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Hybrid warfare in the Baltics

Dorthe Bach Nyemann

Introduction

Scholars interested in hybrid threats and hybrid warfare currently debate which strategies best apply in countering these challenges – at the national as well as international level. One key question is whether it is possible to deter actors from pursuing hybrid warfare operations.¹ There are numerous difficulties with hindering deniable or covert actions which are often taking place below the threshold of an armed attack, whereas there are potentially high strategic gains for the adversary who only faces low expenses and low risks – politically as well as militarily – compared to conventional confrontations.²

Taking a closer look at Russian goals and actions in the Baltic States after 2014, the aim of this case study is to show that actions amounting to hybrid threats do occur in the Baltic States. However, the case study has not been able to find evidence of coordinated and synchronized attacks across a broad spectrum of societal functions that would amount to hybrid operations or hybrid warfare. Furthermore, the case study aims to render probable that this – the lack of evidence of hybrid operations in the Baltic States – can at least be partly explained by initiatives taken by the Baltic States themselves in conjunction with initiatives from NATO and the EU to successfully deter Russia from taking further steps. The argument goes that so far, these responses have deterred Russia from pursuing more significant influence in the region. Instead, the case study detects a broad Russian institutional framework for possible future operations in the Baltic States. The institutional framework is ‘ready to use’ if better conditions for Russian activities should appear down the line.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section consists of a short presentation of the conceptualization of hybrid warfare utilized in this chapter, and how we may positively identify a hybrid operation. In the second section, the strategic value of the Baltic States to Russia is discussed in order to evaluate whether it is reasonable to expect hybrid operations or other types of Russian actions in the area. In the third section the chapter goes through an overall assessment of the levers of power which Russia has used in order to influence and ultimately change political priorities in the Baltic States. Can this be identified as a hybrid operation or is it something else? The fourth section presents a case of successful hybrid deterrence in the Baltics, by

going through a range of arguments as to why the case study does not find an ongoing hybrid operation in the region. This is done by presenting illustrative examples of actions taken by the Baltic States from 2007. In addition, the study presents measures by NATO and the EU and the negative consequences that these have had for Russia. Finally, the chapter discusses the extent to which these initiatives can explain the lack of hybrid warfare in the Baltic States.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to address some methodical issues. First, hybrid warfare and hybrid threats are characterized as ambiguous, covert, low-level actions, making it difficult to attribute them to an actor and consequently making it hard to realize connections between different incidents and a broader picture of a coordinated synchronized attack.³ Moreover, hybrid warfare can scale up and down in intensity, preventing clear distinctions between legitimate influence and illegal interference.⁴ Without access to classified material in the three countries, relying on official documents and published reports, it is impossible to draw absolute conclusions as to whether hybrid warfare is taking place in the Baltic States.

A second problem arises when trying to make the case of successful deterrence. It is not possible to prove why we do *not* see an operation. There could be many reasons for this, not at all connected to the initiatives or responses taken by the individual states or internationally. These factors must be taken into account when we discuss why Russia is not pursuing a higher level of interference in the Baltic States.

Given the many elements that can and do play a part in an analysis of hybrid warfare, this case study will only be able to provide illustrative examples of Russian activities in and countermeasures by the three countries. Referring to other works that provide greater depth on separate issues, the aim is to give an overall picture of the Russian engagement in the Baltic States. Choosing this approach, however, does open up for a relevant critique of missing pieces to the puzzle or lack of documentation.

Identifying hybrid warfare in the Baltic States

Hybrid warfare and hybrid threats are contested concepts and currently an arena for much scholarly debate.⁵ In order to make these concepts useful tools for an analysis of the current situation in the Baltic States – which is the purpose of this chapter in particular – a short presentation of variables and distinctions is necessary.

This case study makes a distinction between *hybrid threats* and *hybrid actions* on the one hand and *hybrid warfare* and *hybrid operations* on the other hand. Hybrid threats are deniable or covert actions by an aggressor in a target state involving instruments of power such as cyberattacks (not amounting to an armed attack), information operations, economic pressure or other unfriendly activities often performed by third-party malign non-state actors.⁶ These tactics are tailored to specific vulnerabilities in the societal functions of the target state. The purpose is to affect the perceptions of citizens in the targeted state and to create effects in the whole society, including the private sector and civil society, without triggering decisive responses, including armed responses.⁷

These tactics amount to hybrid warfare *if* the hybrid actions are *coordinated* and *synchronized*, thus enhancing their effect, *and if* they are combined with the threat

or use of military means – conventional or irregular – signifying a hybrid operation.⁸ Given the deniable, covert and ambiguous character of hybrid actions, the problem of realizing whether a state is facing a hybrid warfare scenario is complicated. Ideally, states must react to hybrid threats *before* the situation evolves to a case of hybrid warfare.⁹

The current strategic value of the Baltic States for Russia

Since 1991, Russia has sought to persuade the Baltic governments to make political choices favourable to Russia, directed not least at the large numbers of Russian minorities living in the area.¹⁰ The Baltic States, in turn, have acted utterly different on a range of policy matters of importance to Russia. After many years of negotiation and adaption to Western standards and procedures, they all became members of both NATO and the EU in 2004, which constituted *the low point* in Russia's relations with these former members of the Soviet Union. In the aftermath, Russia's ability to use military and economic pressures as tools for influence in the Baltic States became significantly delimited.

