Russia's hybrid threat tactics against the Baltic Sea region: From disinformation to sabotage

Hybrid CoE

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Hybrid CoE's mission is to strengthen its Participating States' security by providing expertise and training for countering hybrid threats, and by enhancing EU-NATO cooperation in this respect. The Centre is an autonomous hub for practitioners and experts, located in Helsinki, Finland.

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Summary

Russia's hybrid threat activities, conducted alongside its war against Ukraine, pose significant challenges to regional and international security. Over the past year, Russia has become increasingly aggressive in using its hybrid threat toolbox, particularly in the Baltic Sea region, but also elsewhere. The proximity of countries in the Baltic Sea region to Russia and Belarus, coupled with various connections, creates both vulnerabilities and opportunities for detecting threats. Russia employs diverse tactics, such as disinformation, cyberattacks, psychological pressure, instrumentalized migration, and acts of sabotage, to pressure and destabilize these countries. Yet despite continuous targeting, they demonstrate resilience and resolve in countering such threats, maintaining internal coherence and vigilance. Strong alliances and proactive measures are necessary for effective defence. However, Russia will persist in adjusting its tactics and testing reactions, potentially escalating tensions. Hence, close monitoring, resisting shifts in the boundaries of acceptability, raising awareness, and enhancing deterrence are vital for the EU, NATO, and their member states.

Introduction

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. This unprovoked aggression against a neighbouring sovereign state has fundamentally altered the European security landscape. In response to Russia's aggression, EU/NATO/Western nations have actively provided Ukraine with various forms of support. This has included political, military, financial, economic, humanitarian, and other assistance, as well as the imposition of a wide range of economic and diplomatic sanctions on Russia.

The Russian regime views its war against Ukraine as part of a larger global conflict with the "Collective West". President Vladimir Putin has tied both his domestic legitimacy and the restructuring of the Russian political and economic system to a large-scale geopolitical confrontation with the West, accusing the latter of waging a "hybrid war" against Russia.[1] Thus, even if Putin could afford to end the war in Ukraine, he cannot allow the larger conflict to dissipate as it has become part of Russia's new identity. This Kremlin narrative leads to the conclusion that Europe and its allies must prepare for Russia's long-term aggressive actions extending far beyond Ukraine.

This Hybrid CoE Working Paper focuses on hybrid threat activities that Russia has been employing in Europe in parallel with the war against Ukraine. The paper is based on an examination of Russian hybrid threat activities directed at five EU/NATO member states in the Baltic Sea region – Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. It focuses on activities that took place from mid-2023 to April 2024, as this is a period during which Russia appeared to have adopted a more openly aggressive stance and began to employ its hybrid threat toolbox more extensively. Considering that Aleksandr Lukashenko's regime in Minsk has turned Belarus into a full-fledged vassal of Russia, the paper will also consider hybrid threats emanating from Belarus.

The paper will begin by outlining Russia's overall strategic goals in Europe. It will then explain why the five countries have been selected for this case study. It will go on to look at the main types of Russian hybrid threat activities, focusing in particular on disinformation and influence activities, the use of diasporas and Russia-linked institutions, attempts at sabotage and vandalism, intelligence activities, the use of cyber tools, the instrumentalization of migration, and threats affecting energy and communications infrastructure. Lastly, conclusions will be drawn.

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1   'Putin slams "imperialist" West, says it fears Russia', Reuters, 30 September, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-slams-imperialist-west-says-it-fears-russia-2022–09–30/.

Russia's strategic goals

Fully preoccupied with the war against Ukraine, and acknowledging NATO's military power, Russia does not appear to be pursuing direct military conflict with the West. Instead, it is seeking to fulfil its strategic objective of weakening Europe and its allies mainly through the use of non-military hybrid threat tools. From Russia's perspective, these can be seen as the most effective option for destabilizing Europe and undermining its support for Ukraine, while remaining below the threshold for triggering NATO's collective defence (Article 5).

The onset of the full-scale aggression against Ukraine was not accompanied by Russia's non-conventional onslaught in Europe, as many had expected. Initially, the Russian hybrid threat toolbox itself was degraded by the widespread discreditation of its propaganda narrative, the imposition of various sanctions, and the disruption of Russia's intelligence and influencing networks through the large-scale expulsion of intelligence operatives accredited as "diplomats" to Russian embassies. This was accompanied by European governments significantly curtailing Russia's economic leverage by radically diminishing the continent's dependence on Russia's fossil fuel supplies. Furthermore, if Russia had hoped that the huge wave of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Europe would destabilize European societies, its expectations did not materialize. However, despite these initial setbacks, Russia was not completely isolated. Its ability to inflict harm and destabilize European states and societies was diminished, but not eliminated.

