

Baltic Security Situation: A Short Overview

Santrumpa: Baltijos saugumo situacijos apžvalga

Šiame tekste nagrinėjamos su Baltijos šalių saugumu susijusios problemos: kokios grėsmės regiono saugumui yra matomos, kokios strategijos toms grėsmėms pašalinti yra taikomos ir kokie klausimai lieka už įprastinės diskusijos ribų. Pirmojoje teksto dalyje apžvelgiami du pagrindiniai grėsmės veiksniai: tradicinė Rusijos karinės agresijos grėsmė ir Kremliaus vykdoma hibridinio karo kampanija. Šioje dalyje taip pat pateikiamas dabartinių strategijų vertinimas: dabartinė Baltijos saugumo politika negeba išspręsti struktūrinės saugumo dilemos ir yra iš esmės reaktyvi hibridinių atakų atžvilgiu. Dėl šių priežasčių, įtampa regione neslūgsta ir saugumo klausimai išlieka itin aktualūs. Antrojoje dalyje trumpai aprašomi saugumui pavojų keliantys veiksniai, kurie dažnai lieka ignoruojami dominuojančiame diskurse: tai ekonominis, politinis ir socialinis Baltijos šalių klimatas bei trišalio bendradarbiavimo stygius. Galiausiai, tekste pateikiamos konkrečios rekomendacijos kaip Baltijos šalys galėtų pasitelkti tarptautines organizacijas išspręsti hibridinio karo keliamus pavojus ir kartu įjungti Rusiją į platesnį bendradarbiavimą su Vakarais. Šis tekstas pirmiausia buvo pristatytas diplomatijos konferencijoje Lichtenšteine šį rugpjūtį.

Introduction

Security concerns occupy a privileged position in the national politics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – sometimes, indeed, it seems to be the one question that truly unites the three Baltic states. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, this seems hardly surprising: Vladimir Putin's aggressive foreign policy bring back the Baltics' shared trauma of Soviet occupation and make the already complicated geopolitical situation of the region look even worse. The ongoing modernization of the Russian military has revitalized the long-established fear of a conventional military attack; the newly-emerged strategy of hybrid warfare has introduced new threats and has exposed new vulnerabilities.

In this environment, the Baltic states have, unilaterally and within multilateral frameworks, launched a wide-ranging effort to improve their security infrastructure and defensive capabilities. However, despite the intense interest in the goal, the Baltic strategy has been only a qualified success. On the one hand, the Baltics have successfully revitalized their militaries and have successfully acquired some assurance from NATO. On the other, building security capacities in the Baltics has attracted criticism from the Kremlin and has enabled further Russian military build-up, while hybrid attacks continue to occur in all three states. Perhaps most importantly, while they enjoy relatively broad support, the recent efforts of the Baltic governments have failed to significantly improve the security perceptions in their populations.

There are multiple explanations for the limited success of the Baltic security strategy. In part, any decisive improvement in the security situation in the Baltics is hard to expect because the region is trapped in a security dilemma. The complex geopolitics mean that any defensive upgrades on the one side are interpreted as a potential offensive build up from the other side – and with the existing power asymmetries, the Baltics always end up on the more vulnerable side.

However, structural conditions do not explain the full extent of the problems with the current security policy in the Baltics. The current effort is incapable of significantly enhancing security, as it severely underutilizes multilateral tools available for increasing regional security through technical cooperation

with Russia. At a broader level, the current effort is even incapable of enhancing security perceptions, as it employs a restricted narrative on security concerns in the Baltics and largely ignores the human and economic dimensions of security.

Thus, any analysis of the Baltic security strategy has to discuss not only the identified threats and the actions taken, but also the threats that do not receive the required attention and the policy routes not entertained. In this overview, I attempt to comment both on the existing security narrative and to propose some new avenues for exploring what it means to build up security in the Baltics; a short list of policy recommendations is included.

The Recognized Threats and the Strategies Employed

This section combines the discussion on the security threats currently dominating the political discourse in the Baltics and the overview of the policy responses to the identified threats. The main conceptual division is based on the nature – conventional or hybrid – of the threats currently dominating the agenda of the Baltic security elites.

Conventional Military Threat

By and large, the prospect of a direct Russian attack on the Baltics is considered as very unlikely both within the political and security elites and in the general population. However, after the Kremlin launched a program for comprehensive modernization of the Russian military and held two separate military exercises simulating the occupation of the Baltic States in 2009 and 2013, the Baltics became increasingly concerned about the less-than-credible NATO contingency plans for Baltic defense. The 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea raised the Baltic fears to new heights: The Baltics now see Moscow as being able and willing to use conventional military tools to further its geopolitical ambitions and fear that NATO is unprepared or unwilling to respond accordingly.

