

Hybrid Threats: The Baltic Perspective

Written testimony by Rihards Kols
Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee
The Saeima (Parliament) of the Republic of Latvia

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
“GAME-CHANGER”
The Baltics Under Pressure
Thursday, March 17, 2022

Honorable Senator Wicker, Honorable Senator Cardin, Distinguished Members of the Helsinki Commission,

Two parables are at the heart of understanding hybrid threats.

2000 years ago, the Roman poet Horace said: "You too are in danger, when your neighbour's house is on fire" (*Nam tua res agitur, paries cum proximus ardet*).

And Russian General Valery Gerasimov said: "The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness."

History and the tentacles of the Russian World

Since regaining our independence from the Soviet Union in 1990, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have been under constant Russian pressure.

This pressure has manifested itself is through the conventional military threat, punctuated by ongoing airspace violations by Russian military aircraft and navy, unannounced, large-scale military exercises of inherently offensive nature along their borders, and the general disposition of Russia's military forces in regions closest to the Baltic borders, doing so under the pretence of counteracting the "hostile West" and promoting militarism.

Influence, psychological, and information operations have been part of Russian doctrine since the early days of the Soviet Union, but historically they have been relegated to supporting roles. Nevertheless, as General Gerasimov has observed and thus included in the Russian military doctrine, non-kinetic are exceedingly practical, and these instruments will become

dominant in future warfare. This is reflected in most current Russian foreign, security and defence policies and doctrinal documents.

For years, the strategic goal of Russian information operations in the Baltic states has been to create distance between the Baltics and the West. The Russian concept is rooted in the idea that democratic societies are vulnerable to political manipulation, and exploiting this perceived weakness is far less costly than pursuing annexation or occupation. Consequently, Russian information operations in the Baltics focus on nine objectives: (1) Encourage and support armed actions by separatist groups to promote chaos and territorial disintegration; (2) Increase polarisation between elites and society to foment a crisis of values followed by process of orientation toward Russian values; (3) Demoralise the military and otherwise attrit resolve; (4) Undermine socioeconomic stability; (5) Engender socio-political crisis; (6) Intensify simultaneous forms and models of psychological warfare to demoralise the Baltic states' armed forces and population and break their resolve; (7) Incite mass panic and degrade confidence in crucial government institutions; (8) Defame political leaders not aligned with Russian interests; (9) and Undermine international alliances and partnerships.¹²

Russia seeks to achieve its strategic ends in the Baltics through influence operations rather than conventional means. Recognising resistance to deeper ties with Russia in the Baltics, Russia has diversified its messaging beyond pro-Russia content. Instead, the Russian strategy is to attempt to convince members of the population that their countries' current alignment with the West, embrace of democracy, and membership in NATO and the EU are in some way detrimental, degrading or dangerous. Russia heavily leverages Russian and local-language traditional media, social media, and the internet toward this end.

There is no universally agreed definition of hybrid threats, considering that a wide range of activities falls under this term. Moreover, hybrid threats evolve constantly, and new means in hybrid warfare emerge. However, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats defines hybrid threats as "an action conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine or harm a target by influencing its decision-making at the local, regional, state or institutional level. Such actions are coordinated and synchronised and deliberately target democratic states and institutions' vulnerabilities".³ The use of hybrid tactics often is based on trying to undermine fundamental democratic values and liberties, and it is done under what some call a "chaos strategy".

Russia sows chaos to achieve its agenda beyond its borders by deploying an array of hybrid warfare tools - hybrid warfare is a tactical application of the chaos strategy. Total spectrum warfare deploys a blend of conventional and nonconventional means to affect on the ground changes in target populations or territories while seeking to avoid direct military confrontation. Hybrid warfare is employed in a tailored way to sow chaos in target countries. Such efforts generally include irregular warfare, active measures, and special operations. Like the world, hybrid war is not static, and new tools are developed and employed constantly. For the Baltics, having lived in this environment for the majority of their lives, both under Soviet

¹ <http://www.dynacon.ru/content/articles/1085/>

² <https://mwi.usma.edu/striking-the-right-balance-how-russian-information-operations-in-the-baltic-states-should-inform-us-strategy-in-great-power-competition/>

³ <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hy-brid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/>

occupation and after regaining their countries' independence, this multi-vector warfare - hybrid warfare tactics and the chaos they attempt to create, have become intuitively recognisable and often seep into the background like white noise.⁴