After 2004, Russia has sought to employ a variety of other means and methods to 'stay' influential in the region. The first demonstration of these means and methods took place in Estonia in 2007. At that time, the Estonian government decided to relocate a monument of Soviet troops from central Tallinn to a nearby military cemetery. The monument depicted a Soviet soldier who died while fighting to take Tallinn back from Nazi occupation in the Second World War. In the years prior to 2007, the statue had become a focal point of tension between different groups in Estonia.¹¹ For the local Russian minority, it had come to represent the 'liberator' from fascism while for the Estonians, it represented the 'oppressor' and reflected the many years as a part of the USSR. As is well known, the relocation of the monument caused the infamous widespread and severe cyberattacks on Estonian society.¹²

However, other related actions were simultaneously taking place, coordinated towards the same political aim, that is, getting Estonia to abide by Russian interests, respecting the Russian interpretation of history and securing the preservation of Russian cultural heritage. Simultaneously with the cyberattacks, organized riots took place in Estonia and at the Estonian Embassy in Moscow, culminating with an attack on the Estonian ambassador to Russia at a press conference. The riots were accompanied by looting and destruction, and more than 200 people were arrested.¹³ Russian one-eyed media reports on police violence towards Russian minority demonstrators and the absence of reports on the violent actions of demonstrators fuelled an array of angry statements from Russia, including a statement by a member of the Russian parliament that this event should be a cause for war.¹⁴ Although no Russian sanctions were announced, many Estonian companies lost trade revenue. This might be due to a patriotic reaction by Russian business owners, however, a ban on heavy commercial truck traffic at a border bridge in Narva did involve a government decision.¹⁵ In an analysis from 2008, Rain Ottis labels Russia's efforts in Estonia as information warfare.¹⁶

In hindsight, the actions in 2007 – coordinated and synchronized with escalatory effects across Estonia's societal functions, including deniable and ambiguous violent actions by non-state actors – appear to be a hybrid operation, albeit not a very successful one. Estonia neither changed its political practices, nor its decisions or priorities. On the contrary, the connections to the West and the commitment between NATO and Estonia grew even stronger after 2007 and came to include many more policy areas and interdependencies than before. Specifically, cyber-security and cyber defence have become part of the NATO agenda through continuous Estonian legwork. The Russian actions helped the Baltic States to re-establish NATO as a collective defence alliance and not just a toolbox for military expeditions outside of the Alliance as had become the case since the early 1990s.

What are Russia's strategic objectives in the Baltic States today? In Russia, there is still a widespread nostalgia for the imperial past, and for various reasons, many in Moscow consider the Baltic States as residing within Russia's 'natural' sphere of influence and refuse to acknowledge them as sovereign and independent.¹⁷ A large number of ethnic Russians remain in Estonia (more than a quarter of the population) and Latvia (where 40 per cent speak Russian as their first language, and around 25 per cent are ethnic Russians). A smaller but still substantial number of ethnic Russians remain in Lithuania (4.5 per cent in 2018).¹⁸ To Russia, this justifies pursuing Russian influence, interest and in some instances even intervention in these countries.

Russia's political, economic, military and even geopolitical interests in the Baltic States are, however, quite limited. The region does not even house a valuable transit route for energy transportation. As a consequence, Russia's foreign policy pays insignificant attention to the Baltic States. In the perception of the Baltic States, Russia is *the* main threat – but the interest is not reciprocated by Russia.¹⁹ Russia might have an interest in splitting the NATO Alliance and EU cooperation, if possible, and weakening the Baltic States could be a stepping stone in such a strategy. If tested, however, this gamble would risk weakening Russia and even further consolidating NATO and EU cooperation as was the case with Estonia in 2007.²⁰

Against this backdrop, how valuable is it for Russia to maintain its influence in the Baltic States, and can Russia realistically expect to expand its influence and power in these countries? Russia's policies have turned out to be less assertive here than in other regions, such as the south Caucasus or the Balkans. Russia seems to be driven by pragmatism towards the Baltic States.²¹ An indirect approach to evaluating the importance of the Baltic States to Russia is to examine the domestic efforts of the Russian leadership to influence Russian citizens' perceptions of the Baltic States. In Russian TV coverage between 2014 and 2018, negative coverage of Europe is concentrated around countries like France (17 per cent), Germany (12 per cent), the UK (10 per cent) and the EU (9 per cent), whereas the Baltic States get less than 1 per cent of the attention.²²

Thus, if TV coverage is interpreted as part of preparing the Russian public for potential conflict, as some analysts suggest,²³ the Baltic States are currently not a high-value target for Russia. This is a crucial point to keep in mind when seeking to evaluate the success of countermeasures against Russian hybrid threats in the Baltic States. In all likelihood, Russia could and would engage much more in hybrid actions, even amounting to hybrid warfare, if on the one hand such an operation stood a chance of

being successful, and if the Baltic States constituted a vital national interest to Russia on the other.

