

Implications for NATO:

Latvia and the Russian Hybrid Warfare Threat

Alisa Tsaturov

Alisa Tsaturov is a Masters' candidate at The George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs with a concentration in Security Studies and Europe and Eurasia. She currently works at the U.S. Department of State in the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs as a Program Analyst. She also taught English overseas as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in Eastern Latvia and is a fluent Russian speaker.

ABSTRACT

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance currently faces not only a conventional threat from Russia, but also a more insidious threat—that of hybrid warfare. In the past several years there has been a noticeable increase in the range and intensity of Russian hybrid warfare attacks. Efforts of the United States, NATO, and individual countries have been insufficient in recognizing and combating this multifaceted issue thus far. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are particularly at risk due to their proximity to Russia and their shared history. Latvia is more susceptible to Russian hybrid operations, since it contains the highest population of Russian speakers and ethnic Russians out of the three Baltic States. The potential of a traditional Russian military threat to the Baltics and to NATO is a fact that is known and well documented: the United States, NATO, and the Baltics must be prepared to prevent not only the likelihood of conventional attacks, but all potential forms of Russian aggression, including non-violent subversion efforts.

The NATO alliance faces not only a conventional threat from Russia, but also one that is more insidious in nature—hybrid warfare. In the past several years, there has been a noticeable increase in the range and intensity of Russian hybrid warfare attacks, but the efforts of the United States, NATO, and individual countries have been insufficient in recognizing and combating this multifaceted issue thus far. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are particularly at risk due to their geographic and historical proximity to Russia. This paper outlines nonviolent Russian hybrid operations carried out in Latvia, the country that contains the highest population of Russian speakers and ethnic Russians of the three Baltic States.¹ The potential of a

traditional Russian military threat to NATO and the Baltics is known and well documented. However, the United States, NATO, and the Baltics must be prepared to prevent possible conventional attacks as well as all forms of potential Russian aggression, including non-violent subversion efforts. Since the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, as well as after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent War in the Donbas, the term "hybrid warfare" has attracted interest from Western scholars and strategists. James Wither uses a definition found in the 2015 edition of *Military Balance*, which defines hybrid warfare as:

*"The use of military and non-military tools in an integrated campaign, designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative and gain psychological as well as physical advantages utilizing diplomatic means; sophisticated and rapid information, electronic and cyber operations; covert and occasionally overt military and intelligence action; and economic pressure."*²

Hybrid warfare involves the blending of traditional tactics with non-conventional techniques, the blurring of conflict between war and peace, as well as attempts to influence the domestic politics of target countries through political subversion. Hybrid warfare presents a unique danger in the modern day because it is waged in an increasingly globalized context and often weaponizes information to sow confusion and disorder through technological means.

According to Franklin Kramer, a distinguished fellow and board member at the Atlantic Council and former Assistant Secretary of Defense, and Lauren Speranza, Assistant Director of the Transatlantic Security Initiative at the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, Russian hybrid threats can be divided into four key categories: low-level use of force, cyber-attacks, economic and political subversion, and information warfare. Russian hybrid operations are frequently carried out by non-traditional participants, who are drawn from "a bewildering array of 'political entrepreneurs' hoping that their success will win them the Kremlin's favor: diplomats and spies, criminals and think tankers, oligarchs and journalists."³ Politically, the goal is to exploit existing weaknesses in society, sow confusion, and spread demoralization in order, "for Moscow to exert predominant influence over the foreign and security policies of immediate neighbors so that they will either remain neutral or support Russia's international agenda and not challenge the legitimacy of the Putinist system."⁴ It is important to add that Russian operations may at times be disjointed, opportunistic, and even at odds with one another.

In order to address the Russian hybrid challenge it is crucial to understand the Russian political landscape, as well as the worldview of President Vladimir

Putin and the Russian government. Under the rule of President Putin, Russia has slid towards authoritarian kleptocracy. Corruption pervades Russian government and economic institutions, where elites secure their hold on power by economically robbing public resources.⁵ Putin has consolidated control through a power-vertical system that has led to the removal of most forms of political dissent. Using this system, the Kremlin selects local governments itself while harassing, targeting, or penalizing opposition.⁶ Additionally, freedom of the press has been significantly reduced and stifled, with independent news outlets shut down or brought under the control of the state.