There are several reasons for why the Baltics lack confidence in their current security arrangements under NATO. First, the Baltic States fear that the Russian nuclear deterrent has created a stability-instability paradox in the region. That is, the three countries are concerned that their Western allies would not risk fighting the nuclear-armed Russia if it launched a small and quick attack or, especially, if it used indirect means of attack (such as attacking through and with Belarus). Second, uncertainties concerning the actual implementation of Article 5 further exacerbate the question of how willing NATO would be to challenge Russia: the only time the collective defense clause has actually been invoked was against a non-state threat following the September 11 attacks in New York – and it was the United States that invoked it. Third, even those that are confident in protection under Article 5 are concerned that the Baltics would not hold *until* the NATO forces could reach them – and, in the event of a Russian air and sea blockade of the eastern part of the Baltic Sea, that no allies would reach them at all. These three concerns, naturally, often overlap in practice.

As a response, the Baltics and Poland have both demanded a permanent and larger NATO presence on their soil and have begun building up their defensive capabilities. While regarded as a relative success¹, the Warsaw summit has not completely satisfied the Baltic and Polish demands. Each

¹. Paulius Gritėnas, “Prezidentė Dalia Grybauskaitė Po NATO Vadovų Pasitarimo: „Gavome Viską, Ko Norėjome“,” *15min.lt*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/prezidente-dalia-grybauskaite-po-nato-vadovu-pasitarimo-gavome-viska-ko-norejome-56-653023>.

country is to receive a battalion of 1000 soldiers on a rotating basis – something closer to assurance than protection, as, according to security experts, at least seven brigades of three battalions each are needed to effectively stop a potential Russian invasion.² Still, it remains to be seen how the Baltic security community update their strategy in light of Warsaw summit: one potential initiative is Latvia's proposal for a NATO naval base in its port-city Liepaja, yet no practical discussion has commenced yet.³

While activity within NATO is under reconfiguration after Warsaw, much is happening independent of the Alliance. Lithuania and Latvia have drastically increased their defense spending;⁴ the four countries are focusing more on non-NATO multilateral defense arrangements (such as Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade, the BALTBAT, or the Nordic Battlegroup⁵), and have obtained bilateral US military assistance in troops and arm deliveries (primarily in Poland). In addition to their direct purpose in boosting the defense capabilities of the region, they also serve the indirect goal of showing that the Baltics are serious about their defense, are 'doing their part', and have a prospect at resisting a Russian invasion – thus making them worthy of defending.

At the same time, both within-NATO actions and activities independent of the Alliance reinforce the Russian perception that they are increasingly perceived as an enemy and Kaliningrad and Belarus, Moscow's one true ally in the region, are increasingly encircled by armed and antagonistic states. As such, the theoretical threat of conventional conflict in the region remains intact, and the security dilemma in the region is growing more and more complex with each step towards greater NATO presence in the Baltics.

Hybrid Warfare Threats

The preeminent threat to the national and human security in the Baltics, however, is considered to be the phenomenon of hybrid warfare, a broad strategy of creating instability and draining the target from within via mixed-tactics such as cyber-attacks, provocation, propaganda, and exploitation of internal divisions within the target nation *before or concurrent* with the conventional military confrontation. While there are multiple examples of hybrid warfare threats that the Baltics and Poland are facing (both in reality and allegedly), the most prominent ones in security discussions are the exploitation of the ethnic divisions in the Baltics, the Russian propaganda campaign against the West and about the Baltics, the possible smuggling of unmarked Russian operatives into the Baltic states, and repetitive Russian military provocations.

². Reva Goujon, "Making the Most of a NATO Summit," *Stratfor*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/making-most-nato-summit>.

³. Elisabeth Braw, "Latvia's Push for a NATO Naval Base," *World Affairs Journal*, June 21, 2016, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/elisabeth-braw/latvia%E2%80%99s-push-nato-naval-base>.

⁴. Andrius Sytas, "Spooked by Russia, Lithuania Spares No Money for Defense," *Reuters*, April 29, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/artide/us-lithuania-russia-idUSKCN0XP2FX>; Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Latvia, Lithuania To Raise Defense Spending," *Defense News*, July 30, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/europe/2015/07/29/latvia-lithuania-raise-defense-spending/30843863/>.