Russian advancement in the use of levers of power

An assessment of Russia's capabilities as a hybrid warfare actor in the Baltic States requires a comprehensive review of Russia's use of its levers of power against the societal functions of these states, from the military and the informational to the social, the political and the economic sphere.²⁴ Putting the puzzle together piece by piece provides us with an overall picture of Russia's practices in the Baltic States, where a wide range of levers are available and perfected through extensive experience and training. Capabilities of influence in different spheres can be institutionalized through the establishment of organizations, ongoing practices, shared understanding within specific groups and flows of resources to maintain all of the above. Identifying an institutional framework of influence within the different spheres will provide an understanding of Russia's current position and also of the level of preparedness for future actions in the area.

Military

The rise of hybrid warfare can be traced to the success of traditional military deterrence from the West. Since becoming members of the NATO Alliance, the Baltic States enjoy the comfort of the security umbrella in article 5 of the NATO treaty, including the credibility of the whole Alliance.²⁵ Even though the Baltic States are part of NATO, their geography still makes them vulnerable targets, and Russia's development of conventional military capability has made the Baltic States question if security guarantees under article 5 are a sufficient deterrent against Russian aggression. Since 2008, Russia has launched massive military reforms and improved the quality of its forces as well as its confidence regarding military performance. Russia is displaying its military on the borders of neighbouring countries, in airspace and in the maritime zones. In 2014, the overall number of intercepts made by the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission was more than 130.²⁶

Russia regularly organizes exercises close to the Baltic borders, intimidating its neighbours and instilling fears that these exercises hide preparations for real attacks. Russia is overwhelmingly stronger than the forces in the Baltic area and has regional conventional superiority.²⁷ Among the greatest concerns is the introduction of advanced weapon systems – Iskander-M ballistic missiles and the S-400 long-range air defence system – which would severely delay NATO reinforcements to the region.²⁸ However, the most prominent risk is that military superiority combined with actions in other spheres using non-military means could substantially weaken the Baltic States' internal legitimacy and coherence. In an internal crisis, Russia could use its military strength and presence to put pressure on the Baltic States, staying below the threshold of article 5 of the NATO treaty, but still applying irregular military force in a manner similar to the scenario in Ukraine. This could include applying previously placed

equipment, using perfidy at sea and on land, engaging in cyberattacks and information operations with assistance from local malign non-state actors combined with other covert actions to achieve a 'frozen conflict' situation prior to NATO deployment. In order to be successful, such an operation will rely on Russia activating strong levers of power in the non-military spheres in the Baltic States.

Information

Russia has established an international institutional framework of disinformation through social media, including interception tools to engage in personalized harassments and direct messaging on civilian mobile devices on a massive scale.²⁹ Russia has practised these abilities in Ukraine and Syria and through election meddling all over Europe and in the United States.³⁰ Russia has even targeted NATO personnel in the 'Enhanced Forward Presence' mission in the Baltic States.³¹ The targeting of foreign military personnel has been widely practised by Russia in Eastern Ukraine, with tactical level messages trying to demoralize the soldiers and stressing the trust between various levels of command or by targeting families and relatives remote from the battlefield by means of disturbing messages.³²

Despite evidence of effective use of social media targeting both individuals and large groups internationally, there is little evidence that suggests that Russia pursues influence through systematic election meddling or systematic individual or group targeting using social media in the Baltic States. One of Latvia's security agencies, 'The Constitution Protection Bureau', concluded in its annual report from 2018 that close media monitoring and an intensified analysis of Russian propaganda initiatives showed *no* attempts to influence the outcome of the 2018 election in Latvia. There were indications of high levels of information gathering on the election by Russia, but this was mostly done using open-source material.³³ The Digital Forensic Research Lab has investigated online campaigns for a boycott of the 2019 EU Parliament Election, also in Latvia. What they found was just a small group of accounts belonging to local Latvians trying to target Latvian Facebook users. Even when these groups themselves translated their messages into Russian, there is no evidence of amplified likes or shares from outside the small community or any other Russian meddling.

Over an extended period, Russia has used mass media to influence the Baltic public,³⁴ overtly through Russia Today, Sputnik and other media with a direct connection to the Russian regime and covertly with money and instructions to private media on what stories to bring, even artificially boosting audience numbers in specific headlines. One example is the media Baltnews, officially an independent media website present in all three countries, but financed by media companies in the Netherlands and Serbia linked to Russia. The flow of finances and the daily instructions by skype sessions on headlines and themes have been uncovered, but these media and a range of others continue their state-sponsored propaganda.³⁵

The tailored messages for the public in the Baltic States have three overall themes:³⁶

- 1) Anti-Americanism, the decay and instability of all Western institutions (specifically EU and NATO), values and societies.

