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Russia-NATO relations:

Understanding security challenges in the Baltic region

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Introduction

The three Baltic republics – namely Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – were the first countries to obtain independence from the USSR, and the only former Soviet territories that eventually became members of both NATO and the European Union. Thus, the Baltic question acquires importance in light of the context in which it is inserted, meaning the complex, often difficult relationship between the Atlantic Alliance and the Russian Federation.

In an interview released to NBC News' Keir Simmons on June 11, 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that, in recent years, the relationship with the United States and the West has "deteriorated to its lowest point", defining the newly elected US President Joe Biden as "radically different" from his predecessor Donald Trump[1]. Hence, after the integration of the Baltic trio within the Western institutional framework, events such as the Georgian War (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2014) – not to mention the sanctions that followed those conflicts – have contributed to dramatically increasing the tensions with Moscow, underlining the necessity of a comeback to the negotiating table in order to prevent any potential escalation. In this respect, during the most recent Biden-Putin Geneva summit in June 2021, President Biden underlined three major issues in the relationship with Russia: first, the respect of Ukraine's territorial integrity; second, opposition to cyberattacks directed towards American infrastructure and third, Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny shall not die in prison[2]. However, even though by agreeing to open talks on topics such as cyber threats and new categories of weapons the meeting laid the ground for a more predictable relationship between Washington and Moscow, in practice – just like the precedent G7 and NATO meetings that took place earlier this year – it failed to provide Ukraine with a roadmap to achieve NATO membership, thus leaving Kyiv with the burden of deterring further Russian aggression in the Donbas. Along the same lines, the Biden Administration's decision to ease sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline in support of Germany triggered the disappointment of Ukraine and the Baltics as, bypassing the former, the new pipeline will most likely make Kyiv's gas transit redundant and increase the risk of escalatory moves in the country[3].

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[1] Myah Ward, "Putin: Relationship with U.S. has 'deteriorated to its lowest point' in years", *Politico*, June 6, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/11/putin-us-relationship-deteriorated-493572

[2] Peter Dickinson, "Biden-Putin summit review: Good news for Ukraine?", *Atlantic Council*, June 17, 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/biden-putin-summit-review-good-news-for-ukraine/

[3] Ibid.

Within this framework, another point worthy of attention is the relevance of the Baltic area when it comes to the sensitive realms of hybrid and cyber threats and energy security. Hence, in light of their configuration and historical background, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are providing a valuable contribution to the capabilities and the security of the Alliance, as, together with the participation in major NATO missions, the three countries have started sharing their expertise with the Allies through the establishment of, respectively, the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Tallinn, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) in Riga and the NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence (ENSEC COE) in Vilnius. Accordingly, during the June 2021 summit of the North Atlantic Council that took place in Brussels, the Heads of State and Government of the NATO countries reiterated their commitment to favour the common security of the Alliance through increased transparency and exercises, "notably on the security situation in the Baltic Sea region"[4]. This becomes especially relevant in reason of the risks related to the development of new technologies and the increased usage of high precision weapons, thus causing essential changes in the current character of warfare. Such *New Generation Warfare* (NGW) is thus focused on a more intrusive usage of the information and psychological dimensions to achieve strategic goals; hence, the rising centrality of non-military means – such as political, economic, social and information tools – makes the Baltic area a crucial case study to understand the changing nature of current conflicts, where the coexistence and failed integration of different ethnic minorities – mainly former Soviet citizens of Russian origin – constitutes one of the major risk factors to fuel instability in the region.

Therefore, the present dissertation aims at answering two main research questions:

1) *What are the reasons that led to the current asset of the Baltic region?*
2) *What are the potential consequences of an escalation and why this scenario needs to be avoided?*

To answer the abovementioned questions, the research will be structured into three chapters. First, Chapter 1 will provide a theoretical basis to the whole research, starting from an analysis of Russia's understanding of the concept of *soft power* as a means to achieve strategic goals through cultural attractiveness, a common language and history, in order to consolidate its influence in the so-called "near abroad". Hence, the Chapter examines the evolution of Russia's Foreign Policy Concepts from Vladimir Putin's first presidency in the early 2000s to the latest document published in 2016, so as to understand the developments in the way the Baltic republics are perceived in Russia's official discourse in the aftermath of key historical events. In this respect, the presence of different proportions of Russian-speaking "compatriots" residing in the Baltic region – mainly in Estonia and Latvia – represents a key bargaining chip when it comes to Russia's foreign policy strategy towards those countries, where the issues of citizenship and naturalisation remain key obstacles to the stability of the area.

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[4] NATO, *Brussels Summit Communiqué*, Press Release (2021) 086, issued on June 14, 2021, last updated June 24, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm

Chapter 2 will then deal with the long history of occupation – from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union – that eventually led to the independence of the three Baltic republics from the USSR in 1991, and their subsequent membership within NATO and the European Union in 2004. Since then, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have made a significant effort to promote reforms to integrate within the Western liberal system, thus becoming a disputed area between, on the one hand, Russia's desire to preserve its influence in former Soviet territories and, on the other, NATO's commitment to guarantee the safety and stability of its Allies. Following this path, the last paragraph will be centred on the issue of Baltic energy security and the projects developed to favour an increased diversification of supplies and the protection of critical infrastructure. Within this framework, the case study of Lithuania and the LNG Terminal developed in Klaipėda acquires special relevance in the analysis of this topic.

Finally, Chapter 3 will be dedicated to security issues that resulted from the Baltic membership within Western institutions – the Atlantic Alliance in the first place – and the tensions that followed the annexation of Crimea on the part of Russia in 2014. To this aim, the second paragraph of the Chapter will focus on the evolving nature of modern conflicts, with special attention to hybrid and cyber threats and the relevance they acquire in the Baltic security framework, especially in the aftermath of major events such as the 2007 cyberattack on Estonia. Eventually, the final section will attempt to explain why an escalation of tensions in the Baltic area – even though highly unlikely – was and remains undesirable for both NATO and Russia, analysing existing projects and potential recommendations to strengthen the resilience and stability of the Baltic region.

Literature review and Methodology

The present research aims at providing a picture as complete as possible of the reasons behind current security challenges in the three Baltic republics through an analysis of the process that led to the present configuration of the region, in order to understand the risks related to a potential escalation of tensions between NATO and the Russian Federation. For this purpose, emphasis is placed on a combination of both official sources and academic works, from the Baltic, Russian and Western contexts, so as to provide the reader with an unbiased reading key that departs from one-sided interpretations of major historical events. To do so, this work is based on both primary and secondary sources. On the one hand, official sources from the Baltic and Russian governments (most of the times available in the English language) and NATO documents, treaties and statistical data/graphs were essential to understand the involved counterparts' postures on the current situation in the Baltic region and their interests in the area. On the other, the use of monographs, journal articles from specialised magazines (in English and, sometimes, in Russian), press releases and website contents helped to contextualise the crucial historical events that led to the present configuration of the region and understand the most recent debates on latest developments. Despite the challenges in retrieving precise information on the exact capabilities developed by one side or the other to better understand each other's perception of danger, available secondary sources were extremely useful for a critical and quite comprehensive analysis of such delicate topics. In this respect, having a little knowledge of Russian, the choice to insert terms in the original language (sometimes also in Estonian and Latvian) was essential to preserve the correct definition of key concepts the way they were conceived by their authors, and avoid misunderstandings that may arise through translation. Finally, Chapters 2 and 3 were integrated with two interviews with, respectively, Dr Vytautas Butrimas, from NATO ENSEC COE and Dr Kadri Kaska, from NATO CCDCOE, representing an essential contribution to the quality of this dissertation by providing a more specific point of view on the issues of the protection of critical energy infrastructure (CEIP) and Estonia's expertise in the cyber realm.

As mentioned in the introduction to the present dissertation, Chapter 1 provides a theoretical basis to the whole research, focusing on an analysis of Russia's understanding of the concept of *soft power* throughout the subsequent foreign policy Concepts ever since the coming to power of Vladimir Putin. This is particularly relevant because, by examining the way the Baltic area was portrayed in Russia's official discourse, it was possible to understand its relevance for the strategic objectives of the Federation and why the region is depicted differently from other former Soviet countries, especially within the broader framework of Moscow's "compatriot policy".

Therefore, the Chapter is based on a series of primary sources: as for the analysis of Russia's version of soft power within its official discourse, the majority of the chosen documents were retrieved from the websites of the Kremlin, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Russian Duma. In this respect, the 2000, 2008, 2013 and 2016 foreign policy Concepts of the Federation were essential to understand the origins of Russia's soft power strategy and compatriot policy, especially in relation to the specific historical-political context in which they were inserted. Furthermore, when it came to the study of the Russian diaspora in Estonia and Latvia, the analysis of data and official documents – all available in the English language – from the respective governments of the two countries was helpful to understand the legal aspects of the peculiar situation of Russian-speaking minorities residing in the Baltics under no citizenship status. Together with the data retrieved from the Council of Europe's reports to monitor the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities on the part of the signatory governments, those documents contributed to providing a wider picture of the state of the art in terms of the integration and the recognition of the political rights of former Soviet citizens in the Baltics.

Moreover, among the secondary sources, the analysis of Joseph Nye's piece on the meaning of "soft power" and the works of relevant Russian personalities that produced extensive work on the matter, such as Konstantin Kosachev, Alexander Sergunin, and Leonid Karabeshkin has allowed a detailed and comprehensive understanding of Russia's soft power strategy, but, most importantly, those authors have pointed out the major controversies of the concept that have arisen in relation to subsequent historical developments. Concerning Russia's compatriot policy, the works of Kristina Kallas, Una Bergmane and Angela Di Gregorio have provided useful information on how this approach is perceived by the Baltic populations – with a special focus on Estonia and Latvia – highlighting significant differences in the ways minorities regard their identities in the post-Soviet era.

As the second Chapter of the present dissertation starts providing a historical analysis of the events that brought to the current configuration of the Baltic region, most of the information was drawn from monographs, journal articles and online encyclopaedias. Within this framework, Andres Kasekamp's work "A history of the Baltic states" traces the developments that took place in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from the Middle Ages to the endured occupation on the part of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, which eventually turned into the membership within the

European Union and NATO. More specifically, the article by Andrew Parrott provides a complete representation of the years between the outbreak of WW1 and the first struggles for independence, while Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera's publication was essential to better picture the years of the Soviet occupation. On the period between independence from the USSR and the admission within the Western institutional outlook, Agnia Grigas's work "The Baltic States in the EU: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" and James S. Corum's monograph discuss the main challenges related to the membership of the three republics in the Western institutional system within the broader context of the collapse of the USSR.

In this respect, a point of major importance is the issue of energy security of the Baltic region, to which is dedicated the last paragraph of the Chapter. Once again, Grigas' extensive work on the matter and Simon Hoellerbauer's article helped to unveil important details on the energy relationship between the Baltic states and Russia, where the former are putting a lot of effort to exit the Soviet BRELL system and enter the European energy network. Furthermore, more recent newspaper articles and online resources on the single energy initiatives provided an overview of how far the debate on the Baltic energy security is going, especially the controversies related to the Nord Stream project, strongly backed by Germany and Russia. Along the same lines, Irma Paceviciute's work accurately describes the case of Lithuania, whose peculiarity is related to its role of transit country for Russian gas to reach the oblast of Kaliningrad, which allowed Vilnius to use its position as a guarantee for the supply of natural gas to the whole country. Diversification and energy independence have thus become Vilnius' major strategic interests and, after the construction of the Klaipėda LNG terminal, official sources from the IEA have declared that in the past decade Lithuania has also made impressive progress towards a clean energy transition through the electricity market reforms and rising domestic clean power generation, showing a significant potential to become the leading country in the region for clean energy and energy security[5]. In this sense, the interview with Dr Vytautas Butrimas (NATO ENSEC COE) represented an enlightening opportunity to deepen the discussion on the protection of critical energy infrastructure (CEIP), which becomes crucial in a context under increasing risk of hybrid and cyber threats, such as the Baltic one.

Then, being the focus of Chapter 3 on the security challenges the Baltic area is facing, the selected sources mainly include official documents from the Atlantic Alliance, reports developed by the Baltic Centres of Excellence or journal articles retrieved from specialised magazines.

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[5] "Lithuania is well placed to lead on clean energy and energy security in the Baltic region, according to IEA policy review", IEA, April 28, 2021, https://www.iea.org/news/lithuania-is-well-placed-to-lead-on-clean-energy-and-energy-security-in-the-baltic-region-according-to-iea-policy-review

Hence, in the absence of univocal information on the part of Russia on the actual forces stored in the Kaliningrad Oblast, the works by Sven Sakkov, Dave Johnson, Sergey Sukhanin, Robert Dalsjö and the Defense Intelligence Agency provide an accurate description of the importance and confirmed capabilities of the A2/AD "bubble", together with Moscow's investment in the exercises "Zapad" in its Western Military District to improve readiness and protect its border regions.

Altogether, this is situated within the broader context of Russia's understanding of the concept of *New Generation Warfare* (NGW): in this respect, starting from the definition provided by General Valery Gerasimov – Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces – the publications by Andrew Radin, Mirosław Banasik, Jānis Bērziņš and Mikael Weissmann have been particularly enlightening. Furthermore, official documents from the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation provided a more precise understanding of Russia's perception and activities in the information space. As for the analysis of hybrid and cyber threats in the Baltic region, NATO StratCom COE reports have resulted useful to have a broader idea of how those kinds of threats work and what consequences they imply for targeted societies; more specifically, works by Māris Cepurītis, Belén Carrasco Rodríguez, Janne Hakala and James Pamment provided an extensive explanation of the centrality of the control of the information dimension in the area, especially in the cases of Latvia and Estonia. In this respect, the interview with Dr Kadri Kaska (NATO CCDCOE) helped to analyse in more detail the role of the cyber dimension within the strategic thinking of Estonia, examining the contribution the country is giving to the activities and capabilities of the Alliance, including the Baltic area.

Lastly, official sources from online platforms of the Atlantic Alliance and specialised reports from RAND Corporation and the Swedish Research Agency represented a crucial contribution to allow a comprehensive analysis on the risks of an escalation between NATO and Russia in the Baltics. Overall, this contributed to further confirm that, even though a fully-fledged conflict in the area remains highly unlikely, it is necessary to invest in the reopening of negotiations between the involved counterparts and favour the stability and resilience of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the face of emerging security threats.

CHAPTER 1

Русский Мир (Russkiy Mir): A Soft Power Tool

Nationalism exists in various shades, it can be a political movement, an ideology, a sentiment, or it can include facets of all previous options. Nationalist rhetoric can be associated with any political system and ideology, from totalitarian regimes to democracies, but all forms of nationalism always are in close connection with the historical and political context in which they arise[6].

The demise of the USSR led to the creation of a series of independent republics, making the newly born Russia resort to soft power mechanisms to regain influence in the post-Soviet space. Based on Joseph Nye's narrative, Moscow has thus developed its own understanding of "soft power", focusing on its rich past, the regional and global relevance of the Russian language and its centrality within the Orthodox community. Especially with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin, Russia has thus started to pursue soft power goals in former Soviet countries, in order to build an image of a neutral and reliable trade partner. In particular, Moscow's strategy has at its heart Russian compatriots displaced outside its territory, with the intent to boost a process of identity construction through cultural promotion.

Within this framework, the Baltic context is quite unique, especially the cases of Estonia and Latvia. There, the memory of the Soviet era favoured the re-enactment of the legislative systems in force prior to WW2, granting citizenship to all residents in the Baltic countries before the outbreak of the war. However, this led to the creation of the controversial category of "non-citizens", meaning all Russian-speaking minorities excluded from the naturalisation process, which Russia aims to protect as part of the broader "Russkiy Mir".

1.1 Soft power – The Russian way

In the words of J. Nye, who first used the term, a country's *soft power* implies the ability to be attractive outside its territory. It results from three types of resources: "a country's culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)"[7], where he mainly referred to the appeal of American culture and values of pluralistic democracy and market economy on foreign countries. Thus, the ultimate aim of soft power is to achieve desired policy outcomes through negotiation and attraction, in contrast with means of economic or military coercion[8]. However, it must be said that the perception of a country outside its territory has a major impact on the power of that same country to be credible and attractive abroad. This makes states' efforts to improve their soft power revolve not only around the cultural sphere, but also – and most importantly – around the geopolitical one.

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[6] Anatoly M. Khazanov, "Contemporary Russian Nationalism between East and West", *The IWM Post*, October 14, 2002, https://www.iwm.at/transit-online/contemporary-russian-nationalism-between-east-and-west/

[7] Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Think Again: Soft Power", *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2006, https://foreignpolicy.com/2006/02/23/think-again-soft-power/

In the early 2000s, Russia has started to develop its own soft power strategy. According to Konstantin Kosachev, the Russian approach to soft power is based on three pillars: cooperation, security and sovereignty[9]. As for the first point, Moscow sees cooperation as a matter of creating equal conditions, without any imposition of political and ideological models from outside. Concerning internal and external security, it constitutes a pivotal factor for the progressive development of a country. Within this framework, the constant threat of ethnic, cultural and national conflicts – together with strained relationships with neighbouring countries – can be a significant obstacle for development. Thirdly, as a pillar of international law, the principle of sovereignty is pivotal in the process. In light of this, Russia's official discourse supports the geopolitical independence of smaller states, especially CIS countries[10].

During the Soviet era, the communist ideology took root in some European and Third World countries, where the USSR presented its ideals as an adequate alternative to the wickedness of Western values. Moreover, other means of the Soviet Union's attractiveness were great figures such as the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the Russian ballet – with outstanding performances at the Bolshoi and Mariinsky theatres – and the major sporting events in which the USSR invested massively[11]. However, it was with Putin that the idea of soft power officially became part of Russia's foreign policy strategy. The principle unofficially emerged during President Putin's second term (2004-2008), within the context of Moscow's policies to consolidate its influence in the "near abroad" after the Baltic States achieved accession to both NATO and the EU, as set out in the first "2000 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation"[12]. Among Russia's soft power priorities, the Concept also mentions the Middle East, underlining the necessity to develop and strengthen economic ties in the region, especially with Iran[13]. In that period, Moscow's soft power efforts produced significant achievements in various realms, such as the widespread influence of the Russian language for trade and education in the former Soviet territories, not to mention the growing Russian film industry, music and artistic tradition. Last – but not least – the role of the Federation for the export of natural gas with the giant Gazprom, and electricity with the company FGC UES (*Федеральная сетевая компания Единой энергетической системы*, Federal Grid Company of Unified Energy System)[14]. At the time, Russia was trying to recover from the political and economic upheavals that accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet Union, together with the "frozen conflicts" (e.g. Transdniestria and Nagorno-Karabakh) within the former Soviet territories, and the tensions at the international level. Within this context, the "colour revolutions" in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) constituted a significant challenge to Russia's soft power projections, provoking a significant loss of support for the Kremlin. Moreover, the war with Georgia (2008) also had a major impact on the perception of Russia abroad, especially in the European Union. Within this framework, Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference represented a major turning point in Russia's foreign policy strategy and soft power efforts. It is on that occasion that the President laid down Russia's intention to play an increasing role in international affairs, and take the opportunity to work with other "responsible and independent" partners in the construction of a fair, democratic and truly multipolar world order[15]. This idea became even more evident with the publication of the "2008 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*"*, which highlighted the growing importance of economic, demographic and scientific factors to both strengthen Russia's position in international relations and establish "equal mutually beneficial partnerships with all countries"[16]. Hence, Russia became the promoter of an alternative approach to the American conception of soft power, one based on the centrality of multiculturalism against the universalist ambitions of liberalism, which eventually led to a crisis of the unipolar model. In this context, Russia presents itself as a country that, being the conjunction of multiple civilisations in the first place, represents a suitable mediator between them, and a strong reference on the international stage.

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[8] Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (Autumn 1990).

[9] Konstantin Kosachev, "Не рыбу, а удочку: В чем состоит особенность «мягкой силы» России" [Not fish, but but the fishing rod: What constitutes the peculiarity of Russia's "soft power"], *Russia in Global Affairs*, N° 4 2012 July/August (September 4, 2012), globalaffairs.ru/articles/ne-rybu-a-udochku/

[10] Ibid.

[11] Anna L. Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Soft Power Projection in the Middle East", in *Great Power Competition: The Changing Landscape of Global Geopolitics*, ed. Mahir Ibrahimov (Fort Leavenworth: Army University Press, 2020).

[12] President of Russia, *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, June 28, 2000, https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm

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[13] Ibid.
The strategic importance of the Middle East was also reiterated in the 2016 version of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept. See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, November 30, 2016, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248

[14] Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Soft Power Projection in the Middle East", 4.

[15] President of Russia, *Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy*, February 10, 2007, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034

[16] President of Russia, *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, January 12, 2008, http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116

With the beginning of Putin's third presidency, Russia's understanding of soft power came to include a series of foreign policy strategies aimed at favouring the Federation's objectives abroad, in order to improve its position internationally[17]. The very concept of soft power first appeared in the Russian doctrine with regards to Russia's "compatriots" in the post-Soviet space, as laid down in the "2013 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation". Indeed, the 2013 Concept defines soft power as an essential component of modern international relations in alternative to traditional diplomatic means. The document also mentions the fact that, in an international scenario characterised by increasing power competition, soft power strategies might be manipulated to exert pressure on other states and interfere in their domestic politics, under the guise of supporting projects of cultural nature or related to human rights abroad[18] - mainly referring to the mission of the United States to export democracy in other countries. Within this framework, Russia laid down its aim to use soft power to combine its international experience and national characteristics to establish a positive image of itself at the global level. By boosting interactions with the civil society, the 2013 Concept praises Russia's high-status culture, science and sports achievements, together with its involvement in programmes to provide assistance to developing countries[19].

As for the Baltic States, the 2013 Concept mentions Russia's aim to improve cooperation with North European countries as part of the broader interest for the Arctic region, while claiming the Kremlin's disapproval for the expansion and military activities of NATO in the vicinity of Russian borders[20]. In this respect, it is important to pay attention to Russia's official posture towards the Baltic Republics; hence, in the Concept Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania belong to the category of "Euro-Atlantic states"[21]. What is peculiar about the Baltics is not just a mere political matter, but also the presence of Russian-speaking minorities – more or less integrated – within their territories. In light of the above, it is clear that the Baltic region owns a very specific place in Russian foreign policy strategy, which has to take into consideration a whole series of limitations related to the socio-political record with those countries.

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[17] Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin, "Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy", *Politics*, Vol. 35 No. 3-4 (November 2015), https://publications.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/share/folder/su7lgqm8im/direct/172540174.pdf

[18] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, February 18, 2013, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186

[19] Ibid.

[20] "Russia maintains a negative attitude towards NATO's expansion and to the approaching of NATO military infrastructure to Russia's borders in general as to actions that violate the principle of equal security and lead to the emergence of new dividing lines in Europe". Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* (2013).

[21] Ibid.

This political idea of Russia's soft power laid down in its foreign policy posture is strictly related to the Orthodox Church's more "spiritual" understanding of the concept. According to Andrei Tsygankov, Russia's long-term national interests are based on three pillars: first, sovereignty or "spiritual freedom"; second, a strong state, capable of preserving that sovereignty; third, cultural loyalty to those sharing Russia's sense of honour, no matter their geographic location[22]. Altogether, these points make reference to the defence of the Russian Orthodox Church around the world, where the latter has a crucial role in the definition of the Federation's moral vision. Along the same lines, during his speech at the 2013 Valdai Club meeting, President Putin officially laid down his vision of Russia's mission as an Orthodox power, against the threat of Western – American – unilateralism. In that context, Putin acknowledged the relevance of a shared history, common values and traditions for a people to achieve economic growth and increased geopolitical influence. Speaking of Russia, he praised the country's diversity in terms of cultures, faiths and political perspectives, and claimed the need to create a culture of both unity and diversity, in order to favour pluralism and global stability[23]. However, the subsequent conflict with Ukraine created a gulf between Russian and Western values, where the former upheld its defensive aim to shield not only strategic interests, but also core national values such as cultural freedom and pluralism. From the Russian Orthodox Church's perspective, the Ukraine crisis constitutes a civil war within the "Russian world", which can only be solved with the Ukrainian government recognising the plurality of the Ukrainian society, thus being a legitimate member of the Russkiy Mir[24]. Hence, where the Russian state uses soft power as a strategy to expand the country's political and cultural influence, the Church sees it as a spiritual concept stemming from God's plan to rebuild a *Holy Rus*[25].

Coming back to Nye's three kinds of soft power resources, Russia thus wants to highlight its rich past and multicultural configuration, the regional and global relevance of the Russian language and its centrality within the Orthodox community. Hence, under Vladimir Putin, the foreign policy strategy of the Federation focused on soft power projections on the international scene (especially the post-Soviet space), with the aim to create an image of a neutral peacemaker and reliable trade partner. Nevertheless, the 2013 Concept also shows a pragmatic and instrumentalist understanding of soft power on the part of Russia[26], where, contrary to Nye's conception of the centrality of civil society for soft power, most of Moscow's instruments in this realm are mainly government-based. Indeed, when analysing the areas in which Russia focused its soft power efforts – both in the CIS countries and outside the region – the final outcome results rather mixed, in particular with regards to Russian-speaking minorities living in the Baltic region. Indeed, Moscow's soft power strategy has often been criticised in many realms: among others, Russia's energy policy has been portrayed as more of a hard power resource rather than a soft one. Also, the Federation's cultural dimension and traditions were often overshadowed by the perception of most recent political developments[27], the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea in the first place. Indeed, speaking of foreign policy strategies, energy exports can have both an offensive and defensive purpose, depending on the type of relationship installed between the producing and consuming country and the degree of autonomy of the latter. Within this framework, energy exports can represent both an expedient to build closer economic ties and a means of coercion towards consuming or transit states[28]. Energy was used as a foreign policy tool already in Soviet times, when Moscow built an integrated oil and gas transportation network with all the Soviet republics, in order to favour a unified economy within the Union. A crucial reason for Russia to exercise its influence abroad through its energy policies resides in President Putin's nationalisation of energy resources, concentrating them in the two major state-owned enterprises Gazprom and Rosneft[29]. With the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia remained the major energy supplier of former Soviet Republics, offering favourable trade terms for both oil and gas deliveries. This helped to create dependency relationships with receiving countries, with the potential to produce economic (creation of pipelines), political (influence within the consuming states' political systems) and geopolitical (creation of alliances, advantages on potential rivals) benefits for the supplier[30]. The aforementioned action line applies especially to the countries of the so-called "near abroad", meaning not only the CIS and Eastern Europe, but also the Baltic States. Here, the idea of Russia's energy strategy as a soft power resource was thus weakened by the widespread scepticism of European partners, in light of Russia's energy supply cuts and pricing adjustments to gas contracts, not to mention the Western stance on the Ukraine crisis[31].

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[22] Nicolai N. Petro, "Russia's Orthodox Soft Power", *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, March 23, 2015, https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/727

[23] President of Russia, *Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club*, September 19, 2013, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243

[24] Petro, "Russia's Orthodox Soft Power".

[25] Ibid.

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[26] The 2013 Concept defines soft power as "a comprehensive toolkit for achieving foreign policy objectives building on civil society potential, information, cultural and other methods and technologies alternative to traditional diplomacy". Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* (2013).

[27] Sergunin and Karabeshkin, "Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy", 357.

[28] European Parliament, *Energy as a tool of foreign policy of authoritarian states, in particular Russia*, April 2018, 8, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/603868/EXPO_STU(2018)603868_EN.pdf

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid, 16.

Another point of major controversy resides in the way Russia handles its contemporary popular culture, especially with regards to the role of Russian media and organisations for "soft power" promotion in former Soviet countries, especially the Baltics. According to Agnia Grigas, the younger generations of Russian speakers in the Baltic countries perceive Russia's policies in the region – especially the presence of Russian influence in the local channels of information – as a risk to compromise the sovereignty of the latter, and tend to identify themselves with the country in which they grew up[32]. Moreover, the activities of Russian organisations responsible for cultural promotion and relations with foreign countries, such as *Россотрудничество* (Rossotrudnichestvo) and *Русский мир* (Russkiy Mir Foundation), are seen quite ambiguously among the populations of the Baltic Republics.