Since the initial phase, Russia has adopted a more aggressive stance, threatening and harming Europe and its societies with multifaceted hybrid attacks. No longer seeking to feign friendliness, it has been increasingly willing to demonstrate an openly hostile attitude and to employ hybrid threat activities up to the use of direct violence.

In the short term, Russia's main focus remains on attempting to subjugate Ukraine. The central aim of its information operations and influence activities in Europe is to undermine further military and other forms of assistance to Ukraine, which is crucial to sustaining its military defence and overall functioning as a state. Moscow considers Western war-weariness to be a result of its own efforts. This could enable Russia to radically alter the course of the war and achieve its aims.

However, the long-term goals that Russia is pursuing with its war of aggression go beyond Ukraine. In late 2021, the Russian Federation presented the West with an eight-point list of demands, including the demand that NATO should withdraw any troops or weapons deployed to countries that joined the Alliance after 1997.[2] There is no reason to assume that Russia would have changed its wider strategic aims despite the setbacks it has suffered in Ukraine. Russia is still seeking a reordering of the European (and therefore global) security architecture, especially with its efforts to establish a sphere of influence over large parts of the continent. Whatever the outcome of the war in Ukraine, as long as the existing regime in the Kremlin remains in power, Russia's imperialist ambitions are unlikely to wane.

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2   Andrew Roth, 'Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe', *The Guardian*, 17 December, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato.

The Baltic Sea region in the context of Russian aggression

The five countries included in this paper – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, and Poland – were selected based on several geographical, historical and societal criteria. From the author's perspective, these criteria potentially make the countries susceptible to certain Russian hybrid threat activities.

First, these countries are **the only EU member states that have a land border with Russia** (in the case of NATO, Norway also shares a 195 km stretch of border with Russia in the Arctic). The combined border of these states with Russia extends over more than 2,300 kilometres. Three of the nations – Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland – also share a border with Belarus, adding another 1,250 kilometres.

Second, all of the countries are nations that have been **under Russian or Soviet rule at various stages in their history**. As a way of justifying its aggression, Russian propaganda likes to speak about "historical borders of Russia" – as opposed to the ones established in 1991 after the break-up of the Soviet Union. The countries analyzed in this paper are all repeatedly mentioned, to varying degrees, in (revanchist) Russian narratives as possible subsequent targets after Ukraine.

Third, the five nations are all **located on the Baltic Sea, which is a strategically important region** for Russia. The Baltic Sea is **a key gateway for Russia's maritime trade, especially for oil exports**. In October 2023, over half of Russia's total oil exports were shipped from Russian Baltic Sea ports.[3] These exports constitute a major source of revenue for the Kremlin, enabling it to fuel its war machine. The Baltic Sea is also a route between the **heavily militarized Russian outpost of Kaliningrad Oblast** and the Russian mainland, and Russia has a transit agreement with Lithuania to access the exclave.

Furthermore, there are other features that distinguish these countries. Estonia and Latvia have the largest number of **ethnic Russians and Russian citizens** in the EU as a proportion of their populations. The countries have been at the **forefront of international support for Ukraine**, all being among the world's top 10 Ukraine-supporting nations when government support for Ukraine is calculated by share of GDP.[4] Lastly, their societies have been affected by the war due to the **large influx of refugees from Ukraine**, with the three Baltic states and Poland in particular being among the countries that have received the largest share of Ukrainian refugees relative to their population.[5]

3 Isaac Levi, 'October 2023 — Monthly analysis on Russian fossil fuel exports and sanctions', Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, 23 November, 2023, https://energyandcleanair.org/october-2023-monthly-analysis-on-russian-fossil-fuel-exports-and-sanctions/.

4 Data from the Ukraine Support Tracker, Kiel Institute for the World Economy, https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/, accessed on 23 April, 2024.

5 Data from the UNHCR Operational Data Portal at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine, accessed on 23 April, 2024.

Main types of Russian hybrid threat activities

Disinformation and influence operations

Russia actively engages in disinformation and influence operations in the West, specifically targeting Ukraine and its relations with Western countries, both directly and indirectly. The main aim is to undermine political and public support for Ukraine as much as possible. Russian propaganda portrays Ukraine as an unreliable partner, unworthy of support, and alleges misuse of military and financial aid. It propagates the narrative that national governments are neglecting the needs of their own citizens in favour of supporting Ukraine. At the same time, messages are being spread that Ukraine is losing the war and that Russia will inevitably win. These messages are designed to influence political leaders and public opinion by suggesting that supporting Ukraine is pointless and counterproductive, as it might lead to open war with Russia instead.

Russia's disinformation ecosystem has been mobilizing significant resources against European nations to flood various social media networks with its manipulative narratives. During the past year, several European nations have identified massive, sophisticated pro-Russian disinformation networks of unprecedented size and automation on various platforms, targeting multiple Western countries directly supporting Ukraine.[6] In March 2024, the Czech Republic and Poland uncovered a network spreading Russian propaganda and exerting influence across Europe, including in the European Parliament. While the overall focus of these disinformation and influence activities seems to be on the larger nations of Europe, such as Germany or France, similar messages have also been spread in the countries covered in this paper. While the main narratives are common, there are also distinctive messages applied in the national context of specific nations.