From the perspective of the Baltic states, the development of hybrid threat-related policies at the EU or NATO level has been a natural consequence of the changing security landscape in Europe, especially the gradually deteriorating relations between the West and Russia. In the immediate aftermath of Russia's first attack on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, different hybrid attack scenarios against one of the three Baltic states were envisaged, e.g., Russia's attempt to overtake Narva, a city in the extreme eastern point of Estonia, where more than 80% of the population are ethnic Russians; or the so-called "*little green men*", armed soldiers without insignia that were seen in Crimea in March 2014, entering Latgale, the region in Latvia's east⁵; or Russia creating an incident linked to Kaliningrad – the Russian enclave on the Baltic sea wedged between Lithuania and Poland. In the event of any war between Russia and NATO countries, it is through this gap that NATO would have to rush reinforcements and supplies from Poland to the Baltic countries, and it is this gap that Russia would have to close to prevent that. Military strategists have long suggested that Russian forces from Belarus could attempt to punch across the narrow Lithuanian territory known as the Suwalki Gap to the Moscow-controlled enclave of Kaliningrad, effectively cutting off the three Baltic states.⁶

These scenarios included Russia sending troops to "restore order" in case of an uprising in Kaliningrad or sabotaging the train lines across Lithuania that serve as a vital transit corridor from Russia. Because Baltic rail infrastructure is still primarily dominated by Soviet-era rails of a specific gauge width, one incompatible with the EU standard rail gauge width, the risks are substantial enough to cause concern. It has been considered that Russia could use the same pretext as in Ukraine, i.e., protection of the Russian-speaking minorities, to target one of the countries in the region, or rely on state-controlled Russian TV channels widely watched by ethnic Russians in the Baltics to spread propaganda and air true and imagined grievances.⁷

On the other hand, it would be inaccurate to argue that the Baltic states became aware of the hybrid threats they faced only in 2014. Of course, then, the alarm level was unprecedented, but the Baltic states had long been aware of the prevalent risks.

2007 marked a turning point, as the actual extent of the Baltic states' hybrid threats became evident in Estonia. The country was hit by a series of cyber-attacks stretching over a twenty-two-day period and directed at government servers, banks and essential digital infrastructure. These attacks came to be considered the world's first cyber-war. The attacks occurred when Estonia was in an intensive row with Russia over relocating a Soviet-era war memorial from the centre of Tallinn to a military cemetery. Although Kremlin has denied its involvement, the attacks were carried out from servers in Russia. A series of investigations suggested that these attacks were politically motivated. The decision to relocate the statue was

⁴ <https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CEPA-Hybrid-Warfare-1.28.21.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/13469356-5829-11e4-b331-00144feab7de>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/apps-hybrid-idUSL8N2PI23B>

⁷ <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/business/more-than-a-virus-pandemic-and-online-security-in-the-baltic-states.a399930/>

followed by two nights of rioting in Tallinn, something Estonia's capital had never witnessed before. Reports later concluded that what we saw was, in fact, an early indication - an overture, if you will - of what we would call hybrid warfare today. The difference in interpretations of history by Estonians and Russian-speakers in Estonian society was exploited to sow discontent. The crisis was exacerbated by simultaneous application of diplomatic efforts, disinformation on social and traditional media, economic pressures and, of course, the cyber-attacks mentioned earlier.

In general, hybrid threats involve many ever-expanding activities across different domains. The Baltic states' challenges vary, but the significant risk has been associated with Russia's non-military influence activities, which employ political, diplomatic, economic, legal or information tools. In addition, these countries are also exposed to hybrid warfare occurring in cyber-space.

A long-term concern has been Russia's so-called *sootchestvenniki* or "compatriots abroad" policy. Its officially stated goal is to support Russians living abroad, including defending their interests and rights in their place of residence. In this context, it needs to be emphasised that Moscow, per its "compatriots abroad" policy and the concept of the "Russian World," aims to bind together all Russian speakers - not just ethnic Russians but quite literally even the descendants of descendants of ancestors who could have had a connection to, say, Czarist Russia. It aims to tie Russian speakers abroad to Russia's declared sphere of interest. It considers these minorities as an essential political means of exerting influence. There's an explicit constitutional basis for the Kremlin's aggressive actions against Ukraine and other countries which are home to large Russian-speaking populations - by making general references to "Russian cultural identity", Moscow leaves considerable room for interpretation over what exactly that entails and where it believes it has the justification to intervene, leaving it to the Kremlin to determine where the boundaries of the "Russian world" lie.

In past regional wars, Moscow has argued that it must "protect" Russian "compatriots" – this was the case for the fight against Georgia, Moscow's annexation of Crimea, and, now, under the pretence of defending populations residing in Donetsk and Lugansk regions, a full-scale war against Ukraine.