Within this framework, Russia's policies towards Russian speaking "compatriots" will require closer attention, especially when it comes to the Baltic states.

1.2 Protecting Russian speakers abroad: The "compatriot policy"

As appears from the analysis of the Foreign Policy Concepts of the Federation since the beginning of Putin's presidency, the main principle underlying Russia's foreign action is the safeguard of the citizens', society's and State's interests[33]. In particular, the protection of the rights and legitimate interests of Russian compatriots living abroad represents one of the pillars of the Federation's foreign policy strategy. A telling example is the latest 2016 Concept, where special consideration is reserved for the compatriot policy. Among others, the 2016 Concept states that, as a nation committed to the safeguard of human rights and freedoms, Russia aims to "further the consolidation of compatriots living abroad, so as to enable them to better realize their rights in the countries of residence and facilitate the preservation of the Russian diaspora's identity, as well as the voluntary relocation of compatriots to the Russian Federation"[34]. Within this framework, it appears appropriate to start by analysing the very concept of "diaspora" in relation with the case of Russia. As we will see, the latter is peculiar both because it is different from a diaspora *strictu sensu*, and it cannot be defined as purely Russian, but rather Soviet, related to the demise of the USSR.

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[31] Filippos Proedrou, "Russian Energy Policy and Structural Power in Europe", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70:1 (January 2018), 78, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322781019_Russian_Energy_Policy_and_Structural_Power_in_Europe

[32] Agnia Grigas, "Compatriot Games: Russian-Speaking Minorities in the Baltic States", *WPR – World Politics Review*, October 21, 2014, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/14240/compatriot-games-russian-speaking-minorities-in-the-baltic-states

[33] State interests were added in the 2008 Concept as a sign of the consolidation of the State's power and the control of national resources, energy in the first place. See: Francisco J. Ruiz González, "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation: A Comparative Study", *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos*, Framework Document 06/2013 (April 2013), 2, http://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2013/DIEEEM06-2013_Rusia_ConceptoPoliticaExterior_FRuizGlez_ENGLISH.pdf; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (2016).

Mainly referred to as the dispersion of the Jews after the First Temple was destroyed in the 6th century BC, the notion of "diaspora" now implies a displacement outside the native land, a (often) restricted access to power and a political means of social cohesion[35]. Speaking of Russia, it is worth noting that nowadays the idea of "displacement" is not understood the way it was in the past, as Russian migrants that have left their country since the collapse of the Soviet Union have kept their ties to their homeland, and often come back to visit their families and loved ones. Moreover, it was the borders that were suddenly changed, and not the people that moved out of them[36]. Second, integration into the country of arrival is key. Nevertheless, if a diaspora community succeeds to integrate into the new community, it also becomes less susceptible to the influence of the motherland, and this factor will be essential when analysing the cases of the Baltic states. Third, due to the aforementioned structural fallacies, the "Russian diaspora" lacks a common political project to trigger an acceptable level of mobilisation, as the "compatriots" are too heterogeneous[37]. Hence, due to the absence of a common understanding of the meaning of this "post-Soviet diaspora", ranging from citizens of the Federation living abroad to Russian-speaking former citizens of the USSR, the concept eventually became a myth in Russia's foreign policy strategy to be used as a soft power tool.

Also, the dilemma Russians-Russian speakers is exacerbated by the difficulties related to the translation of the terms used to designate them. Indeed, while in the English language "Russian" refers to both ethnicity and citizenship, in Russian there are two terms that are often used interchangeably, thus creating confusion. The first is *русский* ("russkiy"), which means ethnic Russian, while the second is *россиянин* ("rossiyanin"), defining Russian citizens. Nevertheless, people tend to use "russkiy" rather than "rossiyanin" in official documents, and even in spoken language the two terms tend more and more to be used as synonyms[38]. Within this framework, the very meaning of Russian "compatriots" displaced outside the Federation's borders becomes quite ambiguous, and the understanding of the concept is susceptible to change depending on the context and the political intention.

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[34] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (2016).
[35] Mikhail Suslov, "'Russian world': Russia's Policy towards its Diaspora", *Ifri*, Russie.Nei.Visions, No. 103 (July 2017), 8, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/suslov_russian_world_2017.pdf
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Soft Power Projection in the Middle East", 3-4.

That said, ever since the demise of the Soviet Union, the “compatriot policy” has always been a pillar of Russia’s soft power strategy. The very first period after the dissolution was characterised by continuous clashes between the Russian President and the Parliament, with the “Congress of the Russian Communities” (*Конгресс русских общин*, KRO) as the head of the debates on compatriots[39]. Hence, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the succession of Yeltsin’s Russia created an issue of identity, where the new government had the burden to decide whether to keep continuity with the Soviet past or create a brand-new national identification discourse. In this respect, the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn well expressed the concerns of the political elite of the time with regard to compatriots displaced outside the Russian Federation. Indeed, he blamed the Yeltsin administration for not safeguarding the interests of Russians in the post-Soviet space, and for the disintegration of the Russian people that followed the demise of the USSR[40]. In 1995, the Duma signed the “Declaration on the support to Russian diaspora and on the protection of Russian Compatriots*”*, where the term “compatriot” denoted former Soviet citizens who kept spiritual and cultural ties with the motherland[41], which led to the creation of a Council of Compatriots within the Duma. In the document, the Russian diaspora is referred to as *российская диаспора* (“rossijskaya diaspora”), not *русская* (“russkaia”), which underlines the ethnic dimension of the concept. In response to this, in 1994 Boris Yeltsin issued a decree “On the Principal Directions of the Federation’s State Policy Towards Compatriots Living Abroad*”*, underlining Russia’s aim to provide support and protection to compatriots living both in CIS countries and the Baltic region[42]. However, those efforts remained limited to rhetoric, and no actual practical measures followed[43]. The debate on the actual meaning of the term “compatriot” was partly solved by a bill conceived in the State Duma in 1997, which eventually entered into force in 1999 as the law “On the State Policy in Relation to Compatriots Abroad*”*. The law depicts three groups of compatriots: first, citizens of the Federation living outside Russia; second, former citizens of the USSR, now residing in former Soviet countries and third, migrants from the Russian Empire, USSR and Russia who lost the Russian citizenship[44]. Within this framework, the second category results to be the most ambiguous, pointing out Russia's responsibility to protect its compatriots under an imperial logic. Along the same lines, Soviet politician Dmitri Rogozin proposed a law "On the national and cultural development of the Russian nation", where is laid down the need for the Russian people to be reunited based on "free will and international legislation"[45], leaving former Russian citizens the freedom to choose how to build their ties with the motherland. Notwithstanding this, the ethnic dimension of the debate on compatriots and the idealisation of Russian speakers displaced around the world remained rooted in Russia's foreign policy approach, and the contradictions related to compatriots remained part of a broader struggle to define national borders after the trauma of disintegration.

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[39] Suslov, “‘Russian world’: Russia’s Policy towards its Diaspora”, 15.

[40] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “’Русский вопрос’ к концу XX века” [The “Russian question” at the end of the 20th century], *Novyj mir*, No. 7 (1994), https://magazines.gorky.media/novyi_mi/1994/7/russkij-vopros-k-konczu-xx-veka.html

[41] Russian Duma, *“О Декларации о поддержке российской диаспоры и о покровительстве российским соотечественникам”* [On the Declaration on the support to Russian Diaspora and on the protection of Russian Compatriots], December 8, 1995, http://docs.cntd.ru/document/9015013

[42] President of Russia, *Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 11.08.1994 г. № 1681* [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation n. 1681 of August 11, 1994], http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/6801

[43] Kristina Kallas, “Claiming the diaspora: Russia’s compatriot policy and its reception by Estonian-Russian population”, *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, Vol. 15, n. 3 (2016), 5, http://www.bearnetwork.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Claiming_the_diaspora_Russias_compatriot.pdf

In the particular case of the Baltics, the Yeltsin era was accompanied by harsh criticisms on the part of Russia of the legislation enacted in the Baltic countries concerning citizenship, especially Estonia and Latvia[46]. Hence, the vivid memory of the period that preceded WW2 remained crucial in the Baltic national doctrines, thus considering the return to Europe as the natural state continuity for the three countries[47]. When Estonia and Latvia obtained independence from the USSR, those who already had citizenship status before the Soviet occupation automatically became citizens, while those coming from other Soviet republics were asked to pass an exam to become Estonian or Latvian citizens, but the answer of Russian speakers was not entirely positive. At present, about 10% of the people residing in Latvia and 6% in Estonia live with no citizenship status; they only result as former Soviet citizens[48]. The issue of Russian-speaking minorities without citizenship rights became a central claim in Russia's compatriot policy, especially with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin.

In light of the above, the years between 1998 and 2003 resulted decisive for the formation of Russia's compatriot policy. The new President Putin promoted a relationship based on common cultural and economic interests with the diaspora, where the latter constituted a means to help

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[44] Suslov, "'Russian world': Russia's Policy towards its Diaspora", 19.

[45] Ibid.

[46] The case of Lithuania is different, due to the smaller portion of Russians living in the country. See: Vadim Smirnov, "Russia's 'soft power' in the Baltic", *RIAC*, May 4, 2012, https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-s-soft-power-in-the-baltic/

[47] Peter Van Elsuwege, "State Continuity and its Consequences: The case of the Baltic States", *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 16(02): 377-388 (June 2003), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231893169_State_Continuity_and_its_Consequences_The_Case_of_the_Baltic_States

[48] Una Bergmane, "Fading Russian Influence in the Baltic States", *Orbis*, Vol. 64, Issue 3 (2020), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7329289/

Moscow to cope with globalisation, providing knowledge and promoting international dialogue among equal partners[49]. Compared to Yeltsin's era, the strategy became focused on claiming compatriots as an organic part of the Russian nation, also through the creation of the *Русский мир* (Russkiy Mir Foundation) and the agency *Россотрудничество* (Rossotrudnichestvo) – officially known as the "Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation". According to Vladislav Surkov, first deputy head of the Putin administration and one of its key ideologists, the "Russkiy Mir" project is closely related to the concept of "sovereign democracy", where the former constitutes a central soft-power tool to exercise Russia's influence on neighbouring countries[50]. Indeed, the idea of "Russkiy Mir" – including Russia and all Russians around the world – was understood as a full-fledged identity construction process, with the aim to overcome the image of Russia as a "divided nation". The original project was based on three pillars: first, the Russian language; second, the Soviet victory over Nazism at the end of WW2 and third, the centrality of the Russian Orthodox Church. Taken together, these elements imply three types of linkages with the Federation: cultural, through the common language, religious community and historical memory; political, through the identification with the Russian state and economic, supporting policies in favour of Russia's economic interests[51]. However, the abovementioned ties with a given country do not necessarily imply the existence of a consolidated and powerful civilisation, which implies that the reinforcing of the diaspora has to be accompanied by financial resources and the setting up of dedicated institutions, both domestically and internationally. In light of this, in the past ten years the Russian government has been putting a lot of investment efforts in institutions for the promotion of its culture abroad: in 2015, the Russkiy Mir foundation's budget was around 430 million roubles (ca. 4 million euros)[52]; while Rossotrudnichestvo's annual financing was planned to increase from 2 billion roubles (ca. 22 million euros) to 9.5 billion roubles (ca. 105 million euros) by 2020[53].

Also, the Ukraine crisis of 2014 and the subsequent annexation of the Crimean peninsula on the part of Russia were crucial in the development of its compatriot policy. Hence, in the past few years, the concept of "Russian world" acquired a new geopolitical connotation, strictly centred on the uniqueness of the Russian civilisation and the struggles that – due to its history and geographic location – the country had to face. Within this framework, from the initial meaning referring to Russian-speakers and former Soviet citizens living outside the Federation, the idea of "Russian world" came to represent the territorial reunification of Russian lands[54]. What comes out is a new conceptual vision of foreign politics, where, in an international context growing increasingly complex, the preservation of sovereignty and the rights of cultural and civilisational identities are key. Speaking of the Baltics, in 2018 Vladimir Putin has expressed his concern for the violations of the rights of Russian speakers living in the three republics under the status of "non-citizens", reiterating Russia's willingness to help and calling the European Union to pay proper attention to the problem[55]. Nevertheless, the national governments of the Baltic states claim that they do not deny those people rights, as citizenship remains open to all people who are willing to learn the national language. What is more, Estonia and Latvia are progressively trying to eliminate the concept of "non-citizen", but still highlighting the centrality of the language in order to get citizenship. For instance, in Estonia non-citizens have the right to vote for municipal elections. As for Latvia, since 2019 Latvian-born children can get Latvian citizenship automatically, while until then, it was up to their parents whether to acquire citizenship or non-citizen status[56].

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[49] *Выступление Президента России Владимира Путина на Первом Всемирном конгрессе российских соотечественников* [Speech of the Russian President Vladimir Putin at the first World Congress of Compatriots], World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad, October 11, 2001, https://vksrs.com/publications/vystuplenie-prezidenta-rossii-vladimira-/

[50] Suslov, "'Russian world': Russia's Policy towards its Diaspora", 22.

[51] Kallas, "Claiming the diaspora: Russia's compatriot policy and its reception by Estonian-Russian population", 8.

[52] Exchange rate of 2021. See: Suslov, "'Russian world': Russia's Policy towards its Diaspora", 23.

[53] Exchange rate of 2021. See: "Russotrudnichestvo receives additional budget funding", Russkiy Mir Foundation, July 24, 2013, https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/132843/

Putin's presidency has thus provided a new significance to the compatriot policy and the idea of "Russkiy Mir", moving from pure rhetoric to ensure the protection of ethnic minorities to geopolitical strategy, where the diaspora progressively lost its initial relevance. In this instance, the expedient of the diaspora was used as a device to both extend Russia's influence over former Soviet states and favour the construction of a national identity at home. In such a framework, the case of the Baltics is peculiar, as the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept portrays Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as part of Northern Europe, not the post-Soviet space[57]. However, the Baltic states acquire major significance in terms of Russia's regional policies in the broader Baltic Sea Region.

1.3 The Russian diaspora in Estonia and Latvia

Speaking of Russia's compatriot policy in former Soviet territories, due to a series of historical and geopolitical factors, the Baltic framework has its own peculiarities, and it does not fit in the broader portrait of other republics of the USSR. Indeed, not only the Baltics were independent between the two world wars, but their values of parliamentarism and democracy constituted a factor of major importance to gain independence from the Soviet Union and protect their culture and language[58]. Thus, even though minorities enjoy the protection of their rights and freedoms – as so provided by common international standards – in the respective constitutions of the Baltic republics[59], their legislative systems with regards to minorities show a tendency towards the preservation of the national identity they had to reconstruct after the years of occupation. Hence, contrarily to many of the CIS countries, with the demise of the Soviet Union the Baltic states insisted on obtaining legal continuity with their independent statehood before WW2, thus cutting all ties with the USSR. This legal recognition had the consequence of restoring the laws into force in those countries before the war, including stricter measures on citizenship recognition, especially in the cases of Estonia and Latvia[60].

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[54] Suslov, "'Russian world': Russia's Policy towards its Diaspora", 25.

[55] "Putin urges EU to pay attention to Russian speakers' rights in Baltics", *The Baltic Times*, August 6, 2018, https://www.baltictimes.com/putin_urges_eu_to_pay_attention_to_russian_speakers__rights_in_baltics/

[56] Bergmane, "Fading Russian Influence in the Baltic States".

[57] "Russia stands for maintaining in the north of Europe an area of trust and stability based on the principle of equal and indivisible security. To these ends, Russia develops practical cooperation with North European countries, including by implementing joint projects within multilateral frameworks, with due consideration of environmental aspects and interests of indigenous peoples. Russia's participation in the activities of the Council of the Baltic Sea States plays an important role. Russia advocates the further unleashing of the project potential of the Northern Dimension and its partnerships as a platform for regional cooperation in Northern Europe". See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (2016).

Within this framework, Figure 1 provides an insight into the composition of the respective populations of the two countries and the way those data changed from the pre-war era. Based on Kullo Arjakas' work "The Baltic States: A Reference Book" and official figures from the Interior Ministries and statistic centres of Estonia and Latvia, this report of the European Parliament shows how, in the aftermath of independence from the Soviet Union, Tallinn and Riga adopted more selective measures – legislation on the official language to be adopted, education and the media – with regards to migrants from former Soviet countries, based on a favourable ratio of the local population to Russian-speaking minorities[61].

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[58] Angela Di Gregorio, "Democratic Transition and Linguistic Minorities in Estonia and Latvia", *European Parliament – Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs*, April 2018, 6, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2018/604952/IPOL_IDA(2018)604952_EN.pdf

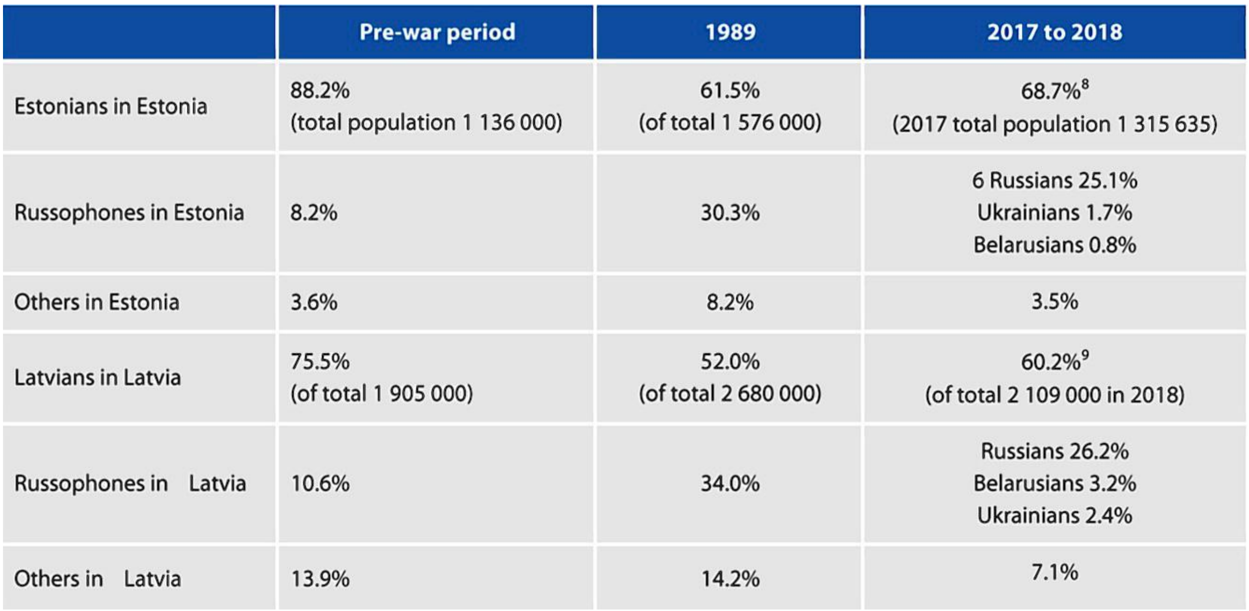
[59] Overall, the Constitutions of the Baltic countries only contain specific provisions for the protection of minorities. For instance, Art. 114 of the Latvian Constitution claims the right for minorities to preserve their language and cultural identity, where citizenship does not constitute a requirement to enjoy minority rights. See: President of Latvia, *The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia*, June 19, 2014, https://www.president.lv/en/republic-of-latvia/the-constitution-of-the-republic-of-latvia#gsc.tab=0

As for Estonia, together with individual rights, the Constitution also protects group rights, even if in some cases their implementation was quite limited. For instance, Art. 50 and Art. 51.2 lay down the right for minorities to establish self-governing agencies and, where at least one half of the residents come from a certain minority, everyone has the right to receive responses from institutions in the language of the minority. See: President of Estonia, *Constitution of the Republic of Estonia*, July 3, 1992, https://www.president.ee/en/republic-of-estonia/the-constitution/

[60] Lithuania opted for a softer stance, granting citizenship to the 90% of former Soviet citizens residing in its territory (the so-called "zero option"). Nevertheless, the law on citizenship adopted in 1991 is based on stricter requirements, thus being more in line with the ones adopted in Estonia and Latvia. Overall, it is also worth noting that the Russian-speaking minority in Lithuania was much smaller compared to the ones in Estonia and Latvia. See: Di Gregorio, "Democratic Transition and Linguistic Minorities in Estonia and Latvia", 7.

[61] Di Gregorio, "Democratic Transition and Linguistic Minorities in Estonia and Latvia", 9.

Figure 1: Ethnic composition of Estonia and Latvia from the pre-war period to the present time



	Pre-war period	1989	2017 to 2018
Estonians in Estonia	88.2% (total population 1 136 000)	61.5% (of total 1 576 000)	68.7%[8] (2017 total population 1 315 635)
Russophones in Estonia	8.2%	30.3%	6 Russians 25.1% Ukrainians 1.7% Belarusians 0.8%
Others in Estonia	3.6%	8.2%	3.5%
Latvians in Latvia	75.5% (of total 1 905 000)	52.0% (of total 2 680 000)	60.2%[9] (of total 2 109 000 in 2018)
Russophones in Latvia	10.6%	34.0%	Russians 26.2% Belarusians 3.2% Ukrainians 2.4%
Others in Latvia	13.9%	14.2%	7.1%

Source: Angela Di Gregorio, "Democratic Transition and Linguistic Minorities in Estonia and Latvia", *European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs*, April 2018, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2018/604952/IPOL_IDA(2018)604952_EN.pdf

As a result, the Russian-speaking minorities living in Estonia and Latvia automatically lost their citizenship and the privileges related to it. However, it is not a matter related to the protection of minority rights *strictu sensu*, but rather to the exclusionary measures resulting from the denial of citizenship, especially in terms of voting rights and political representation. Therefore, in both countries there is a distinction in terms of residence status, which is called *määratlemata kodakondsusega isikud* ("person of undetermined citizenship") in Estonia and *nepilsoni* ("non-citizens") in Latvia. According to both countries' governments, the aforementioned status and citizenship imply extremely similar conditions, and the former would not constitute any discrimination, being created as a transitional measure to allow former Soviet citizens to request naturalisation[62]. However, even though joining the European Union implied an extension of the possibilities granted to non-citizens, thus reducing the incentives to acquire the local citizenship, EU citizenship remains related to the one of a Member State. Altogether, this led to a peculiar situation for Russian-speaking minorities residing in Estonia and Latvia.

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[62] Ibid, 11.

1.3.1 Estonia

As for Estonia, the consolidation of the compatriot movement began straight after the adoption of central programmes in Moscow, with the aim to consolidate the Estonian-Russian diaspora through cultural, linguistic and economic ties. However, the administrative bodies behind the compatriot policy soon realised the difficulty to realise their political projects, not only in light of the weakened ties between Russia and Estonia, but mainly because of the difficulty to be attractive to the youth. Still, this does not mean that Russia's strategy was utterly unsuccessful. In her investigation on the reception of Russia's compatriot policies and the *Russkiy Mir* project on the Russophone minority in Estonia, Kristina Kallas provides an interesting analysis of the Estonian-Russians' understanding of their identity and the perception of Moscow's policies after the shock of the collapse of the USSR. In particular, the study shows that in 2015, the cultural and linguistic connection with Russia constituted the strongest tie respondents felt with the motherland, and this was true among all age groups[63]. This link is not only maintained through the everyday use of the language and in some cases education in the Russian language, but also and most importantly through the consumption of Russian media. Another point worthy of attention is the widespread territorial identification with Estonia, especially among the younger generations[64]. This comes as a result of the prolonged residence in the country, and the subsequent identification with the daily cultural and socio-economic structures of Estonia, thus creating obstacles to the identification with Russia. Nevertheless, the cultural identification with Russia does not automatically imply the acceptance of its political measures and identity[65]. Within this framework, while Moscow claimed its goal to create a cultural, political and economic connection of Russian-speaking minorities with the motherland, it comes out that, in Estonia, this identification was more problematic than expected. Indeed, even if the linguistic tie with Russia remains strong – especially in the case of older generations – Russophones residing in Estonia are progressively identifying themselves with the latter, and this becomes particularly true for younger generations, in most cases born in the Republic of Estonia. Even in terms of party politics, Russian speakers in Estonia have traditionally supported the Centrist Party (*Keskerakond*), which has always openly favoured measures to accommodate the needs of the Russian-speaking minority, such as education in the Russian language and easier naturalisation processes. However, the progressive emergence of the civic concept of “people of the Estonian land” – including the naturalised former Soviet citizens – has contributed to the consolidation of a party discourse based on civic rather than ethnic principles, as most Russian speakers are switching toward other parties, the Reform Party in the first place[66].

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[63] In particular, in all age groups more than half of the interviewees (in some cases up to 70% of the responses) said Russian culture and language strongly links them with Russia. See: Kallas, "Claiming the diaspora: Russia's compatriot policy and its reception by Estonian-Russian population", Figure 1 and Figure 2.

[64] Ibid, Figure 3. The identification with Estonia is stronger among younger categories, meaning ages 15-24 and 25-34 (70-80%), but it is also quite widespread among those born in Russia.

[65] Ibid, 15.

Despite the stronger identification of Russophone minorities with Estonia, the issue of non-citizens remains quite central in the country, especially in terms of minority protection. After gaining independence from the USSR, in 1992 Estonia passed a law that automatically granted citizenship to all Estonian citizens prior to June 16, 1940, and their descendants, while the others had to achieve at least two years of residence, pass a language exam and pledge allegiance to the State and the Constitution. Also, a law on aliens and stateless people was adopted in 1993, providing them with residence permits and voting rights in local elections, but not to stand for public office. About this last point, the 1993 law on local elections was substituted by a new one in 2002; however, even though it had the aim to grant the right to vote and run for public office for EU citizens residing in Estonia, the new law did not change much for “non-citizens”[67]. Within this context, according to the Fifth Report submitted by Estonia on the implementation of the “Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities”, over the past few years the country has significantly reduced the number of residents with undetermined citizenship status, moving from 32% in 1992 to 5% in 2018. The Report states that, together with the acquisition of Estonian citizenship, other major reasons for this reduction were the acquisition of other countries’ citizenships and the decease of former Soviet citizens residing in Estonia.[68] Based on data from the Estonian Police and Boarder Guard Board and the Population Register of the Ministry of the Interior, the Report describes a declining tendency of people living in an undetermined status of citizenship, moving from 91.288 in 2014 to 77.878 at the beginning of 2019[69] (Figure 2). Among others, the document also mentions a constant effort of the part of the Republic of Estonia to ease citizenship proceedings in the past few years, thus having a direct, positive impact on the reduction of children with undetermined citizenship. For instance, in 2016 there was an amendment of the Citizenship Act, which allowed children of parents with undetermined citizenship to become

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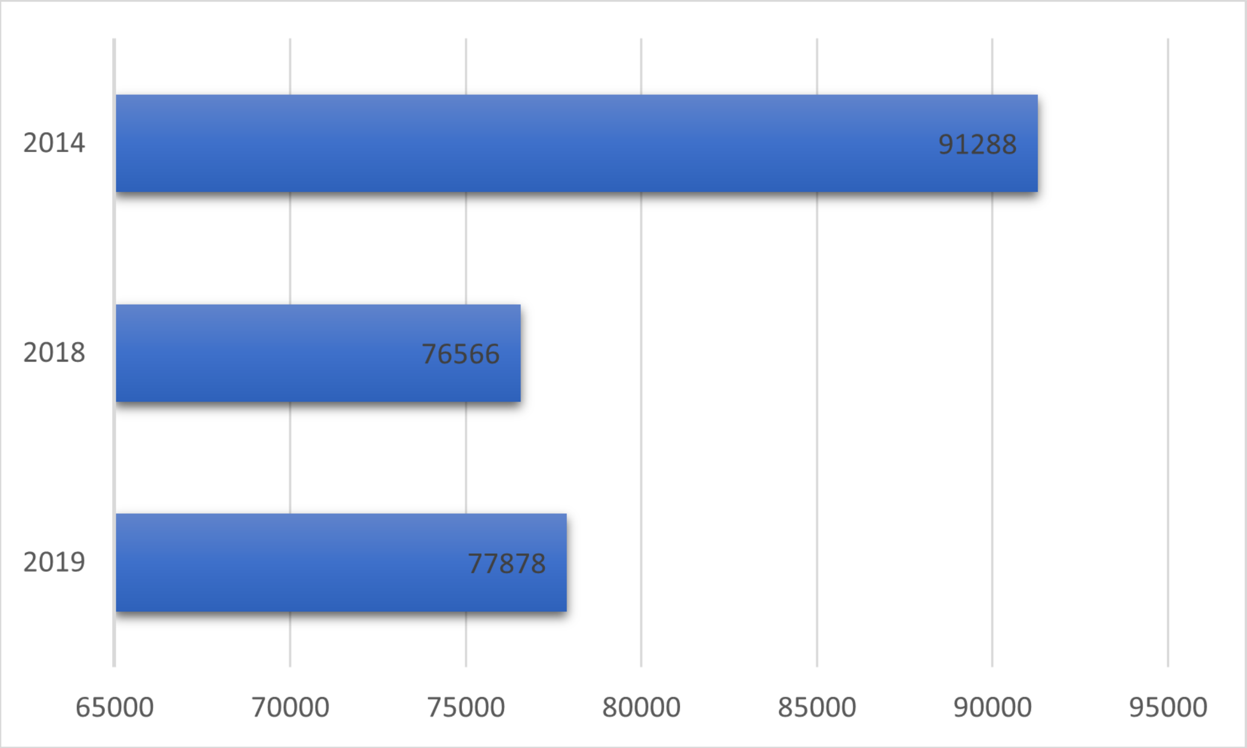
[66] The formation of a coalition with the Estonian nationalistic right-wing party “Pro Patria” in 2016 also contributed to an erosion of the Russian-speaking electorate of the Centre Party. See: Petr V. Oskolkov, “Estonia’s party system today: electoral turbulence and changes in ethno-regional patterns”, *Baltic Region*, Vol. 12, no 1 (January 2020), 4, 10, doi: 10.5922/2078-8555-2020-1-1.
[67] Di Gregorio, “Democratic Transition and Linguistic Minorities in Estonia and Latvia”, 15-16.
[68] Council of Europe, *Estonia’s Fifth Report on the Implementation of the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities 2019*, November 25, 2019, 4, https://rm.coe.int/5th-sr-estonia-en/1680994327
[69] Ibid.