- 2) Human rights problems, for all residents not belonging to the Baltic majority – Russian speakers, ethnic Russians, Poles and other minorities.
- 3) Anti-fascism, claiming that the fascist history of the Baltic States with their support of the Nazi regime is still part of the modern states' practices.

These themes are similar to what Russia presents with relevant local angles to the public in Ukraine and to their home audience through Russian media.³⁷

Naturally, the question this brings up is which effect, if any, it has had on the Baltic public? Taking Estonia as an example, 71 per cent of non-Estonians do rate Russian TV channels as a very important or quite important source of information. However, most viewers are also exposed to other media and therefore learn about opposite media perspectives. Surveys show that only 29 per cent of the non-Estonians believe that NATO constitutes the main security guarantee for Estonia compared to 70 per cent of ethnic Estonians, and 46 per cent of non-Estonians see good relations with Russia as critical for security, while only 15 per cent of ethnic Estonians agree.³⁸ However, it is doubtful that this proves any aspiration for more Russian influence or even critical or less patriotic views on Estonia. One must be cautious in evaluating differences of opinion as a measurement of a lack of support for the state or the government's legitimacy. Asked if willing to participate in defence activities according to skill and ability, 64 per cent of ethnic Estonians answered yes, while this was true for 46 per cent of the Russian-speaking respondents. Moreover, 73 per cent of non-Estonian respondents compared to 83 per cent of ethnic Estonian respondents believed armed resistance was necessary in case of a foreign military attack on Estonia.³⁹

Another well-researched case for societal destabilization through information is Latvia. The Defence Academy of Latvia has published a study on the possibility of societal destabilization in Latvia from 2016 which shows that one-fifth of the public mostly relies on Russian media for information and that the level of trust in the government and parliament overall is low. In 2015, only 17 per cent of the entire population tended to trust the national parliament.⁴⁰ The negative Russian narratives explained earlier have gained a high level of acceptance in views held by groups with low incomes, low to medium level education and in areas with high numbers of Russian-speaking residents. For example, 55 per cent of the Russian-speaking residents believe that restoration of fascism is taking place in Latvia.⁴¹ As disturbing as this may be, the study also highlights that the Russian-speaking residents consume both Latvian and Russian media news, and that the trust in Russian media is almost four times lower than in Latvian media. Even though some of the negative narratives have been adapted by the large groups of Russian-speaking Latvians, 91 per cent of the public in Latvia identifies itself as Latvian, 54 per cent as European and only 12.7 per cent as Russian.⁴² Even accepting rivaling identifications, the vast majority of Latvians clearly lean towards Western identification.

Overall, Russia does seem to have some success in using media to enhance the Russian narrative and to underpin the divide, social as well as ethnic, in the Baltic States. The means seem mostly to be 'old fashioned' public diplomacy, influencing the public by their free choice of information and media.

Social

The institutional framework of influence is underpinned by more than just providing and shaping information. Russia has taken a range of other initiatives to try to influence perceptions of Russia and mobilize groups in the Baltic States. Most Russian speakers in the Baltic States can be categorized as 'imperial' communities of minorities that never left their homes, but found themselves without citizenship after the independence of the Baltic States. They suddenly became subject to a naturalization process, including language tests. These policies reinforced perceptions of injustice and non-inclusion among the ethnic Russian communities in the Baltic States, already in the early 1990s. These feelings were fuelled by problems of inequality in the labour market and reinforced by (voluntary) community segregation. Even though much has been done to ensure a more inclusive integration in later years – the Baltic States made themselves vulnerable to Russian influence policies in the social sphere by their own doing in the early stages of independence.⁴³

One example of Russian influence in the social sphere is the institutionalization of its compatriot policy, which among other things includes substantial and often covert funding of local NGOs with close connections to Kremlin.⁴⁴ To Russia, compatriots include former Russian citizens living abroad, former citizens of the USSR, descendants of compatriots and foreign citizens who admire Russian culture and language.⁴⁵ The compatriot policy is executed through centres around the world which promote Russian culture, language and interest coordinated by, for example, the Rossotrudnichestvo agency under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The 'Russki Mir' initiative from 2007 is represented in all three countries.⁴⁶ The Russian compatriot policy is more than a promotion of culture and language. It includes 'fighting the falsification of history' and protecting the rights of compatriots.⁴⁷ In this way, it also becomes a valuable tool in promoting negative narratives on the Baltic States and a tool to maintain close contact with Russian minorities. Though the compatriot policy, Russia already has – internationally and locally – the institutional framework to support and inflame protest movements with finances, narratives and organization. The compatriot policy is widely subsidized in the Baltic States by funds from Kremlin to different subgroups of NGOs that are supporting Russian interests.⁴⁸ It is one thing to inform and another thing to mobilize social groups. A survey conducted in Latgale, an eastern region of Latvia, described by Russia as the most discriminated against area in Latvia, found no separatist tendencies by the responders. In fact, 78 per cent of those speaking the Latgalian dialect said that they would support Latvia if Russia started activities directed against the state. Moreover, the influence of Russia's public diplomacy appeared to be very low. Seventy-six per cent had not heard of the organization 'Rossotrudnichestvo', and only 6 per cent had positive attitudes towards the organization.⁴⁹ Besides, attitudes do not always lead to actions. People in Latvian society are generally neither socially or politically active, and participation in NGOs, political parties or even interest groups is meagre. Russia will find that it is tough to mobilize dissatisfied citizens in Latvia, where the most dissatisfied group tends to share the opinion that they cannot influence social or political structures regardless.⁵⁰