⁵. Elisabeth Braw, "The Nordic Battlegroup, Ready and Willing," *World Affairs Journal*, April 17, 2015, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/elisabeth-braw/nordic-battlegroup-ready-and-willing>.

The ethnic minority question is most prominent in Estonia and Latvia, both with large populations of ethnic Russian. There, Moscow has repeatedly accused the two countries of denying their ‘compatriots’ human rights, discriminating them on the basis of ethnic or linguistic differences, and restricted their civil freedoms. However, in recent years Russia has been exploiting the Polish ethnic minority question in Lithuania and even sponsored the activities of a pro-Kremlin political party that claims to be the representative of the Lithuanian Poles.⁶

The Russian propaganda activities, carried out in multiple forms (most notably, Russian TV channels in the Baltics and in Russia and various groups, pages, and personal profiles on social media platforms such as Facebook) constitute the second broad hybrid threat.⁷ Russian propaganda oriented towards the Baltic audiences generally portray the three countries as corrupt puppets of the West plagued by poverty and emigration; the campaigns directed towards the Western audiences depict the Baltics as militant and irrationally anti-Russian one-issue states, as well as denigrate their historical memory of the Soviet occupation.

Perhaps the most subversive of hybrid threats is that of ‘the little green men’ – unmarked Russian soldiers smuggled inside their territories. While in Estonia and Latvia, this threat is mainly connected to the local ethnic minorities, it takes a more complicated form in Lithuania.⁸ Lithuania serves as a transit region to Kaliningrad, and the railway passengers to Kaliningrad do not have to apply for visa entry as Russians coming to Lithuania, creating a theoretical opportunity for dangerous operatives to enter the territory.⁹

Lastly, the repetitive military provocations from Russia have also been included into the category of hybrid warfare tactics. These include Russian fighters intruding into the Baltic airspace or flying without transponders on (although both cases happened in the Nordic countries, they received considerable attention in the Baltics too),¹⁰ the multiple Russian military exercises that caused Lithuania and Sweden to temporarily stop the construction of the NordBalt electricity link,¹¹ or the arrest of Eston Kohver, an Estonian security officer, on the Estonian-Russian border.¹²

By definition, hybrid warfare demands a multi-layered and continuously mutating response to the threat, and the Baltic states have a mixed record of success on this question. The countries have shown resolve and ingenuity in combating online propaganda and took strict action against TV-based

⁶ Edward Lucas, “The Coming Storm: Baltic Sea Security Report” (Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, June 2015).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Steven Pifer, “Watch Out for Little Green Men | Brookings Institution,” *Brookings*, July 7, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/watch-out-for-little-green-men/>.

⁹ Lucas, “The Coming Storm: Baltic Sea Security Report.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Andrew Higgins, “Increasingly Frequent Call on Baltic Sea: ‘The Russian Navy Is Back,’” *The New York Times*, June 10, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/11/world/europe/intrusions-in-baltic-sea-show-a-russia-challenging-the-west.html>.

¹² Shaun Walker Moscow Walker, “Russia Jails Estonian Intelligence Officer Tallinn Says Was Abducted over Border,” *The Guardian*, August 19, 2015, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/19/russia-jails-estonian-police-officer-allegedly-abducted-border-eston-kohver>.

disinformation.¹³ At the same time, the relations with the ethnic minorities remain problematic: while there is little actual antagonism, different ethnic groups live increasingly in isolated worlds. No specific plan of action has been presented on how to combat the potential threat of ‘little green men,’ while the responses to provocations have been conducted on case-by-case basis.

Whatever the responses to the Russian hybrid threat there have been, the vast majority of them were unilateral. The main institutional achievement – establishing NATO Centers of Excellence in Estonia (on cyber-security) and in Lithuania (on energy security) – has created the infrastructure for more coordinated European action and has given the Baltics a platform to speak about the hybrid threats. However, due to the very nature of hybrid warfare, the actual crises are very target-specific and cannot be fully addressed within a reactive multilateral framework. Further, it is unclear whether any proactive strategy within NATO, even if entertained, would not produce the same security dilemma as its conventional defense initiatives.

Because of their limited success in dealing with hybrid warfare, the Baltic States so acutely perceive and so strongly react to the threat of a Russian conventional attack. Each of the various minor Russian provocations resurface the underlying existential threats a military attack from Moscow harbor. However, the more consistent, established, and coordinated effort to increase security in the conventional sense has not calmed the perception of insecurity, even if it has objectively strengthened the defensive capabilities of the Baltic States.