Estonian citizens without need to apply for it, provided that the parents have no other citizenship and have resided in Estonia for at least five years[70].

Figure 2: People with undetermined citizenship in Estonia (2014-2019)



Source: Council of Europe, *Estonia's Fifth Report on the Implementation of the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities 2019*, November 25, 2019, https://rm.coe.int/5th-sr-estonia-en/1680994327. Elaboration of data retrieved from the Estonian Police and Boarder Guard Board and the Population Register of the Estonian Ministry of the Interior.

Overall, it turns out that the relations between Russian speakers residing in Estonia on the one hand, and the governments of Russia and Estonia on the other are quite complex and multidimensional, thus creating a unique situation for those minorities compared with other former Soviet countries. Within this context, the generational gap and the impact of the European legislation on non-citizens' rights are key to understand integration issues in the area. We will now turn to a more detailed analysis of the Latvian situation.

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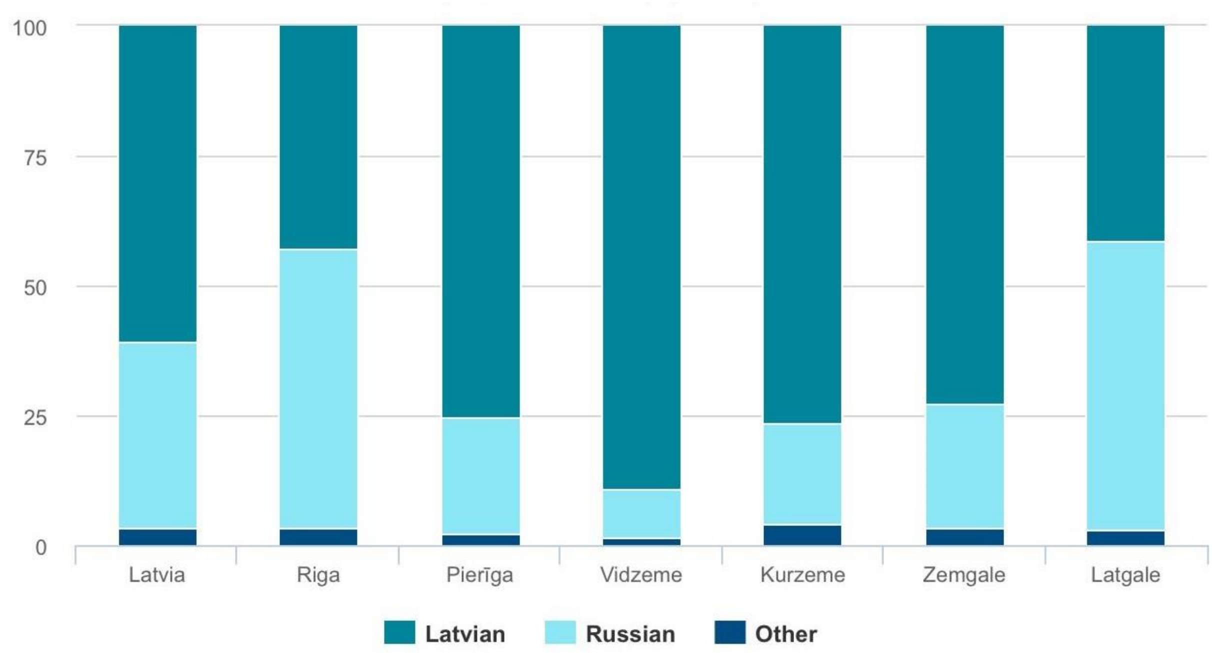
[70] § 36(3). Acquisition of Estonian citizenship by minors born before 1 January 2016 – 3) The expression contained in subsection 1 of this section concerning persons whom no state recognises under valid laws as its citizens also includes persons who were citizens of the Soviet Union before 20 August 1991 and whom no other state has recognised under valid laws as its citizens. See: Estonian Parliament, *Citizenship Act*, April 1995, https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/512022015001/consolide

1.3.2 Latvia

Differently from Estonia, in Latvia the Russian-speaking diaspora is more widespread across the whole national territory, which – among others – makes the situation of minorities slightly more problematic. Figure 3 shows the portions of Russian speakers and Latvian speakers within each region of Latvia in 2017, where the regions with the highest concentration of residents whose mother tongue is Russian are Latgale (55.5% of the population of the region) and Riga (53.5%)[71].

Figure 3: Native language of the population of Latvia by region in 2017 (percentage per region)



Source: "Indicators characterising languages used by the population of Latvia", Central Statistical Bureau Republic of Latvia, accessed April 8, 2021, https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/characteristics/key-indicator/indicators-characterising-languages-used. Results of External Migration Survey.

Within this framework, the controversial issues of citizenship and naturalisation in Latvia are closely related to the historical memory of the Russia-Latvia relations and Latvia's position within the international community, in particular after the accession to the European Union. Being the Russians the largest minority in Latvia, after the demise of the Soviet Union the matter of the status of Latvian-Russians became a central question in the relationships among ethnic groups within the country and the leverage the diaspora could have on political decisions. Upon gaining independence from the USSR, Riga opted for the legal continuity with the Latvian state before the Soviet occupation, restoring the Constitution and the citizenship law in force before WW2[72]. On October 15, 1991, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia thus passed a resolution "On the Renewal of the Rights of Citizens of the Republic of Latvia and the Fundamental Provisions for Naturalisation", which restored citizenship rights to those who had Latvian nationality prior to the outbreak of the war and their direct descendants, if resident in Latvia before the entry into force of the resolution[73]. For the others, a series of steps had to be followed to obtain naturalisation, including residence in the territory of Latvia for 16 years at least, a language test and a pledge allegiance to the Constitution and the Republic[74]. As a consequence of this, a third of the Russian diaspora residing in Latvia (ca. 300.000 people) could renew their citizenship, while the rest of them (ca. 600.000 people) were excluded from it[75]. As mentioned above, this led to the creation of the new category of former Soviet citizens without actual citizenship – the so-called "non-citizens" – for which Latvia adopted in 1995 a law "On the status of those former USSR citizens who do not have citizenship of Latvia or any other State". The idea behind this law was to act as a bridge between the lack of citizenship and its acquisition, thus making the situation of "non-citizens" different from actual statelessness. Indeed, the law provided travel documents to leave and re-enter the country, diplomatic protection, the right to education and healthcare and the possibility to preserve the native language and culture, unless this is in conflict with Latvian laws. However, the absence of political rights – including the right to vote in general and municipal elections and to be elected for public office – remained one of the key controversies[76]. The opening of the naturalisation process showed the reluctance of some members of the Latvian-Russian community towards the Republic of Latvia, especially among the older generations. Overall, the imposition of the Latvian language was perceived as the biggest obstacle, both in relation to education and media consumption. Hence, despite the support from the international community, the promotion of the language in the field of education met significant resistance on the part of the Russian diaspora residing in Latvia, claiming an assimilation of the national minorities instead of a proper integration[77]. As for the media, the fact that Latvia possesses two completely separate systems of information – one in Latvian and another in Russian – contributes to the fragmentation of the national identity of the country[78]. The deep-rooted ethnic cleavage between Latvian and Russian speakers is crucial also when it comes to the national political scenario, extremely divided especially on issues related to corruption. Here, the largest Russian speakers' party in Latvia "Harmony" (*Saskaņas Centrs*) is representative of the divisions within the Latvian society, as it was itself created out of a coalition of three smaller parties – National Harmony Party (TSP), New Centre (JC), and Social Democratic Party (SDP), the latter being the only one with an ethnically Latvian background. Despite Harmony's attempts to move from being a Russian party to a social democratic one including the broader Latvian electorate, Harmony's leader's Ušakovs position on the 2012 referendum to make Russian Latvia's second official language and the Ukraine crisis further deepened divisions over nationalism within the country[79].

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[71] "Indicators characterising languages used by the population of Latvia", Central Statistical Bureau Republic of Latvia, accessed April 8, 2021, https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/characteristics/key-indicator/indicators-characterising-languages-used

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[72] Nils Muižnieks, *Latvian-Russian Relations: Domestic and International Dimensions* (LU Akadēmiskais apgāds: Rīga, 2006), 15, https://www.szf.lu.lv/fileadmin/user_upload/szf_faili/Petnieciba/sppi/lat_un_starp/latvian-russian_relations_final(1).pdf

[73] Ibid.

[74] Di Gregorio, "Democratic Transition and Linguistic Minorities in Estonia and Latvia", 12.

[75] Jacek Więcławski, "The Case of the Russians in Latvia and the Need of the Comprehensive Research Approach in Contemporary International Relations", *International Journal of Social Science Research*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (February 2015), 122, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272565334_The_Case_of_the_Russians_in_Latvia_and_the_Need_of_the_Comprehensive_Research_Approach_in_Contemporary_International_Relations

[76] Muižnieks, *Latvian-Russian Relations: Domestic and International Dimensions*, 16.

In this context, Moscow has always presented itself as the defender of Latvian-Russians' rights, denouncing nationalist tendencies on the part of the Latvian administration. Still, the perception of Russia's compatriot policy is not homogeneous within the residents of Latvia, depending on the ethnic group, the region and the age bracket. In a research conducted by the National Defence Academy of Latvia's Centre for Security and Strategic Research between 2015 and 2016, it turned out that, among the respondents, Russian speakers tend to support more of Russia's policies on the situation in Latvia. However, even though the people with undetermined citizenship remain central in the Kremlin's narrative on the discrimination of minorities, the opinion of non-citizens on the matter and their support to Russia is far from being homogeneous[80]. Since it is the Russophone residents of Latvia that tend to withstand more Moscow's compatriot policy, the major support is in most cases found in the cities and regions with the highest numbers of Latvian-Russians. As for age groups, these narratives tend to be supported by people older than 46 years old, and less by younger respondents[81]. Last but not least, another factor worthy of note is the impact of demographic processes on ethnic relations within Latvia and the issue of citizenship. Indeed, the censuses conducted within the Latvian population from 1989 to 2011 showed a negative demographic trend in the last two decades, with a decline by 40% of the Russians living in Latvia. In this sense, the Russian-speaking community is even more affected by this trend than others, as the increased ageing and mortality rate are contributing to the progressive reduction of former Soviet citizens that emigrated to the country[82].

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[77] Więcławski, "The Case of the Russians in Latvia and the Need of the Comprehensive Research Approach in Contemporary International Relations", 126.

[78] Ibid.
Another example is the adoption of a National Programme for the Integration of Society in 2001, which however defined integration as "mutual understanding and cooperation among individuals and groups… based on the Latvian language as the state language and on loyalty to the state of Latvia". See: Muižnieks, *Latvian-Russian Relations: Domestic and International Dimensions*, 20.

[79] Una Bergmane, "Latvia's 'Harmony' in Jeopardy", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, April 30, 2019, https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/04/latvias-harmony-in-jeopardy/

[80] Ieva Bçrzina et al., *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia: Potential National Security Threats* (Rīga: National Defence Academy of Latvia, 2016), 9, https://www.academia.edu/37621540/The_Possibility_of_Societal_Destabilization_in_Latvia_Potential_National_Security_Threats

[81] Ibid, 11.

Eventually, through pressures from the international community – especially the EU and OSCE – over the years Latvia has slightly eased the naturalisation procedure, favouring younger non-citizens born in Latvia, and is working to deal properly with the difficulties related to the Russian diaspora[83]. However, when making a comparison between Riga and Tallinn, it turns out that the legislation on citizenship that was adopted after obtaining independence from the Soviet Union mainly served a state-building aim, where eventually other needs related to the diaspora have arisen. Especially in the case of Latvia, despite the progressive distancing of younger Russian speakers from the Soviet past, the Latvian society remains quite divided on the issue of minorities, underlining a problem of integration that goes far beyond naturalisation alone.

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[82] Więcławski, "The Case of the Russians in Latvia and the Need of the Comprehensive Research Approach in Contemporary International Relations", 124.

[83] See: Council of Europe, *Third Report on the Implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by the Republic of Latvia*, December 6, 2016, https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016806c72e5

CHAPTER 2

Russia and NATO in the Baltic Region: Between Territoriality and Enlargement

The history of the Baltic states has been characterised for a long time by invasions and, in some cases, annexations on the part of their powerful neighbours to both the East and West. Before the beginning of the Soviet domination, all three republics experienced subjection to the Russian Empire, where the condition of Baltic peasants represented the most pressing issue. With the outbreak of the First World War and the Russian revolution, the Baltics lived a short phase of independence, which was interrupted by the surrender of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the USSR with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939. Eventually, the crisis of the Soviet rule triggered by Gorbachev's liberalisation policies opened the door for peaceful national movements claiming independence from the Soviet Union; in 1991, all three Baltic states were officially recognised as independent republics, and they joined both the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union in 2004. Since then, the Baltic republics have represented a disputed area between, on the one hand, Russia's desire to preserve its influence in territories formerly belonging to the Soviet Union, and, on the other, NATO's commitment to enlarging eastwards appealing to the collective identity of the Euro-Atlantic community and its liberal norms in order to favour the stability of the Alliance.

In this context, the issue of energy security is of crucial importance to have a complete picture of security challenges in the Baltics. Since regaining independence from the Soviet Union, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have experienced a complete subordination to the Russian Federation in terms of energy supplies, especially natural gas. Accession within the European Union thus promoted a series of infrastructure projects to achieve a major diversification of energy supplies, where Lithuania stands out for the construction of the Klaipėda LNG terminal in 2014, favouring increased independence from Gazprom's influence and accessing the global market as a reliable service provider.

2.1 A disputed region

Traditionally, the Baltic states have always been in the midst of dominant empires, and have often ended up being invaded and conquered by them, especially in the cases of Latvia and

Estonia[84]. By contrast, Lithuania has been long independent under a Grand Duchy, before joining Poland in the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1569[85]. It was with the Treaty of Nystad, signed in 1721, that Sweden ceded to the Russian Empire all its Baltic provinces, including Ingria, Estonia, Livonia, and a strip of Finnish Karelia[86], while with the Third Partition of Poland, which was not completed until 1797, Russia acquired Courland, the territory of Lithuania east of the Neman River, and the rest of the Volhynian Ukraine[87]. Eventually, by the end of the 18th century, all territories corresponding to the current three Baltic republics became part of the Russian Empire.

The main question was the condition of peasants within the Empire. As for the Baltic provinces of Eastland, Courland and Livland, despite the introduction of agrarian reforms abolishing serfdom – respectively in 1816, 1817 and 1819 – the Baltic German landowners that already exercised their control in the area kept their privileges remaining the actual owners of the lands, for which peasants now owed them a rent[88]. Hence, with the subsequent codification of the Baltic corporate law of 1845, the tsar legitimised the nobles' rights on manor lands, using them to preserve social order[89]. Along the same lines, even though the continuing unrest on the part of Estonian and Latvian peasantry progressively led to increased emancipation, about half of the land of the Baltic provinces eventually remained property of the Baltic German nobility until the end of the Russian Empire[90]. As for the territories of Lithuania, they enjoyed an even lesser degree of autonomy. For instance, in 1840 the tsarist powers replaced the Statute of Lithuania with Russian law, thus making the name of Lithuania disappear from official documents, and serfdom was abolished only in 1861 for Lithuanian and Latgalian peasants, much later than their Estonian and Latvian compatriots[91].

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[84] From the end of the 12th century onwards, the territory belonging to the current Latvia and Estonia saw a significant interaction with neighbouring peoples, including Germans, Swedes, Poles, Danes and – eventually – Russians, contributing to the intrinsic multiethnicity of those areas. In particular, the Baltic Germans were particularly influential, and they long dominated the political, economic and cultural life in the contemporary territories of Estonia and Latvia, as they owned lands, controlled municipalities and the Lutheran church. See: Katja Wezel, "Introduction: German community – German nationality? Baltic German perceptions of belonging in the nineteenth and twentieth century", *Journal of Baltic Studies,* Vol. 48 no. 1 (December 2016), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311731382_Introduction_German_community_-_German_nationality_Baltic_German_perceptions_of_belonging_in_the_nineteenth_and_twentieth_century; Alise Vitola and Theocharis Grigoriadis, "Diversity & empire: Baltic Germans & comparative development", *Diskussionsbeiträge*, No. 6 (2018), 7, https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/176830/1/1018159312.pdf

[85] Di Gregorio, "Democratic Transition and Linguistic Minorities in Estonia and Latvia", 7.

[86] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Second Northern War", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 4, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Northern-War

[87] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Partitions of Poland", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 17, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/event/Partitions-of-Poland

[88] Andrejs Plakans, "Peasants, Intellectuals, and Nationalism in the Russian Baltic Provinces, 1820-90", *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 46, no. 3 (1974): 445-75, 450, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1877320

[89] Andres Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states* (London: Red Globe Press, 2018), 63-64.
This stratified society led to a series of uprisings among the Latvian and Estonian peasantry, who believed that the nobility was the obstacle to the implementation of the tsar's plan to improve their conditions. Indeed, in the 1840s many Estonians and Latvians converted to Orthodoxy believing that acceptance of the tsar's faith would get them the lands, but eventually the Russian law did not allow for reconversion.

[90] Ibid., 64-65.

The tide of reforms led to the beginning of "national awakening" movements across the Baltic region, moving from a society based on class divisions to one characterised by cleavages of ethnic nature. In light of this, Emperor Alexander III started a cultural and administrative "Russification" campaign, in order not to make the Baltic provinces be absorbed within the German cultural influence after its reunification. Thus, at the end of the 19th century Russian became the official language adopted in Baltic schools, and the Russian Orthodox churches were propagated all over the region[92]. As for the bureaucratic dimension, the tsarist authorities harmonised the administrative structures of the Baltic provinces, with the aim to challenge the power of the Baltic German landowners[93]. Eventually, the "Russification" policies strengthened the Latvian and Estonian identity awareness, favouring publications in the respective national languages and a large reading public, favoured by widespread literacy among the populations of the Baltic provinces[94]. Within this framework, the socio-economic transformations and modernisation that took place during the second half of the 19th century brought the formation of the first Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian parties and labour unions, calling for democracy, agrarian reforms and the right to use their native languages for education[95]. However, the tsar responded to these revolutionary attempts through massive executions, arbitrary arrests and exiles. The beginning of the 20th century saw the outbreak of World War I, where the crossing of the German border on the part of the Russian army in August 1914 led to the involvement of the Eastern front in the fights. The Baltic states experienced war very differently, as Estonia was not involved in WW1 until the very end of the conflict, while Latvia witnessed the conflict within its territory – suffering an enormous amount of losses – and Lithuania was occupied by Germany – which, nevertheless, allowed to spare the lives of many soldiers who would have otherwise been employed by the Russian army[96].

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[91] Ibid, 66.
Even Lithuania's "national awakening" started more than two decades later than Estonia's and Latvia's.
[92] Vitola and Grigoriadis, "Diversity & empire: Baltic Germans & comparative development", 11.
[93] Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states*, 78.
However, the problem remained that many peasants had troubles accessing justice as they did not understand Russian.
[94] Ibid., 76-77.
According to the census conducted in 1897, 96% of the Estonian population and 92% of the Latvian one could read.
[95] Ibid., 83.
[96] Ibid., 85.

2.1.1 WW1 and the struggle for independence

Even if Estonia remained untouched until 1918, the conflict still affected the country since its very outbreak. Along with the many repercussions on the national economy, Estonia feared that a Russian victory could imply a "Russification" of the Estonian population, thus reducing the support to fight for tsarist forces. The beginning of the Russian revolution in February 1917 led to the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and the formation of a Provisional Government in Petrograd[97]. The revolutionary wave within the Russian Empire refuelled Estonians' demands for autonomy, which reached the peak with a protest in Petrograd in March 1917 involving 40.000 people. Eventually, the new government declared the autonomy of the Estonian province – including the northern half of Livland and the province of Estland, but it left out the areas of Narva and Setu, and Estonia appointed Jaan Poska – mayor of Tallinn – as its Governor-General. In this context, the progressive replacement of the Russian language with the Estonian one and the formation of Estonian military units was not exactly well seen by the Bolsheviks, making the Provisional Government incapable of controlling the subsequent developments[98]. After the successful revolution in Petrograd in October 1917, the Bolsheviks took power in Tallinn, but the elections planned for the following year were cancelled when it became clear they had no absolute majority to win them. At the same time, in response to the stalemate of the Brest-Litovsk negotiations[99], Germany resumed the offensive against Russia, and occupied Estonia from February 18, 1918, to March 4, within the framework of Operation *Faustschlag*. However, taking advantage of the advance of the German army, on February 24 the Salvation Committee – three-man executive of the Estonian Provincial Assembly – had declared the independence of Estonia, and in May 1918 the UK, France and Italy gave it *de facto* recognition, making it a matter of international interest[100]. Still, both the Bolsheviks and Germany had no intention to give up on the Baltic provinces: even though Lenin formally gave up most of Russia's territories to Germany with the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty[101], he was convinced that those concessions would be only temporary, as the revolution would have spread soon, while the German forces saw the occupied territories as naturally belonging to the *Reich*. With the signature of the armistice on the Western Front on

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[97] Andrew Parrott, "The Baltic States from 1914 to 1923: The First World War and the Wars of Independence", *Baltic Defence Review*, No. 8 Vol. 2 (2002), 144, https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/docs/bdreview/bdr-2002-8-11.pdf

[98] Ibid, 144-145.

[99] As the negotiations were not producing any significant result, the German general M. Hoffmann proposed the independence of Poland and the Baltic territories as part of the German requests, but the Soviet delegation – guided by L. Trotsky – called for a recess. See: Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Treaties of Brest-Litovsk", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 24, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/event/treaties-of-Brest-Litovsk

[100] Parrott, "The Baltic States from 1914 to 1923: The First World War and the Wars of Independence", 145.

[101] Signing the Treaty, the Bolsheviks ceded Lithuania, Courland, Riga and the Estonian islands, and eventually also gave up their sovereignty over Estonia and Livland through an additional agreement. See: Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states*, 90.

November 11, 1918 and the outbreak of the revolution in Germany, the Bolsheviks declared the Brest-Litovsk treaty void and prepared to invade the Baltic territories; hence, the Estonian War of Independence began on November 28 with the Soviet offensive on Narva[102]. Through the support of British and Finnish forces, Estonia counterattacked, and at the beginning of 1919 the territory was free from the Soviets; to secure national borders, Estonian forces also advanced into Latvia, where they had to face the opposition of the newly established pro-German government. On June 23, 1919, Estonia regained the Latvian town of Cēsis, making it become known as Estonia's Victory Day[103]. Within this framework, in Russia the fights between the Bolsheviks and the Whites had not come to an end, but the cooperation between Estonian forces and the White Army – supported by Great Britain – and the relentless defence of the Narva corridor on the part of the former led to the eventual recognition of Estonia's existence on the part of Soviet Russia, signing the Tartu Peace Treaty on February 2, 1920[104].

As for Latvia, it was strongly affected by the events of WW1, being in the midst of the line dividing the Russian and German forces. By February 1918, the whole Latvian territory was under German occupation. Being against the independence of the Baltic states, Germany reunited Estonia and Latvia under the Baltic Dukedom, controlled by Baltic Germans, and declared its independence in November 1918. It was only with the signature of the 1918 armistice that Latvia saw the formation of a Latvian National Council, reuniting all political forces with the exception of the Bolsheviks, and on November 18, the Council declared the independence of the country[105]. With the annulment of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, the Bolsheviks started to gain ground, leading to the creation of the Latvian Soviet Republic in the occupied territories. The intervention of the German *Freikorps* was the only reason to prevent the Bolshevik forces from taking over the whole Latvian territory; nevertheless, as already stated, this led to the formation of a pro-German government led by Andrievs Niedra, which, however, got the recognition neither from the West nor the Latvian population[106]. In the spring of 1919, Red forces were pushed back into Latgale by the joint effect of the German advance from the West and the Estonians from the North. The two armies also met around Cēsis in June, where the Estonians defeated the Germans and prevented them from advancing towards the North of the country. In this context, German volunteers and White Russians opposing the independence of the Baltics reunited into the Russian Volunteer

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[102] Parrott, "The Baltic States from 1914 to 1923: The First World War and the Wars of Independence", 146.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states*, 94.
[105] Ibid., 91.
Still, the power in Riga remained in the hands of the German provisional government, as the German army was the only organised military force in the region.
[106] Parrott, "The Baltic States from 1914 to 1923: The First World War and the Wars of Independence", 149.

Western Army, promoting the restoration of the Russian Empire. This composite force attacked Riga in October, but was eventually repulsed by the Latvians. The final stage of the war intertwined with the Polish-Soviet war, as the Polish army gave Latvia essential support in reuniting ethnically Latvian territories, and a peace treaty that made Russia give up sovereign rights over Latvia was signed on August 11, 1920[107].