It is a Russian quasi-ideology aimed at expanding influence abroad and uniting the Russian world based on the Russian language, a supposed shared history and the Russian Orthodox Church. The promotion of "Russkiy Mir" is a component of Russian foreign policy and is implemented by several actors - most notably, by networks of local agents of influence, which may promote specific elements of the concept, thus raising the level of its acceptance by a target society as a whole. A crucial role is played by the institutions that promote Russian "soft power" abroad, in particular "Rossotrudnichestvo" (Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation) and "Russkiy Mir" foundation, established by Vladimir Putin's decree in 2007. The foundation has opened approximately 20 centres in Ukraine alone, focusing on mainly the Southern and Eastern parts. Geographically their location coincided with the "Novorossiya" project the Kremlin tried to implement in 2014-15. After the start of Russian aggression, the centres were closed. However, both the foundation and *Rossotrudnichestvo* kept functioning in Ukraine via a network of proxy organisations. These organisations are involved in promoting historical and territorial revisionism, Russian disinformation narratives and hatred towards a

Ukrainian national state, polarising society and, according to the Security Service of Ukraine, often serving as a façade for the activities of the intelligence services.⁸

The "Russkiy Mir" "umbrella" covers several cultural and historical narratives, even if seemingly unrelated at first. But, in the end, in this "Russian World," Putin's Russia anoints itself with the messianic title of the vanquisher of absolute evil – and with the right to fight against what it considers fascism again.

In practice, the Kremlin and its enablers work towards increasing the loyalty of the "compatriots" to the Kremlin and decreasing their loyalty toward their local and national governments through strengthening linguistic, cultural, and religious ties, providing humanitarian aid (e.g., food, medicine, and economic investments), and articulating policies aimed explicitly at compatriots (via events, cultural and scientific cooperation, foundations to "promote Russian culture", etc.). From then on, practices such as systematic distribution of Russian citizenship ("passport-ization") to convert compatriots into Russian citizens and engage in disinformation aimed at discrediting imagined opponents and enemies, and distorting the perception of reality for its target audiences. Disinformation mainly emphasises the suffering and vulnerability of minority Russians in Russia's near abroad, whilst simultaneously pushing towards imperialism under the pretext that Russia "has to protect" compatriots if their safety is threatened or acted upon militarily if said compatriots request protection from Russia. This usually means establishing either formal (e.g., the annexation of Crimea) or informal (e.g., frozen conflicts) control over the territory where these compatriots live. Frozen conflicts, in turn, fuse elements of soft and hard power together are an increasingly attractive option for maintaining and asserting Russian influence in the region. Many of these "frozen conflicts" are themselves unresolved legacies of the Soviet era and are now being used to ensure Russia's periphery - or its sphere of historically justified influence, according to the Kremlin - remains tied to Moscow rather than to Brussels or Washington.

Of course, it is not clear that Russia could create a Crimea- or Donbas-type scenario in the Baltics - the societies have become increasingly resilient. Moreover, mobilising Russian-speakers to attempt a "little green men" scenario in the Suwalki gap would be rather tricky, too, as the region is rather heterogeneous, and these subversive elements would be noticed very quickly - long before any sabotage could be mounted. Moreover, the Baltic states are willing and prepared to defend their countries and very much prepared to immediately counter hostile Russian hybrid tactics. In particular, the societies are psychologically and emotionally ready to encounter the possible mobilisations of their fellow citizens of fringe segments of the Russian-speaking minority communities.

Stand-off between the West and Russia

The West - the European Union and, to an extent, the NATO alliance - has always struggled to craft a cohesive policy toward Russia. While we share democratic and liberal values, as we have seen repeatedly, we do not necessarily share geopolitical and economic interests or wish to sacrifice them.

⁸ <https://uacrisis.org/en/russkiy-mir-as-the-kremlin-s-quasi-ideology>

At the heart of the contestation between the West and Russia is the incompatibility of the way they understand the sovereignty of states - the EU, for example, supports their democratic transition and is willing to strengthen their democratic resilience to escape Russia's malign influence, the Kremlin recognises only their limited sovereignty (if that) because they are part of Moscow's "sphere of influence" or determined to be a vital buffer zone of Russia's privileged interest. These interests are opposed and incompatible. And although the West does not recognise Russia's right to have its spheres of influence in its immediate vicinity, it has shown that it will not go to war over them. This has resulted in a series of "frozen conflicts" along Russia's periphery that have become buffer zones of deprivation and illegality. Both sides have accepted an unacceptable post-Cold War settlement.

The Kremlin views political rivalry as the *kto kavo* principle (who dominates whom). It regards its national security as "defensive expansion," and it was inevitable that the relationship with Russia would become increasingly difficult. Still, we must strengthen our democratic resilience and have a clear and realistic strategy toward Russia as the Kremlin marches on the path towards total isolation. Russia's internal limitations - the political and economic system based on clientelism and corruption, demographic problems, and the inability to transform its economy is weakening its ability to act in its neighbourhood but, as we see today, it has also thus emboldened its policies to counter this perception and brought about an all-or-nothing approach to its previously tactically *more intelligent* operations abroad.