Mixed with political challenges are: Putin's deep-seated mistrust toward the West, a concerted effort to avoid color revolutions, and a conviction that the fall of the Soviet Union was one of the greatest geopolitical tragedies of the 20th century. From the Kremlin's perspective, the West "gained the upper hand in the 1990s, both militarily through NATO's eastward expansion, and in propaganda terms by portraying Western democracy as the only attractive form of government."⁷ In the eyes of Putin and his government, Russia must therefore constantly defend itself against Western-supported regime change. Putin's philosophy is marked by a dizzying "blend of Russian statism, great power chauvinism, pan-Slavism, panOrthodoxy, multi-ethnic Eurasianism, Russian nationalism... social conservatism, anti-liberalism, anti-Americanism, and anti-Westernism" which ultimately aims to restore Russia to its former glory by fundamentally restructuring the existing international order with Russia as a major center of power.⁸

Even though the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are NATO members, there is growing concern that these countries may be the targets of ongoing Russian hybrid warfare attacks, constituting a direct threat to NATO. They are geographically near to Russia, and are composed of significant Russian-speaking minorities.⁹ This is true more so in Latvia than the other two Baltic states. Russians living in Latvia reside mostly in the capital of Riga and make up approximately half of the population of the eastern region of Latgale, which borders Russia and Belarus,¹⁰ and is the least economically developed region in Latvia. The country as a whole has a population of less than two million people, and over one-third of Latvians speak Russian as their native language.¹¹ This, combined with Latvia's small military and distance from Western Europe (politically and geographically), present challenges.¹² As the middle Baltic country, Latvia is of strategic importance for Russia: if Russia was to reassert dominance in Latvia, this would effectively isolate Estonia and align Kaliningrad closer with the Russian mainland, dealing a significant blow to the NATO alliance.

The Baltic countries spent the majority of the twentieth century occupied by imperial powers including the Soviet Union. After gaining independence in 1991 from the Soviet Union, Latvia began the process of re-building a

robust national identity, adding to the ethnic tensions. Therefore, according to Corey Collier, “Latvians tend to view each other as either pro-Russian (with all the communist baggage that comes with it) or as pro-Western (which to ethnic Russians means either sympathetic to Nazism or NATO aggression).”¹³ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Latvia and Estonia adopted a policy that stated that all individuals who could not trace their ancestry to Latvia or Estonia prior to 1940 were required to apply for citizenship. The naturalization exam included a compulsory language requirement, which meant that Russians who did not speak Latvian were disqualified. Those who were disqualified were often Russian citizens or stateless individuals.¹⁴ While some Russians have integrated well into Latvian communities, some enclaves remain and consist mainly of older Russians who resist assimilation and “ may be susceptible to manipulation by Moscow’s agitprop (political propaganda) offensives.”¹⁵

Russia has moved to exploit the divisions existing in Latvian society through a number of different tactics including but not limited to: diplomatic pressure, psychological operations, incitement of the Russian population, and information operations.¹⁶ For example, when the Latvian government rejected efforts—that had been supported by the Kremlin—to establish Russian as an official language in Latvia, the Russian government seized this opportunity to promote the narrative of the oppression of Russian minority communities in former Soviet states and to present Putin as the protector of Russians in the near abroad. Another tactic included the use of “passportization,” through which Russia granted “ethnic Russians—even third-generation Latvian-born ethnic Russians—[the ability to] acquire Russian citizenship, Russian passports, and retire on a Russian pension years earlier than Latvian citizens.”¹⁷

Additionally, there is some concern that if Moscow wanted to retaliate against NATO and the United States in the Baltics, the Kremlin could foment a locally organized separatist movement: a potential candidate being the Latgalian city of Daugavpils, with a majority Russia population. Such a scenario remains unlikely but possible, as many Russians living in Latgale would not be open to intervention by Moscow but a small population would be supportive. If armed, pro-Russian separatists could create major problems for Latvia, particularly as the media could blow such a revolt out of proportion.¹⁸ In such a situation, Russian actions would be opportunistic in nature, with the Kremlin attempting to capitalize on the pre-existing societal divisions in Latvia.

Currently the Kremlin, with support from local pro-Russia activists in Latvia, has tried to keep tensions brewing by supporting organizations and NGOs sympathetic to the Russian cause. Bugajski and Assenova reveal that a study conducted by *Re:Baltica* showed that there are over 40 organizations throughout the Baltics which seek to, “influence political discussions and push Moscow’s political line.”¹⁹ One such example is Latvian Human Rights

Committee, an organization that advocates for the rights of non-Latvian citizens and has suspected links with Moscow.