In Lithuania, the German occupation lasted longer than in the other Baltic provinces, contributing to an increasing desire for national independence. After the October revolution, Germany favoured the organisation of a conference on the determination of the Lithuanian people, electing a 20-member Council (*Taryba*) to draft a constitution, chaired by Antanas Smetona. This was part of a broader plan to use Lithuanian independence as a form of leverage against the Red forces in the Brest-Litovsk talks; hence, on December 11 the *Taryba* proclaimed an independent Lithuanian state under the aegis of Germany[108]. As the Council started to lose support among the population, it eventually signed an Independence Manifesto on February 16, 1918, and Lithuania was declared autonomous; however, the Germans only accepted the Manifesto on March 23, and accepted to do so only on the basis of the December configuration. Eventually, following the decision of Kaiser Wilhelm II to bind as much as possible Lithuania and Germany, a personal union was created with the crowning of the German Duke of Urach as the king of Lithuania[109]. With the signature of the armistice, the *Taryba* annulled the election of the king, and appointed the first government led by Augustinas Voldemaras, but the invasion of Lithuania on the part of the Red Army led to the merger with Belarus, and the creation of the Lithuanian-Belarussian Soviet Republic (1919). Still, the Soviet rule did not last long: in the South of the country, the Red Army was blocked by German troops around the city of Kaunas, while the Polish freed Vilnius from the Bolsheviks in April, giving the Lithuanians time to organise their own military forces against both the Reds and the Polish expansionist ambitions[110]. After a subsequent offensive on Vilnius, Lithuania signed a peace treaty with Soviet forces in July 1920, setting eastern and southern borders of the country, but it was only in August that the city was eventually returned to Lithuania. The case of the city of Vilnius is peculiar, being a central site not only for the Lithuanian and Polish cultures, but also the Belarusian and Jewish ones. Hence, in October 1920 Polish forces led by General Zeligowski seized the city of Vilnius, with the aim to recreate a federation between Lithuania and Poland, but the Lithuanian resistance led to the signature of an armistice in

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[107] Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states*, 93-95.
[108] Ibid., 89.
[109] Parrott, “The Baltic States from 1914 to 1923: The First World War and the Wars of Independence”, 152-153.
[110] Ibid., 153.

November[111]. The complexity of the situation relates to the fact that, on the one hand, Vilnius was the ancient capital of Lithuania, while on the other the majority of its population were Polish and Jewish. In light of this, in the two years that followed the end of WW1, the city got under the control of Germans, Lithuanians, Poles and Russians[112].

Overall, the conflicts in the Baltic region were perceived by the Entente powers as peripheral elements of the broader Russian civil war, supporting the territorial integrity of the Russian Empire, as so claimed by the White forces. Hence, international recognition of the Baltic autonomy only came a few years later of its official declaration[113]. Despite the initial enthusiasm, the democratic systems set up during the independence years did not last long, in light of the high political fragmentation and instability and the consequences of the economic crisis of the 1930s, which easily replaced the parliamentary era with the rise of authoritarian regimes in the Baltic states. Still, the newly born governments contributed to the redistribution of land, favouring the resurgence of agriculture as the most important economic sector, and the promotion of the respective native languages in both culture and education, with the aim to reduce the German and Polish influence in those countries. With Hitler's rise to power and Nazi Germany's expansionist policies, Baltic security concerns increased dramatically; after surrendering the Baltic Sea to Germany with the 1935 Anglo-German naval agreement and despite the subsequent declarations of neutrality on the part of the three states – Estonia and Latvia in December 1938 and Lithuania in 1939 – eventually Hitler and Stalin managed to find an agreement on the partition of Eastern Europe in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In addition to the agreement on the part of the two powers not to attack each other, the terms of the treaty stated that Estonia, Latvia, Finland, Eastern Poland and Bessarabia (Romania) belonged to the Soviet sphere of influence, while Western Poland and Lithuania were assigned to Germany[114].

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[111] Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states*, 95.

[112] Ibid.
Another difficult situation was in the territory of Klaipeda, detached from Germany after WW1 and placed under French mandate. On May 8, 1924, the League of Nations recognised the incorporation of Klaipeda into the Lithuanian state, but this worsened the relation of the latter with Germany. See: Parrott, "The Baltic States from 1914 to 1923: The First World War and the Wars of Independence", 154.

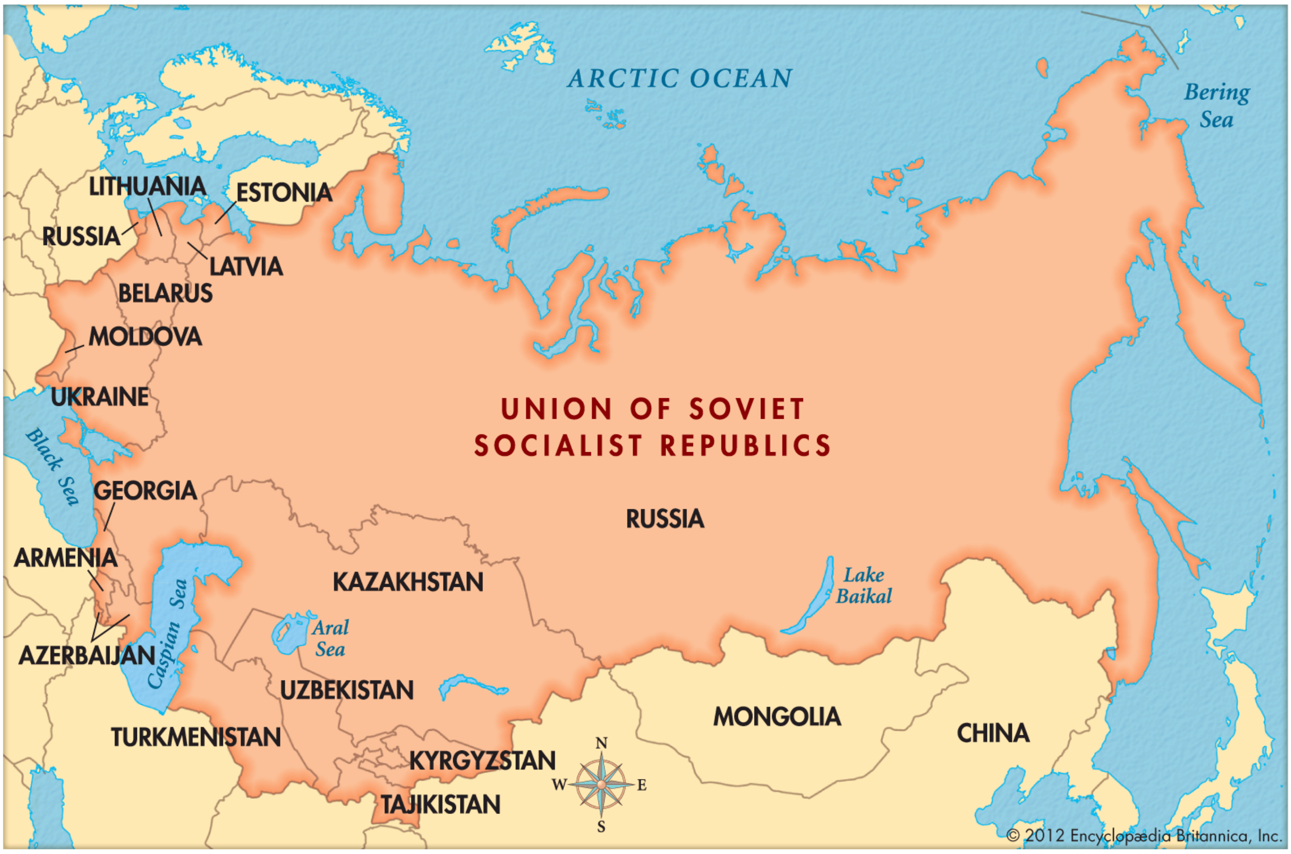
[113] Ibid., 96.
The Entente powers granted recognition to Estonia and Latvia in 1921, while the recognition of Lithuania by Great Britain and France happened in 1922 in light of the Vilnius dispute.

[114] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 16, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/event/German-Soviet-Nonaggression-Pact

2.1.2 The Soviet years

Hitler's growing successes in Western Europe soon pushed Stalin to increase the pressure on the Baltic states for the creation of allied governments, and the military occupation of the three republics was concluded by the end of June 1940. Within this framework, Baltic leaders preferred not to oppose Soviet requests hoping the occupation would be a temporary condition, keeping their systems and institutions untouched. Instead, the Kremlin immediately favoured the formation of pro-Soviet governments, sending Communist party officials to Tallinn, Riga and Kaunas and organising simultaneous general elections in all three countries[115]. After taking down all opposition, in August 1940 Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were officially accepted by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR as the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth Soviet republics.

Figure 4: Map of the USSR


ARCTIC OCEAN
Bering Sea
LITHUANIA
ESTONIA
RUSSIA
LATVIA
BELARUS
MOLDOVA
UKRAINE
Black Sea
GEORGIA
ARMENIA
AZERBAIJAN
Caspian Sea
UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS
RUSSIA
KAZAKHSTAN
Aral Sea
Lake Baikal
UZBEKISTAN
TURKMENISTAN
KYRGYZSTAN
TAJIKISTAN
MONGOLIA
CHINA
N
W
E
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© 2012 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Source: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. 2012. https://cdn.britannica.com/28/96328-050-EF39A054/Map-Soviet-Union-countries.jpg

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[115] Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states*, 115-117.
The Communist parties drafted the official electoral slates, where any candidate other than the members of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Unions of Working People were not allowed to take part in the ballot. Also, in many cases it was reported that data were altered to prove an almost complete support to the Communist candidates.

The "sovietisation" that followed made it immediately clear that Baltic independence would not have lasted long. Hence, after the nationalisation of banks and industries, the newly bom "People's Armies" were incorporated into the Red Army, after a purging of senior officers accused of "counterrevolutionary activities". Along the same lines, the arts, the press and literature were censored in favour of Stalin's cult of personality[116]. The experience Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had of WW2 thus differed from other European countries, because the Baltic were subjected to three occupations by the two totalitarian Germany and USSR during the war. Indeed, in June 1941 Germany invaded the Baltic region, adding a racial factor to the conflict; not only the German occupiers organised the deportation and murder of the Baltic Jews, but they also forced many Balts to fight in the Waffen-SS, experiencing significant losses[117]. However, in 1944 the Red Army returned to the Baltic region and re-established the Soviet rule in the area through the centralised economy and strict ideological control. At the end of World War II, the borders and populations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were once again shifted, where Vilnius was the most affected city by the subsequent foreign occupations[118]. After the war Stalin also created a brand-new region between Poland and Lithuania, the Kaliningrad Oblast, which became a major hot spot for the subsequent security issues between NATO and Russia, and will be dealt with in the following chapter.

Imprisonments based on political matters continued even after Stalin's death, even if on a lower scale. It was in that period that dissidents started to emerge towards the Soviet rule in all three republics, where Lithuania stands out as the only one to avoid repression for replacing Soviet officials with young nationals within the Lithuanian Communist Party[119]. The dissidents also underlined concerns of environmental nature, among others, due to the massive exploitation of oil shale reserves in Estonia and the extensive activity of the Ignalina nuclear power plant in Lithuania. The protests reached their peak in the 1970s, but it did not take long before dissidents were deported again to Soviet camps.

2.2 The path towards independence and the NATO-EU enlargement

In the late 1980s, the Soviet rule was deeply rooted within the Baltic state systems. Nevertheless, the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev represented the first step of the major changes that followed, introducing his well-known policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika*

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[116] Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence - 1940-1990* (London: Hurst Publishers, 1993), 24-25.
[117] Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states*, 122-124.
[118] Ibid., 127-128.
[119] Ibid., 134-135.

(restructuring). Hence, since 1987 the Baltic states took the leap and started a series of nonviolent commemorations of historical events unacknowledged by the regime, claiming their rights to freedom of speech and public assembly. The struggle against the Soviet occupation took the name of “Singing Revolution” based on the choice to use songs as the symbol of national awakening and the means to pursue self-determination, reviving the (at the time) illegal national anthems of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania[120]. Along the same lines, on August 23, 1989, around two million Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians joined together in a 690-kilometre human chain, which became known as the “Baltic Way”, as a form of protest on the occurrence of the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact legitimising the Soviet annexation of the Baltic republics. Despite the profound impact those demonstrations had on the local populations, still they did not succeed in bringing complete independence and democracy. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the progressive crisis of the Soviet Eastern European partners, the Baltic republics started to witness the formation of national movements in all three countries, with the final aim to bring independence from the Soviet Union. The Baltic cause took a leap forward when, in the first half of 1990, those movements started gaining consensus in general elections, rejecting the label of “Soviet Socialists” and restoring pre-war republics’ symbols. Within this framework, Latvians were the first to take action in light of the significant presence of Russian speakers in their territory – contrarily to the slightly favourable situation of Estonia – while Lithuania was able to give the final boost to independence thanks to its internal homogeneity[121]. Having realised the complexity and the risks of the upcoming situation, in January 1991 the at the time chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian SFSR Boris Yeltsin visited Tallinn, where he signed a joint statement of mutual support concerning the self-determination of the Baltics and individual cooperation treaties with the three republics[122]. In order to prevent further deaths among the peaceful demonstrators, Yeltsin also demanded Soviet troops not to act against the people[123]. However, the Kremlin eventually answered resorting to violence[124], and Gorbachev tried to obstacle the Baltic secession proposing an alternative, looser Union Treaty, which was boycotted by the Baltic governments through individual referenda on independence[125]. Widespread opposition to the treaty led to the "August Coup" – an attempted putsch in Moscow by conservative members of Gorbachev's own government to take control of the Soviet Union – which eventually left the Baltics with no choice but to fight for their own independence. Hence, on August 20, the Estonian Supreme Council declared its independence from the USSR and Latvia followed suit on August 21, while Lithuania reaffirmed the declaration it made in 1990. Meanwhile, the attempted putsch met a campaign of civil resistance guided by Yeltsin, who ended up becoming the dominant leader despite the return of Gorbachev. The following months witnessed a wave of international recognition for the Baltic independence, which culminated with the admission of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the United Nations on September 17[126]. Eventually, on December 8, 1991, President Boris Yeltsin, Ukrainian SSR President Leonid Kravchuk and Byelorussian SSR Supreme Soviet Chairman Stanislav Shushkevich signed the Belovezha Accords, declaring the official dissolution of the Soviet Union and the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)[127].

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[120] Guntis Šmidchens, “Singing Revolution: Past and Present”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, October 12, 2016, https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/10/singing-revolution-past-present/

[121] Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states*, 153.

[122] Vladimir Kara-Murza, “Russia and the Baltics: Once Friend, Now Foe”, *The Baltic Times*, January 22, 2015, https://www.baltictimes.com/russia_and_the_baltics__once_friend__now_foe/

[123] Ibid.

[124] In order to deal with the issue of Lithuanian separatism, on January 13, 1991, 65 KGB officers assaulted strategic sites in Vilnius, including the radio and television centres, where 13 Lithuanian civilians were killed and 604 wounded. Still, Gorbachev and his administration have always denied any responsibility for the attack. See: John B. Dunlop, "The August 1991 Coup and Its Impact on Soviet Politics", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 2003), https://www.jstor.org/stable/26925262?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

Independence from the USSR led to the creation of two parliamentary republics (Estonia and Latvia) and a semi-presidential one (Lithuania), where the latter followed the French model of direct election of the President in a two-round voting system. All three republics have unicameral parliaments, with a four-year mandate and a 5% threshold for political representation of the parties[128]. Once they set the framework for their post-Soviet political systems, the newly independent Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania started to work to be integrated within the European Union and the international institutional architecture, mainly the Atlantic Alliance, so as to favour economic growth and security. In 1993, Estonia and Lithuania were admitted to the Council of Europe[129], while Estonia and Latvia entered the World Trade Organisation in 1999. Within this framework, regional cooperation was crucial to support the Baltic independence from the Soviet political and economic system, underlining the three republics' northern European identity in contrast with their post-Soviet legacy[130].

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[125] In Lithuania, 91% of voters supported independence, in Estonia 78% and in Latvia 74% of the population, despite the large Russian-speaking community. See: Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states*, 155.

[126] Ibid., 156.

[127] Oleg Barabanov, "The Belovezha Accords: Not the Worst Option for Soviet Dissolution", *Valdai Club*, December 9, 2016, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/belovezha-accords-25-years-ago/

[128] Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states*, 157-158.

[129] Latvia was admitted two years later because of the issue of Russian-speaking minorities in the country.

[130] The Council of Baltic Sea States, comprising 11 members, was set in 1992 to boost regional cooperation and interaction, as well as several cooperation programmes within Nordic institutions including the participation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and the support of their interests within international organisations. See: Mikko Lagerspetz, "How Many Nordic Countries? Possibilities and Limits of Geopolitical Identity Construction", *Cooperation and Conflict*, 38(1): 49-61 (March 2003), https://www.academia.edu/1803756/How_Many_Nordic_Countries

2.2.1 Turning westwards – NATO and the EU

The distinction between East and West imposed during the Cold War thus implied a broad consensus on the necessity for the EU and NATO to expand, in order to include the whole "European" region. In this sense, among the main criteria to be accepted within those organisations we have not only the candidate state's economic and political stability, but also the acceptance and willingness to pursue the Western values of democracy, rule of law and human rights protection[131].

With the Russian army finally gone from their territories, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania applied for EU membership in 1995, where Estonia was the first among the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) to start negotiations in 1997 in light of its more rapid market reforms, while Latvia and Lithuania followed suit less than two years later. In this context, the main question concerning the Baltic accession to the EU was whether the three republics would ever overcome the vulnerabilities related to their connection to the Soviet Union[132], namely, the political and economic instability, the shared border with the former USSR and, most importantly, the issue of Russian-speaking minorities residing in the region[133]. Hence, as mentioned in Chapter 1 of the present dissertation, the main issue was the fact that, being the Baltics independent states – and not legal successors of the Soviet Union, former Soviet citizens residing in Estonia and Latvia were forced to apply for naturalisation, mainly based on the knowledge of the local languages[134].

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[131] Ibid.
Article 49 TEU: "Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union. […]". See: Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, OJ C 202, 7.6.2016, p. 43–43, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M049;
Preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty: "The Parties to this Treaty reaffirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments. They are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. They seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area. They are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security". See: The North Atlantic Treaty, NATO, April 4, 1949, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/stock_publications/20120822_nato_treaty_en_light_2009.pdf

[132] "Certain criteria must be met for admission. These criteria (known as the Copenhagen criteria) were established by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 and strengthened by the Madrid European Council in 1995. They are: 1) stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; 2) a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU; 3) ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law (the *'acquis'*), and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union. For EU accession negotiations to be launched, a country must satisfy the first criterion". See: "Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria)", EUR-Lex, accessed June 7, 2021, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession_criteria_copenhague.html

[133] Agnia Grigas et al., "The Baltic States in the EU: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", *Institut Jacques Delors*, Studies & Reports, no. 98 (July 2013), 20, https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/balticstateseu-grigaskasekampmaslauskaitezorgenfreija-ne-jdi-july13.pdf

[134] Ibid., 21.
In order to monitor Estonia and Latvia's approach towards the minority issue, in 1993 OSCE established a mission in Tallin and Riga, which was eventually concluded in 2001.

As for Lithuania, the less substantial presence of Russian-speaking minorities led to the granting of citizenship to all residents in the country. Moreover, another crucial issue is related to Lithuania's shared border with the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, the most highly militarised region in Europe[135].

The Baltic states finalised their accession at the Copenhagen summit (2002), together with Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Cyprus and Malta, and they became official members of the European Union on May 1, 2004. Thanks to the subsequent reforms and institution building, the three Baltic republics witnessed a successful trade liberalisation and spectacularly growing economies in the mid-2000s. Despite the recession triggered by the economic crisis in the second half of 2008, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania successfully managed to recover and keep on growing following the route of international devaluation, and they respectively joined the Euro Area in 2011, 2014 and 2015[136]. Within the EU framework, the Baltic countries have become the proponents of initiatives to strengthen cybersecurity, energy security, the Eastern Partnership and enlargement of the Union, also through increased regional cooperation with Nordic countries within the European Union.

Meanwhile, accession to the EU went hand in hand with NATO membership, as security represented a fundamental priority for the Baltic states. There was however widespread discussion – both within the Alliance and concerning the reaction of the Kremlin – on the risks related to the Baltic membership, not only due to the internal reforms to be carried out and necessary military capabilities, but also the three republic's geographical position and potential severing of relations with the Russian neighbour. In 1997, Russia also offered the Baltic states security guarantees on their independence, with the aim to keep them neutral with regards to NATO, but the proposal got rejected[137]. Eventually, the Baltics proved their worth in contributing to the activities of the Alliance: indeed, after joining the NATO Partnership for Peace programme in 1994, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania sent personnel in almost all NATO missions, including former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan[138]. Moreover, at the end of the 1990s Baltic forces joined efforts to create an infantry battalion (BALTBAT), naval squadron (BALTRON), air surveillance system (BALTNET) and staff college (BALTDEFCOL)[139]. Along with the progressive improvement of the Baltic military forces, this led to the admission of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Atlantic Alliance on March 29, 2004.

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[135] See Chapter 3 of the present dissertation.

[136] Ibid., 33.

[137] James S. Corum, *The security concerns of the Baltic states as NATO Allies* (Carlisle: US Army War College, 2013), 30.

[138] Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states*, 175-176.

[139] Ibid.

The Baltic membership within the EU and NATO forcibly led to cooling relations with the Russian neighbour. In particular, in the aftermath of the 2008 conflict in Georgia – triggered by independence claims of the provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – and the Russian invasion of the country, the Baltics and the Eastern European Allies joined their efforts to influence the upcoming 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, so as to include the issue of collective security among the top priorities and revive the principles of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty[140]. Also, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 contributed to further worrying the Baltics on a potential determination on the part of Moscow to restore its influence in former Soviet republics, and favour an escalation of tensions with NATO in critical spots, such as the Baltic area[141].

However, despite the EU and NATO membership, energy security remains the Achilles' heel of the Baltic states, also defined as "energy islands" strictly linked to and dependent from the Russian Federation. In this context, the priorities of the Baltic trio within the EU framework are the diversification and security of energy resources, a major competitiveness of domestic energy markets and the promotion of renewable sources of energy[142]. The following paragraph will thus give a more detailed account of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania's energy realities and policies towards Eastern and Western partners, with a special focus on the case of Lithuania.

2.3 Baltic energy security between East and West

The energy sector is an extremely complex realm, characterised by a significant ground of uncertainty in relation to the change of prices and the economic implications thereof. Moreover, energy policies imply intricate supply chains that stem from the extraction of raw materials to their subsequent transportation and processing, depending on the requirements of market demand. Energy markets thus combine economic interests, geopolitical and environmental goals, where energy security constitutes the main concern. Within this framework, even in the aftermath of the Baltic accession within NATO and the European Union, the fragmented political and social environment of the three republics has always represented a major opportunity for Russia to exercise its influence within the region, especially when it comes to the energy sphere[143]. The reason for the above lies in the almost absolute dependence of the Baltic states on Russian energy sources, in light of both the lack of domestic resources and the close link to Soviet infrastructures in terms of pipelines, electricity and gas, thus allowing Moscow to preserve its privileged monopoly over energy supplies in the area[144].

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[140] Corum, *The security concerns of the Baltic states as NATO Allies*, 32.

[141] See: Viljar Veebel, "Researching Baltic security challenges after the annexation of Crimea", *Journal on Baltic Security*, 5(1) (July 2019), https://sciendo.com/downloadpdf/journals/jobs/5/1/article-p41.xml

[142] Grigas et al., "The Baltic States in the EU: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", 66.

[143] Hence, after the NATO and EU accession, between 2005 and 2007 the Baltics witnessed rising gas prices to 2.4 times the 2005 rates, having a huge impact on Baltic households in need for heating during winter months. See: Agnia Grigas, "The Gas Relationship between the Baltic states and Russia: politics and commercial realities", *Oxford*

The total dependence on Russia (100% for gas and 90% for oil) and the centrality of gas for the production of heat and electricity in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania[145] thus increase the difficulties related to a Baltic energy policy. In this sense, the main concern is not merely related to the high levels of dependence on imported energy for domestic consumption, but rather to the lack of diversification of energy supplies – especially natural gas, where potentially hostile relations with the supplier increase the risks of vulnerability for the receiving state[146]. For Russia, the Baltic energy market is particularly profitable due to the Baltics' status of "gas islands", allowing Moscow a wide marge of discretion on market prices. Indeed, the Kremlin secured its economic interests in the region by making its national company Gazprom acquire a controlling share in the three Baltic national companies, thus owning 37% of Estonia's Eesti Gaas (with a further 10% owned by ITERA, another Russian gas company), 34% of Latvia's Latvias Gāze (16% also owned by ITERA), and 37% of Lithuania's Lietuvos Dujo, and making the Russian company have a significant impact on the strategies employed[147]. Despite the overall Baltic vulnerability in the gas sector, Latvia and Lithuania constitute partial exceptions, the former thanks to the Inčukalns gas storage facility, which is also used by Estonia, Lithuania and Russia in the winter period, while the latter's role of transit country for Russian gas to reach the territory of Kaliningrad allowed Vilnius to use its position as a guarantee for the supply of natural gas[148]. However, in both cases it is necessary to remain cautious over the potential bargaining power of Latvia and Lithuania towards Russia. First, even though the Inčukalns storage proved useful during former gas supply

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Institute for Energy Studies, NG 67 (October 2012), 10-11, https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/NG_67.pdf

[144] Agnia Grigas, "Legacies, Coercion and Soft Power: Russian Influence in the Baltic States", *Chatham House*, Russia and Eurasia Programme (August 2012), https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0812bp_grigas.pdf

[145] Hence, the Baltics can only import gas through Russian pipelines, while oil allows diversification thanks to the oil terminals on the Baltic Sea coast. Secondly – and differently from the oil sector – the Baltics are not essential transit countries for Russian gas exports to other markets. Lastly, Russia has made significant investment in the Baltic gas sector. See: Grigas, "The Gas Relationship between the Baltic states and Russia: politics and commercial realities", 2, https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/NG_67.pdf

[146] Ibid., 4.

Among the most recent energy incidents between Russia and the Baltic states there are the halting of oil supplies to the Latvian port operator Ventspils Nafta (VN) since 2003 and the Lithianian oil refinery Mažeikiu Nafta (MN) since 2006, not to mention interruptions to rail deliveries of crude oil to Estonia in May 2007. See: Grigas, "Legacies, Coercion and Soft Power: Russian Influence in the Baltic States", 4.

[147] Simon Hoellerbauer, "Baltic Energy Sources: Diversifying Away from Russia", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, June 14, 2017, https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/06/baltic-energy-sources-diversifying-away-russia/

[148] Grigas et al., "The Baltic States in the EU: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", 68.

interruptions, Inčukalns was not designed taking into account emergency measures, but rather to guarantee constant supplies to face the needs of the national company Latvijas Gāze, which is still partially owned by Gazprom[149]. Second, concerning the case of Kaliningrad, since the early 2010s Moscow has been investing in reducing the reliance on Lithuania for energy supplies in the region[150].

Hence, for the Baltic states the EU market represents a major opportunity to achieve diversification of energy sources, routes and suppliers through the liberalisation of the European energy market. To this aim, between 1996 and 2009 the Union has adopted three legislative packages, where the Third Energy Package – which entered into force in September 2009 – aims at the prevention of energy monopolies through the separation of energy generation and supply from its transmission (defined as "unbundling") for both electricity and gas companies, thus encouraging competition[151]. Within the Baltic framework, unbundling thus implies separating Gazprom's monopoly over gas supply from transmission operations and pipelines. Among the three unbundling options enlisted in the legislative package[152], Lithuania opted for the most restrictive "ownership unbundling" (OU), where all integrated energy companies sell off their gas and electricity networks, thus meeting initial opposition on the part of Moscow. As for Estonia and Latvia, at first they sought an exemption from the new European gas directive, and they both adopted a softer stance towards Gazprom choosing the "independent transmission system operator" (ITO) option. ITO implies that energy supply companies could still retain and operate gas or electricity networks, but must do so through legally independent stock companies – "subsidiaries" – operating under their own name and oversight. However, by 2012 Estonia moved towards the OU model, while Latvia started unbundling in 2017[153].

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[149] Grigas, "The Gas Relationship between the Baltic states and Russia: politics and commercial realities", 9.