Hybrid Threats - recognising and responding to asymmetrical tactics

In recent years, hybrid threats have been one of the dominant security-related topics in the EU and NATO. In April 2016, the EU adopted *Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats*, laying a foundation for a coordinated response to hybrid threats at the EU level. Likewise, NATO has had a strategy for countering hybrid warfare since 2015. While these might appear to be relatively new developments, mixed methods of war have long been used to destabilise adversaries. But in recent years, the scale and intensity of hybrid attacks have been unprecedented, mainly due to rapid technological change and global interconnectivity. Moreover, hybrid threats can include military means and threats to use them and a wide range of non-military standards that are implemented simultaneously supplementing each other and hiding the actor's identity or making it hard to prove their involvement.

Undoubtedly, NATO should adopt a "comprehensive approach" to counter hybrid threats. It should use existing powers and other tools to develop a multilateral yet coherent approach to non-military aspects of hybrid conflicts. More and more often, experts suggest that NATO should build closer partnerships with the private sector, which has been common in the United States for a long time. Moreover, member states could cooperate with it to increase their resilience and deterrence capabilities. Mainly defensive and deterrent ones and counterattacks, targeting the creators of hybrid threats.

The First Great Information War

There is, of course, nothing new about using the information as a vital instrument of war. But in the past, information tended to be an accompanying feature of physical activity. Now, the informational element appears to be as important as, if not more important than, the physical dimension. But is this approach new? Deception, after all, is as old as war. And Putin's particular

style of mask recalls the Soviet strategy of *Maskirovka* (masking), which was developed in the 1920s and defined by the Soviet Military Encyclopaedia as "complex measures to mislead the enemy regarding the presence and disposition of forces, military objectives, combat readiness and plans.

This is not "soft power" in the classic sense of projecting a positive national image through culture and public relations, but rather a case of using strategic narrative to keep your opponent intimidated, confused, and dismayed—of exploiting ubiquitous information to appear bigger, scarier, and more indispensable than reality would suggest. What matters is that the information age is not so much "military escalation dominance"—the Cold War doctrine emphasising the ability to introduce more arms than the enemy into a conflict. Instead, it's "narrative escalation dominance"—being able to present more startling storylines than your opponent.

The Baltic states are no stranger to Russian propaganda and disinformation, and the disinformation currently flowing out of Russia and within Russia has an eerily familiar ring. The Kremlin is using similar tactics to those of the Cold War: cutting off international media, feeding Russian citizens and (today) Russian speaking population abroad false information, a mass Russian propaganda campaign — and it must be countered.

We are fighting the first great information war. It has been ongoing in the Baltics for the better part of the last 15 years, and the previous eight years at least seem to have been noticed by the West, too.

There is a need for a new doctrine of "information defence" where governments and international bodies support exchanges between journalists, think-tank scholars, and academics in areas that could soon suffer a propaganda attack.

Generally, it is widely regarded that Russia's information policy is coordinated at the highest level, and Kremlin uses it as an influence against foreign countries. Information operations are often implemented through targeted dissemination of propaganda and disinformation. Its purposes include strengthening mistrust in state institutions and military forces, undermining relations with other states, and discrediting NATO forces deployed in the region. In addition, historical memory is often placed at the centre of propaganda and disinformation, distorting the countries' historical memory and weakening the national identity. The particular historical narrative is critical to Kremlin. Thus, the financing of propaganda and the promotion of history are rising.

However, most often, influence is exerted through various public information channels. For example, the Russian Embassy in Latvia was paying for articles in Russian-language media, published without any indication that the content was sponsored and by whom.⁹ Cyber-attacks are also increasingly used to place fake news articles in the local press.

To address the Russian hybrid challenge, it is crucial to understand the Russian political landscape to address the Russian hybrid challenge. Under the rule of President Putin, Russia has slid towards authoritarian kleptocracy. Corruption permeates the Russian government and

⁹ https://www.sab.gov.lv/files/Public_report_2019.pdf

economic institutions, where elites secure power by economically robbing public resources. Putin has consolidated control through a power-vertical system that has led to the removal of most forms of political dissent. Using this system, the Kremlin selects local governments themselves while harassing, targeting, or penalising opposition. Additionally, freedom of the press has been significantly reduced and stifled, with independent news outlets shut down or brought under the control of the state.