In reality, this contradiction is almost impossible to avoid: short of a radical improvement to NATO Baltic security infrastructure, defensive build-up in the Baltic States will provoke – or enable – negative reactions in Russia. Since it is unclear how forceful the necessary NATO deterrent must be and since unclear how willing or able NATO would be to develop it, the security dilemma gains undeniable, if uncomfortable, importance. The Russian government exploits the negative attitude many Russians have towards the Baltics and regularly portrays the Baltic States as at the front of the NATO *expansion* towards Russia and thus justifies its own military activity in Kaliningrad or Belarus. Naturally, this reinforces the existing Baltic concerns, and completes a classic case of the security dilemma. To escape the loop, the Baltic States require a smart strategy to combat the hybrid threats the Kremlin poses and, while some further increases the conventional security measures are welcome to meet the NATO contribution requirement, the hard security dimension should be entertained with prudence.

The Threats Beyond the Discourse

Due to the highly visible and existential nature of the Russian threat, it tends to overshadow other important threats to regional security and stability. Importantly, a strong security stance against Russia also receives relatively high societal support and is politically easy, making the pursuit of more complicated or more divisive solutions to security threats even less likely. Yet the indirect, often small-scale human security concerns indirectly contribute to the Baltic vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia. Any consideration of the Baltic security situation, thus, is bound to be incomplete and provide misleading strategic recommendations if it does not go beyond the national security concerns the security elites prioritize.

¹³. Michael Weiss, “The Baltic Elves Taking on Pro-Russian Trolls,” *The Daily Beast*, March 20, 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/03/20/the-baltic-elves-taking-on-pro-russian-trolls.html>; Una Bergmane, “Latvia’s Debate About Russian Propaganda – Analysis,” *Eurasia Review*, July 12, 2016, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/12072016-latvias-debate-about-russian-propaganda-analysis/>.

Repeated population surveys have identified economic insecurity as the main broad concern of the Baltic citizens.¹⁴ Several related issues can be placed into this broader category. First, the growing sense of economic inequality diminishes the support for deeper European integration as many of the experienced or perceived difficulties are attributed to the adoption of the Euro (in Latvia and Lithuania) and the unequal access to the advantages the EU offers (especially relevant for the increasing rural-urban divide). Second, economic inequality in the three countries correlates with the ethnic divisions between the majority population and the ethnic Russians, which makes it easier for the Kremlin to exploit the already controversial question of the Russian minority status in the Baltics. Lastly, economic insecurity also leads to a heightened preference for populist parties, something that both destabilizes the political coordination in the region and is often utilized by the Kremlin.

Second, the Baltic citizens, especially in Lithuania and Latvia, feel disenchanting with the domestic political climate and especially the domestic political parties. A 2014 Eurobarometer survey showed that only 9% of Latvian and Lithuanian, and only 13% of Estonian citizens said they trust the national political parties; in contrast, almost 50% of each population claim to trust the EU.¹⁵ While the confidence in domestic political institutions is higher, the findings are nonetheless worrying. First, the lack of trust in political parties again contributes to the rise of populist, anti-establishment political movements; second, it limits the access and connection citizens have with the government. The rising populism and the disappearing political dialogue make the societies less certain about their futures (which contributes to the feeling of insecurity) and make the state less capable of addressing the issues.

The suspicious attitude towards local politicians highlights the acute perceptions of corruption in the Baltic societies, especially in Latvia and Lithuania. An understudied phenomenon, corruption damages state security in a uniquely broad way: it creates instability within the state (through radical movements of disgruntled citizens), it creates opportunities for private side-bargains for foreign agents, and it damages the state capacity to ensure human security, as it degrades the rule of law and distorts the functioning of such state institutions as the police or the customs. Needless to say, corruption also empowers criminal networks within the states and beyond their borders, which pose a direct threat to any society.¹⁶

Crucially, Estonia has managed to minimize or prevent these internal destabilizing trends, not least because of its early and explicit commitment to the Nordic, rather than Baltic, political identity and societal direction. This presents another highly complex issue to the Baltic security situation: despite often being considered as a united whole, the Baltics often lack a shared political vision and have few shared positive interests. Developing them (as well as addressing any of the issues listed above) however, is a much more delicate matter than cooperating on the broadly supported and politically non-controversial goal of increasing security against Russia. This reality often prevents coordinated

14. The Baltic Course, "The Greatest Concerns by Baltic Residents Relate to Health Care and National Security," *The Baltic Course / Baltic States News & Analytics*, June 11, 2015, <http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/analytics/?doc=107387>; Dovydas Pancerovas, "Lietuvos Gyventojams Baisesnė Socialinė Grėsmė, O Ne Rusijos Invazija Ar Terorizmas," *15min.lt*, June 28, 2016, <http://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/lietuvos-gyventojams-baisenes-socialines-gresmes-o-ne-rusijos-invazija-ar-terorizmas-56-647741>.