The Baltic states are described as warmongers and Russophobic outposts of a "Collective West". They are claimed to be facing economic and social collapse because their governments are directing all their money to Ukraine, disregarding the interests of their own citizens. The Baltic states themselves have made it more difficult for Russia to conduct information operations by restricting access to Russian television channels and other sources of propaganda. This has led Russia to shift the focus of its propaganda efforts to social media. This includes utilizing fringe groups, especially far-right alternative media ecosystems, which try to oppose the mainstream media by finding suitable talking points from Russian propaganda and amplifying them without journalistic standards, while calling themselves patriots.

The **Latvian** security service has highlighted an increasingly aggressive and provocative message emanating from the Russian Embassy in Riga, Latvia. The embassy's social media accounts have regularly spread false and misleading information about, for example, Latvian domestic politics and history. In 2023, Russian sources released smear campaigns, including blatantly false films, against top politicians

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6 'France uncovers a vast Russian disinformation campaign in Europe', *The Economist*, 12 February, 2024, https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/02/12/france-uncovers-a-vast-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-europe; 'Baerbocks Digitaldetektive decken russische Lügenkampagne auf' [Baerbock's digital detectives uncover Russian campaign of lies], *Der Spiegel*, 26 January, 2024, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/desinformation-aus-russland-auswaertiges-amt-deckt-pro-russische-kampagne-auf-a-765bb30e-8f76–4606-b7ab-8fb9287a6948.

in Latvia.[7] After Latvia's announcement in late 2023 that around a thousand Russian citizens would have to leave the country because they did not meet the requirements of the existing immigration law, Russia has ramped up its rhetoric against Latvia and the other Baltic states. Russian President Vladimir Putin has threatened Latvia with repercussions.[8] Maria Zakharova, spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, has accused the Baltic states of openly preparing for the mass deportation of the Russian-speaking population and has adapted a Nazi narrative, accusing the Baltic countries of seeking "the final settlement of the Russian question".[9] This can be seen as an information attack aimed at escalating the situation and creating useful (pre)conditions for future provocative steps in the Baltic countries.

In the case of **Finland**, Russian propaganda has started to convey the message that Finland has experienced "problems" because of its NATO accession. This narrative, including nostalgic messages about the "good old days" of Finno-Russian relations, has been present in various statements by Russian leaders, including Putin himself.[10] Moscow's Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, has stated: "They had lived calmly and in peace and suddenly ended up between Russia and NATO as a member of that alliance, but since they are our neighbours, if, God forbid, there is some escalation, they will be the first to suffer".[11] Additionally, according to Russian propagandists, since Finland became a NATO member, Washington has been making all the important decisions in the country.

Russia deliberately interfered in Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO. According to an alleged Russian document leaked to the media, the plan called for further stoking of tensions after the violent protests in 2023 following the burning of the Quran in Sweden. Russia planned to organize provocations disguised as protests before the membership applications were approved. In particular, the goal was to increase tensions between Türkiye and European countries to prevent or delay Türkiye's signing of the accession documents as required. The Finnish Security and Intelligence Service confirmed that it was aware of Russian intelligence service plans to incite protests in Finland, but the plans were not carried out.[12]

Poland has been a major destination and arrival route for Ukrainian refugees since the start of Russia's invasion. Since then, Poland has increasingly been targeted by disinformation

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7   Constitution Protection Bureau of the Republic of Latvia, '2023 Annual Report', https://sab.gov.lv/files/up-loads/2024/02/SAB-2023.gada-parskats_ENG.pdf.

8   Jennifer Pahlke, 'Putin claims discrimination of Russian minority in Latvia', Deutsche Welle, 25 December, 2023, https://www.dw.com/en/putin-claims-discrimination-of-russian-minority-in-latvia/video-67819921.

9   Excerpts from the briefing by Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, 17 January, 2024, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1925990/#9.

10 'Putin warns of problems with neighboring Finland after West "dragged it into NATO"', CNN, 17 December, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/17/world/putin-warns-problems-finland-nato-intl/index.html.

11 'Finland first to suffer if Russia-NATO tensions escalate – Russian diplomat', Euractiv, 28 December, 2023, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/finland-first-to-suffer-if-russia-nato-tensions-esca-late-russian-diplomat/.