The Baltic states regularly face challenges in the information field, and linguistic minorities are especially susceptible to such information warfare. For example, Russia's information operations have targeted Russian-speaking audiences in Latvia and Estonia via social media, state-owned television platforms and newspapers, and other agents of influence. After Estonia came under a wave of cyber-attacks lasting three weeks in spring 2007, the region quickly learned that cyber-attacks pose a major modern warfare challenge. The following year, the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence was established in Tallinn, tasked with conducting cyber defence research and training. All three Baltic states became the initial signatories of the centre's founding and four other NATO member-states. In addition, Estonia became one of the first countries to release a National Cyber Security Strategy as early as 2008. The country also launched a new cyber command division within its military and advocates for a robust regulatory framework internationally. Lithuania and Latvia followed with their national cyber security strategies in 2011 and 2014, respectively.¹⁰

Russia prefers hybrid, or threshold, warfare: the fusion of disinformation and political, economic, and military actions designed to immobilise or weaken adversaries without triggering an adequate response. The terms are faddish, as though the practice were a new addition to the inventory of warfare. The simplistic definition of warfare as only military operations was novel, and that narrow conception has now evaporated. Strategic failures are almost always failures of imagination, as with the Trojans falling to wonder what might be inside that gigantic wooden horse.

The West, however, has several advantages: time, allies, transparency. Transparency is a potentially devastating tool against authoritarians because when corruption is exposed, it delegitimises the authoritarians. The governments of free societies already face public scrutiny, which positions them well to demand the same of others. Russia's leaders are afraid of accountability for their wealth. Russian doctrine argues that corrupting another country's elites is part of a "new-generation" war. Therefore, it is time for the West to realise that corruption is a severe security issue.

Russia's weaponisation of corruption - its export of corrupt practices via the abuse of Western legal and financial loopholes to further its geopolitical goals - has stimulated anti-American sentiment in Europe and galvanised extremist forces on both sides of the Atlantic. While Moscow pushes its anti-globalisation narrative, it simultaneously takes advantage of globalisation to export its version of crony capitalism to several countries. The Russian brand of corruption thrives on globalisation and depends on access to the global financial system. Under this model, a lack of law supports a corrupt system, where markets are distorted and courts are politicised. State funds are looted, and assets are acquired through corporate raiding

¹⁰ <https://www.enisa.europa.eu/topics/national-cyber-security-strategies/ncss-map/national-cyber-security-strategies-interactive-map>

and asset stripping. Cronies then syphon off national funds to offshore accounts. Offshored money can buy real estate, education, and healthcare in the West. It can also be used back home to finance rigged elections, support local political figures, reward loyalists and enablers, and fund projects strategically important for geopolitical goals. In the meantime, discontent brews in society.

Numerous studies have examined Russian support for the various populist parties of Europe. And the Kremlin's financing of these parties is either well-established or strongly suspected.¹¹ As then-Vice President Joseph R. Biden acknowledged in a speech at the Brookings Institution in Washington in May 2015: "As it tries to rattle the cage, the Kremlin is working hard to buy off and co-opt European political forces, funding both right-wing and left-wing anti-systemic parties throughout Europe."¹²

The Russian corruption's infiltration of Western businesses and financial institutions has been recognised as a threat for decades and neglected mainly for just as long. The events of recent years have made clear the futility of attempting to differentiate between the Russian mafia and the Russian state. Russia has integrated corruption and kleptocratic business practices into its arsenal for total war against the West, weaponising kleptocracy in the same way it has weaponised energy, information, refugees and whatever other Western weaknesses it has uncovered. Insofar as the West continues to consider Russia "open for business," it will be easy for the Kremlin to pursue its goals using corruption and sweetheart business deals for its Western enablers.

The Russian corruption's infiltration of Western businesses and financial institutions has been recognised as a threat for decades and neglected mainly for just as long. The events of recent years have made clear the futility of attempting to differentiate between the Russian mafia and the Russian state. Russia has integrated corruption and kleptocratic business practices into its arsenal for total war against the West, weaponising kleptocracy in the same way it has weaponised energy, information, refugees and whatever other Western weaknesses it has uncovered. Insofar as the West continues to consider Russia "open for business," it will be easy for the Kremlin to pursue its goals using corruption and sweetheart business deals for its Western enablers.

The Kremlin realised that money is a "weapons system" much earlier, hence the Soviet Union's networks of "friendly firms," corruption, money laundering, and funding for anti-Western activities and organisations. Globalisation merely added new weapons to the old Russian arsenal of subversive activities. In the Russian concept, as in the US one, money is used to win the "hearts and minds" of decision-makers in the West, corrupt the democratic system, and weaken societies to win wars against the West. That war recognises no boundaries, as there are no boundaries for corruption, money laundering, and illicit activity. Neglecting Russia's weaponisation of kleptocracy gives the Kremlin a significant advantage. It puts the West in

¹¹ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-putin-foreign-policy-advisor-sergey-karaganov-a-1102629.html>

¹² Keynote Remarks: The Honorable Joe Biden, Vice President of the United States of America

danger of being seriously undermined by an adversary that recognises no clear distinction between war and peace.¹³

It's a brave new war without beginning or end, where the borders of peace and war, serviceman and civilian, criminal and public servant, too, have become utterly blurred.