[150] For instance, in 2019 the governmental energy holding InterRAO announced the launch of the Pregolsky gas-powered station, in order to reduce Kaliningrad's dependence on the EU grid. Moreover, in the past two years Gazprom carried out alternative gas supplies to the region, focusing on LNG deliveries by sea. Together with the offshore gas receiving terminal and the floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) "Marshal Vasilevskiy" that were recently put into operation in the area, Russia is thus putting significant effort to enhance the energy security of the Kaliningrad Oblast. See: "Project for LNG supplies to Kaliningrad Region", Gazprom, accessed June 17, 2021, https://www.gazprom.com/projects/kaliningrad-terminal/ ; Anastasia Lyrchikova, "Russia launches plant to reduce Kaliningrad's reliance on EU grid", *Reuters*, March 6, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-power-plants-idUSKCN1QN1KR

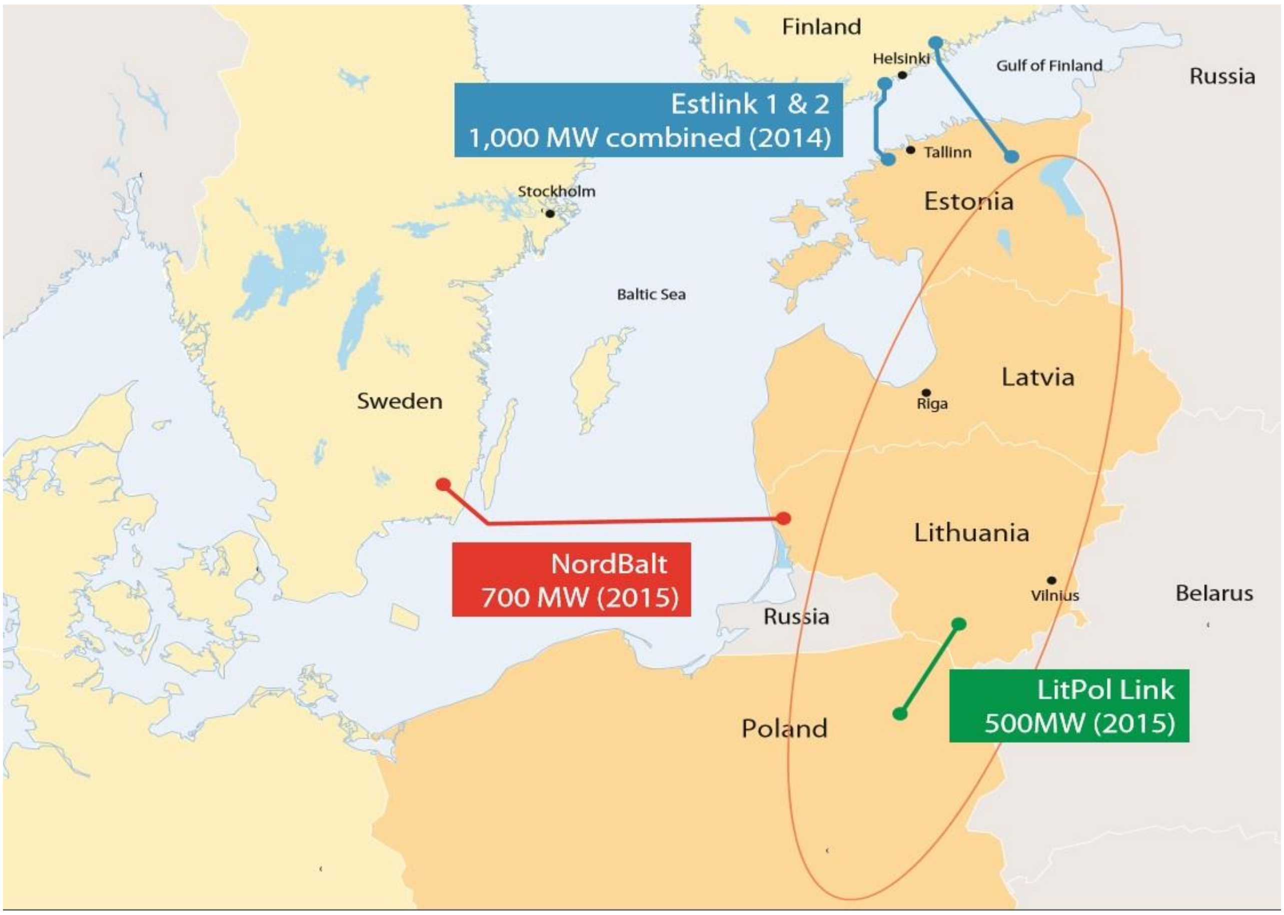
[151] Grigas et al., "The Baltic States in the EU: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", 75.

[152] See: "Third energy package", European Commission, accessed June 17, 2021, ec.europa.eu/energy/topics/markets-and-consumers/market-legislation/third-energy-package_en

[153] The situation in Latvia was also made complex by the impact of the companies Latvijas Gaze and the national electricity producer Latvenergo, major consumer of the Russian gas. Moreover, the Latvian government had signed an agreement with Latvijas Gaze, providing it with exclusive rights for the supply and distribution of gas until 2017, so that unbundling could have brought significant costs in case the agreement was broken. See: Grigas, "Legacies, Coercion and Soft Power: Russian Influence in the Baltic States", 7; Hoellerbauer, "Baltic Energy Sources: Diversifying Away from Russia".

Moreover, within the framework of the Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan (BEMIP), since 2009 the European Commission started promoting a series of initiatives aimed at favouring an open and integrated electricity and gas market among EU member states in the Baltic region. Concerning electricity, the major BEMIP projects Estlink, Nordbalt and the LitPol Link – respectively connecting the Baltic republics with Finland, Sweden and Poland – gave a significant contribution to the integration of the Baltic region in the European energy market.

Figure 5: Estlink 1 & 2, NordBalt and LitPol Link


Finland
Helsinki
Gulf of Finland
Russia
Estlink 1 & 2
1,000 MW combined (2014)
Tallinn
Stockholm
Estonia
Baltic Sea
Latvia
Riga
Sweden
Lithuania
NordBalt
700 MW (2015)
Vilnius
Belarus
Russia
LitPol Link
500MW (2015)
Poland

Source: European Commission, "EU invests in Baltic synchronisation project", April 18, 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/eu-invests-baltic-synchronisation-project-2018-apr-18_en

Nevertheless, the electricity grids of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania remain attached to the Russian and Belarusian systems, as part of the Soviet-era BRELL Agreement. Indeed, in June 2018 the Heads of State or Government of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland – together with the then European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker – agreed on a political roadmap for the synchronisation of the Baltic electricity grid with the continental European network by 2025[154].

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[154] "Baltic energy market interconnection plan", European Commission, accessed June 17, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/energy/topics/infrastructure/high-level-groups/baltic-energy-market-interconnection-plan_en

As for gas interconnection projects, the EU invested significant resources for two initiatives, namely, the Balticconnector pipeline between Estonia and Finland and the Gas Interconnector Poland-Lithuania (GIPL), which shall integrate the Baltic and Finnish gas networks within the continental European gas network by the end of the year 2021. At the end of 2019, the Balticconnector was eventually commissioned, which will end Finland’s gas isolation by linking its gas network with the continental European one. Among others, Balticconnector will allow a major diversification of gas sources through alternative routes and secure gas supplies, thus boosting competition in the gas market. Furthermore, in April 2020, the governments of Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Lithuania agreed on the necessity for the regional integration of their national gas markets, favouring the production of renewable and decarbonised gases[155].

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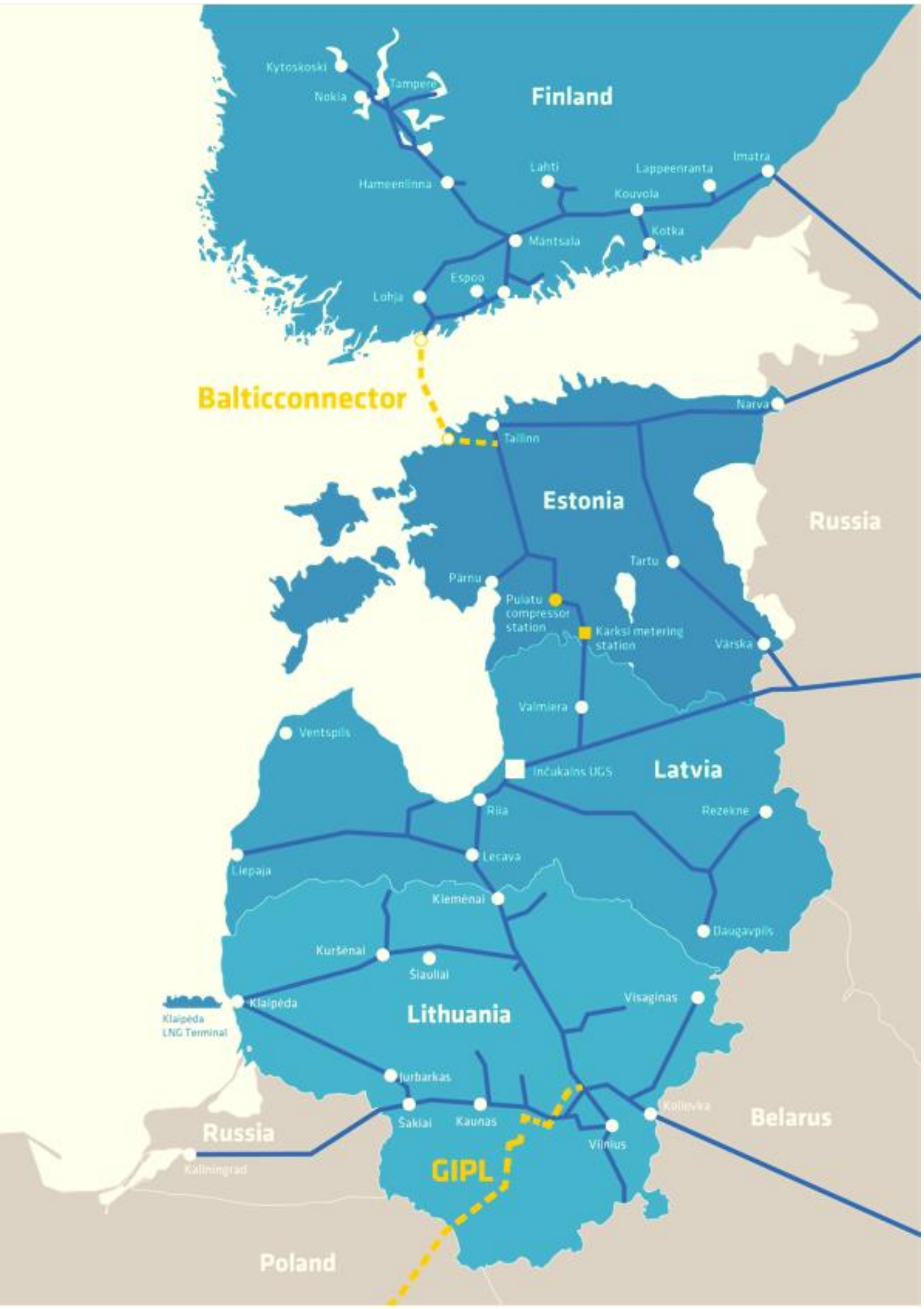
[155] Ibid.

Figure 6: Balticconnector and GIPL


Kytoskoski
Tampere
Nokia
Finland
Hameenlinna
Lahti
Lappeenranta
Imatra
Kouvola
Kotka
Mäntsala
Espoo
Lohja
Balticconnector
Narva
Tallinn
Estonia
Russia
Tartu
Pärnu
Puiatu compressor station
Karksi metering station
Värska
Valmiera
Ventspils
Inčukalns UGS
Latvia
Riia
Rezekne
Liepaja
Lecava
Kiemėnai
Daugavpils
Kuršėnai
Šiauliai
Klaipėda
Klaipėda LNG Terminal
Visaginas
Lithuania
Jurbarkas
Kollevka
Belarus
Šakiai
Kaunas
Vilnius
Russia
Kaliningrad
GIPL
Poland

Source: "Project purpose and objectives", Balticconnector, accessed June 18, 2021, http://balticconnector.fi/en/the-project/

In this framework, a point of major controversy when it comes to the Baltic energy security is represented by the Nord Stream project, strongly supported by Germany and Russia. Nord Stream is an export gas pipeline across the Baltic Sea that provides the Russian Federation – and the national company Gazprom – direct access to the European Union, thus bypassing transit countries. At the end of 2000, the pipeline was given priority by the European Commission within the framework of the Trans-European Network for Energy (TEN-E) Guidelines, underlining the centrality of Nord Stream for the EU energy security and sustainable development[156]. Moreover, following the success of the initial project, in 2018 the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline was launched, also running from Russia to Germany across the Baltic Sea. However, the project met with widespread opposition among the EU and NATO eastern members, underlining the potential risks for the energy security of those states relying on Russian gas imports through Ukraine, increasing the latter's political and economic vulnerability in the post-2014 scenario[157]. Moreover, Nord Stream 2 was harshly criticised by the United States and most of Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU), claiming that the project would favour Russian predominance in the European gas sector[158]. Hence, on March 7, 2016, eight EU governments – Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Romania – signed a letter addressed to the then President of the European Commission Juncker expressing their objection towards the Nord Stream 2 project, stating that the prosecution of the pipeline would create "potentially destabilising geopolitical consequences" and "pose certain risks for energy security in the region of central and eastern Europe"[159]. From the perspective of the Baltics, greater integration with the Russian Federation could intensify the East-West divide within both the European Union and in particular the Atlantic Alliance, thus preventing the pursuit of a coherent stance towards Moscow and weakening the credibility of the two institutions. In light of this, the signatories of the abovementioned letter, together with Austria, Croatia, Slovenia and Bulgaria, have joined the Three Seas Initiative (TSI), launched in 2015 and aimed at increasing European interconnectedness by creating a north-south infrastructural axis, so as to undercut subjugation to Russia in Central Europe and favour the development of energy, transport and digital economy in the region[160]. For instance, concerning the energy sector, priority projects for the Baltics include the creation of a liquified natural gas (LNG) terminal in Krk, Croatia, to connect to the Polish terminal of Świnoujście and the LNG terminal in Klaipėda, Lithuania, with north-south pipelines. Altogether, these initiatives aim at a diversification of gas resources so as to favour the independence of the Baltics from the BRELL Agreement. In this context, it is worth noting that the implementation of the projects defined in the TSI could also favour the promotion of regional integration among the participating countries within the EU framework, and the strengthening of transatlantic cooperation through an increased US involvement[161]. Nevertheless, some minor differences remain on the geopolitical interests of individual countries with regards to Russian gas and the Nord Stream 2 project; still, for the moment they represent no critical obstacle to Central and Eastern European cooperation in the energy sphere[162].

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[156] "Nord Stream", Gazprom, accessed June 16, 2021, https://www.gazprom.com/projects/nord-stream/

[157] Matthew Thomas, "Nord Stream 2: Germany's Faustian Bargain with Gazprom and Why it matters for the Baltics", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, December 22, 2020, https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/12/nord-stream-2-germanys-faustian-bargain-with-gazprom-and-why-it-matters-for-the-baltics/

[158] Ibid.

[159] Andrius Sytas, "EU leaders sign letter objecting to Nord Stream-2 gas link", *Reuters*, March 16, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-eu-energy-nordstream-idUKKCN0WI1YV

[160] Matthew Thomas, "The Three Seas Initiative", *Baltic Security Foundation*, March 16, 2020, https://balticsecurity.eu/three_seas_initiative/

Overall, the European Commission has assessed that nowadays the Baltic region is among the best interconnected in Europe – with an interconnection level of 23% – thus showing positive results for the post-2014 EU energy strategy[163]. Nevertheless, the fact that many of the abovementioned projects are ongoing or in phase of development makes the way forward still blurred, which is added to the need for the Baltics to present a more unified approach on gas and electricity challenges if willing to improve the energy security of the region. In this sense, among the three republics, the case of Lithuania stands out for the priority accorded to the reduction of the Baltic dependence on Russian natural gas and increased diversification of energy supplies.

2.3.1 Lithuania and the Klaipėda LNG Terminal

Since its independence from the Soviet Union, Lithuania has always been particularly concerned about the energy security of the Baltic region. Indeed, as stated above, the case of Lithuania is peculiar due to its role of transit country for Russian gas to reach the oblast of Kaliningrad, which allowed Vilnius to use its position as a guarantee for the supply of natural gas to Lithuania. Furthermore, the closure of the Soviet-era Ignalina nuclear power plant in 2009 – until then producing up to 70% of the country's electricity – as part of the agreement for Lithuania's EU membership[164] contributed to increasing prices for electricity bills, and rising reliance on Moscow for most of Lithuania's energy supply.

Thus, in response to existing energy challenges, diversification and energy independence became Vilnius' major strategic interests. In this sense, the putting into operation of a floating-storage and liquefied natural gas (FLNG) regasification unit in the city of Klaipėda in December 2014 contributed to ensuring the security of Lithuania's gas supply, leading to independence from

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[161] Hence, during the 56th Munich Security Conference (MSC) in 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced a commitment to invest one billion dollars in support to the TSI. See: Pawel Musialek, "The Three Seas Initiative: Natural Gas in Central European Foreign Policy", *ISPI*, February 21, 2021, https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/three-seas-initiative-natural-gas-central-european-foreign-policy-25128

[162] Ibid.

[163] Gianmarco Riva, "The Baltic States and Energy Security: How Else Can the EU Foster Their Energy Resilience in the Face of Russian Pressure?", *PONARS Eurasia*, July 24, 2020, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-baltic-states-and-energy-security-how-else-can-the-eu-foster-their-energy-resilience-in-the-face-of-russian-pressure/

[164] The main reason for this was the fact that the Ignalina facility was built following the same design as Chernobyl, which generated the worst civil nuclear disaster in history in 1986.

Gazprom's influence over the price of natural gas, and accessing the global market as a reliable LNG terminal and service provider. The terminal consists of a floating storage regasification unit (FSRU) named “Independence”, a berth and a gas pipeline. Among others, LNG favours a major geographic flexibility, as it releases the gas trade from the fixed element of the pipeline, with the additional benefit of a lower price, representing thus a major source of supply diversification. The regasification capacity of the terminal is 3.8 bcm per year, which is sufficient alone to fulfil the 90% of the gas demand of the three Baltic states and Finland[165]. This new facility enables the import of gas from Norway, Russia, Nigeria, Trinidad, Tobago and the United States. Indeed, in 2015, the Lithuanian company LitGas signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the American Delfin LNG, in order to start building a new LNG terminal in Louisiana; in the same year, LitGas also signed an agreement with the American company Cheniere Energy, the first to get permission to export from the US to Lithuania[166]. Moreover, in response to Lithuania’s increasing gas demand, in 2016 the government committed to importing 370 mcm per year of natural gas from the Norwegian company Statoil, which contributed to a sharp reduction in the price of gas[167].

The energy security ensured by the LNG terminal is thus pivotal for Lithuania. In this sense, the Law on the Liquefied Natural Gas Terminal[168] claims that the LNG terminal shall be operational at least until December 31, 2044, and that Lithuania shall ensure that the terminal operator – AB Klaipėdos nafta (KN) – as of December 31, 2024, shall acquire and become an operator of an FSRU – either "Independence" or any other that favours the competitiveness of Lithuania’s gas supply – by choosing the most advantageous solution[169]. Overall, despite the disastrous consequences of COVID-19 on the energy sector, LNG was among the least affected, also due to a changing supply-demand balance that favoured imports from the US to Europe[170]. In this framework, the year 2021 in Klaipėda started by exceeding 200 LNG operations since the terminal became operational, where 2020 alone witnessed 72 cargo handling operations – with

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[165] Irma Paceviciute, “Towards the Energy Union: The BEMIP and the Case of Lithuania”, *IAI Working Papers 17*, n. 6 (January 2017), 10, http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiwp1706.pdf

[166] Kenneth Rapoza, “How Lithuania Is Kicking Russia To The Curb”, *Forbes*, October 18, 2015, https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2015/10/18/how-lithuania-is-kicking-russia-to-the-curb/#48b45f242006

[167] Paceviciute, “Towards the Energy Union: The BEMIP and the Case of Lithuania”, 10.

[168] Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas), Lietuvos Respublikos suskystintų gamtinių dujų terminalo įstatymas, January 1, 2019, https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.427221/asr

[169] The selection process is scheduled to start in 2021. See: “Long-term operation of Klaipėda LNG terminal”, Klaipėdos Nafta – KN, accessed June 19, 2021, https://www.kn.lt/en/our-activities/lng-terminals/long-term-operation-of-klaipeda-lng-terminal/560

[170] “More than 200 LNG operations completed at Klaipeda LNG terminal in Lithuania”, *Energy Global News*, January 27, 2021, http://www.energyglobalnews.com/more-than-200-lng-operations-completed-at-klaipeda-lng-terminal-in-lithuania/

34% of the total shipments from the USA[171]. Furthermore, in May 2021, Vilnius announced the arrival of a 164-tonne transformer, within the framework ongoing synchronisation process with the Continental European power grid, thus representing a major step for unplugging from the Soviet-era BRELL Agreement controlled by Moscow[172]. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), in the past decade Lithuania has also made impressive progress towards a clean energy transition through electricity market reforms and rising domestic clean power generation, showing a significant potential to become the leading country in the region for clean energy and energy security[173].

However, after achieving the exit from BRELL and the subsequent integration within the Continental European grid by 2025, another crucial challenge for the Baltic states remains improving the security of their critical energy infrastructures, which remain highly exposed to the risk of increasing cyber and hybrid threats. Thus, for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania energy security is strictly related to the achievement of the overall security of the region, whose state of the art will be analysed in further detail in the following chapter.

2.3.2 Interview with Vytautas Butrimas, Subject Matter Expert (SME) at NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence (NATO ENSEC COE) in Vilnius, Lithuania

Q: Why is the protection of critical energy infrastructure crucial for the Baltic energy security?

A: Critical energy infrastructure protection (CEIP) is crucial not only for the Baltic nations, but for any country that uses energy to support its economic activities, national security and the well-being of its society. For instance, at the beginning of 2021, the failure of a device at an electrical substation in Croatia led to the split of the European power grid into two; this was not the result of an intentional attack, but rather a technical failure. Thankfully, the safety systems worked as programmed and managed to avoid a major power failure[174].

Unfortunately, CEI and the safety systems designed to avoid major malfunctions have become targets for malicious state actors and cybercriminals. For instance, in May 2021 ransomware planted by a cybercriminal group caused the shutdown of a 5000-mile-long fuel pipeline serving the needs of the US East Coast causing long lines at fuel pumps[175]. Also, in 2016, part of the city of Kyiv, Ukraine, lost power because of a cyberattack; the analysis showed that the relays that act as safety systems for power grids which disconnect valuable bulk power equipment from the grid when there is a frequency imbalance or other failure were targeted[176].

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[171] Ibid.

[172] LRT.lt, "Baltics step closer to leaving Moscow-controlled power grid", *Lietuvos Radijas ir Televizija – LRT*, May 13, 2021, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1409029/baltics-step-closer-to-leaving-moscow-controlled-power-grid

[173] IEA, "Lithuania is well placed to lead on clean energy and energy security in the Baltic region, according to IEA policy review".

[174] For further information: "System Separation in the Continental Europe Synchronous Area on 8 January 2021 – update", ENTSO-E, last updated January 15, 2021, https://www.entsoe.eu/news/2021/01/15/system-separation-in-the-continental-europe-synchronous-area-on-8-january-2021-update/

As for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, they are planning to disconnect their power grids from the Moscow-based BRELL system and synchronise with the European power grid[177]. This will imply great benefits for all three nations, but it will also introduce new challenges to maintain the stability of the expanded continental system. Still, it must be kept in mind that the technologies that can make these wonderful things happen are also vulnerable to cyberattacks[178].

Q: How to build durable resilience when it comes to hybrid threats towards critical energy infrastructure?

A: This question should actually be split into three parts. First of all, we should understand ***what*** needs to be protected when talking about critical energy infrastructure. Second, what are the ***threats*** to those identified assets and third, ***how*** to protect those assets efficiently from identified threats.

When referring to the protection of critical energy infrastructure, many use the term "critical information infrastructure" which is actually a subset of other sectors found in critical infrastructure. Hence, if on the one hand we have information infrastructure (e.g. websites, databases, emails etc.), on the other we also have other types of infrastructure where protecting information is not the main task, but are rather centred on the management of a physical process. If one loses information there is a loss of data, but if one loses the control of a physical process, such as it happened in Fukushima nuclear power station[179] or at a steel mill in Germany[180], the consequences can result in loss of lives, property and damages to the environment. The risk is in arriving at the wrong answer to the *what* to protect question. If the choice is made to protect information, then the special security needs for protecting a physical process will not be fully met. When talking about the energy sector, we are talking about very powerful forces of nature; hence, here's what I mean when I say: ***what*** do we want to protect? In the case of a power utility, you might want to protect the office IT such as the billing and the accounting system (e.g. Colonial pipeline in the US). But the same protection measures may not work well where protecting the process is the priority and not the information. Then we come to the ***types of threats***. If one chooses to protect only against cybercrime threats (e.g. ransomware attack on Colonial pipeline), then there is a risk that the protective measures may not be effective in dealing with an advanced persistent threat (APT) executed by a state. In this respect, to defend against an APT requires more sophisticated measures to match the sophisticated measures employed by the APT itself. Once you know what you want to protect and from what kind of threats, we come to the ***how***. One lesson the Colonial pipeline case taught us is the importance to keep the IT and operational sides separated (which had no technical difficulties but was forced to shutdown for safety reasons when the IT side went down), so as not to make them affect each other in case one experiences a failure. In this respect, cybersecurity for critical infrastructure has to be perceived in a different way; IT specialists do not understand the industrial side of the operation, and engineers might not know IT security threats and their centrality (e.g. using easy and shared passwords to allow access in case of emergencies). Indeed, they need to work together and build a bridge between IT and the operational/industrial side in order to avoid the risk of accidents, which is why it is important to understand what to protect in the first place. Finally, as previously said, in 2025 the Baltics are planning to desynchronise from the BRELL in order to join the EU power grid system, and to do so technology is required. In this framework, a lot of attention has to be paid to synchronisation itself which for a power grid is subject to operating at a strict frequency. We think a lot about planting malware and causing some physical effect, but we should not forget that the laws of physics can also be manipulated to put the system out of phase. An example of this is the fact that any rotating device remains subject to the so-called "Aurora vulnerability", meaning the usage of cyber means to disrupt large rotating equipment, which can be done by disconnecting and reconnecting the generator out of phase to the grid, thus manipulating the laws of physics can cause physical damage[181].