Furthermore, Russia maintains ties to ethnic Russians living in countries of the former Soviet Union through its, "Compatriot Policy, [which] funds pro-Russia organizations in the Baltics, supports educational exchanges, and seeks to protect the interests of Russians abroad."²⁰ While Russia claims that the Compatriot Policy and its corresponding entity *Rosstrudnichestvo* are legitimate culture-based institutions, the Baltic countries argue that Russia is trying to hamper the integration process and, "undermine... Latvia's sovereignty and security, including through the promotion of alternative views of the Soviet Union's occupation of the Baltics and by convincing the population that the Baltic governments are fascist."²¹ Russia has also resorted to diplomatic pressure and psychological tactics by raising questions about the sovereignty and legitimacy of the Baltic States: some members of the Duma have brought up the, "legality of the break-up of the USSR and the independence of the Baltic states and other former Soviet republics."²² Some Russian officials, "have attacked the Preamble to the Latvian Constitution... claiming that it gives a privileged position to the titular nation over ethnic minorities and will facilitate further inter-ethnic splits."²³

The split between the Russian and Latvian media spaces is a long-term issue that has plagued Latvia since independence. Russian speakers prefer to watch Russian shows due to higher production and more relevant plots, and therefore Russian speakers exist in a "separate informational space" from the Latvian population.²⁴ As noted by Bugajski and Assenova, "Russian state TV exerts influence over the older generation, while the youth is reached mostly through the Internet."²⁵ Russian propaganda, which is controlled and funded by the state, has a "tremendous influence on Russian speakers in the Baltics."²⁶ Such a potential leverage point allows Russia more influence than the West or Latvia itself, as it pits state-sponsored disinformation against free media.²⁷

The NATO alliance must be prepared to defend against a conventional Russian attack, and must also do everything in its power to neutralize and defend against nonviolent Russian hybrid threats. Additionally, it is crucial to understand that although some of the moves made by Moscow may appear insignificant or ineffective at this moment in time, the strategy of "salami tactics" proves otherwise. Using this technique, an adversary—in this case Russia—works to gain control of a political landscape "piece-by-piece," so that the victim does not realize until it is too late. There are steps that NATO, Latvia, and other Baltic countries can take on several fronts in order to strengthen their position and counter Russian hybrid operations.

On a regional and national level, Latvia needs to begin bridging the Latvian-Russian ethnic divide and healing social divisions. Currently, "Latvia lacks a common forum for inter-ethnic reconciliation, and there is little

dialogue in the two communities regarding Latvia's occupation under... Sovietism."²⁸ The creation of such a forum, perhaps with the help of local civil society, would be an important stride in the right direction. The change towards increased integration must be consistent and gradual, because "there is a danger in moving too quickly, because ethnic Russians gaining citizenship [and] immediately transitioning to voting constituents... could empower pro-Russian political parties."²⁹

The Latvian government must also address the legacy of Communism and devote more attention to the development of the eastern Latgale region, where "a lack of modernisation... [and] severe and long-lasting socio-economic backwardness has remained a continuing source for political disaffection placing a strain on state loyalty."³⁰ Next, the government should push for more transparency regarding Russian investment in Latvia and seek to limit Russian financial and political activities in Latvia, including the funding of pro-Russian NGOs.

In the realm of informational warfare, Latvia and the Baltics must use their advantage of being open and democratic societies, in the sense that all citizens in these countries have access to a wide range of media sources, unlike Russian citizens living in Russia. Sandra Murinska suggests that the "most effective way to reduce the influence of Russian media is to strengthen Latvia's media space."³¹ The funding and resources devoted to fighting Russian disinformation must be increased, both locally and nationally. In a coordinated effort NATO, the United States, and Latvia should aim to counteract Russian sources of information and enhance the resilience of the population by working to balance out the flows of media and information.

One way to do so would be to support private efforts of civil society and journalists in creating engaging media content, both on TV and on the Internet, which would ultimately encourage Russian speakers from turning to Russian news sources. It would also be important to collect information on the media consumption habits of citizens living in the region of Latgale, and then to produce media that counters Russian propaganda, relays local news, and provides coverage of major global events, with Russian speakers in that region as the target audience.

Some key structures that address these issues are already in place, namely the NATO Stratcom Center of Excellence in Riga and on the civil society level, the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence. The work of these organizations is essential, and the Latvian government, the United States, and NATO must provide support for such endeavors. Kramer and Speranza write that "creating a fund at...the NATO level that is focused on supporting such private sector and civil society efforts could have multiplier effects and could be very worthwhile in responding to Russian propaganda."³²

The NATO alliance, in a joint effort with the United States, Latvia, and

other Baltic states must take action to prepare for and safeguard against a wide range of Russian hybrid operations, from political and economic subversion to information warfare. Such an approach will require increasing regional knowledge as well as local, supranational, and international cooperation. Hybrid warfare seeks to target existing weaknesses in international organizations, government institutions, and society as a whole; the alliance must cultivate resilience of local populations by ensuring access to balanced news sources in the face of such threats, and understand that Russia will exploit known vulnerabilities if given the chance. Ultimately, the NATO alliance must recognize that hybrid warfare operations are a reality of 21st century warfare and implement policies that will ensure the continued peace and security of its member nations now and in the future.

ENDNOTES

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