Critical infrastructure & energy security

The Baltic states were rapidly reconsidering the risks associated with their energy security, which became especially pressing after the 2014 Ukraine crisis. The three Baltic states used to be entirely dependent on Russia for gas imports, mainly due to the remaining Soviet infrastructure.

As a result, Baltic-Russian relations used to be characterised by energy dependence, making the three states vulnerable to price manipulation and cut-offs. However, the countries have been able to overcome this challenge. In 2014, Lithuania built a liquified natural gas terminal (LNG). The countries have also improved their gas and electricity connections to Europe under the Baltic energy market interconnection plan (BEMIP) initiative by the EU. As a result, since then, energy security threat perception in the Baltic states shifted away from energy dependency on Russia. But in 2020, the State Security Department of Lithuania estimated that Russian energy companies were still seeking to maintain dominance over the Baltic energy markets.

The protection of critical infrastructure in the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – has constantly changed during the last decades. It will continue to be so in the future. Moreover, it has been influenced by both internal and external developments and perceived threats. As a result, there are many differences in approach among the three. However, on the other hand, all three countries are members of the European Union and NATO, and these organisations regulate many state aspects, including the functioning of critical infrastructure.

There is no globally accepted standard definition of critical infrastructure. Still, in the Baltic case, energy is a crucial field of critical infrastructure, as it influences all areas of human activity. On top of that, information technology is becoming almost as important as electricity in a modern state. Also, the international transport connections – including railway – are of paramount importance in the current globalising world. Hybrid warfare might be an even more complex phenomenon to define. Still, there seems to be a consensus among analysts that Belarus state-backed intrusions of illegal migrants into Latvia, Lithuania and Poland and forced landing of the jetliner on its way to Vilnius in 2021 are examples of that phenomenon.

The targets of the cyberattacks – government, media and banking websites, and international flight as a segment of international transport – are undoubtedly part of critical infrastructure. Moreover, the states' border facilities are usually considered ones as well. Therefore, it would be fair to state that the Baltic states have some knowledge in countering previously unknown hybrid threats to critical infrastructure.

¹³ <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/files/publications/WeaponizingKleptocracy.pdf>

Modern societies' most critical infrastructure systems are power supply and IT systems; security is paramount to keep everything else running. Therefore, securing their continuity of operation and resilience against foreign influence by politically manipulated restrictions on supply, cyber and physical attacks is crucial.

Although relatively small, the Baltic states have some first-hand experience tackling hybrid threats that had not been tackled by democratic countries earlier or not at all, namely the Lithuanian and Latvian experience with illegal migrants sent in from Belarus in 2021. Although both these dangers were somewhat unexpected, the answer has been efficient. Therefore, the Baltic states should not see themselves only as learners in this field but also as providers of know-how in Europe and worldwide. The Baltic cyber expertise has already benefited democratic countries across the globe, and the same work should continue with border incidents.

Countering the hybrid threats

The Baltic states have implemented a broad spectrum of measures to counter hybrid threats and are aware of the challenges. It would require a separate paper to discuss them in detail, but generally, the efforts have improved collective situational awareness, preventing, responding to or recovering after attacks.

As hybrid warfare continues to change and new means emerge, it is not always possible. E.g., Lithuania has sought to prevent society's exposure to adverse information from Russia by limiting Russian content on television. But patterns of media consumption and production are undergoing rapid transformation. Instead of users consuming traditional media, anyone now can create and spread content, which is increasingly difficult to prevent and mitigate. Against this background, existing policies would be less effective in the long term. Further, investment in societal resilience may be the most effective strategy to strengthen Baltic states' ability to cope with hybrid threats, considering that the region is exposed to influence activities by hostile actors that target different social groups.

In this security environment, hybrid threats are one of the most significant risks, considering the complex nature and forms of expression of hybrid threats and the necessary comprehensive approach to counter them with civilian and military resources.

In Latvia, one of the main priorities for national defence is the implementation of a comprehensive national defence system which is a crucial element for overcoming hybrid threats and promoting sustainability, where each ministry, as well as each sector of the economy, has a significant role in ensuring the overall continuity of the state, the economy and society.

A comprehensive national defence system is based on a whole-of-government approach as an essential strategy to develop military capabilities and armaments and promote the sustainability of society, which is particularly important in resisting such hybrid threats as information operations, propaganda disinformation, etc. At the same time, Latvia has improved the regulatory framework applicable to the provision of critical services in crisis conditions to stimulate the state and economy's continuity and functioning in any kind of crisis, promoting societal resilience and indicating readiness for Latvia to resist aggression.