15. Will Mawhood, "Estonians' Trust in Parliament, Government Much Higher than EU Average," *The Baltic Times*, December 29, 2014, http://www.baltictimes.com/estonians__trust_in_parliament__government_much_higher_than_eu_average/.

16. Sarah Chayes, "Corruption: The Unrecognized Threat to International Security," Working Group on Corruption and Security (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2014).

action within the EU, such as during the Lithuanian-Latvian dispute over the energy link to Sweden or during EU budgetary planning sessions. As a coordinated position within the EU is essential to the further modernization of the countries and their societies, its absence makes comprehensive security in the Baltics extremely hard to achieve.

Policy Recommendations

It has probably become clear that improving the security situation in the Baltics will require a multi-dimensional and multilateral strategy to minimize the foreign threats and to reduce the domestic vulnerabilities. It will also require expanding the dominant security narrative within the Baltic security elites and addressing the many different concerns contributing to the perceptions of insecurity at a citizen level. This task, however, is well beyond the scope of this review and I can only hope the section above can be helpful in identifying the broad threats that will require measured, country-specific, and long-term solutions.

At the same time, there are concrete policy recommendations on how to improve the existing strategy of improving the Baltic security vis-à-vis Russia. If the Baltic States are mainly concerned that hybrid warfare can prepare for and provoke a successful Russian conventional attack, then it needs to invest in the preventative capacity for the hybrid attacks while constraining the Kremlin's ability to portray such efforts as a reactionary, antagonistic, or aggressive behavior. For that reason, some cooperation with Russia will be unavoidable; effective cooperation that does not weaken the Baltic states, however, will have to be firmly set in the liberal international institutions. The organization that has the material capabilities as well as the political inclusivity required to give a chance for reducing tensions through working together is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The OSCE includes Russia and has largely been viewed positively by the Kremlin (contrary to NATO or the EU), yet it grants broad powers to its Secretariat on technical cooperation issues. As such, the Baltic states could:

- Cooperate with the Secretariat to improve conflict prevention mechanisms in the region
Including Confidence and Security Building Measures, facilitating sharing of information on military exercises, air-patrol flights, arm deliveries, and cyber-security capability building
- Border security management through the OSCE between Estonia and Latvia
Concerned parties can invite Russia to participate on the issue to avoid future incidents that increase tensions, misperceptions, fears
- Use the OSCE tools for combatting transnational corruption, especially in relation to political party funding
Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania can use the OSCE tools to inspect if certain political parties in their political systems receive funding from foreign governments or government-affiliated businesses abroad
In addition, other corruption prevention mechanisms can contribute to improving general human security in the region lobbying regulation, asset repatriation, anti-money laundering initiatives (especially in Lithuania-Belarus)

- Cooperate with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities to foster inclusion of the ethnic minorities in the Baltic States
 - Broader and more comprehensive inclusion of national minorities can facilitate more positive relations between minorities and the Baltic governments and prevent/minimize tensions that can be exploited from abroad
 - Efforts can include initiatives in education, promoting respect for minority and majority languages, promoting effective participation in public life, improving the representation of minorities in the media
- Cooperate with the Representative on Freedom of the Media to effectively combat foreign propaganda tools
 - The OSCE supervision can prevent potential overly restrictive or punitive measures and reduce the chances of misinterpretation and misrepresentation between the Russian and the Baltic informational policy and media activity

Each of the methods of cooperation within the OSCE should be kept open for Russian input. At the same time, the Secretariat would oversee the process so that it does not privilege one party but, rather, allows for mutually-agreed upon solutions to the region's problems. If the Russians cooperated, obviously, the many avenues for hybrid attacks (exploiting the minority question, propaganda attacks) would be eliminated. Even if the Russians refused to cooperate, the programs, once initiated, would be likely to reduce the objective vulnerabilities to Russian provocations. Thus, if the Russian pressure continued, the Baltic governments could more easily identify it and bring the international attention to the propaganda campaigns. As such, building defensive capacities through inclusivity within the OSCE might not only be attainable – it might even be enough.

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