Political

Direct political influence on parties and politics has been dealt with somewhat differently in the three Baltic States. Even though the NGOs supporting Russian views and interests in the Baltic States may not be very visible or widely supported by the public, it does not mean that Russia is without influence at the political level. An article dating back to 2015 on how Russia funds NGOs in the Baltics, edited by Sanita Jemberga with input from a large research group from different media in all three countries, tries to give an overview of the connection between Russian funding and its influence in political organizations.⁵¹ According to the article, Russia supports more than forty organizations in the Baltic States, which are receiving millions of Euros each year. Around 68 per cent of the recipients are somehow connected to pro-Kremlin political parties. Taking a closer look at the organizations, it is obvious that Russia supports these groups and individuals, involving systematic support of the narratives also promoted by Russian media. In Estonia, the three organizations 'Legal Information Centre for Human Rights', 'Estonia without Nazism' and 'the Integration Media Group' all underpin the Russian narrative. Two of the organizations are headed by Andrei Zarenkov. Zarenkov has attempted to be elected to the national parliament and also to local councils, without any luck.⁵² In Estonia, influencing the political level directly through political parties has proven hard. No ethnic Russian parties have been represented in the Riigikogu since 2012. The majority of non-Estonians vote for the Centre Party, which is not an ethnicity-based party.⁵³ Also, in Estonia, there are no organized groups of any kind who advocate separatism for the Russian-speaking population.⁵⁴ In Lithuania, the picture is similar. The funded NGOs are 'Centre for Human Rights' and 'Centre for Defence and Research of the Fundamental Rights', both connected to the movement 'Lithuania without Nazism'. Their statements tend to match views from the Russian foreign ministry, and they also try to promote influence in Lithuanian parties.⁵⁵

Focusing on Latvia, the Constitution Protection Bureau finds that all types of parties and media are exposed to Russian propaganda, but that the parties 'Latvia Union of Russians' and the 'Harmony Party' are mostly exposed. The efforts by Russia to influence the political debate in Latvia include tailored statistics, public opinion polls, pseudo-expert viewpoints and more.⁵⁶ As in the other Baltic countries, anti-fascist events are used to bring veterans and right-wing supporters together in marches as well as in roundtable discussions. The core participants are supported by NGOs financed by Russia and closely connected to the party 'Russian Union'. The group appears insignificant with respect to political influence with few members, and it is well known to Latvian security services.⁵⁷

In conclusion, even if there is presently no sign of systematic election meddling by Russia in the Baltic States, this case study demonstrates that there are indications of a well-established institutional framework for long-term political influence.

Economics

Since 1991, the Baltic States' dependence on Russian trade and energy has diminished substantially. In 2015, Estonia had less than 10 per cent of its foreign trade with Russia,

and only 10 per cent of its energy resources came from there.⁵⁸ The lack of economic dependencies has diminished the Russian lever of power in the economic sphere and also the possibilities of using energy as a tool for economic and political pressure. This helps explain the limited focus on Russia's use of its economic influence and covert economic activities in the Baltic States by the countries' national intelligence agencies. In the national threat assessment from Lithuania 2018, an increase in foreign companies seeking to operate in the financial sector has, however, been noticed. The possibility of third-country companies operating in strategic sectors under cover of an EU registered company has also caught the attention of the Lithuanian authorities in the 'National Threat Assessment 2019'.⁵⁹ The Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service raises the same sort of concerns, but mentions no details.⁶⁰ These aspects of hybrid threats do not get any attention in the Latvian assessment from 2019.⁶¹ More attention should be paid to covert economic activities and to organized economic crime in the Baltic States in future research. This will help us understand how this lever of power can underpin the social, political and informational levers of power as hybrid threats or even in coordinated efforts amounting to hybrid warfare. We should expect a lot more activity within covert economic activities than this case study has been able to present.