Three Seas Initiative: A Marshall Plan for the 21st century

The Three Seas Initiative is a new forge of unity between free nations in the Adriatic, Baltic and the Black Sea regions, integrating the North-South axis. It is a platform for pragmatic collaboration to create a network of cooperation possibilities for twelve countries of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. It seeks to promote large-scale infrastructural, digital, and energy-related investments that are highly needed in this geographic area, as the region still faces underdevelopment challenges mainly in infrastructure and interconnectedness following 45 years of socialist rule and its lasting negative setbacks after its ongoing negative setbacks the collapse of the Soviet Union.³ The 3SI has been conducting a supportive role in the efforts of the European Union (EU), which has played a pivotal role in gradually building better infrastructure and interconnectedness in the CEE countries and aiming to overcome the present gap between the West and the East of Europe.¹⁴ By launching a North-South infrastructural axis, the Three Seas Initiative aims to create an interconnected and more self-sufficient Europe with greater diversification of supply chains and infrastructure.

In a way, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) could turn out to be a 21st-century Marshall Plan for Central and Eastern Europe. Coincidentally, 2022 is the 75th anniversary of the Plan that helped rebuild Europe after World War Two. Its figures are impressive, with up to one billion US dollars to be contributed to the economic development of these regions. And its potential political and institutional impact is just as significant. By interconnecting various actors, 3SI would help maintain stability and democracy in countries that the Western countries formally describe as "peripheral". But we are not peripheral - we are the frontier where democracy in the entire Western world has to stand or fall.

The region is not simply a geographical expanse, but a critical frontier at which the geopolitical policies of the West, Russia and China collide - in some places physically, in others - on a meta-level, contraposing two normative worlds of democracy and freedom on the one hand and authoritarianism and revisionism on the other.

In his book "Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics", Tim Marshall noted that "technology may seem to overcome the distances between us". This seems to be now more accurate than ever before. On the other hand, though, he also asserts that "the land where we live, work and raise our children is hugely important" and "the choices of those who lead the seven billion inhabitants of this planet will to some degree always be shaped by the rivers, mountains, deserts, lakes and seas that constrain us all - as they always have" And this is true. This is the reality.

The Three Seas Initiative is the most significant political and economic policy initiative to emerge in Central and Eastern Europe over the past fifty years.

3SI creates an excellent framework for strengthening transatlantic relations, through direct engagement of the United States in Europe, as part of its increasing global role worldwide. A more robust economic US presence in the region would strengthen transatlantic business,

¹⁴ <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Fokus-2021-11.pdf>

energy and geopolitical ties to Central and Eastern Europe while compensating China's and Russia's initiatives and actions to advance and make regional inroads.

The objectives of the Three Seas Initiative are genuine and timely, proving to be of great relevance in these challenging times generated by the worst health and economic crisis in the last century. Firstly, bolstering the financial resilience, including through creating opportunities for economic growth and well-being in the region; secondly, increasing the inter-connectivity - in terms of conventional infrastructure that could make the better interconnection between north and south, developing new and modern infrastructure aiming to achieve the climate goals, but also expanding and modernising the digital infrastructure for a "smart connectivity"; enhancing the energy security by diversification of energy market and infrastructure for an increased open competition; last but not least, creating the right path for defending current geopolitical interest.

The 3SI plays a role in achieving gas supply independence from Russia, enabling a higher level of infrastructural interconnectivity and fostering economic and military mobility. The 3SI countries also want to strengthen European security in the context of regional threats and risks, such as the growing influence of Russia, by increasingly cooperating with the US. By investing in the 3SI, the US sets its foot in the neighbourhood and hopes to lure the region to its side and make it more strategically predictable. To do so, the US provides liquified natural gas (LNG) to allow CEE to diversify its energy sources and thus become less reliant on Russian oil and gas. By achieving increased energy diversification, higher energy security and market competitiveness could be reached, as Russia would not be able to "blackmail" the countries in the CEE region anymore.

The CEE region has suffered far too long from its satellite role within the Soviet Union during the Cold War and flat-out refuses to become a "buffer zone", squeezed between Western Europe on the one hand and assertive regional players such as China and Russia on the other. However, the race for new infrastructure, transportation, and digitalisation connectivity between the main competitors could lead to more incentives for the EU and the US to engage more actively, positively impacting the balance of power in this region.