12 'Russia planned Islamophobic campaigns in Finland, Sweden to delay Nato membership', YLE, 4 December, 2023, https://yle.fi/a/74–20063396.

campaigns aimed at causing tensions between the two countries and their populations. Polish officials and politicians have warned that information operations to incite such enmity have intensified both on social media and on the streets, where anti-Ukrainian stickers have been observed in several Polish cities. [13]

Since autumn 2023, there have been large-scale protests by Polish farmers against the import of grain from outside the EU, most notably from Ukraine, which they say is unfair competition. These protests have included blocking traffic and border crossing points on the border with Ukraine. Ukrainian sources have claimed that Russian intelligence services may be involved in organizing these blockades, pointing to the role of certain pro-Russian politicians in organizing them.[14] While there is no direct evidence of this so far, and Ukrainian officials have confirmed that the blockade by Polish farmers on the Ukrainian border has not affected the delivery of military or humanitarian aid to Ukraine, these protests have aggravated tensions between the two nations and have reportedly slowed the transport of non-military goods into Ukraine. When the border blockades by Polish farmers also began to affect traffic

across the Lithuanian-Polish border, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis described the actions as resembling hybrid threat operations against the national security of both Poland and Lithuania.[15]

Russian disinformation campaigns against Poland include a narrative accusing Poland of hatching a plan to take over Belarusian and Ukrainian territory.[16] Furthermore, Belarusian officials have accused Poland of preparing to overthrow the regime in Minsk by sending troops to the border of Belarus and organizing armed formations and diversionary groups consisting of people who had previously left Belarus or Russia.

Russia is also using the Belarusian regime to exert pressure on neighbouring countries. In summer 2023, after the failed mutiny by Wagner boss Yevgeny Prigozhin, the core of the Wagner Group's fighters were temporarily transferred to Belarusian territory. Belarusian leader Lukashenko immediately began using the Wagner brand in his influence activities against his neighbours. Most famously, he claimed that the mercenaries were asking for "permission to go on an excursion to Warsaw and Rzeszow".[17]

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13 Mykhailo Samus, 'Turbulence in Poland: new opportunities for Russian disinformation', 13 December, 2023, https://infowarfare.pl/2023/12/13/turbulence-in-poland-new-opportunities-for-russian-disinformation/.

14 Yevheniia Mazur, 'How blockade of Polish border is going & what Russian special services have to do with it', Liga.net, 24 November, 2023, https://www.liga.net/en/politics/articles/vosem-fur-i-sosiski-kak-prohodit-blokada-polskoy-granitsy-i-pri-chem-zdes-rossiya.

15 'Polish farmers' Lithuania border blockade resembles "hybrid operations" – FM', BNS, 28 February, 2024, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2209902/polish-farmers-lithuania-border-blockade-resembles-hybrid-operations-fm.

16 Piotr Żochowski, 'Russia and Belarus accuse Poland of preparing aggressive plans', Centre for Eastern Studies, 24 July, 2023, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023–07–24/russia-and-belarus-accuse-poland-preparing-aggressive-plans.

17 Jakub Bornio, 'Belarus Remains a Persistent Vector of Russia's Hybrid Campaign Against the West', Jamestown Foundation, 15 August, 2023, https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-remains-a-persistent-vector-of-russias-hybrid-campaign-against-the-west/.

In addition, Russia has started using a rather specific tool to harass and threaten foreign politicians by opening criminal cases against them. In early 2024, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs published lists of individuals wanted in Russia on criminal charges. By February 2024, the Ministry's search database had listed more than 700 foreigners declared wanted in connection with the war in Ukraine or for political reasons. Among those listed were several high-ranking Baltic politicians, most notably Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas. The list also included a number of current and former ministers and Members of Parliament from the Baltic states, as well as local political figures from Poland, the Czech Republic and even Germany.[18] Allegedly, the criminal cases initiated against foreign politicians are specifically related to the dismantling of Soviet-era monuments and the relocation of World War II graves. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed the inclusion of foreign politicians on the list, saying that "these are the people who undertake hostile actions both against historical memory and against our country".[19] Under Putin's rule, the narrative about the victory over Nazi Germany in the "Great Patriotic War" has been turned into a central pillar of Russian identity. Russia has also weaponized its own versions of history to serve as key components of a broader strategy to advance its imperialist ambitions.

While none of the people on the list intend to visit Russia, the whole issue of targeting foreign officials with political criminal cases should not be trivialized. In autumn 2023, former Latvian government minister and MP Vjačeslavs Dombrovskis narrowly escaped being detained in Kyrgyzstan at Russia's request while on a teaching assignment at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.[20] Furthermore, besides exerting psychological pressure on certain politicians, these actions by Russia to misuse legal mechanisms for political purposes can also be seen as attempts to delegitimize certain governments or politicians in the eyes of their allies and partners.