Adding cyber to Russian levers of power

The institutionalized framework for influence in the social sphere applying information operations is assumed to be supplemented by substantial espionage activities, including hacking into the critical infrastructure of the Baltic States, thus providing Russia with knowledge on how these states function and how their vulnerabilities are best addressed. Moreover, there is evidence showing specific Russian interest in cyber activities related to the membership of NATO and the EU in all three states' threat assessments. The state organized cyber espionage is supplemented by cybercrime activities and the involvement of patriotic hackers – third-party actors supporting Russian interest as well as their own financial gains.⁶² In 2018, repeated Russian attempts to spy through cyber means in the Lithuanian energy sector were observed. The penetration is ongoing in state institutions, in private companies and with private citizens.⁶³ The capabilities that Russia now possesses in the cyber domain can be activated in a hybrid warfare situation, making Russia able to deeply affect the Baltic societies, provided the conditions are more fruitful than today. The partly unknown level of cyber capabilities that Russia possesses implies a worrisome continuum from peaceful influence policies to hybrid threats, encompassing grey zone interference strategies with the possibility of engaging in hybrid warfare.

Russian use of levers of power in the Baltic States

Russian foreign policy is often more tactical than strategic, relying on opportunities that come up.⁶⁴ This makes it less predictable and lowers the possibility of coordinated synchronized actions on the one hand, while enhancing sudden creative escalations

on the other hand. The analysis of Russian levers of power in the Baltic States shows a range of different actions taken by Russia, characterized as hybrid threats. Russia seeks to uphold its influence in the region by a variety of non-military means and by maintaining military balance towards the NATO Alliance. Russia is maintaining an institutional framework of influence in the social, informational and political spheres and may be more involved in economic activities than apparent at first sight. There is also a high presence in the cyber domain of critical infrastructure as well as espionage on the vital state institutions. At the same time, Russia's actions appear to be at a low level. The use of social media is unsystematic and sporadic. The social, organizational and political mobilization of Russian speakers has been characterized by sporadic activities involving few groups and individuals, and obvious opportunities for election meddling have not been used. Russia may judge its possibilities for success in the Baltic States as too low to put in the effort, not least because of the initiatives taken by the states themselves in conjunction with NATO and the EU. In conclusion, the Russian institutional framework for influence is well established, but presently not heavily maintained or coordinated.

Can actions taken by states and international partners explain Russia's lack of success in the Baltic States?

A more aware public with a wide range of information

It is often seen as *the* critical vulnerability of the Baltic States that they have a large minority of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking citizens. In 2019, the Digital Forensic Research Lab measured the influence of adverse reporting on NATO deployment in the Baltic States, following the coverage by Sputnik in both the local languages and in Russian on three topics related to NATO deployment. The Lab found more negative framing of the NATO deployment by Sputnik than what was released by local public media in all three countries. The good news they discovered was that in 2019, Sputnik and other Russian state-sponsored media have low levels of views in all three countries compared to other media. If compared to the use of the private web portal Delfi, the largest web portal in the Baltic States which has news in both local languages and Russian, Delfi has substantially more views and a significant reach.⁶⁵ Delfi has no clear sympathies or political interests and has gained popularity in recent years. In 2015, Estonia established channel EVT + a Russian language channel to provide the public with information, not produced in Russia.⁶⁶ The education in digital vulnerabilities has also taken many shapes and forms in the three countries, making the public conscious of cybercrime, hacking and misinformation. One example is the Estonian site Propastop.org, a volunteer site that investigates Russian misinformation and broadcasts its findings to the public in four different languages, including Russian. One successful example of news checking in Latvia is the 'Lie Detector' section of the Latvian news portal lsm.lv, which checks whether Latvian politicians and officials are telling the truth. Another is the Latvian media expert Mārtiņš Kaprāns who regularly

reveals Russian disinformation about Latvia, the Baltic States and NATO on the website of the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA, www.cepa.org).

Local initiatives to exclude Russia from taking advantage of vulnerabilities and supporting the institutional framework of influence

Since resilience measures can take numerous shapes and forms and initiatives have been ongoing in the Baltic States, this section will only scratch the surface in order to illustrate the variety of local initiatives that are taking place in the different spheres.

Using an example from industrial policy, in March 2018 the Law of the Protection of Objects of Importance to Ensuring National Security came into force in Lithuania. The law provides a national authority with a mandate to decide if an investor does not conform to the national security interest of Lithuania. The regulation was made in order to prevent Russian entities from entering under the cover of an EU-based company and thus operating with fewer restrictions under EU law. This came about after the discovery of the concealed collection of data through the AFK Sistema controlled Kronshtadt Group by Russia. The company had won a bid to establish digital cartographic data centres in Lithuania and collected data useable for battlefield simulators, UAVs and software to the Russian military.⁶⁷ This illustrates how industrial screening, EU regulation and local law and economics as well as military concerns have to be aligned to enhance resilience and to prevent coordinated hybrid activities. The example also points to the difficulties of both identifying and launching coordinated initiatives against hybrid threats.

