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Estonia: Potential Vulnerabilities amid Progress

By Agnia Grigas

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Key Points

- All three Baltic States have been consistently targeted by Moscow's compatriot policies, information warfare, and various forms of military intimidation.
- There is an ever-present risk that Russia will try to use the Baltic States' sizable ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking minority to advance its foreign policy and potentially even territorial ambitions by subverting local governance and exacerbating internal political and social rifts.
- Estonia and its allies would do well to deter and prepare for Russia's hard offenses while mitigating and neutralizing its softer efforts at destabilization.

Since the 1990s and particularly since Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, all three Baltic States have been consistently targeted by Moscow's compatriot policies, information warfare, and various forms of military intimidation. Estonia's vulnerabilities and fissures vis-à-vis potential Russian aggression can be assessed through four categories of analysis: (1) social and ethnic tensions stemming from the presence of its Russian-speaking minority, (2) the risks emanating from the country's domestic political environment, (3) economic and energy liabilities, and (4) its exposure to broader geostrategic and security threats.

Moscow's view of the Baltic States is complex. On the one hand, it views them as part of its sphere of influence, despite their NATO and EU membership. For instance, in 2008 President Dmitry Medvedev asserted Russia's right to "privileged interests" in its neighboring states and "certainly the regions bordering [Russia]."[1] On the other hand, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are treated distinctly by Russia compared to former member states of the Soviet Union because the West never recognized their annexation by the Soviet Union and because since reestablishing independence in 1991 they have carved out their own geopolitical destiny by joining the EU and NATO in 2004.

Yet unlike other new EU and NATO members, the Baltic States are vulnerable to Russia's policies of "compatriot protection" because of their sizable ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking minority, residing mostly in areas bordering the Russian Federation. As I have recently argued,[2] there is an ever-present risk that Russia will try to use this minority to advance its foreign policy and potentially even territorial ambitions by subverting local governance and exacerbating internal political and social rifts.[3]

The Russian Minority

What Moscow refers to as its "compatriots" residing in neighboring states are a mixed group that includes Russian speakers who are often—but not always—ethnic Russians, who will be

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referred to more generally as the Russian minority. Estonia's Russian minority is concentrated in the capital, Tallinn, and Ida-Viru County. Ethnic Russians comprise 24 percent of the country's population, or around 315,000 people. Tallinn's ethnic Russians number more than 150,000 and make up about 37 percent of its population. In Ida-Viru (one of Estonia's 15 counties), which borders Russia, ethnic Russians number nearly 73 percent of the population (more than 100,000 people).[4] The region's largest city, Narva, which is Estonia's third-largest city, is 82 percent (49,000 people) ethnic Russian.[5] Native Russian speakers, including those of other ethnicities, such as Belarusians, Ukrainians, and others, are even more numerous.[6]

Following independence, the main source of tension between Estonia and Russia has been Tallinn's decision not to grant automatic citizenship to Soviet-era immigrants (who in 1991–92 made up an estimated 32 percent of the population)—many of whom were either ethnic Russians or Russian speakers.[7] The decision stemmed from Tallinn's "doctrine of continuation" and aimed at "restoring" its statehood based on the foundation of the pre–World War II Estonian state. All Estonia's inhabitants and its descendants who were citizens before the Soviet occupation (regardless of their ethnicity) were automatically granted citizenship, while those who had immigrated during the Soviet era had to apply for citizenship. The Estonian government likely opted for this distinction in citizenship policy to prevent a sizable (and voting) Russian minority from potentially blocking the state's efforts on strategic issues such as independence, EU rather than Commonwealth of Independent States integration, and NATO membership.[8]

Estonia's noncitizens were issued so-called alien passports, which restrict the right to vote in national elections but not in municipal elections. (Proof of residency is required.)[9] At the same time, Estonian residence permits, to which noncitizens are entitled, enable holders to live and travel freely in the EU's Schengen Area. In 2016, Estonia started allowing children born to noncitizen parents living in Estonia to become naturalized citizens at birth and eased the language test required for citizenship for children age 15–18 and people over 65.[10]