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[175] For further information: Mike Lennon, "Colonial Pipeline Struggles to Restart After Ransomware Attack", *Security Week*, May 9, 2021, https://www.securityweek.com/colonial-pipeline-struggles-restart-after-ransomware-attack
Earlier warning was already given in 2020. See also: "Alert (AA20-049A) Ransomware Impacting Pipeline Operations", Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency – CISA, last updated October 24, 2020, https://us-cert.cisa.gov/ncas/alerts/aa20-049a

[176] For broader discussion on Ukraine see: Vytautas Butrimas et al., "Hybrid warfare against Critical Energy Infrastructure: The Case of Ukraine", *NATO ENSEC COE*, Energy Security: Operational Highlights (2020), https://www.enseccoe.org/data/public/uploads/2020/11/hybrid-warfare-against-critical-energy-infrastructure-the-case-of-ukraine.pdf

[177] See: Saulius Jakučionis, "Baltic states, Poland endorse schedule for power grid synchronisation with West", *Lietuvos Radijas ir Televizija – LRT*, June 20, 2019, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1071399/baltic-states-poland-endorse-schedule-for-power-grid-synchronization-with-west

[178] See also: Drew Spaniel et al., "Weapons of mass disruption: As Assessment of the Threat Disruptionware Poses to Energy Security Continuity", *Institute for Critical Infrastructure Technology – ICIT* (July 2020), https://secureservercdn.net/166.62.108.22/5kb.d9b.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Weapons-of-Mass-Disruption-ICIT-July-2020.pdf

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[179] Vytautas Butrimas et al., "The Cybersecurity Dimension of Critical Energy Infrastructure", *Marshall Centre*, per Concordiam, No. 03.04 (October 2012), 12-17, https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-10/pC_V3N4_en_Butrimas_Bruzga_1.pdf

[180] Federal Office for Information Security, *The State of IT Security in Germany 2014*, 2014, 31, https://www.bsi.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/BSI/Publications/Securitysituation/IT-Security-Situation-in-Germany-2014.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3

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[181] For further information: Vytautas Butrimas et al., “Energy Security: Operational Highlights”, *NATO ENSEC COE*, No. 13 (2020), 48, https://enseccoe.org/data/public/uploads/2020/03/nato-ensec-coe-operational-highlights-no13.pdf

CHAPTER 3

The Baltics within the Alliance

Security concerns and way forward

The Baltic membership within the main Western institutions – the Atlantic Alliance in the first place – has been characterised by increasing tensions in the area, which suffered further deterioration after Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. This is especially true in light of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania's proximity to Russia's enclave of Kaliningrad and its so-called A2/AD "bubble", whose capabilities range from cruise and ballistic missiles and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) to means of Electronic Warfare (EW) and submarines. Within this context, the security of the Baltic area remains characterised by a series of emerging threats that risk endangering the stability of the region, namely hybrid and cyberthreats, where the absence of a common definition and the uncertainty related to the perpetrators and available instruments increases ambiguity around those acts and best practices to counter them. Indeed, modern conflicts have witnessed a growing relevance of non-military means, such as political, economic and information measures – including the involvement of local populations in triggering governmental instability – for the achievement of strategic goals, which in Russia's military thinking takes the name of *New Generation Warfare* (NGW).

Based on the above, the Baltics' contribution results extremely relevant to the activities of the Alliance, both in terms of military support to NATO operations and for what concerns research and analysis. Hence, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania promoted the institution of three Centres of Excellence accredited by NATO – respectively, the NATO CCDCOE in Tallinn, the StratCom COE in Riga and the ENSEC COE in Vilnius – and are pioneer nations in improving the capabilities of the Alliance when it comes to cyberthreats, strategic communications and energy security.

However, it remains clear that an escalation of tensions in the area would be highly undesirable, both in light of the insufficient NATO forces to protect the allied Baltics and the economic distress it could imply for Russia, whose economy has been already hit by Western sanctions and the unfavourable consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.1 Why the Baltics?

The independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from the Soviet Union and subsequent membership within the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union has progressively led to cooling relations between the Baltic states and Moscow, reaching the lowest peaks with the Georgian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea on the part of Russia in 2014. The path towards EU and NATO accession was no easy one, but the efforts of their Nordic neighbours in the modernisation of the Baltic armed forces and the individual commitment of Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius to promote internal reforms in their economy, governance and security eventually proved key to be accepted within the Euro-Atlantic community. Since their accession, despite the size of their national military forces, the Baltic republics have been active contributors to European regional security and the activities of the Alliance, the NATO mission in Afghanistan in the first place[182]. Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous chapters, from the perspective of Russia the importance of the Baltic region lies in the existing economic relations with Moscow – especially when it comes to the energy sector – and the unequal presence of a Russophone diaspora in all three republics, representing a non-negligible factor of influence and a potential risk for regional stability in the area.

Aside from the far north, the Baltic region is the only area where the Alliance and Russia directly touch each other. Hence, the borders of the Baltic states and Poland constitute about 84% of the 1163 km shared land border between NATO and Russia, not to mention the 1268 km of shared border between Latvia, Lithuania and Poland with Belarus, a crucial Russian ally[183]. The Baltic states thus directly face Russia's Western Military District (MD), which includes on the Baltic side one guards air assault division and one Spetsnaz brigade based in Pskov (which is 32 km away from Estonia); two motorized rifle brigades; one artillery brigade and one missile brigade equipped with 12 dual-use Iskander missiles; one army aviation brigade and one air defence regiment equipped with S-300 missiles[184].

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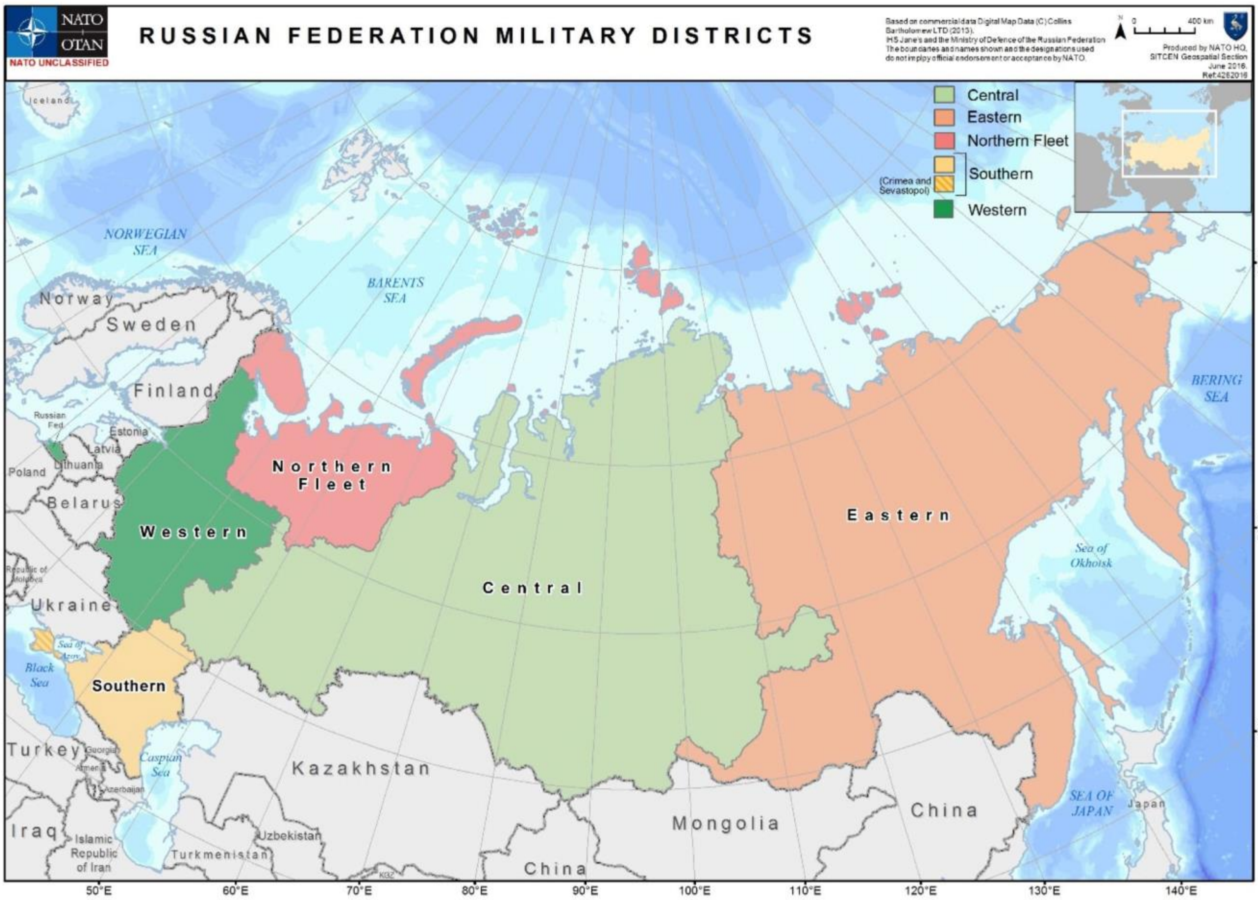
[182] Moreover, by the year 2019 they all increased their respective defence spending to the recommended 2% of their gross domestic product (GDP).
Sally A. Painter, "US must remain committed to NATO and the Baltic States", *Atlantic Council*, September 8, 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-must-remain-committed-to-nato-and-the-baltic-states/

[183] Sven Sakkov, "Why the Baltics matter. Defending NATO's North-Eastern border", *NATO Defense College*, NDR Policy Brief, No. 13 (June 2019), https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1328

[184] The importance of the Western Military District and the military exercises "Zapad" will be discussed later in the paragraph. See: Heinrich Brauß and András Rácz, "Russia's Strategic Interests and Actions in the Baltic Region", *German Council on Foreign Relations*, DGAP Report, No. 1 (January 2021), 9, https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/210107_Report-2021-1-EN.pdf

Figure 7: Russian Federation military districts


NATO
OTAN
NATO UNCLASSIFIED
RUSSIAN FEDERATION MILITARY DISTRICTS
Based on commercial data Digital Map Data (C) Collins Bartholomew LTD (2013).
IHS Jane's and the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used do not implpy official endorsement or acceptance by NATO.
N
0
400 km
Produced by NATO HQ, SITCEN Geospatial Section
June 2016.
Ref:4262016
Central
Eastern
Northern Fleet
(Crimea and Sevastopol)
Southern
Western
Iceland
NORWEGIAN SEA
BARENTS SEA
Norway
Sweden
Finland
Russian Fed.
Estonia
Latvia
Lithuania
Poland
Belarus
Republic of Moldova
Ukraine
Sea of Azov
Black Sea
Northern Fleet
Western
Central
Eastern
Southern
Turkey
Georgia
Armenia
Azerbaijan
Caspian Sea
Iraq
Islamic Republic of Iran
Turkmenistan
Uzbekistan
Kazakhstan
KGZ
China
Mongolia
China
Sea of Okhotsk
BERING SEA
SEA OF JAPAN
Japan
60°N
50°N
40°N
50°E
60°E
70°E
80°E
90°E
100°E
110°E
120°E
130°E
140°E

Source: Dave Johnson, "ZAPAD 2017 and Euro-Atlantic security", NATO, December 14, 2017, https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2017/12/14/zapad-2017-and-euro-atlantic-security/index.html

In this respect, the enclave of Kaliningrad represents a crucial asset for Russia towards the Baltic region. Formerly called Königsberg, the city of Kaliningrad and the surrounding region were annexed to the Soviet Union from Germany in 1945, and remained part of the Russian territory even in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR. Between the 1990s and early 2000s, the Kaliningrad Oblast was expected to be "Russia's gateway to Europe"; instead, the development of an Anti-Access Area-Denial (A2/AD) "bubble" made it become a crucial military bastion for Russia, thus having significant implications for regional security in the Baltic area[185]. This has to be added to the precarious situation of the Suwałki gap, a 65 km strip stretching between the Polish and Lithuanian borders dividing Kaliningrad from the allied Belarus and representing the only direct linkage between the Baltic states and the European Union.

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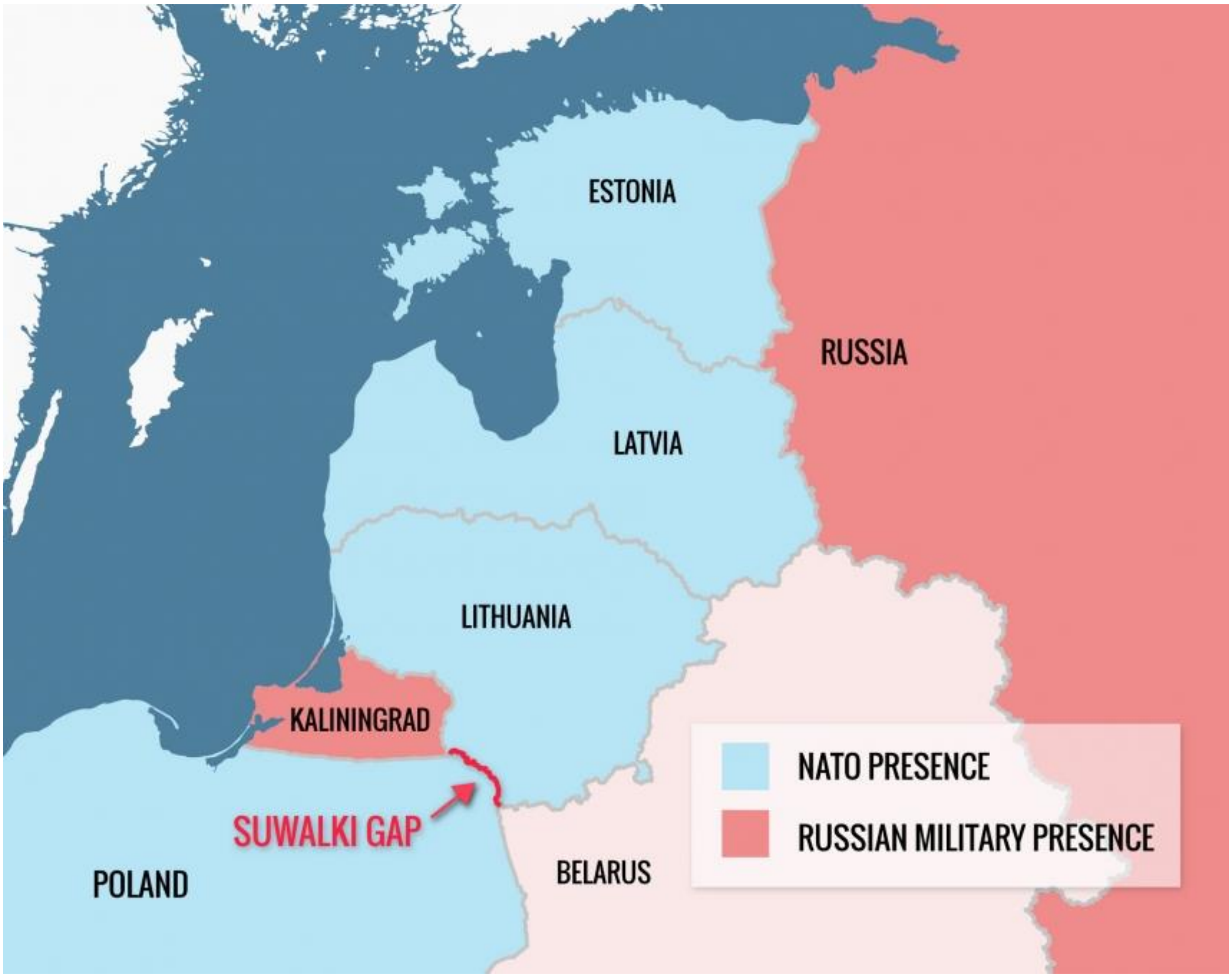
[185] Sergey Sukhankin, "From 'Bridge of Cooperation" to A2/AD 'Bubble': The Dangerous Transformation of Kaliningrad Oblast", *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (2018), 15, https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2018.1416732

Figure 8: **Kaliningrad Oblast and the Suwałki gap**


ESTONIA
RUSSIA
LATVIA
LITHUANIA
KALININGRAD
SUWALKI GAP
POLAND
BELARUS
NATO PRESENCE
RUSSIAN MILITARY PRESENCE

Source: The Baltic Times, "Lithuanian, Polish, US experts to visit Suwałki gap", March 13, 2018, https://www.baltictimes.com/lithuanian__polish__us_experts_to_visit_suwalki_gap/

Speaking of the very concept of "A2/AD", it is composed of two main elements: Anti-Access (A2), which aims at impacting the movement of the opponent *towards* a given theatre, while Area-Denial (AD) deals with movement *within* it. Despite the absence of universal agreement on the concept, according to the Western perspective A2AD bubbles act within five main areas, namely, 1) air, 2) sea, 3) land, 4) space and 5) cyberspace. In this framework, the capabilities of those "bubbles" are ensured by instruments such as cruise and ballistic missiles, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), mines, guided rockets, mortars and artillery, means of Electronic Warfare (EW), short-range/man-portable air defence and anti-armour systems and submarines[186]. As for Russia's understanding and usage of the concept of Anti-Access/Area-Denial, Russian military strategists tend to prefer principles such as "wars of the future" and "hybrid/nonlinear warfare" to the very idea of A2AD (in Russian, *Ограничение и воспрещение доступа и манёвра*)[187]. Hence, it becomes clear that the establishment of A2AD bubbles on the part of Russia is strictly linked to its perception of the evolving nature and future challenges of making warfare, the combined use of military and non-military means in the first place. Based on an analysis of Russia's military strategy in the 2010s, it thus comes out that the approach of the Kremlin towards A2AD would imply a combination of different aspects: 1) *Information operations*, especially decisive in the initial period of conflict in order to prevent adversary domination of the information environment; 2) *Strategic air operations*, reflected in the procurement of platforms and weapons focused on aerospace defence and precision-guided munitions; 3) *Integrated air defence system*, with the aim to integrate all systems within a central command structure so as to favour the interaction of defence forces and 4) *Modern precision strike capabilities: air and sea systems in combination with older technologies*, offering a significant variety of offensive and defensive capabilities[188].

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[186] Ibid., 16-17.

In this context, Kaliningrad moved from being the means to secure the Soviet influence from the Kola Peninsula to the Danish Straits in the period before 1991 to becoming an actual fortress used for security-related goals. Despite the economic crisis that followed the collapse of the USSR and the disastrous consequences for Kaliningrad's military potential, in 1994 Russia eventually opted for the formation of the Kaliningrad Special Region (KOR) – including land and sea forces – and in 1999 it co-hosted the first post-Soviet military-strategic exercises called "Zapad-99"[189]. Along the same lines, the early 2000s saw a remilitarisation of the area – notwithstanding the declared reductions of military forces between 2006 and 2009[190] – until the oblast gained special prominence with the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2013, having acquired all the resources necessary to be defined as a defensive A2AD "bubble"[191]. Although current military capabilities of the enclave remain the object of heated discussion and speculation, available data showed that significant progress has been made in terms of military and naval potential, not to mention electronic warfare (EW)[192]. Indeed, together with Russia's Baltic Fleet[193], the Kaliningrad enclave now hosts a series of A2/AD resources, including the S-400, S-300 and Pantsir-S surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, Bastion-P coast defence systems – using supersonic Oniks anti-ship cruise missiles, Bal coastal defence systems, Iskander-M ballistic missiles combined with Iskander-K land attack cruise missiles, and the ship-based Kalibr cruise missile – the latter exists in both anti-ship and land-attack version[194]. Furthermore, the Russian army units in the Baltic region also contain organic air defence and rocket artillery assets, including the Tor (SA-15) and Buk (SA-11/17) short/medium-range air defence missile systems, together with the Smerch rocket artillery system, having a reported range of 90 km[195]. Altogether, the aforementioned elements point out Russia's tendency towards 1) an intensification of re-equipment of dated arms with advanced pieces; 2) priority accorded to missile and anti-missile complexes, including hypersonic missiles and 3) a combination of anti-missile and radar systems[196], thus making Kaliningrad's military capabilities superior to those of its neighbours and alarming for regional security in the area. With this in mind, military exercises have remained crucial in Russia's military thinking, especially after NATO's decision to establish an Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, implying the deployment of four multinational battlegroups (with an approximate total troop number of 4615 units) respectively led by the UK, Canada, Germany and the US[197]. Consequently, Russian-Belarusian quadrennial strategic-level exercises Zapad (*Запад*, meaning "West" in Russian) conducted in the Western Military District represent Moscow's countermeasures to protect its border regions, contributing to an overall improvement of Russia's military's fighting power in terms of readiness, mobility, command and control (C2) and quantity of forces deployed[198]. Within this framework, nuclear deterrence remains key in Russia’s military strategy. Hence, the latest Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation published in 2014 makes reference to the possibility to use nuclear weapons in the prevention of large-scale and regional conflicts, not to mention the cases of aggression against the Federation “when the very existence of the State is in jeopardy”, where the NATO expansion near Russia’s borders is enlisted among the first military threats the country is facing[199]. In this respect, during an interview for the American National Public Radio (NPR) in November 2001, talking about the Baltic annexation within NATO, President Putin affirmed that, if the relations with the Alliance were to improve, then the latter’s enlargement eastwards would consequently cease to be an issue for Russia, claiming the openness of the Federation to such cooperation[200]. Still, the most recent developments with Putin’s political opponent Alexei Navalny and Lukashenko’s regime crisis in Belarus have contributed to rising tensions between Russia on the one hand and the Alliance and the EU on the other, and resuming talks becomes more urgent than ever.

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[187] Ibid.

[188] Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a military to support great power aspirations*, (Washington DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017), https://www.dia.mil/portals/27/documents/news/military%20power%20publications/russia%20military%20power%20report%202017.pdf

[189] Sukhankin, "From 'Bridge of Cooperation" to A2/AD 'Bubble': The Dangerous Transformation of Kaliningrad Oblast", 23.

[190] Sergey Sukhankin, "David vs. Goliath: Kaliningrad Oblast as Russia's A2/AD 'Bubble'", *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 2(1) (2019), 98, https://sjms.nu/articles/10.31374/sjms.20/

[191] However, the debate upon the nature of enclave is huge and still open, being the real military capabilities of the enclave largely unknown. For instance, during Zapad-99, there was a first simulation of the use of nuclear weapons as means of conflict de-escalation.
Sukhankin, "From 'Bridge of Cooperation" to A2/AD 'Bubble': The Dangerous Transformation of Kaliningrad Oblast", 26.

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[192] In particular, it was the Ukraine crisis that gave a significant boost for progress in EW. See: Sukhankin, "From 'Bridge of Cooperation" to A2/AD 'Bubble': The Dangerous Transformation of Kaliningrad Oblast", 32-33.

[193] The Baltic Fleet in Kaliningrad and St Petersburg has eight guided missile destroyers, 2–3 submarines and 12 missile boats or attack corvettes, as well as naval aviation, which consists of one squadron of fighters and one squadron of strike aircraft.
Robert Dalsjö et al., "Bursting the Bubble – Russian A2/AD in the Baltic Sea Region: Capabilities, Countermeasures, and Implications", *Swedish Defence Research Agency*, FOI-R--4651—SE (March 2019), 42, https://www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--4651—SE

[194] Ibid., 26.

[195] Ibid.

[196] Sukhankin, "From 'Bridge of Cooperation" to A2/AD 'Bubble': The Dangerous Transformation of Kaliningrad Oblast", 30.

[197] "NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence", NATO, last updated February 2021, https://shape.nato.int/resources/site16187/General/factsheets/factsheet_efp_2021.pdf

[198] Brauß and Rácz, "Russia's Strategic Interests and Actions in the Baltic Region", 13.
The next military exercise of the series is scheduled to take place in autumn 2021, for which Russia's Ministry of Defence is completing the creation of a new motorized rifle division in Kaliningrad. Furthermore, another matter of relevance will be the posture of the allied Belarus in light of the ongoing crisis of Lukashenko's regime. See: "Press review: Erdogan, Putin discuss Israel clashes and Russia beefs up Baltic security", TASS – Russian News Agency, last updated May 13, 2021, https://tass.com/pressreview/1289111

Furthermore, in the post-2014 era, non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals – especially in the information environment – have progressively acquired increasing centrality within Russia’s strategy, especially in the advent of the so-called “New Generation Warfare” (NGW), thus raising the potential and fear of hybrid threats and scenarios in the Baltic region.

3.2 The changing nature of conflict: Russia’s *New Generation Warfare* (NGW)

In the words of Dmitry Adamsky, *New Generation Warfare (NGW)* implies the “amalgamation of hard and soft power across various domains, through the skilful application of coordinated military, diplomatic, and economic tools”[201]. In 2013, General Valery Gerasimov – Chief of the General Staff – provided a clearer explanation of Moscow’s thinking about NGW, claiming growing importance of non-military means (such as political, economic and information measures) for the achievement of strategic goals, with an increased centrality of local populations in fuelling political instability[202]. Basically, General Gerasimov stated that the world is steadily moving towards a new era of warfare, where the control of the information environment is key. Furthermore, another focal point of the Russian doctrine relies in the usage of high-precision weapons as a consequence of the changes in the conventional battlespace[203]. Within this framework, the development of new technologies that took place all over the 1990s was essential for the subsequent changes in the character of war, allowing a more intrusive use of the information environment and the psychological dimension, as predicted by Russian military theorist Evgeny Messner[204]. Indeed, Messner claimed that the domination of the information system would have led to the effect described by Clausewitz as a "fog", reducing the differences between truth and fake to destabilise the internal situation of the targeted country[205].

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[199] President of Russia, *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, December 25, 2014 (retrieved from The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Press release of June 29, 2015, at: https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029)

[200] President of Russia, *Interview for the National Public Radio*, November 16, 2001, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21402

[201] Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), 9, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1500/RR1577/RAND_RR1577.pdf

[202] Moreover, in the past few years Russia has emphasised the centrality of influence within its national strategy doctrines through increasingly skilful internal and external communications.
Ibid., 9-10.

Figure 9: Armed conflicts, past and present

Traditional Forms and Modes	New Forms and Modes
• Military operations begin after strategic deployment (declaration of war); • Frontal collisions between large, mainly ground units; • Defeat of enemy forces through firepower, seizing of frontiers and regions to achieve territorial control; • Destruction of the enemy's economic potential and territorial annexations; • Combat operations on land, air and sea; • Hierarchical structure of troops.	• Military operations start in peacetime (no declaration of war); • Non-contact clashes between various military groups; • Annihilation of the enemy's economic potential through the simultaneous destruction of critical military and civilian infrastructure; • Mass employment of precision weapons, special forces, robotics and weapons based on new physical principles; • Simultaneous actions on land, sea, air and information environment; • Asymmetric and nonlinear means; • Management of troops in a unified information space.

Source: Dave Johnson, "Russia's Approach to Conflict – Implications for NATO's Deterrence and Defence", *NATO*, Research Paper No. 111 (April 2015), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/190782/rp_111.pdf

General Gerasimov thus stated that the 20th century conflicts were manifesting a tendency towards increasingly blurred boundaries between peace and war in the traditional sense; wars are not declared anymore, and military means just represent a complement to other political, economic and information instruments when achieving strategic objectives. Moreover, the differences between the strategic, operational and tactical levels blur as well, not to mention the gap between offensive and defensive operations, where high-precision weapons are key (e.g. DRONE type unmanned aerial vehicles or multi-functional robots)[206]. In this respect, Russian military literature mentions five recurrent themes related to NGW: 1) *Asymmetric warfare*, implying the simultaneous employment of political, diplomatic, informational, economic and military means to create damage to targeted governments; 2) *Low-intensity conflict*, using the leverage of socio-economic and political factors to raise discontent and tensions; 3) *Network-centric warfare*, creating a communication network able to provide participants in operations real-time information; 4) *Sixth-generation warfare*, using high-precision weapons to destroy the enemy's means of retaliation and, last but not least, 5) *Reflexive control*, manipulating the opponent to make him act as desired by the controller[207]. The combination of those five elements creates the so-called *New Generation Warfare*. In their article "The Character and Content of New Generation Warfare", Sergey G. Chekinov and Sergey A. Bogdanov point out eight phases of NGW:

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[203] Ibid.

[204] Mirosław Banasik, "Russia's Hybrid War in Theory and Practice", *Journal on Baltic Security*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2016), 168, https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/JOBS/JOBS.02.1.pdf

[205] Ibid.

1. The operation starts after a long planning process with non-military asymmetric warfare, creating favourable conditions to start the operation.
2. Special operations (e.g. propaganda and cyberattacks) are deployed to mislead political and military leaders on the real aims of the operation.
3. Intimidation and deception through the bribing of governments and military officers, so as to make them abandon their duties.
4. Destabilising propaganda to increase discontent among the local population and favour chaos.
5. No-fly zones, land and sea blockades; use of private military companies in cooperation with local opposition units.
6. Beginning of military action, immediately preceded by reconnaissance and subversive missions. All types of armed forces are implied.
7. Combination of targeted information operations, electronic warfare operations, aerospace operations and use of high-precision weapons, which can be launched from various platforms.
8. Implementation of the land component (military subdivisions and special troops) to roll over remaining resistance points and surviving enemy units[208].

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[206] Ibid., 171.