Instrumentalization of diasporas and Russia-linked institutions

Russia has a long history of instrumentalizing Russian-speaking diasporas as a strategic tool to extend its influence beyond its borders and divide societies in other countries. Russia is not interested in their integration into local societies, but in keeping them under its influence. Leaked documents from the Russian presidential administration from late 2021 set out a broad range of activities that Russia has employed to maintain its influence in the **Baltic states**, including funding pro-Russian organizations and institutions, supporting efforts to maintain Russian language schools, and opposing the demolition of Soviet monuments.[21]

18 'Wanted in Russia', Mediazona, 13 February, 2024, https://en.zona.media/article/2024/02/13/wanted.

19 'Russia puts Estonian PM Kaja Kallas on wanted list', *Politico*, 13 February, 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-declares-estonian-pm-wanted/.

20 'Latvian Foreign Ministry: Russia targeting Latvian officials while abroad', LSM, 2 October, 2023, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/diplomacy/02.10.2023-latvian-foreign-ministry-russia-targeting-latvian-officials-while-abroad.a526183/.

21 'Secret Kremlin document reveals Russia's plans for Baltic states', LRT, 1 May, 2023, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1973471/secret-kremlin-document-reveals-russia-s-plans-for-baltic-states-lrt-investigation.

Russia has been trying to exploit the pro-Russian forces and organizations already present in the Baltic states. In 2022, they were used to organize protests against the demolition of remaining Soviet monuments in the Baltics. While the removal of a tank monument by the Narva River in **Estonia** and the demolition of a huge Soviet World War II memorial in Riga provoked protests from the local Russian-speaking population, there were no major disturbances in the end. Since 2022, the Baltic states have expelled or imposed entry bans on a number of pro-Kremlin provocateurs who had spent years spreading Russian narratives and engaging in systematic pro-Russian activities.

The Russian Orthodox Church has been a traditional player in Russia's influence activities, supporting the Kremlin's narratives and actions, exerting influence and advancing Russia's strategic interests by other means. The Moscow Patriarchate has thrown its full weight behind the military aggression against Ukraine, with Patriarch Kirill declaring it a "holy war".[22] The Russian Orthodox Church is one of the few instruments of Russian influence activities that has not been affected by international sanctions. The connections that local Orthodox churches in the Baltic states have with the Moscow Patriarchate have raised questions about their loyalty.[23] In early 2024, Estonia decided not to extend the residence permit of the head of the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Eugen, and he had to leave the country. Estonian politicians have described the Church's links with the Moscow Patriarchate as a security threat.[24]

In **Latvia**, following a parliamentary decision, the Latvian authorities took over the Moscow House in Riga in early 2024. The building had belonged to the Moscow City Government and was a place where Russian-sponsored associations had operated. Public information provided by the State Security Service showed that the Moscow House had been used as a base for various anti-Latvian measures since its establishment.[25] A high-level political case is the affair involving Tatjana Zdanoka, a Latvian member of the European Parliament, who has openly promoted Russian interests during her long political career. A report published by an international media investigative team in January 2024 revealed that she had also been an agent of the Russian intelligence services for years. Media outlets cited leaked emails between Zdanoka and her Russian intermediaries, and Latvia has since opened a criminal investigation into the matter.[26]

In **Finland**, native Russian speakers make up less than 2% of the population and have not engaged in much political activism to date.

22 Brendan Cole, 'Ukraine Is Now "Holy War," Russian Church Declares', *Newsweek*, 28 March, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-war-holy-1884577.

23 Sebastian Rimestad, 'Orthodox Churches in the Baltic States Torn Between Moscow and Constantinople', Blog of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies, 28 March, 2024, https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2024/03/28/orthodox-churches-in-the-baltic-states/.

24 'Interior minister: Orthodox church cannot continue under Patriarch Kirill', ERR, 5 April, 2024, https://news.err.ee/1609304208/interior-minister-orthodox-church-cannot-continue-under-patriarch-kirill.

25 'Saeima approves takeover of "Moscow House" in Rīga', LSM, 11 January, 2024, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/saeima/11.01.2024-saeima-approves-takeover-of-moscow-house-in-riga.a538515/.

26 Christo Grozev et al., 'Latvian Member of European Parliament is an agent of Russian intelligence, leaked emails confirm', *The Insider*, 29 January, 2024, https://theins.press/en/politics/268694.

The closure of the Finnish-Russian border in late 2023 led to some protests by Russian-speaking groups, and an association was also formed with the declared intent to ensure the rights of Russians and dual citizens living in Finland. Pro-Kremlin propaganda has been disseminated on Russian social media channels in Finland, and some Russians in Finland have been contacted and asked to post videos about concerns related to the closure of the Finnish-Russian land border.[27]

Sabotage, vandalism, and intelligence activities

Sabotage, subversion and other "shadow" activities aimed at destabilization are essential parts of Russian unconventional or hybrid warfare. Until early 2024, there was some surprise in Europe at the limited use of sabotage and other means to disrupt Western supplies to Ukraine. This is considered to have been partly due to a desire to manage escalation with NATO, but also as a result of a lack of capacity. In spring 2024, Russia was reported to be actively seeking to rebuild the capacity to embark on such operations.