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While the noncitizen numbers have steadily declined since the 1990s (in 2014, only 7 percent of Estonian residents did not have citizenship),[11] over time this Estonian policy has created a window for Moscow to try to promote Russian citizenship among the Russian minority. Thus, in 2013, 36 percent (or about 23,000 people) of Narva's population held Russian citizenship. After Moscow eased Russian citizenship requirements in 2006 and again in 2014, a number of the country's residents who had not acquired Estonian citizenship opted for Russian citizenship instead. The Russian passports qualify them for Russian pensions, universities, and visa-free travel to Russia. The latter benefit should not be underestimated, as many residents visit their families in Russia or travel for work (Tallinn and St. Petersburg are nearly equidistant from Narva). With Russian passports and Estonian residence permits, such minorities have the best of both worlds: access to the EU's Schengen zone and visa-free travel to the Russian Federation.[12]

Narva's Russian citizens are a distinct security concern for Estonia because, as Russia's military campaigns in Crimea, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia have shown, Moscow's claims of protecting Russian *citizens* could be deployed with more vigor than those of protecting ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in general. At the same time, there is a consensus among Estonian academics, politicians, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers that Estonia's Russian minority is not especially receptive to the Kremlin's manipulative foreign and compatriot policies.[13] Indeed, almost none of Estonia's Russian speakers I interviewed for my book[14] called for Russian military protection. Furthermore there are signs of increasing integration of the Russian-speaking youth into Estonian society. For instance, a 2015 survey demonstrated that compared to 2011, more ethnic Russian youths living in Estonia had Estonian-speaking friends and that the general Estonian language skills of ethnic Russians under the age of 40 had improved.[15] The 2015 study found that 77 percent of young people of non-Estonian ethnicity have citizenship.[16]

Still, tensions surfaced in the 2007 riots of young Russians in Tallinn over the relocation of a Soviet monument, the Bronze Soldier. The timing of the move—just weeks ahead of the May 9 Russian Soviet Victory Day celebrations—was particularly sensitive for the Russian-speaking community of Estonia, which celebrates the holiday. Moscow was widely seen as inciting the unrest by spreading false accounts in the Russian-language press that the monument and presumably the accompanying graves of unknown soldiers were destroyed. The Russian Embassy also allegedly took part in organizing the riots while Russian activists, including members of the pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi, traveled from Russia to stoke the violence. Despite their never having lived under the Soviet Union, teenage Estonians of Russian origin rioted and held signs with slogans such as "The Soviet Union Forever!"[17] At least some of these young men were likely graduates of Kremlin-run paramilitary abroad camps such as Soyuz for Russian-speaking children from former Soviet republics and the Baltic States.[18]

Since its independence, Estonia has been led by economically liberal, center-right political parties, making it one of the most prosperous newer members of the European Union.

In 1991 and 1993, several attempts were made to proclaim an autonomous or even an independent Narva, with referendums held and local councils voting for the initiative. The last referendum of July 1993 in the cities of Narva and Sillamäe reported 98 percent support for independence, and the turnout exceeded 50 percent of the population. The Estonian State Court ruled the results illegal.[19]

Since then there have been no separatist movements among Estonia's Russian minority. In 2015, the separatist leaders of Donetsk in Ukraine sent a letter to the Narva City Council asking for support for their movement and urging Narva to begin a separatist movement itself. The city council soundly rejected the offer.[20] Likewise, despite Russian media falsifying claims of the troubles Russians face in Estonia, few have opted for Russia. The Russian government policy of diaspora resettlement launched in 2006 has been a failure in Estonia, and between 2007 and 2009 fewer than 40 people chose to repatriate.[21]

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Political Environment

Since its independence, Estonia has been led by economically liberal, center-right political parties, making it one of the most prosperous newer members of the European Union. The country quickly moved from the Soviet authoritarian, one-party model of governance to a robust democratic parliamentary system. Yet the political system remains rather fragmented as in many other European states, with half a dozen political parties competing for power in Estonia, resulting in broad but fragile coalitions and a high turnover rate of governments.

The plethora of smaller parties has created greater potential for Russia to meddle in Estonia's domestic politics.[22] In Tallinn and Ida-Viru, left-leaning political parties such as the Centre Party, the membership of which is 75 percent ethnic non-Estonians, have long dominated local politics. In the 2015 parliamentary election, the Center Party received a majority of votes in some districts of Tallinn and in Ida-Viru.[23] Since independence, Tallinn has had 16 years of leadership and four mayors from the Centre Party.