[207] Jānis Bērziņš, "Not 'Hybrid' but New Generation Warfare", in *Russia's Military Strategy and Doctrine*, ed. Glen E. Howard and Matthew Czekaj (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2019), 167-179, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331521752_Not_'Hybrid'_but_New_Generation_Warfare

[208] Ibid., 168-170.

The first four phases are non-kinetic, while, after the beginning of actual military action in the fifth, the last three phases represent a combination of network-centric warfare, sixth-generation warfare and reflexive control. Overall, Russia's understanding of NGW is characterised by a mixture of different strategies, with strategic centrality accorded to internal and external communications and psychological operations. Such nonlinearity of new forms of warfare has often created confusion with the Western concept of "hybrid warfare", first used by the former US Marine officer Frank Hoffman, with the aim to make the US military understand the reduced importance of military force in the aftermath of the Cold War scenario. To do so, he used the example of the growing efficiency of nonstate actors in Middle Eastern scenarios against the often technologically and numerically more equipped state militaries, against which a mixture of countermeasures – largely presupposing the usage of military power – had to be employed due to the difficulty to fully understand the threat[209]. On the contrary, Russia's understanding of NGW revolves around the pursuit of military objectives, and thus does not necessarily imply the application of kinetic force; however, this does not exclude a reciprocal influence between the two understandings and interpretations of each other's military strategies[210].

3.2.1 Hybrid threats and strategic communications

NGW thus implies the possibility to choose among a wide range of means, such as impacts in cyberspace, information environment – propaganda, deception, sabotage – and even criminal activities. The point about such a new frontier of warfare is that those subversive actions are arrayed over time, and can thus happen to give the impression of not being connected to each other through the use of a hybrid sequence of "improvisations" having different consequences in various realms and geographic areas – together with the usage of conventional war attributes – increasing ambiguity and non-linearity on the actual perpetrator/s and the goals behind them[211]. Hence, the respective populations of target states become central for the success or failure of hybrid activities, where the psychological dimension of the masses acquires a fundamental role for the political stability of the concerned state.

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[209] Mikael Weissmann, "Hybrid warfare and hybrid threats today and tomorrow: towards an analytical framework", *Journal on Baltic Security*, Vol. 5, Issue 1 (June 2019), 18, https://sciendo.com/article/10.2478/jobs-2019-0002

[210] Hence, both strategies of low-intensity conflict and network-centric warfare come from the US, while sixth-generation warfare reflects Russian military theorist Vladimir Slipchenko's understanding of the implications of "Operation Desert Storm" and the NATO bombing in Yugoslavia. See: Bērziņš, "Not 'Hybrid' but New Generation Warfare", 168.

[211] Banasik, "Russia's Hybrid War in Theory and Practice", 159-60, https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/JOBS/JOBS.02.1.pdf

The vulnerability of the Baltic context is related to the difficulty to integrate the Russian-speaking minorities installed in the region and a different interpretation of the course of history, where – this is especially the case of Estonia and Latvia – a significant proportion of Russophones rely on Russian media for information and entertainment, making them subject to the risk of propaganda and strategic information campaigns. In this respect, being today's hybrid conflicts intelligence-intensive, in order for information operations to be successful, it is necessary to have control not only over the message to be conveyed, but also over the full media system that deals with its transmission. When dealing with strategic communications, it is important to understand the various concepts and tools used to both analyse the information environment and frame communication campaigns to achieve political objectives, the meaning of *narrative* in the first place. Understanding "narrative" as a system composed of various elements – including actors, events and locations both as described in the media and in real-world situations – is a useful tool to get a broader picture of how those interact and make meaning to an audience[212]. In the words of Mark Laity, Chief of Strategic Communications at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), a narrative is "an organizational scheme expressed in story form and stories are often the basis for community identity, as well as strategies and actions"[213], which implies that 1) narratives organise information (e.g. providing functional roles to actors in given locations) and 2) they involve the way humans see and understand the world around themselves, meaning identities. In this sense, narratives alone cannot be considered hostile or friendly, but they need contextualisation in order to gain certain traits; for instance, when it comes to hostile narratives, it is worth analysing the framework of information influence activities. The information influence system is composed of four dimensions: 1) those activities work influencing the audience through the use of *deceptive* means (e.g. incorrect information) favouring misinformation; 2) the aim is to undermine the targeted state/society so as to advance the author's purposes; 3) information influence activities are *disruptive*, as they produce actual harm to the target and 4) they constitute *interference*[214]. Thus, information influence activities can be used by a given hostile actor to polarise public opinion within the targeted society by spreading narratives useful to its purposes and increasing social unrest. Within this framework, the debate on the teaching language to be adopted in Latvia constituted a significant example of how a given government policy can result in completely different narratives and perceptions depending on the audiences that receive it. Since the restoration of independence, the issue of Russian-speaking public schools has dominated public debate in Latvia, both in light of the long Soviet occupation and the subsequent diversity of the Latvian population. When in 1998 the Latvian government announced the willingness to implement a school reform aiming at making all public education in the Latvian language, the resulting narratives were quite different. If, on the one hand, Riga was promoting *integration*, the Russian-speaking minorities perceived it as a form of *discrimination* and forced assimilation, and challenged the reform through public protests often accompanied by reactions from the Kremlin, thus risking a polarisation of the Latvian society and reduced confidence in the government institutions[215].

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[212] Māris Cepurītis et al., "Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment – Report 2019/2020", *NATO StratCom COE* (November 2020), 9-10, https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/cuploads/pfiles/russias_footprint_nb8_2020_nato_stratcom_coe.pdf?zoom=page-fit

[213] Ibid.

[214] Ibid., 20.

Viewed in this way, information influence campaigns also imply the risk of *information laundering*, meaning the legitimisation of false/deceitful information through a network of intermediaries aiming at obscuring the original source and progressively manipulating existing data, which contributes to spreading societal confusion on a given topic increasing internal dissent towards the targeted state[216]. As the information environment lacks clear boundaries, information laundering networks often act from different countries, either by the domestic laundering of international news or the external manipulation of domestic events to affect the foreign view of the country[217]. In light of the above, understanding the functioning of the cyber realm becomes crucial in current discussions on hybrid threats, especially when it comes to the Baltic security framework.

3.2.2 The renewed centrality of cyberspace

The coming of the internet has favoured the creation of a more globalised and interconnected world, thus increasing the value of information and opening to the possibility for new attack vectors, such as hacking, the spreading of disinformation, electronic warfare and psychological pressure. Even though there is no coherent definition for the term “cyberwarfare”, cyberspace is now considered as the fifth domain of warfare – together with land, sea, air and space – which, however, differs from other realms in the fact that perpetrators of cyberattacks can target any aspect of the internet network governing a given society, from physical infrastructure to all different platforms that compose the system[218]. Hence, as mentioned in the previous sections, the asymmetric nature of cyberattacks is the main reason why it is complex to determine who are the actors behind them and what are their goals, allowing them to exploit the inherent vulnerabilities of the system to cause damage to individuals, organisations and governments through sabotage, economic disruption and information campaigns[219].

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[215] Ibid., 22-29.
Also, in 2014 Latvia guided the establishment of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) in Riga, with the aim to contribute to the Alliance’s strategic communications capabilities through the contribution of international experts from the civilian and military, private and academic sectors.

[216] Belén Carrasco Rodríguez, “Information Laundering in the Nordic-Baltic Region”, *NATO StratCom COE* (November 2020), 6, https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/cuploads/pfiles/nato_information_laundering_small_file_10-12-2020-1.pdf?zoom=page-fit

[217] Cepurītis et al., “Russia’s Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment – Report 2019/2020”, 56.

Within the framework of Russia's strategic thinking, the Ministry of Defence defined "information confrontation" (in Russian *информационное противоборство*) as a conflict between different national identities and values, where superiority is given by the capacity to target the adversary's information system while protecting the domestic one[220]. To discuss the operational environment, Russia's 2016 Doctrine of Information Security uses the terms *информационное пространство* ("information space") and *информационная сфера* ("information sphere"), respectively referring to activities designed to create and store information and influence the public opinion and the overall information infrastructure[221], and all entities involved in generating and processing information in order to ensure information security, as well as "the set of mechanisms regulating social relations in the sphere"[222]. Hence, all activities in the cyberspace are understood in terms of the implications they have on the information space. In this respect, Russia tends to consider the latter from a geopolitical perspective, meaning regarding its information space as a continuation of the Federation's land borders[223].

With regards to the situation in the Baltic region, the case of Estonia is key when it comes to the cyber realm. Indeed, being one of the world's most digitally connected countries, Estonia runs entirely on the internet, from filling taxes to voting to any sort of administrative process, which, as a consequence, requires a high level of cybersecurity[224]. Among others, a key national security interest for Estonia is to give an image of good governance and political stability, presenting itself as a state capable of defending itself from foreign incursions, also in light of its long history of occupation. In this sense, the government of Estonia recognised the centrality of the cyber dimension early in 2004 in its National Security Concept, stating that "the constantly increasing rate at which electronic information systems are adopted in Estonia, and their connection with and dependence upon worldwide information systems, increases the threat of computer crime as well as the vulnerability of information systems, including spheres of primary importance to national security. [...] To prevent computer crime and threats to internal security, which could arise from the vulnerability of IT systems, as well as to ensure the security of national databases and registries, necessary organisational, information technology, and physical security measures are being implemented"[225]. However, such high reliance on technology and interconnectedness made Estonia susceptible to Distributed Denial of Service attacks (DDoS), which take advantage of the vulnerability of unprotected websites and sources to succumb to the direction of massive amounts of internet traffic[226]. Hence, in 2007, Estonia's governmental, financial and other online services were targeted by three weeks of DDoS cyberattacks, apparently in response to the government's decision to relocate a war memorial from the Soviet era – the Bronze Soldier and burial place of Tallinn – thus triggering protests from the Russian-speaking community residing in Estonia[227]. Even though according to some the attack had all the characteristics of a "coordinated act of hostility", ambiguity and the technical sophistication of the act made it challenging to directly attribute it to a state actor, and Russia denied any involvement in the matter. However, despite the initial disruption and costs of the attack, eventually Estonia managed to counter the source of the attack and to build stronger cyber capabilities and resilience, also providing a significant contribution to the capacity of the Alliance[228]. In the aftermath of the attacks, the Estonian Ministry of Defence drafted a national cyber security strategy, with the aim to strengthen the legal framework of cyberattacks and in May 2008 the NATO Co-operative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (NATO CCDCOE) was established in Tallinn[229]. Furthermore, the Estonian government has been putting considerable effort into the promotion of education and training programmes aimed at securing the country's IT systems, not to mention Estonia's involvement in cyber diplomacy and international partnerships to reinforce capabilities against cyber threats, especially in the UN and NATO frameworks[230].

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[218] Anne-Marie Eklund Löwinder and Anna Djup, "Cyberwarfare and the internet: The implications of a more digitalised world", in *Hybrid Warfare – Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations*, by Mikael Weissmann et al. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2021), https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/hybrid-warfare-security-and-asymmetric-conflict-in-international-relations/ch10-cyberwarfare-and-the-internet

[219] Ibid.

[220] Janne Hakala et al., "Russia's Strategy in Cyberspace", *NATO StratCom COE* (June 2021), 5, https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/cuploads/pfiles/Nato-Cyber-Report_15-06-2021.pdf?zoom=page-fit
The translation of the Russian term *информационное противоборство* was quite complex, as "противоборство" refers more to a countermeasure or counteraction, while it was often translated as "warfare".

[221] Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *Концептуальные взгляды на деятельность вооруженных сил российской федерации в информационном пространстве*, [Conceptual Views on the Activities of the Russian Federation Armed Forces in the Information Space], 2011, http://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/9/13480921870.pdf

[222] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation*, December 5, 2016, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2563163#:~:text=The%20Doctrine%20is%20a%20strategic,of%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20No

[223] Hakala et al., "Russia's Strategy in Cyberspace", 7.

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[224] Ivana Kottasová, "How Russian threats in the 2000s turned this country into the go-to expert on cyber defense", *CNN*, June 18, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/18/tech/estonia-cyber-security-lessons-intl-cmd/index.html

[225] Government of Estonia, *National Security Concept of the Republic of Estonia*, 2004, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/156841/Estonia-2004.pdf

[226] James Pamment et al., "Hybrid Threats: 2007 cyberattacks on Estonia", *NATO StratCom COE* (June 2019), 65, https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/cuploads/pfiles/cyber_attacks_estonia.pdf?zoom=page-fit

[227] Ibid., 53.

[228] Ibid., 59.

[229] Ibid., 67.

3.2.3 Interview with Kadri Kaska, Law Branch Chief at NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (NATO CCDCOE) in Tallinn, Estonia

Q: What is the role of cyberspace in the strategic thinking of Estonia?

A: Instead of "cyberspace", we rather use the terms "cybersecurity" or "e-State". This is something that in the past two decades has acquired increasing importance for Estonia, strategically approaching the concepts of "cybersecurity" and "cyber defence" in 2008 – with the development of a Cybersecurity Strategy (from now referred to as "the Strategy") – in the aftermath of the large-scale cyberattacks Estonia suffered in the previous year. The development of the first Strategy has catalysed a broader process of evolution in addition to government-led strategic objectives and their initial implementation, meaning the creation of new initiatives driven by both the public and private sector, thus creating an ecosystem of new issues that have emerged and are to be dealt with by the society as a whole, including civil actors. Hence, the cyber realm and digital development are organically entrenched in the way the Estonian society was shaped over the years, which happened with the contribution of governmental actors, private sector actors and the civil society, where each and every one of them is a co-owner of Estonia's digital story. This digital evolution has been happening for two decades now, and it has thus become part of Estonia's national narrative and the way we perceive ourselves.

Q: How does Estonia contribute to NATO activities in the cyber realm and the overall strengthening of the capabilities of the Alliance?

A: In many respects, Estonia has been the initial driver of debates on cybersecurity within NATO, raising the question of cyberattacks being something more than mere technical challenges to be handled by technical operational bodies. In particular, after the 2007 cyberattack on Estonia we raised the issue of state-sponsored cyberoperations and activities having the potential to disrupt the functioning, security and integrity of targeted governments, and eventually expanded the concept to the potential risks for the stability of the Alliance, insisting on the urgency for NATO to develop its own posture and understanding of the matter. Estonia has thus been a major driver for the development of NATO cyber defence policies, and a solid supporter of them, up until the one established at the latest Brussels Summit in 2021. Also, Estonia proposed the creation of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (NATO CCDCOE) here in Tallinn, which now includes more than 30 countries from NATO and beyond, and represents its largest contributor, both in terms of personnel and funding. Furthermore, Estonia created and hosts the NATO Cyber Range, a technical platform to support the cyber training of the Alliance, developing cyber exercises in a realistic environment. Finally, from a legal perspective, Estonia was also a major supporter of the Tallinn Manual on the way international law is applicable to cyberoperations, a project sponsored by the NATO CCDCOE which is now revised and expanded following developments in international law and State practice on this matter.

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[230] Kottasová, "How Russian threats in the 2000s turned this country into the go-to expert on cyber defense". In the NATO system, it is worth mentioning also the NATO Cyber Range, based at a facility provided by Estonia in order to enhance the capabilities of the Alliance in terms of cyber education. See: "Cyber defence", NATO, last updated July 2, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_78170.htm

Q: What are the latest initiatives the CCDCOE developed to increase the resilience of the Baltic region in the cyber domain?

A: Even though the Centre is not specifically focused on the Baltics – as it belongs to the broader framework of the Alliance and includes the participation of non-NATO members and countries in different partnership arrangements with NATO – it is clear that the whole Baltic region benefits from the work the CCDCOE does. For instance, the Centre offers high-level training, from technical masterclasses to training courses in critical infrastructure protection, international law, or operational planning. The CCDCOE cyber defence exercises include a broad range of experts involved in the creation of potential scenarios and participants from various countries, which contributes to the creation of trust within the community, both within and beyond the framework of the Alliance. Along the same lines, all nations are welcomed to propose research topics to the CCDCOE to be further explored, which happens through research reports and/or workshops that work as community-building projects through high-quality research. Thus, cybersecurity is not just about having the formal information-exchange structures, but it is also about the trust mechanisms that have to be sustained in order to exchange the information that is more relevant to all the involved stakeholders, which, indeed, requires trust. From an Estonian perspective, we use the term "ecosystem", and this is what we are trying to do with the CCDCOE as well, meaning acting as a platform to develop a cyber defence ecosystem that connects not only NATO nations, but also partners from the private sector and academia.

3.3 Preventing an escalation as a common priority

Based on the above, Andrew Radin divides hybrid threats into three potential scenarios for the Baltics: nonviolent subversion, covert violent action and conventional aggression, supported by the usage of means of irregular warfare[231]. In this context, analysts agree that low-level nonviolent subversion is already happening in the Baltic stage, including propaganda and cyberattacks, but it has a low potential to trigger an actual political destabilisation[232]. By contrast, the possibility of covert violent action or conventional aggression is less likely, especially in light of the Baltic membership within the Atlantic Alliance and the subsequent risk to trigger Article 5[233]. Thus, the Baltic region will most probably remain a very complex environment, where the development of modern and increasingly asymmetric means of warfare could lead to an alarming escalation of tensions that would not benefit any of the involved stakeholders.

For more than two decades, ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO and Russia have worked to favour cooperation and dialogue in areas of mutual interest. Actual cooperation started when, in 1994, Russia joined the Partnership for Peace programme, and supported peace operations led by the Alliance in the Western Balkans through the deployment of peacekeepers[234]. Furthermore, the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act concretely contributed to lay the ground for bilateral relations, reflecting the significant changes both actors had undergone since the end of the Cold War and favouring the creation of a new forum of consultations on relevant political and security-related issues[235]. However, the war in Georgia in 2008 and – most importantly – the Ukraine crisis in 2014 led to a suspension of the partnership, subsequently worsened by the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019 and the more recent controversies related to the attempted murder of the leading Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny.

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[231] Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses*, 13.

[232] Ibid.
The case of the Latgale region in Latvia can be considered as a prominent example of this. The separate identity of Latgale – especially the widespread usage of the Latgalian language in the region – and the significant presence of Russophones have often caused ambiguity on potential Russian interference with the region's culture and claims, especially concerning the shared border with the Federation. Along the same lines, in 2015 a series of mysterious online appeals asking for a "Latgalian People's Republic" – corresponding to a Latvian version of the Russia-backed Donetsk republic in Ukraine – were made without succeeding in identifying the source they came from. About this episode, Latvia's minister of foreign affairs dismissed the campaign for Latgale's independence, but said it was uncertain whether it was caused by individuals acting independently or as part of a broader strategy to provide mixed messages and favour uncertainty. See: Andrew Higgins, "Latvian Region Has Distinct Identity, and Allure for Russia", *The New York Times*, May 20, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/21/world/europe/latvian-region-has-distinct-identity-and-allure-for-russia.html

[233] NATO, *Brussels Summit Communiqué*, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm
The Communiqué also mentions the possibility to invoke Article 5 in cases of hybrid warfare, while for cyberattacks the invocation will be evaluated by the North Atlantic Council on a case by case basis.

[234] "Relations with Russia", NATO, last updated April 21, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50090.htm

[235] "Summary – Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation", NATO, May 27, 1997 (last updated November 5, 2008), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25470.htm?selectedLocale=en

Hence, in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, NATO Allies focused on strengthening their defence posture, especially on the Eastern Flank, including a severe limitation of dialogue with the Russian Federation. However, within the framework of the current changing security scenario, the NATO 2030 initiative and the most recent summit between President Biden and President Putin in Geneva, the necessity to change the strategy towards Russia and adapt it to the challenges of our time – a revival of the arms control regime and the security of disputed areas such as the Baltic region in the first place – shall be taken into consideration, so as to favour stability and engagement to achieve common goals. In this respect, rethinking the dimension of dialogue is key to avoid an exacerbation of tensions; indeed, Russia has sent a series of mixed signals concerning its willingness to reopen dialogue with the Alliance, which demonstrates an intention to negotiate on topics such as arms control, terrorism and piracy, and other "transnational issues"[236]. This shall also be considered in light of the modest results achieved so far through the current approach to Russia-NATO relations, where increasing bilateralism when it comes to discussing with the Kremlin risks to favour internal fragmentation within the Alliance and endanger further its credibility[237].

Concerning the Baltic scenario, despite Russia's willingness to make the Baltic governments favour political choices closer to the Kremlin's line of action, since independence Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have opted for increased negotiation and adaptation to Western standards, and they eventually accessed NATO and the EU in 2004. This constituted the lowest point in Russia's relations with the three formerly Soviet republics, and led to increasing military preparedness and tensions on both sides. As mentioned in further detail in Chapter 1, nowadays a significant number of Russian speakers and ethnic Russians continues to reside in the Baltics, especially in Estonia and Latvia, which increases the fear of an extending Russian influence on the part of those countries. Moreover, the risk of aggression against the Baltic states represented a major turning point in boosting cooperation between the Alliance and the European Union in their Eastern territories; hence, based on an analysis started by the Estonian Presidency in 2017, the EU has promoted a "military mobility" initiative, with the aim to reduce legal and bureaucratic obstacles to military logistics across borders[238]. In this respect, the idea is to bring together civilian and military actors, both from NATO members and external partners, in order to target hybrid threats to transportation and critical military infrastructure[239]. This constitutes just an example of a series of projects which have gained momentum in light of the risk of hybrid threats in the Baltic republics, where the major problems remain the uncertainties related to attribution and deniability. Overall, the situation in the Baltics also contributed to a growing debate and enhanced cooperation in the evolution of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

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[236] Marc Ozawa, "Adapting NATO-Russia dialogue", *NATO Defence College*, NDC Policy Brief No. 12 (June 2021), https://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=702

[237] Ibid.

[238] Dorthe Bach Nyemann, "Hybrid warfare in the Baltics", in *Hybrid Warfare – Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations*, by Mikael Weissmann et al. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2021), https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/hybrid-warfare-security-and-asymmetric-conflict-in-international-relations/ch10-cyberwarfare-and-the-internet

However, according to a report from RAND Corporation and a more recent analysis from the Swedish Research Agency, it turns out that the Alliance and its partners would result unprepared compared to Russia in case a large-scale conflict arose[240]. Indeed, being the Baltic states members of the Atlantic Alliance, an aggression against their territories would cause the application of the collective defence provision contained in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, that is, the obligation to consider an attack against a NATO member an attack against all. Based on the above, the two reports underline how, contrarily to the Allied forces deployed in the region, Russia enjoys an overwhelming military superiority as, first of all, Russian forces are motorised, mechanised or tank units. Secondly, Moscow also has a clear advantage when it comes to tactical and operational fires, while NATO has no independent fire units, and light units are poorly equipped with organic artillery. Finally – and most importantly – the absence of adequate NATO ground forces capable of slowing a potential assault would basically provide not enough time to halt the advancing of adversaries[241]. Nevertheless, the report from the Swedish Defence Agency makes it clear that such an armed attack against NATO members and EU countries remains highly unlikely[242]. And, since Russia’s 2014 Military Doctrine allows the first use of nuclear weapons in case the vital interests of the country are under threat, even the possibility to turn a medium-sized conventional war into a nuclear conflict makes this scenario less and less alluring[243]. Thus, if on the one hand the forces of the Alliance would not be enough to prevent the overrun of the Baltic states in the case of an external attack, the outbreak of a conflict on the Eastern Flank would be undesirable even for Russia. Ever since the annexation of Crimea, the Federation has increased its sensitivity to geopolitical shocks stemming from Western sanctions, where the difficulties related to the Covid-19 pandemic have overlapped with the tightening of the relations with Europe and the US, in light of the Kremlin’s support for Belarus’ leader Alexander Lukashenko and the attempted killing and subsequent imprisonment of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. In view of those reasons, the costs of a war would be unbearable even for Moscow.

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[239] Ibid.

[240] Pekka Vanttinen, “NATO ill-prepared for large-scale war, finds Swedish report”, *Euractiv*, March 15, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/nato-ill-prepared-for-large-scale-war-finds-swedish-report/

[241] David A. Shlapak et al., *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank – Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 5-6, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html

[242] Vanttinen, “NATO ill-prepared for large-scale war, finds Swedish report”.

[243] Christopher S. Chivvis, “The Baltic Balance: How to Reduce the Chances of War in Europe”, *The RAND Blog*, July 2, 2015, https://www.rand.org/blog/2015/07/the-baltic-balance-how-to-reduce-the-chances-of-war.html

Within this framework, as accidents are most likely to occur when communication channels reach their lowest point, it becomes necessary to reformulate the approach that led to the cessation of dialogue with the Russian counterpart, favouring instead a reopening of negotiations on the possibility to achieve risk reduction in the Baltic area. To do so, the focus shall be on concrete measures able to preserve and extend existing political agreements, in order to provide the right guidance to reopen a NATO-Russia military-to-military dialogue, starting from the existing Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR)-Russian Chief of Defence secure channel of communication. In this respect, increasing transparency becomes a priority to address in order to prevent an escalation, both in terms of the location and extent of the respective military exercises and initiating discussions on potential risks of emerging technologies in the military field, thus avoiding the proliferation of wrong perceptions and analysing emerging complications related to such systems[244]. Moreover, an advancement in the integration of Russian speakers within the Baltic republics – either through greater recognition of the Russian language or the granting of citizenship to Russian migrants from the Soviet era – could be a major first step to support the integration of ethnic Russians, even though apparently it might clash with individual countries' independence claims and fears of subversion. In this sense, a greater focus on strategic communications – for instance by supporting Estonian and Latvian government-backed television and radio stations broadcasting in Russian – is also necessary to better understand and respond to the concerns and beliefs of the Russian-speaking minority and improve transparency.[245] Furthermore, the Baltic capacity to respond to covert action shall be improved, favouring the filling of existing gaps in terms of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, both for covert action and conventional warfare. In such context, NATO is promoting a series of initiatives to improve intelligence gathering and coordination in the Baltic countries, which include developing shared indicators and warnings, NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs) and combined exercises. Still, the dependence of the Alliance upon its members makes progress in intelligence sharing extremely slow, which, among others, also highlights the necessity for additional research on existing gaps in the Baltic republics' capabilities, including the involvement of civilian agencies[246].

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[244] European Leadership Network (ELN) and Latvian Institute of International Affairs (LIIA), "Mistakes, misunderstandings and miscalculation: Reducing the risk of NATO/Russia military incidents and escalation", Roundtable discussion, June 4, 2021, https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/LIIA-ELN-workshop-report-1.pdf

[245] Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses*, 31-33.

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[246] Ibid.

Conclusion

The present dissertation aimed at providing a picture as complete as possible of the reasons behind the security challenges in the three Baltic republics, analysing the process that led to the current configuration of the region in order to understand the risks related to a potential escalation of tensions between NATO and the Russian Federation. In this regard, this research has allowed to conclude that a large-scale military conflict in the Baltic region remains not only unlikely but also largely undesirable, as it would lead to significant losses for all the involved stakeholders. This becomes especially important in light of the recent events that contributed to the deterioration of the relationship between Russia on the one hand, and NATO and the European Union on the other, such as the Belarus crisis and the imprisonment of Putin's political opponent, Alexei Navalny.

Based on the above, the present work has outlined the main features of the Baltic question starting from an analysis of its understanding within Russia's official discourse, where the relevance of the region was strictly related to the narratives of "soft power" and "compatriot policy". Analysing Russia's official documents and foreign policy Concepts, it comes out that Moscow's understanding of *soft power* is largely based on the ideas of multiculturalism and fair cooperation among sovereign countries, where Russia sees itself as the conjunction of multiple civilisations and a strong mediator on the international stage. In this sense, the very concept of *Russian diaspora* becomes crucial, as the protection of the rights and interests of compatriots living abroad after the collapse of the USSR represents one of the key pillars of Russia's foreign policy strategy. As for the Baltic countries, even though in foreign policy Concepts they are classified as "Euro-Atlantic states"[247], the difficult integration of Russian-speaking minorities – especially in the cases of Estonia and Latvia – has often been accompanied by harsh criticisms on the part of Moscow concerning the exclusionary laws on citizenship enacted by those countries. Most importantly, this work has pointed out the centrality of the construction of an actual national identity for the overall stability of the region, where the generational gap and the advent of European legislation to guarantee the rights of minorities under the status non-citizens are key to understand integration issues in the area. While this aspect is receiving increasing attention within the international community, a greater recognition of the rights of ethnic minorities residing in the Baltics could be helpful for the creation of inclusive governmental structures. Still, this would require further research so as to find a compromise between the Baltics' independence claims and fears of subversion on the one hand, and the accommodation of minority rights on the other.