It should be noted that Russian intelligence services have access to highly significant material and human resources. The mass expulsions of hundreds of Russian intelligence operatives working under diplomatic cover across Europe disrupted the support apparatus through which Russia conducts many of its operations, but Russian intelligence agencies have become more active again. They are recruiting new agents from among Russian citizens who have fled abroad, and are trying to recruit foreign students studying at Russian universities.[28]

Since autumn 2023, **the Baltic states** have seen a clear increase in alleged Russian intelligence service activities, including vandalism and other physical attacks. Reports about the detention of individuals suspected of these acts show that Russian services seem to employ people with criminal backgrounds or those facing economic hardship.

According to the former director of the **Estonian** Internal Security Service (KAPO), Russian intelligence is very interested in Estonia, and hundreds of people in Russia are engaged in anti-Estonian intelligence activities.[29] In January 2024, KAPO arrested a Russian political science professor who had been working at the University of Tartu for more than a decade. He is suspected of years of intelligence activity against Estonia. According to the Estonian security service, this is an example of Russian intelligence agencies' desire to infiltrate different walks of life in Estonia, including academia.[30]

27 'Osa toistaa Putinin propagandaa – näin somessa puhutaan rajasulusta' [Some repeat Putin's propaganda – this is how the border closure is being discussed on social media'], YLE, 15 February, 2024, https://yle.fi/a/74-20073695; 'Viron suojelupoliisi: Suomessa asuvat venäläiset saaneet kehotuksia tuottaa videoita rajatilanteesta' [Estonia's security service: Russians living in Finland have been asked to produce videos about the border situation], STT, 12 April, 2024, https://www.hs.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000010355835.html.

28 Jack Watling et al., 'The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare beyond Ukraine, 2022–24', RUSI, February 2024, https://static.rusi.org/SR-Russian-Unconventional-Weapons-final-web.pdf.

29 'Former ISS chief: Hundreds in Russia engaged in intelligence efforts against Estonia', ERR, 21 January, 2024, https://news.err.ee/1609228761/former-iss-chief-hundreds-in-russia-engaged-in-intelligence-efforts-against-estonia.

30 'ISS suspects University of Tartu professor of action against Estonia', ERR, 16 January, 2024, https://news.err.ee/1609223589/iss-suspects-university-of-tartu-professor-of-action-against-estonia.

In parallel, KAPO uncovered a group of individuals suspected of acting on the instructions of, and in coordination with, Russia's intelligence services with the aim of carrying out vandalism and physical attacks on Estonian territory. As of April 2024, a total of 13 people, some with a criminal background, had been arrested. They had successfully carried out some attacks, damaging the personal car of the Estonian Minister of the Interior and numerous monuments related to the struggle against the Soviet Union. According to KAPO, additional attacks had been planned, which, if realized, would have had a much greater impact.[31] The Estonian authorities characterized this as a hybrid threat operation carried out by Russian security services against Estonia's national security, designed to sow fear and fuel tensions in society.

In **Latvia** in October 2023, the Latvian Prosecutor's Office charged six people with leading the criminal organization "Baltic Anti-Fascists" and participating in its activities. Three individuals were declared wanted, as they reside in Belarus or Russia. The organization had begun to develop and coordinate activities against Latvian national security in late 2022. The group's Telegram channels repeatedly called for the collection of information on Latvian public officials, including security personnel, senior officers of the defence forces, and Latvian citizens fighting on the side of Ukraine.[32] In December 2023, the Latvian Security Service detained another Russian citizen suspected of spying for the Russian intelligence services. The individual had collected and passed on information about critical infrastructure and military facilities in Latvia.[33]

Another example of sabotage in Latvia occurred on the evening of 26 February 2024, when an explosive mixture was thrown into the office of the director of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. Shortly afterwards, police arrested three people in connection with the incident, who had previously been known for their criminal behaviour. The Latvian Security Service stated that it was investigating a possible connection with "foreign influence".[34]

In March 2024, it was reported that Riga city authorities had received an unusual number of reports of acts of vandalism in recent weeks. The main concerns were defaced pro-Ukraine posters and the appearance of symbols on the walls of buildings supporting Russian aggression.[35] The Latvian Security Service also detained an individual suspected of desecrating a memorial site in Latvia on behalf of Russian special services, as well as engaging in provocative activities at memorials in other Baltic states.

31 'ISS director: Russian influence activities in Estonia have become harsher', ERR, 12 April, 2024, https://news.err.ee/1609311528/iss-director-russian-influence-activities-in-estonia-have-become-harsher.

32 'State Security Service advances "Baltic Antifascists" case', LSM, 13 October, 2023, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/crime/13.10.2023-state-security-service-advances-baltic-antifascists-case.a527648/.