In 2004 the Centre Party signed an undisclosed cooperation agreement with Russia's pro-Kremlin United Russia party. In 2011 then-mayor of Tallinn and leader of the Centre Party Edgar Savisaar was investigated by the Estonian authorities for being an "agent of influence" for Moscow and named a "security threat" by Estonian police. He allegedly received €1.5 million in party funding from a Russian NGO run by Vladimir Yakunin, the former head of Russian Railways, former KGB officer, and former close Vladimir Putin ally.[24]

At the national level, however, pro-Russian political parties and movements have not enjoyed much success. The only time a party representing ethnic Russian interests entered the Estonian national parliament was in 1995 when the Russian Party received nearly 6 percent of the votes. Moreover, despite the diversity of political parties in coalition governments, parties representing solely Russian minority interests, such as the Constitution Party and the Russian Party, have never been invited to become a part of a coalition government. By the last 2015 parliamentary elections, most of the ethnic Russian or Russian-speaking politicians had either quit their careers or joined larger political parties without any specific ethnic delineations.

Economic Environment

The influence of economically liberal parties has contributed to Estonia's western-leaning and investment-friendly economy. In 2016 Estonia saw the highest gross domestic product (GDP) growth among EU states at 1.9 percent.[25] Estonia's economy has been characterized by its booming technology sector and is ranked as one of the most innovative economies in Europe, with an estimated 35 percent of Estonians working in "knowledge-intensive industries."[26] The country's involvement in developing Skype has contributed to its reputation as a digital innovation hot spot.

While many ethnic Russians reside in Tallinn and its surrounding districts, which remain the most prosperous regions of Estonia, unemployment in the largely Russian-speaking Narva is still high at 12.4 percent, compared to the national average of 5 percent.[27] The city likewise has one of the highest HIV rates in the EU.[28]

At the same time, the Ida-Viru County, in which Narva is located, is energy rich. The region's large deposits of shale oil are used for heating and electricity production, meeting 80 percent of Estonia's electricity needs. For a country with few natural resources that meets nearly 100 percent of its gas needs with Russian imports (although as of recently it can also access gas via Lithuania's new liquefied natural gas terminal), Ida-Viru shale oil is of high strategic importance—which could also make it, like eastern Ukraine's coal mines, a tempting target for separatist forces or Moscow.[29]

Estonia's power grids are still synchronized with the Russian power systems. Plans to connect to the European system via Poland or the Nordic countries have been supported by the European Commission and are slated to be operational by 2025.[30]

Geopolitical and Security Environment

Russia's hybrid war in Ukraine has added urgency to discussions in the Baltic States and among their allies about a similar Russian intervention that would challenge the alliance and its collective security guarantees, since any success Moscow achieves in destabilizing Estonia will either elicit an effective response from NATO or result in discrediting the authority of the alliance. Arguably, this may be

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Moscow's goal in ratcheting up pressure on the Baltic States since Crimea's seizure.[31]

Today, Estonia is among only five NATO member states that spends 2 percent of its GDP on defense as stipulated by the alliance, having done so since 2014.[32] Tallinn now plans to further increase its defense outlays. Furthermore, unlike Lithuania and Latvia, Estonia has consistently adhered to a policy of compulsory 11-month military service for male citizens age 18–27 to bolster its armed forces.[33]

In 2016, NATO agreed to deploy in the Baltic States three multinational battalions of up to 1,200 troops each with Britain (to Estonia), Canada (to Latvia), and Germany (to Lithuania) as the lead nations. The UK deployed troops to Estonia in 2017 and has already participated in joint military exercises.[34] Moreover, the UK battalions brought over heavy military equipment with them, including tanks, armored personnel carriers, self-propelled artillery vehicles, and other hardware. The US will also contribute members of its special operations forces to assist in intelligence gathering.[35] These deployments have also been joined on a separate NATO mission by hundreds of US troops and their equipment throughout the three Baltic States.[36] Yet while serving as a "trip wire," boosting morale for the Baltic States, and improving their defense capabilities, NATO deployments as currently constituted are still insufficient given Russia's military preponderance in the Baltic region.

