there were no Russian troops in Crimea or eastern Ukraine — until it turned out that there had been, after all — what objective evidence there is demonstrated that he was actually taken near Luhana, in Estonia.

It is certainly not the first time Moscow has taken people across borders, consider Ukrainian pilot Nadya Savchenko, allegedly captured near Luhansk then transferred to Russia. Likewise, Moscow's determination to resist foreign intelligence operations is well known, as is its particular dislike of Estonia. After all, not only has the Estonian Security Police (KaPo) been disproportionately effective in combating Russian espionage activity— and in gathering its own covert information — but even before the Crimean adventure, Tallinn's was a voice warning the West about Russian intentions. Furthermore, Kohver is a highly regarded and decorated KaPo officer.

None of this, though, explains the decision to mount an armed raid into a sovereign state, part of the NATO alliance, to seize a foreign security officer.

Instead, this has to be seen as simply one more move in Russia's current campaign of aggressive brinkmanship against the West. It is a classic example of the Kremlin's current "non-linear war" tactics against the West, which focus on political operations to which the West cannot easily respond.

The main goal appears to be to pick at the unity and credibility of NATO. Kohver's abduction came as NATO was debating how to prevent Russian adventurism and just days after a visit to Estonia by U.S. President Barack Obama. There he delivered a message of support in what is, after all, now a frontline state in the new era of conflict between Russia and the West.

However, Kohver's kidnap demonstrates the extent to which the challenges of the new "hot peace" are so different to those of the Cold War. NATO was created to deter and repel a direct military threat. Yet the Kremlin is by no means stupid enough to offer such an overt challenge, not least because it is aware that it cannot outgun the Western alliance. So instead it play to its strengths and, above all, what it considers Western weaknesses: the differences of opinion between member states, a continued adherence to international norms and laws, pluralistic political systems that can be manipulated.

In 2007, Estonia was hit by a massive and sustained series of cyberattacks following an acrimonious political dispute with Russia.

The hacks were clearly inspired by the Kremlin and carried out largely from Russia, albeit primarily by "patriotic hackers" rather than employees of the state. Yet they posed a quandary for a NATO that did not want to pick a fight with Moscow and was unsure of how to address such a virtual onslaught.

Likewise, this case poses unexpected and thorny challenges to the West, particularly on how it should respond. Is this primarily a bilateral dispute between Tallinn and Moscow? How significant should NATO consider the fact that it was an armed incursion across borders? Is it

a distraction at a time when the emphasis is on trying to bring a lasting peace to Ukraine?

The Russians have managed for the moment to inject more disagreement and division within the Western alliance. While NATO nations are united in their overt condemnation of the raid, there is no consensus on how importantly to treat it and what — if anything — to do. Furthermore, Obama's promises inevitably now sound hollow and other frontline states must now be wondering what real support NATO offers in the face of such oblique pressure.

And yet one must hope Moscow is not celebrating prematurely. Although the Kremlin presumably felt it got away with the 2007 cyberattacks, they led in due course to the creation of NATO's new cybersecurity initiative — based, appropriately enough in Estonia — and also started to push the alliance away from its hopes of being able to consider Russia a partner rather than a problem.

Likewise, every semi-deniable, military-political operation the Russians carry out leads the West to develop countermeasures, toughen their political line, and listen more closely to those voices saying that it cannot consider the present Kremlin as anything other than a threat.

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https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/11/estonian-kidnap-is-russias-latest-provocation-a39316