33 'VDD detains a person on suspicion of espionage on behalf of Russian intelligence and security service', VDD, 03 January, 2024, https://vdd.gov.lv/en/news/press-releases/vdd-detains-a-person-on-suspicion-of-espionage-on-behalf-of-russian-intelligence-and-security-service.

34 'Security Service looks at possible link of museum arson to foreign services', LSM, 14 March, 2024, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defense/14.03.2024-security-service-looks-at-possible-link-of-museum-arson-to-foreign-services.a546659/.

35 'Increasing number of pro-Russian vandalism cases in Rīga', LSM, 15 March, 2024, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/crime/15.03.2024-increasing-number-of-pro-russian-vandalism-cases-in-riga.a546805/.

In **Lithuania**, Leonid Volkov, a close ally of the late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, was attacked with a hammer outside his home in Vilnius on 12 March 2024, and was taken to hospital. In April, Polish authorities detained two Polish nationals, with criminal backgrounds, suspected of carrying out the attack, and a Belarusian national suspected of ordering the attack on behalf of Russian intelligence services.[36] Lithuanian officials described the attack as the "first case of political terrorism in Lithuania".[37]

In February 2024, 12 national flags were desecrated in Klaipeda, Lithuania's third largest city, in what appeared to be a carefully planned provocation. The Lithuanian president described it as a targeted operation planned and coordinated from outside the country.[38] The head of Lithuanian intelligence confirmed that individuals spying for Belarus had been detained in the country in late 2023 and pointed to the growing threat of psychological influence operations such as acts of vandalism.[39]

Likewise, **Poland** has witnessed a growing number of arrests of individuals suspected of acting on the instructions of Russian security services, including planning acts of sabotage.

As a major transit country for various forms of Western military assistance to Ukraine, Poland has become a prime target for Russian espionage and destabilization efforts, with the presumed targets often related to the infrastructure used to transport aid to Ukraine.

In December 2023, a Polish court convicted fourteen nationals of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia of planning acts of sabotage and conducting intelligence activities against Poland on behalf of Russia. The convicted, detained earlier in the year, had carried out reconnaissance of military facilities and critical infrastructure, as well as of military and humanitarian aid shipments to Ukraine passing through Poland. The group was also plotting to derail aid shipments to Ukraine and had undertaken propaganda activities aimed at inciting anti-Ukrainian sentiment.[40] In this plot, Russian intelligence services were using Ukrainian citizens who had arrived in Poland as war refugees. They were recruited through Russian-language postings on Telegram channels in Poland frequented by Ukrainian refugees.[41] Similar reports from Poland provide information about arrests of individuals accused of working for the Russian intelligence services,

36 'Two Poles, Belarusian detained on suspicion of attacking Navalny's associate in Vilnius', LRT, 19 April, 2024, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2254565/two-poles-belarusian-detained-on-suspicion-of-attacking-navalny-s-associate-in-vilnius.

37 'Attack on Volkov is first case of political terrorism in Lithuania – official', LRT, 14 March, 2024 https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2221872/attack-on-volkov-is-first-case-of-political-terrorism-in-lithuania-official.

38 'A provocation? 12 Lithuanian flags desecrated in Klaipėda', LRT, 8 March, 2024 https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2218344/a-provocation-12-lithuanian-flags-desecrated-in-klaipeda.

39 'Lithuania detains several citizens suspected of spying for Belarus', LRT, 07 March, 2024, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2216397/lithuania-detains-several-citizens-suspected-of-spying-for-belarus.

40 'Fourteen members of Russian spy ring who planned to derail Ukraine aid train sentenced in Poland', Notes from Poland, 14 December, 2023, https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/12/19/fourteen-members-of-russian-spy-ring-who-planned-to-derail-ukraine-aid-train-sentenced-in-poland/.

41 Greg Miller et al., 'Russia recruited operatives online to target weapons crossing Poland', *Washington Post*, 18 August, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/18/ukraine-weapons-sabotage-gru-poland/.

including plotting acts of sabotage. In January 2024, the Polish security services again detained a Ukrainian citizen on charges of planning to set fire to facilities in Wroclaw.[42]

In addition, in August 2023, Poland's railway system was disrupted when more than 20 trains were technically forced to stop. It turned out that the perpetrators were able to paralyze the trains by exploiting a vulnerability in their communication systems with a simple radio hack, sending "stop" commands via radio frequency to the targeted trains. The saboteurs also played the Russian anthem and parts of a speech by Putin over the railway's radio system.[43]

While there have been no reports of possible sabotage in **Finland**, the country has long been concerned about Russian nationals and Russian-linked companies buying up land near strategic sites, such as military facilities or border areas. As a result, the Finnish Minister of Defence has the right to prohibit, on security grounds, real estate transactions where the buyer would have come from outside the EU and EEA countries. This right of prohibition has been used repeatedly to deny suspicious Russia-linked transactions. Finnish Defence Minister Antti Häkkänen has also set up a working group to explore the possibility of imposing a total ban on Russian entities and citizens acquiring real estate, and to draw up the necessary legislation. According to Häkkänen, it is known that Russia may exploit real estate ownership for

certain influence attempts, and it is difficult to control and assess which properties could pose a problem.[44] The Finnish Security and Intelligence Service (Supo) recently reported that the expulsion of Russian intelligence officers, coupled with restrictions on Finland's eastern border, had "significantly undermined" human intelligence gathering by Russians in Finland.[45] The same applies to the other countries in the region.