Already in 2015, Estonia got rid of legal loopholes and enabled swift reactions in case of a covert military operation conducted by non-state actors. Any armed personnel without insignia are now by law considered terrorists and can be engaged. The Estonian forces do not use any military equipment from Russia. This makes an 'insurgent's weapons arsenal' from Russia easy to pinpoint and react to. Moreover, whole-of-government exercises test scenarios, including mass riots, cyberattacks, disruption of critical infrastructure and the combination of civilian and military efforts.⁶⁸ Such initiatives underpin awareness in the broader public. The Baltic States have also focused on less measurable initiatives seeking to become less vulnerable and more robust by continually improving welfare and security for all societal groups.

Mobilization of the public

Regarding traditional military deterrence of Russia, the Baltic States could do much more than what is done today. Only 22,000 citizens are under arms in the three countries. This is a low number compared to countries like Finland or Israel, even adding the 30,000 reservists who are not equipped or trained according to the same standards.⁶⁹ The military priorities do not support the official perceptions of an aggressive neighbour to the East with malign intentions. Since 2014, the Baltic States have, however, all expanded their defence spending from around 1 per cent of GDP to

over 2 per cent in 2019. This can be explained by Russian actions, but the pressure from the US Trump administration is a more likely reason for this rapid change.

When it comes to mobilizing the public to protect the state from foreign interference, the picture is somewhat different. There is a growing home guard of volunteers in the Baltic States. In Estonia, there is even a cyber defence league of volunteers, consisting of IT specialists, engineers and lawyers among other professionals with multidisciplinary skills, who engage in frequent tabletop exercises and large-scale cyber events to prepare for coming cyberattacks.⁷⁰ This commitment builds societal competence by gaining practical insights on strategic, operational and tactical skills and tools. Moreover, Estonia has held mobilization exercises with 20,000–30,000 persons and has prepared for partisan groups to step in after a possible invasion.⁷¹

NATO and EU initiatives to deter Russian activities in the Baltic States

At the NATO summit in Warsaw in September 2014, the Alliance decided on a vast number of initiatives aimed at increasing traditional military deterrence against Moscow. Most notable were the so-called Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States and Poland, an upgraded NATO Response Force, Graduated Response Plans and a modernized command structure.⁷² As stated by Martin Zapfe, ‘The main function of NATO’s EFP is to help deter a conventional Russian attack by providing a tripwire, the engagement of which would all but guarantee that the Alliance as a whole would respond in some way.’⁷³ In other words, these initiatives by NATO were tailored with conventional scenarios in mind. The modernization of the NATO command structure included the establishment of Multinational Division North East and of Multinational Division North, division-level headquarters with division-level formations comprised of two to four brigades with various support units. The Baltic States have never previously had this capacity due to their modest size. The improved organization enables activities with the Multi-National Corps Northeast based in Szczecin, Poland, and ensures closer cooperation and coordination with the rest of the Alliance. The NATO initiatives focus on traditional deterrence, but have additionally provided joint comprehensive situational awareness across the Baltic States and Poland that can detect actions across state borders and establish broader contact from NATO to the relevant state agencies and back. This goes on continually from peacetime through crisis and to conflict. The existing solutions in the Baltic States will, however, likely fail in case of a Russian invasion if not further strengthened with both local mobilization and with a Baltic corps headquarters with NATO-trained, Baltic commanders and staff, as concluded in a recent study.⁷⁴

The fear of Russian aggression against the Baltic States has been very productive in improving cooperation between the EU and NATO. One example is the ‘military mobility’ initiative, which addresses the use of roads, bridges and other means of transportation for military deployment. The EU initiative includes the reduction of legal and bureaucratic constraints on military logistics across borders. Military mobility became a relevant topic for EU-NATO cooperation as a result of an analysis initiated by the Estonian Presidency in 2017. The analysis showed a range of insufficiencies in

the Baltic States and the North Sea-Baltic Corridor regarding the transportation of military vehicles and equipment. The ensuing resolution is explicitly targeting hybrid threats to transportation and related critical infrastructure. It brings together military and civilian actors at all levels, including NATO and NATO partners, to establish common standards, transportation regulations, movement permissions and more.⁷⁵ Military mobility cooperation is just one example of a range of initiatives which have gained momentum, funding, legitimacy and speed of implementation due to the threat of hybrid warfare in the Baltic States. The agenda of hybrid threats has paved the way for the construction of a platform for EU security and defence policies that do not duplicate or compete with NATO, but supplement harder military engagements with softer approaches.

Other initiatives from the EU which aim at countering hybrid threats in general and the Russian threat more explicitly are 'The Hybrid Fusion Cell', an entity placed inside the European External Action Service (EEAS) from 2015, an action plan against disinformation from 2018⁷⁶ and further strengthened in 2019 ahead of the European Parliament elections, a Computer Emergency Response Team and a Social Media Assurance Service. A more offensive measure is the new sanctions regime on cyber from May 2019. Moreover, the Commission has launched a sanctions regime against the use of chemical weapons. Both regimes try to surpass the problem of deniability and attribution to states which is one of the fundamental challenges of hybrid threats. The new sanction regimes target individuals directly instead of pursuing state responsibility. Other initiatives address the protection of critical infrastructure and try to improve a whole-of-government approach to hybrid threats.⁷⁷ It would not be wrong to suggest that the hybrid threats debate has helped the EU to enhance cooperation on security issues and to take the debate on European defence and strategic autonomy to a whole new level than previously achievable.