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[247] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* (2013).

Then, the historical analysis of the events that led to the current conformation of the Baltic region showed that, over the course of time, all three republics have always been subjected to a series of invasions and annexations on the part of their neighbours, which has had a powerful impact on Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania's constant aspirations for independence. The findings outlined that, after being encompassed by the Russian Empire and, eventually, the Soviet Union, it was during the period that followed the independence obtained from the USSR that the Baltic region laid the ground for its present configuration. Hence, if on the one hand the membership within major Western institutions such as NATO and the European Union represented a natural continuation of the Baltic traditions of democracy and parliamentarism, on the other it has triggered the disappointment of the Russian Federation, thus leading to a cooling of relations with Moscow. Especially when it comes to energy policies, the lessons learned have revealed that, although significant progress has been made, the complete diversification of the Baltic energy supplies from Gazprom's monopoly and the access to the European network will most likely take some time, as most of the promoted initiatives are ongoing or remain in a phase of development. In this respect, the present research has outlined that another major challenge for the Baltics is the securitisation of critical energy infrastructure, which remains highly exposed to the risk of cyber and hybrid threats. In order to build a durable resilience, it is thus necessary to understand what type of infrastructure shall be protected, what are the threats to those identified assets and how to efficiently protect them; to do so, it is advisable for the IT and the operational/industrial side to work together, so as to be able to prevent the risk of accidents to critical infrastructure.

Finally, this work has examined the more specific security concerns the Baltic region is currently facing, namely the development of the A2/AD "bubble" of Kaliningrad, whose capabilities range from cruise and ballistic missiles and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) to means of Electronic Warfare (EW) and submarines, and the newly emerging hybrid and cyber threats. In this respect, this study has outlined the appearance of a new character of warfare, which results increasingly focused on non-military means, such as political, social, economic and information measures in order to destabilise targeted governments and societies, which, in Russia's military thinking, takes the name of *New Generation Warfare* (NGW). Within the Baltic framework, this dissertation has thus highlighted how, in the case of a fully-fledged military confrontation, NATO forces would result insufficient to protect their allies, while, on the other hand, the turmoil caused by the Covid-19 pandemic to Russia's economy, coupled with different perceptions of the Belarus crisis and the imprisonment of the Russian opposition leader Navalny, would make the – unlikely – prospect of an actual conflict largely undesirable.

By way of conclusion, the Baltic context remains characterised by a series of complexities related to its historical and geographic situation, demographic configuration and political – especially in the energy sphere – choices, which made it a perpetually disputed area between the strategic claims of its neighbours both Eastwards and Westwards. However, the decision of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to join the Western institutional system after obtaining independence from the USSR has increasingly represented an obstacle to Russia's claims in the region, above all in light of the significant percentage of Russian speakers residing in the three republics and denied full recognition of their political rights, especially in Estonia and Latvia. With increasing tensions between the Alliance and the Russian Federation, in the past two decades security has thus become a matter of major concern for the Baltics, which have turned into pioneer nations and fundamental contributors to NATO activities in the cyber, strategic communications and energy security realms. Hence, as accidents are most likely to occur when communication channels reach the lowest point, this study highlights the necessity to reformulate the approach that led to the cessation of dialogue with the Russian counterpart, favouring instead a reopening of negotiations on the possibility to achieve risk reduction in the Baltic area. To do so, the focus shall be on concrete measures able to preserve and extend existing political agreements, in order to provide the right guidance to reopen a NATO-Russia military-to-military dialogue, starting from the existing Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR)-Russian Chief of Defence secure channel of communication. In this respect, increasing transparency becomes a priority to address in order to prevent an escalation, both in terms of the location and extent of military exercises and of discussions on potential risks of emerging technologies in the military field, thus avoiding the proliferation of wrong perceptions and analysing emerging complications related to such systems. Furthermore, an advancement in the integration of Russian speakers within the Baltic republics – for instance by easing the citizenship acquisition process and supporting Estonian and Latvian government-backed television and radio stations broadcasting in Russian – could be a major first step to support the integration of ethnic Russians and favour a greater cohesion of the Baltic societies, even though at first it might seem to clash with individual countries' independence claims and fears of subversion. Lastly, even though the dependence of the Alliance upon its members makes the sharing of capabilities extremely slow, NATO shall keep investing in the filling of existing gaps in terms of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities in the Baltic republics, underlining, among others, the need for a more consistent involvement of civilian agencies.

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Summary

The three Baltic republics – namely Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – were the first countries to obtain independence from the USSR, and the only former Soviet territories that eventually became members of both NATO and the European Union. Thus, the Baltic question acquires importance in light of the context in which it is inserted, meaning the complex, often difficult relationship between the Atlantic Alliance and the Russian Federation. Furthermore, a point worthy of attention is the relevance of the Baltic area when it comes to the sensitive realms of hybrid and cyber threats and energy security. Hence, in light of their configuration and historical background, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are providing a valuable contribution to the capabilities and the security of the Alliance, as, together with the participation in major NATO missions, the three countries have started sharing their expertise with the Allies through the establishment of, respectively, the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Tallinn, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) in Riga and the NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence (ENSEC COE) in Vilnius.

This becomes especially relevant in reason of the risks related to the development of new technologies and the increased usage of high precision weapons, thus causing essential changes in the current character of warfare. Such *New Generation Warfare* (NGW) is focused on a more intrusive usage of the information and psychological dimensions to achieve strategic goals; hence, the rising centrality of non-military means – such as political, economic, social and information tools – makes the Baltic area a crucial case study to understand the changing nature of current conflicts, where the coexistence and failed integration of different ethnic minorities – mainly former Soviet citizens of Russian origin – constitutes one of the major risk factors to fuel instability in the region. In order to understand the reasons and events that led to the current asset of the Baltic region and why a potential escalation of the tensions constitutes an undesirable scenario, the present dissertation is divided into three chapters, which are be based on official documents – including sources from NATO, the Baltic governments and the Russian Federation – academic work, press releases and interviews with valuable experts in the matter.

First, Chapter 1 provides a theoretical basis to the whole research, analysing Russia's understanding of the concept of *soft power* as a means to achieve strategic goals through cultural attractiveness, a common language and history, and strengthen its influence in former Soviet countries. To do so, the Chapter examines the evolution of Russia's Foreign Policy Concepts from

Vladimir Putin's first presidency in the early 2000s to the latest document published in 2016, so as to understand the developments in the way the Baltic republics are perceived in Russia's official discourse in the aftermath of key historical events, such as the Ukraine crisis.

Based on Joseph Nye's narrative, Russia has started to develop its own soft power strategy in the early 2000s. The principle unofficially emerged during President Putin's second term (2004-2008), within the context of Moscow's policies to consolidate its influence in the "near abroad" after the Baltic States achieved accession to both NATO and the EU, a time in which Russia was trying to recover from the political and economic upheavals that accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet Union, not to mention the "frozen conflicts" within the former Soviet territories and the tensions at international level. However, the very concept of soft power officially appeared in the Russian doctrine with regards to Russia's "compatriots" in the post-Soviet space, as laid down in the "2013 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation ". As for the Baltic States, the 2013 Concept mentions Russia's aim to improve cooperation with North European countries as part of the broader interest for the Arctic region, while claiming the Kremlin's disapproval for the expansion and military activities of NATO in the vicinity of Russian borders[248]. In this respect, it is important to pay attention to Russia's official posture towards the Baltic Republics; indeed, in the Concept Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania belong to the category of "Euro-Atlantic states"[249]. What is peculiar about the Baltics is not just a mere political matter, but also the presence of Russian-speaking minorities – more or less integrated – within their territories. In light of the above, it is clear that the Baltic region owns a very specific place in Russian foreign policy strategy, which has to take into consideration a whole series of limitations related to the socio-political record with those countries, including, among others, the significant presence of Russian-speaking minorities residing in the area.

Thus, Russia's understanding of soft power aims at highlighting its rich past and multicultural configuration, the regional and global relevance of the Russian language and its centrality within the Orthodox community; under Vladimir Putin, the foreign policy strategy of the Federation focused on soft power projections on the international scene (especially the post-Soviet space), so as to create an image of neutral peacemaker and reliable trade partner. Nevertheless, Moscow's soft power strategy has often been criticised in many realms: among others, Russia's energy policy has been portrayed as more of a hard power resource than a soft one. Also, another point of major controversy resides in the way the Federation handles its contemporary popular culture, especially with regards to the role of Russian media and organisations for "soft power" promotion in former Soviet countries, in particular the Baltic states.

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[248] "Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* (2013).

[249] Ibid.

In this respect, it appears that, since the beginning of Putin's presidency, the main principle underlying Russia's foreign action is the safeguard of the citizens, society's and State's interests[250]. In particular, the protection of the rights and legitimate interests of Russian compatriots living abroad represents one of the pillars of the Federation's foreign policy strategy, as stated in the latest 2016 Concept. Among others, the 2016 Concept states that, as a nation committed to the safeguard of human rights and freedoms, Russia aims to "further the consolidation of compatriots living abroad, so as to enable them to better realize their rights in the countries of residence and facilitate the preservation of the Russian diaspora's identity, as well as the voluntary relocation of compatriots to the Russian Federation"[251].

Starting from these assumptions, Russia has often been critical of the legislation enacted in the Baltic countries concerning citizenship, especially Estonia and Latvia[252]. Hence, with independence from the USSR and the return to Europe of the Baltics, the latter restored the legislative systems that were in force before the Soviet era, which implied that residents already having citizenship status before the occupation automatically became citizens, while those coming from other Soviet republics were asked to pass an exam to become Estonian or Latvian citizens. Therefore, in both Estonia and Latvia this created the distinct status of "non-citizen" – *määratlemata kodakondsusega isikud* ("person of undetermined citizenship") in Estonia and *nepilsoni* ("non-citizens") in Latvia. At present, about 10% of the people residing in Latvia and 6% in Estonia live with no citizenship status, they only result as former Soviet citizens[253], which made the issue of Russian-speaking minorities without citizenship rights become a central claim in Russia's compatriot policy. When analysing the impact of those policies on Estonian and Latvian residents, it turns out that the result is extremely heterogeneous, as the connection with Russia is more widespread in regions including a majority of Russian speakers within their populations and is becoming less felt by younger generations, which now identify themselves as Estonian and Latvian respectively. However, even though citizenship remains technically open to all people who are willing to learn the national language, when making a comparison between Riga and Tallinn it turns out that the legislation on citizenship that was adopted after obtaining independence from the Soviet Union mainly served a state-building aim, where eventually other needs related to the diaspora have arisen. In this respect, it stands out that those societies remain quite divided on the issue of minorities, underlining a problem of integration that goes far beyond naturalisation alone.

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[250] Ruiz González, "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation: A Comparative Study", 2; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (2016).

[251] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (2016).

[252] The case of Lithuania is different, due to the smaller portion of Russians living in the country. See: Smirnov, "Russia's 'soft power' in the Baltic".

[253] Bergmane, "Fading Russian Influence in the Baltic States".

Chapter 2 then deals with the long history of occupation – from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union – that eventually led to the independence of the three Baltic republics from the USSR in 1991, and their subsequent membership within NATO and the European Union in 2004, with a special focus on the issue of energy security. Traditionally, the Baltic states have always been in the midst of dominant empires, and have often ended up being invaded and conquered by them, especially in the cases of Latvia and Estonia[254]. By contrast, Lithuania has been long independent under a Grand Duchy, before joining Poland in the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1569[255]. It was with the Treaty of Nystad, signed in 1721, that Sweden ceded to the Russian Empire all its Baltic provinces, including Ingria, Estonia, Livonia, and a strip of Finnish Karelia, while with the Third Partition of Poland, which was not completed until 1797, Russia acquired Courland, the territory of Lithuania east of the Neman River, and the rest of the Volhynian Ukraine. Eventually, by the end of the 18th century, all territories corresponding to the current three Baltic republics became part of the Russian Empire. The main question under the Empire was the condition of peasants, as the Baltic German landowners that exercised their control in the area forced peasants to pay them a rent. After a wave of reforms, a series of national awakening movements arose across the Baltic region, moving from a society based on class divisions to one characterised by cleavages of ethnic nature. Hence, Emperor Alexander III started a cultural and administrative "Russification" campaign, in order not to make the Baltic provinces be absorbed within the German cultural influence after its reunification, and repressed any revolutionary attempt with massive executions.

The beginning of the 20th century saw the outbreak of World War I and the Russian Revolution, where the crossing of the German border on the part of the Russian army in August 1914 led to the involvement of the Eastern front in the fights. The Baltic states experienced war very differently, as Estonia was not involved in WW1 until the very end of the conflict, while Latvia witnessed the conflict within its territory – suffering an enormous amount of losses – and Lithuania was occupied by Germany. The Baltics eventually managed to fight back, and they obtained formal autonomy in the early 1920s; still, the political fragmentation and instability in the region easily replaced the parliamentary era with the rise of authoritarian regimes, which, with Hitler's rise to power and Nazi Germany's expansionist policies, led to the surrender of the Baltic states to the Soviet Union with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Soviet era implied a nationalisation of banks and industries and the censorship of the arts, the press and literature in favour of Stalin's cult of personality, where any sort of opposition was immediately repressed. When Gorbachev came to power in the 1980s and introduced his well-known reforms *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring), the Baltic states took advantage of the cracks within the Soviet machine and started to organise a series of nonviolent protests claiming their rights to freedom of speech and public assembly that, eventually, led to their independence from the USSR in 1991. With the Russian army finally gone from their territories, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania applied for EU and NATO membership, and they officially became members in 2004. In this context, the main issue was whether the three republics would ever overcome the vulnerabilities related to their connection to the Soviet Union, namely, the political and economic instability, their complete energy dependence from Moscow and, most importantly, the issue of Russian-speaking minorities residing in the region. Hence, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the problem was that, being the Baltics independent states, former Soviet citizens residing in Estonia and Latvia were forced to apply for naturalisation, mainly based on the knowledge of the local languages. As for Lithuania, the less substantial presence of Russian-speaking minorities led to the granting of citizenship to all residents in the country. Moreover, another crucial concern is related to Lithuania's shared border with the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, the most highly militarised region in Europe.

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[254] From the end of the 12th century onwards, the territory belonging to the current Latvia and Estonia saw a significant interaction with neighbouring peoples, including Germans, Swedes, Poles, Danes and – eventually – Russians, contributing to the intrinsic multiethnicity of those areas. In particular, the Baltic Germans were particularly influential, and they long dominated the political, economic and cultural life in the contemporary territories of Estonia and Latvia, as they owned lands, controlled municipalities and the Lutheran church. See: Wezel, "Introduction: German community – German nationality? Baltic German perceptions of belonging in the nineteenth and twentieth century"; Vitola and Grigoriadis, "Diversity & empire: Baltic Germans & comparative development", 7.

[255] Di Gregorio, "Democratic Transition and Linguistic Minorities in Estonia and Latvia", 7.

In this respect, energy security represents the major Achille's heel of the Baltic republics, as they depend utterly on Russian energy supply in light of both the lack of domestic resources and the close link to Soviet infrastructures in terms of pipelines, electricity and gas, thus allowing Moscow to preserve its monopoly in the area. In this respect, the problem is not merely related to the high levels of dependence on imported energy for domestic consumption, but rather to the lack of diversification of energy supplies – especially natural gas, where potentially hostile relations with the supplier increase the vulnerability of the receiving state. For Russia, the Baltic energy market is particularly profitable due to the Baltics' status of "gas islands", allowing Moscow a wide marge of discretion on market prices. Indeed, the Kremlin secured its economic interests in the region by making its national company Gazprom acquire a controlling share in the three Baltic national companies, thus owning 37% of Estonia's Eesti Gaas (with a further 10% owned by

ITERA, another Russian gas company), 34% of Latvia's Latvias Gāze (16% also owned by ITERA), and 37% of Lithuania's Lietuvos Dujo, and making the Russian company have a significant impact on the strategies employed[256]. Hence, for the Baltic states the EU market represents a major opportunity to achieve diversification of energy sources, routes and suppliers through the liberalisation of the European energy market. To this aim, the European Union has promoted a series of initiatives to favour the diversification of the Baltic energy sources, among others, the Third Energy Package, the Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan (BEMIP) – including the projects Estlink, Nordbalt and the LitPol Link – the Balticconnector and the Gas Interconnector Poland-Lithuania (GIPL). Within this framework, a point of major controversy when it comes to the Baltic energy security is represented by the Nord Stream project, notably supported by Germany and Russia. In this respect, by providing Russia with direct access to the EU bypassing transit countries, the pipeline increases the risks for the energy security of those states relying on Russian gas imports through Ukraine, together with the latter's political and economic vulnerability in the post-2014 scenario.

Altogether, accession within the European Union thus promoted a series of infrastructure projects to achieve a major diversification of energy supplies, where Lithuania stands out for the construction of the Klaipėda LNG terminal in 2014, favouring increased independence from Gazprom's influence and accessing the global market as a reliable service provider. Still, the lessons learned from the present study have revealed that, although significant progress has been made, the complete diversification of the Baltic energy supplies from Gazprom's monopoly and the access to the European network (scheduled for 2025) will most likely take some time, as most of the promoted initiatives are ongoing or remain in a phase of development. Moreover, the present research has outlined that another major challenge for the Baltics is the securitisation of critical energy infrastructure, which remains highly exposed to the risk of cyber and hybrid threats. Analysing the topic with Dr Vytautas Butrimas (NATO ENSEC COE), it emerged that, in order to build a durable resilience, it is thus necessary to understand what type of infrastructure shall be protected, what are the threats to those identified assets and how to efficiently protect them; to do so, it is advisable for the IT and the operational/industrial side to work together, so as to be able to prevent the risk of accidents to critical infrastructure.

Finally, Chapter 3 is dedicated to the security issues that resulted from the Baltic membership within Western institutions – the Atlantic Alliance in the first place – and the tensions that followed the annexation of Crimea on the part of Russia in 2014. In particular, this is related to the proximity of the Baltics to Russia's enclave of Kaliningrad and its so-called A2/AD "bubble", whose capabilities range from cruise and ballistic missiles and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) to means of Electronic Warfare (EW) and submarines, making Russia's capabilities superior to those of its neighbours and alarming for regional security in the area. Furthermore, the closeness to Kaliningrad has to be added to the precarious situation of the Suwałki gap, a 65 km strip stretching between the Polish and Lithuanian borders dividing Kaliningrad from the allied Belarus and representing the only direct linkage between the Baltic states and the European Union. Within this framework, it comes out that the establishment of A2AD bubbles on the part of Russia is strictly linked to its perception of the evolving nature and future challenges of making warfare, the combined use of military and non-military means in the first place, where the control of the information environment is key; in the Russian military thinking, this takes the name of *New Generation Warfare* (NGW). In 2013, General Valery Gerasimov – Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia – provided a clearer explanation of Moscow's thinking about NGW, claiming growing importance of non-military means (such as political, economic and information measures) for the achievement of strategic goals, with an increased centrality of local populations in fuelling political instability[257]. Moreover, another focal point of the Russian doctrine relies upon the usage of high-precision weapons as a consequence of the changes in the conventional battlespace[258]. In this respect, the development of new technologies that took place all over the 1990s was essential for the subsequent changes in the character of war, allowing a more intrusive use of the information environment and the psychological dimension. Overall, Russian military literature mentions five recurrent themes related to NGW: 1) *Asymmetric warfare*, 2) *Low-intensity conflict*, 3) *Network-centric warfare*, 4) *Sixth-generation warfare* and 5) *Reflexive control*, where strategic centrality is accorded to internal and external communications and psychological operations.

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[256] Hoellerbauer, "Baltic Energy Sources: Diversifying Away from Russia".

Speaking of emerging threats and the changing nature of warfare, this study then focuses on the renewed centrality of hybrid threats and the cyber dimension within the Baltic framework, where the major challenge is related to the difficulty to integrate the Russian-speaking minorities installed in the region and a different interpretation of the course of history. Most importantly – this is especially the case of Estonia and Latvia – a significant proportion of Russophones rely on Russian media for information and entertainment, making them subject to the risk of propaganda and strategic information campaigns, as information influence activities can be used by a given hostile actor to polarise public opinion within the targeted society by spreading narratives useful to its purposes and increasing social unrest. To analyse this instance, the present research uses the case of the teaching language to be adopted in Latvia as an example of how a given government policy can result in completely different narratives and perceptions depending on the audiences that receive it, as, if on the one hand Riga was promoting *integration*, on the other the Russian-speaking minorities perceived it as a form of *discrimination* and challenged the reform through public protests often accompanied by reactions from the Kremlin, thus risking a polarisation of the Latvian society and reduced confidence in the government institutions[259]. In this respect, the cyber dimension is key to understand the situation in the Baltics, in particular the case of Estonia, where a high reliance on technology and interconnectedness made the country susceptible to Distributed Denial of Service attacks (DDoS), which take advantage of the vulnerability of unprotected websites and sources to succumb to the direction of massive amounts of internet traffic[260]. Hence, in 2007 Estonia's governmental, financial and other online services were targeted by three weeks of DDoS cyberattacks, apparently in response to the government's decision to relocate a war memorial from the Soviet era – the Bronze Soldier and burial place of Tallinn – thus triggering protests from the Russian-speaking community residing in Estonia[261]. Nevertheless, despite the initial disruption and costs of the attack, eventually Estonia managed to counter the source of the attack and to build stronger cyber capabilities and resilience; on this matter, the interview with Dr Kadri Kaska (NATO CCDCOE) constitutes an enlightening insight on the centrality of cyberspace in Estonia's strategic thinking and the contribution of the country to the activities and capacities of the Alliance.

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[257] Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses*, 9-10.

[258] Ibid.

Eventually, the final paragraph analyses the reasons why an escalation in the Baltics is not only unlikely, but also highly undesirable for all the involved parties. Despite the cooling relationship between NATO and the Russian Federation that happened in the past few years due to events such as the Georgian war and the Ukraine crisis, a rethinking of the dimension of dialogue thus remains the only option to avoid an exacerbation of tensions in the region. Hence, as resulted from a report from RAND Corporation and a more recent analysis from the Swedish Research Agency, it turns out that the Alliance and its partners would result unprepared compared to Russia should a large-scale conflict arise. Indeed, being the Baltic states members of the Atlantic Alliance, an aggression against their territories would cause the application of the collective defence provision contained in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, that is, the obligation to consider an attack against a NATO member an attack against all, where the two reports underline how, contrarily to the Allied forces deployed in the region, Russia enjoys an overwhelming military superiority. Nevertheless, the report from the Swedish Defence Agency also makes it clear that such an armed attack against NATO members and EU countries remains highly unlikely as, since Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine allows the first use of nuclear weapons in case the vital interests of the country are under threat, even the possibility to turn a medium-sized conventional war into a nuclear conflict makes this scenario less and less alluring[262]. Thus, if on the one hand the forces of the Alliance would not be enough to prevent the overrun of the Baltic states in the case of an external attack, the outbreak of a conflict on the Eastern Flank would be undesirable even for Russia, as the combination of the sanctions regime and the economic implications of the pandemic have made the costs of a war unbearable even for Moscow.

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[259] Cepurītis et al., "Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment – Report 2019/2020", 22-29.
[260] Pamment et al., "Hybrid Threats: 2007 cyberattacks on Estonia", 65.
[261] Ibid.

Within this framework, it becomes necessary to reformulate the approach that led to the cessation of dialogue with the Russian counterpart, favouring instead a reopening of negotiations on the possibility to achieve risk reduction in the Baltic area. To do so, the focus shall be on concrete measures able to preserve and extend existing political agreements, in order to provide the right guidance to reopen a NATO-Russia military-to-military dialogue, starting from the existing Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR)-Russian Chief of Defence secure channel of communication. In this respect, increasing transparency becomes a priority to address in order to prevent an escalation, both in terms of the location and extent of the respective military exercises and initiating discussions on potential risks of emerging technologies in the military field. Moreover, an advancement in the integration of Russian speakers within the Baltic republics – either through greater recognition of the Russian language or the granting of citizenship to Russian migrants from the Soviet era – could be a major first step to support the integration of ethnic Russians, even though apparently it might clash with individual countries' independence claims and fears of subversion. Also, the Baltic capacity to respond to covert action shall be improved, favouring the filling of existing gaps in terms of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, both for covert action and conventional warfare. However, the dependence of the Alliance upon its members makes progress in intelligence sharing extremely slow, which, among others, also highlights the necessity for additional research on existing gaps in the Baltic republics' capabilities.

By way of conclusion, the present dissertation aims at providing a picture as complete as possible of the reasons behind the security challenges in the three Baltic republics, analysing the process that led to the current configuration of the region in order to understand the risks related to a potential escalation of tensions between NATO and the Russian Federation. In this regard, the analysis has allowed to conclude that a large-scale military conflict in the Baltic region remains not only unlikely but also largely undesirable, as it would lead to significant losses for all the involved stakeholders. This becomes especially important in light of the recent events that contributed to the deterioration of the relationship between Russia on the one hand, and NATO and the European Union on the other, such as the Belarus crisis and the imprisonment of Putin's political opponent Navalny.

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[262] Chivvis, "The Baltic Balance: How to Reduce the Chances of War in Europe".

Based on the above, this work shows that the Baltic context remains characterised by a series of complexities related to its historical and geographic situation, demographic configuration and political – especially in the energy sphere – choices, which made it a perpetually disputed area between the strategic claims of its neighbours both Eastwards and Westwards. With increasing tensions between the Alliance and the Russian Federation, in the past two decades security has thus become a matter of major concern for the Baltics, which have turned into pioneer nations and fundamental contributors to NATO activities in the cyber, strategic communications and energy security realms. Hence, this study highlights the necessity to reformulate the approach that led to the cessation of dialogue with the Russian counterpart, favouring instead a reopening of negotiations on the possibility to achieve risk reduction in the Baltic area. To do so, the focus shall be on concrete measures able to preserve and extend existing political agreements, in order to provide the right guidance to reopen a NATO-Russia military-to-military dialogue in the first place. In this respect, increasing transparency becomes a priority to address, both in terms of the location and extent of military exercises and discussions on potential risks of emerging technologies in the military field, thus avoiding the proliferation of wrong perceptions and analysing emerging complications related to such systems. As for energy policies, the lessons learned have revealed that, although significant progress has been made, the complete diversification of the Baltic energy supplies from Gazprom's monopoly and the access to the European network will most likely take some time, as most of the promoted initiatives are ongoing or remain in a phase of development. In this respect, the present research has outlined that another major challenge for the Baltics is the securitisation of critical energy infrastructure, which remains highly exposed to the risk of cyber and hybrid threats. In order to build a durable resilience, it is thus necessary to understand what type of infrastructure shall be protected, what are the threats to those identified assets and how to efficiently protect them; to do so, it is advisable for the IT and the operational/industrial side to work together, so as to be able to prevent the risk of accidents to critical infrastructure. Furthermore, an advancement in the integration of Russian speakers within the Baltic republics could be a major first step to support the integration of ethnic Russians and favour a greater cohesion of the Baltic societies. Still, this would require further research so as to find a compromise between the Baltics' independence claims and fears of subversion on the one hand, and the accommodation of minority rights on the other. Lastly, even though the dependence of the Alliance upon its members makes the sharing of capabilities extremely slow, NATO shall keep investing in the filling of existing gaps in terms of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities in the Baltic republics, underlining, among others, the need for a more consistent involvement of civilian agencies.