Increased Tensions, Information Warfare, and Cyber Attacks. On September 5, 2014, an officer of the Estonian Internal Security Service was kidnapped by the Russian Federal Security Services at gunpoint and taken to Russia, where he was charged with espionage. According to Estonia's Internal Security Service, the perpetrators jammed radio communications and threw a smoke grenade during the abduction. The incident allegedly occurred on Estonian territory and indicated a disregard for Estonian statehood and territorial boundaries. Following a diplomatic effort by Tallinn, in September 2015 Russia agreed to release the officer in a prisoner exchange.[37] The capture of the officer was only one of many Russian incursions into Estonia's territory, although the most frequent violations are of Estonia's airspace.[38]

Soon after capturing the officer, Estonian officials unveiled plans to construct a wall between the two countries in August 2015. Slated to be built in 2018, the wall would be about 70 miles long and cost Estonia $80 million.[39] The Ministry of the Interior cited a need for constant surveillance and efforts to curtail human trafficking and illegal border crossing. The wall also looks like a line of defense against possible Russian military action, especially regarding covert movement of personnel across the border.

Russian media sources have portrayed the Baltics as supporters of and even collaborators with what it perceives as the hostile and illegitimate government in Kyiv, all conspiring to lessen Russia's influence in the region.

Russia's extensive state-controlled media has carved out a sizable role in the Baltic information space with a large segment of Baltic countries' population receiving their world and regional news from this source.[40] The Russian government-operated television network RT, formerly Russia Today, and Rossiya Segodnya, the parent company of government-run news outlet Sputnik, have both seen increased funding from the Kremlin for their international media projects. Estonia's most popular Russian-language channels also include First Channel, NTV, and First Baltic Channel, all of which transmit Moscow's top televised programs to Estonia.[41] Additionally, since the late 2000s Russian investors have sought a larger stake in the Baltic media. By 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, Russia's information warfare in the Baltic States intensified as the "Baltic threat" to Russia became a trope.[42] Russian media sources have portrayed the Baltics as supporters of and even collaborators with what it perceives as the hostile and illegitimate government in Kyiv, all conspiring to lessen Russia's influence in the region.

The Bronze Soldier incident epitomized the Russian-language media's modus operandi, which

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is building on the so-called grievances of Russian speakers and a call to protect compatriots. However, Estonia's small size makes dissemination of falsehoods and propaganda more difficult than in Ukraine. Although Russian minorities may be swayed or even incited in the short term, in the long term, Baltic residents are less likely to believe false reporting because they are more likely to know firsthand what is happening in their cities and regions.[43]

The Bronze Soldier events were also accompanied by cyberattacks on Estonian websites. While Russia vehemently denied its involvement, Estonian government officials accused Moscow of taking down the websites of the Estonian presidency and parliament, numerous political parties, three of the country's six big news organizations, two of the biggest banks, and communications firms.[44]

Estonia is a tech-savvy society that relies heavily on e-voting, e-tax, e-customs, e-health care, e-banking, and e-schools all through a digital ID for citizens. In 2014 Estonia launched e-citizenship, which enabled foreigners, including investors, business people, and scientists, among others, to acquire a digital Estonian ID and thus expand the Estonian digital society.[45] While the expertise and capacities that NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence established in Tallinn strengthens Estonia's cyber resilience, this realm remains a serious vulnerability for Estonia, as for many countries.[46]

Conclusion

As a small state bordering Russia while Moscow's foreign policy, military, and territorial ambitions continue to rise, Estonia has several reasons to be concerned: the sizable Russian minority that the Kremlin seems intent on manipulating, the domestic political and energy vulnerabilities, and Russia's information, cyberwarfare, and even territorial incursions, such as violations of Estonian airspace and the abduction of its officer.

Still, EU and NATO memberships lessen the probability that Russia will openly target Estonia or the other two Baltic States in a direct military campaign as it has in other former members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Nonetheless, there is a fine line between Russia's softer and more coercive means of influence and military interventions. Indeed, in practice Moscow often merges both in its hybrid and information warfare campaigns, which have been carried out with frequency and success not only in the former Soviet Union but also more recently in the West. Estonia and its allies would do well to deter and prepare for Russia's hard offenses while mitigating and neutralizing its softer efforts at destabilization.

About the Author

Agnia Grigas, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, is the author of three books: *The New Geopolitics of Natural Gas* (Harvard University Press, 2017), *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire* (Yale University Press, 2016), and *The Politics of Energy and Memory Between the Baltic States and Russia* (Routledge, 2013). Follow her @AgniaGrigas and grigas.net.

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