Are the Baltic States a good case for the possibilities of deterring hybrid warfare?

This case study has pieced together three elements relevant to a possible Russian hybrid operation in the Baltic States, by looking at Russian priorities and aims, Russian capability to act as a hybrid actor and Russian opportunities for success if approaching a hybrid warfare strategy towards the Baltic States.

First of all, the case study asked whether Russia is willing to invest the risk and necessary resources in order to make decisive changes in the Baltic States by coordinated and synchronized activities across a broad spectrum of societal functions, including the threat of or use of force? The study finds that the Baltic States do not have a very high priority in Russian foreign policy. Although destabilizing the Baltic States could bring severe problems to both the EU and NATO, the risk of the opposite, that is, the consolidation of these organizations in times of crisis, is very high. There is no indication that Russia will use hybrid warfare in the Baltic States as a means to that end, however, continuous low-scale hybrid threats must be expected. The fact that the

Baltic States are not of high priority to Russia's core interest provides a vital explanation for the lack of hybrid warfare in those states.

By unpacking Russian influence and actions in the Baltic States, the case study shows that Russia does have substantial capabilities as a hybrid actor. The analyses of Russian levers of power uncover a well-established institutional framework for influence in all societal functions. There is a close connection and coordination between activities in the informational, social and political spheres, where organizations, media and dedicated individuals play a role by continuously reclaiming and framing negative narratives about the leadership in the Baltic States, underpinning a discourse of the systematic discrimination, segregation and unjust treatment of Russian speakers and other minorities.

The use of mass media, social media and NGOs' political messaging are all well attuned, closely monitored and financed by Russia, openly and covertly. Russian information operations are an advanced, professionalized and internationally institutionalized practice. Russia has had some success in claiming deniability and using third-party actors, even locals, as the primary practitioners, and as a result of this creating some ambiguity as to how to react to different activities in the informational, social and political spheres. Russia does also possess cyber capabilities that can be applied in conjunction with other instruments of influence, however, this has not been practised so far. It has not been possible to find much evidence of economic pressures or cyber-related activities by Russia in the Baltic States. This may be due to lack of research – not lack of actions. On occasion, Russia shows its military muscle in the Baltic States, but not in conjunction with other activities or as part of a coherent operation. Even though Russia does seem to have a range of capabilities to engage in hybrid warfare activities in the Baltic States, the activities found in this case study appear scattered, not systematically applied and not well coordinated. The institutional framework is present, but an active continuous 'shaping of the battlefield' is at worst low-key and unambitious.

The presence of hybrid threats, but lack of hybrid warfare in the Baltic States leads to considerations regarding Russian opportunities in the area. Russia faces numerous obstacles vis-à-vis the Baltic States, most importantly, traditional military deterrence by NATO. Russia realizes, as does NATO, that the entire credibility of NATO is at stake if NATO does not protect the Baltic States. Recent initiatives by NATO have signalled to Russia that NATO is held accountable by the Baltic States. Looking below the threshold of an armed attack where we expect to find a range of activities in a hybrid warfare scenario, the EU and the individual states have taken many different initiatives to counter Russian activities since 2007 and even more so after 2014. The societal resilience in the Baltic States, the mobilization of the public, the legal preparedness for crises and conflicts, initiatives to diversify the media landscape also for a Russian-speaking public – all of this has amplified a deterrence by denial strategy in the Baltic States. Despite Russia's success in convincing large groups in the Baltic societies of injustice and minority discrimination and even growing fascism, there are no signs of political or violent mobilization against the Baltic governments or state institutions. Moreover, the large groups of Russian-speaking minorities seem to identify significantly more with Western values and the EU than the Russian alternative. Russian opportunities

for successfully undermining, destabilizing or delegitimizing the Baltic States, their EU commitment or the NATO memberships are meagre. If Russian actions lead to worse counteractions and towards unity within the West, the appeal of hybrid strategies is undermined.⁷⁸

In conclusion, this case study shows that having the capability to engage in hybrid warfare activities is not sufficient. Hybrid warfare is a low-cost strategy with potentially high gains. However, the combination of traditional military deterrence and a broad deterrence by denial below the threshold of an armed attack in conjunction with international support has decreased the Russian appetite for further engagement in the Baltic States. Combined with the low priority of the Baltic States in Russian foreign policy, this explains the lack of hybrid warfare and the low intensity of hybrid threats. On the other hand, we must expect Russia to continue to improve and maintain a broad institutional framework for influence in the Baltic States across the societal functions. The development of countermeasures is, therefore, a process that has to continue.

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