Latvia will host the Three Seas Summit and Business Forum this summer. We hope that the United States representatives will participate in the discussion and the business forum. Because, as stated by Mr Blinken, "...at its core, this forum is about demonstrating how democratic values can put governments in a more vital place to deliver inclusive, sustainable growth that all of our people are looking for, whether that's by expanding trade, fighting corruption, or investing in infrastructure to create jobs, to connect people with communities, and to increase resilience to a warming climate."¹⁵

For NATO to strengthen deterrence along the frontier and respond effectively to Russia's New Generation Warfare planning, the legacy East-West infrastructure must complement the requisite North-South connectivity. In that regard, the Three Seas Initiative is transformative, expanding operational planning options and strengthening deterrence along the Eastern flank. If fully implemented, Europe would finally overcome the post-imperial and post-Soviet legacies

¹⁵ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-latvian-foreign-minister-edgars-rinkevics-at-a-joint-press-availability/>

in CEE. Accordingly, the 3SI merits, in our opinion, American continued political support and investment, and investment from across the transatlantic community.

Defogging the grey zone

Significant responsibility lies in a country's capabilities to identify grey zone aggression. Therefore, we in Latvia have developed amendments to National Security Law that include hostile military actions such as violating territorial integrity and unlawful presence in Latvia's territory. War against Latvia means military attacks and cyber-attacks or other aggressive actions (hybrid) that can create the same destructive consequences for the state and its territorial integrity as a conventional attack. The crisis experienced concerning Covid-19 demonstrated the vital importance of ensuring the continuity of supply chains and critical functions and services.

First, further increasing media literacy demands substantial attention. In 2021, according to the *Media Literacy Index*, which measures the potential of European countries to withstand the negative impact of fake news and misinformation due to the quality of education, free media and high trust among people, Estonia ranked 3rd, but Latvia and Lithuania – only 20th and 18th respectively among 35 countries. Media and information literacy education targeting broader segments of society is crucial. Thus, new private initiatives should be encouraged and the already existing ones supported by the state.

Further, access to independent media and news sources is essential. On the one hand, it has been argued that it is in the interest of Russia to maintain ethnic divisions in the Baltic states. Thus, ethnic group integration is crucial. On the other hand, as a survey in Lithuania has revealed, Polish and Russian ethnic groups live in the Russian cultural and information field. Therefore, while it remains a long-term challenge to integrate ethnic groups and strengthen societal cohesion, in the medium-term, the access of ethnic groups to independent news sources in their language must be assured. Language should not become a mark of division in society but instead should be utilised by the state and private media organisations to deliver accurate and reliable information. The language of ethnic groups can also help recognise propaganda and information warfare instead of pushing their speakers into the information sphere of hostile states.

Hybrid threats are often aimed at the most vulnerable points of a state. Thus, supporting a well-educated and informed society across all ethnic groups using the means acceptable to them is a fundamental step in countering hybrid threats.

The war in Ukraine should prompt the West and, specifically the EU, to profoundly rethink its purpose and its functioning. Unions of states and citizens usually emerge to face external threats and must endow themselves with the institutional and financial means to address these successfully. A national race to re-armament is not what EU member states should do. Instead, they should consider whether a joint EU military capacity can guarantee the security interest of its member states and enduring peace in its neighbourhood if the idea that the EU can be a soft power only is now buried for good. However, what is clear is that Europe and the whole of NATO must immediately start moving towards a much higher level of preparedness without entertaining the usual concerns about provoking Russia.

Accordingly, NATO has deployed a multinational battalion battle group to each Baltic state and Poland as part of its NATO Enhanced Forward Presence concept and boosted the capabilities and readiness levels of the NATO Response Force. In addition, the United States has unilaterally forward-deployed heavy forces into the region on a rotational basis. For their part, the Baltic states have significantly increased defence spending and adopted new, total defence strategies that emphasise whole-of-society resistance against any Russian military incursion. These decisions have fundamentally shifted the strategic landscape in the region, such that the probability of the Baltic states becoming targets of Russian conventional military action has become very small. However, beyond the suboptimal strategic landscape for pursuing traditional military action, additional factors suggest that Russia has switched its attention toward more novel approaches to the Baltic states.

For NATO and Europe, this will be a marathon, not a sprint. We cannot afford to be cavalier about our short-term responses but must do everything in a strategic, organised, conscious, and prepared manner. This should not be mistaken for the lack of resolve and determination to act, but it takes time (Russia spent months building up its forces on the borders of Ukraine).

It is no exaggeration to say that the history of Europe is at an inflexion point — but, as in the past, in crises, there are opportunities for the EU to renew itself and refocus. The dividends of European integration are there for all to see — an area of peace, freedom and democracy like no other on earth. But as the Russian war of aggression makes crystal clear, this state of affairs is not a given; it must be protected, and it is time for the EU to take care of it.

For those who worry that standing up to Russia could just provoke Putin and drag the world into war, we only have to look at the history of the 20th century - nothing is more provocative to a dictator than the weakness of free nations.