The increasing number of reports from the region about acts of sabotage and vandalism linked to the Russian intelligence services indicate that they are stepping up efforts to undertake physical actions in the targeted countries. These activities seem to be mostly carried out by local people recruited through social media and other online channels. Compared to the pre-2022 period, the ability of the Russian intelligence services to operate with their own personnel on the ground is considered to be severely curtailed.

Cyberattacks

The Russian intelligence services use hactivists – hackers who employ a wide spectrum of different cyber tools for political reasons – to support their influence operations. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been accompanied by increased activity from such pro-Kremlin hacker groups, who have claimed responsibility for

42 'Poland detains man accused of planning sabotage on behalf of Russia', Reuters, 15 February, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-detains-man-accused-planning-sabotage-behalf-russia-2024−02−15/.

43 Andy Greenberg, 'The Cheap Radio Hack That Disrupted Poland's Railway System', *Wired*, 27 August, 2023 https://www.wired.com/story/poland-train-radio-stop-attack/.

44 'Puolustusministeri asetti työryhmän valmistelemaan venäläisten kiinteistökaupan täyskieltoa' [Minister of Defence appointed a working group to prepare a full ban on real estate trade by Russians], STT, 26 January, 2024, https://www.ksml.fi/uutissuomalainen/6514000.

45 'Supo: Russian espionage in Finland significantly weakened', YLE, 30 March, 2024, https://yle.fi/a/74−20025015.

hitting countries supporting Ukraine with distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks. A report published by the EU's Agency for Cybersecurity, ENISA, in December 2023 highlighted that 50% of DDoS attacks were linked to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.[46]

Such cyberattacks, aimed at disrupting everyday life, are now commonplace in the Baltic Sea countries and are constantly growing in scale and complexity. "Compared to the past, ideological attacks have become much more targeted so we have also seen a rise in the number of incidents with an impact. A cyberattack is like an extension of foreign diplomacy," writes the Estonian Information System Authority in its latest Cyber Security Yearbook.[47]

The **Finnish** cyber security company WithSecure has reported that, in addition to attacks carried out by "patriotic" Russian hackers, groups directly linked to Russian military intelligence, such as Sandworm, have also been involved in using malware to target utility and logistics systems in countries in the region.[48] **Estonia's** Information System Authority has likewise noted that the impact of cyberattacks has increased widely across different sectors, including critical infrastructure. Generally speaking, targets include websites and electronic public services, as well as the financial,

transport and media sectors. For example, on 9 March 2024, the largest DDoS attack in Estonian history was launched against public websites belonging to the Estonian "ee" internet domain. The main targets were the Tax and Customs Board, the Police and Border Guard Board, and the Ministry of Justice. The attacks were more sophisticated and complex than usual and required considerable manual work to counter them.[49] Thus far, most such attacks can be repelled through sophisticated IT security measures, so that the average citizen is not even aware of them.

Other cyber tools are also used in influence operations. Between October and December 2023, several waves of extensive bomb threat email campaigns were unleashed against hundreds of schools, local municipalities, transport, and energy facilities across the three **Baltic states**. While the threats did not pose a direct danger as no explosives were found, they could be characterized as an inexpensive way to disrupt the work of the targeted institutions and to instil fear and insecurity in the minds of the general public. It is assumed that the messages were a targeted and coordinated attack launched by the Russian intelligence services.[50]

46 ENISA, 'ENISA Threat Landscape for DoS Attacks', 6 December, 2023, https://www.enisa.europa.eu/publications/enisa-threat-landscape-for-dos-attacks.

47 Estonian Information System Authority, 'Number of cyber incidents increased by a quarter in a year', 5 February, 2024, https://www.ria.ee/en/news/information-system-authority-number-cyber-incidents-increased-quarter-year.

48 'Russia behind cyber-attacks on Western utilities, security firm says', YLE, 21 April, 2024, https://yle.fi/a/74–20084802.

49 'RIA: Estonia's state institutions hit by largest cyberattack to date', ERR, 12 March, 2024, https://news.err.ee/1609278921/ria-estonia-s-state-institutions-hit-by-largest-cyberattack-to-date.

50 '"Coordinated attack": Schools in Lithuania flooded with bomb threats', LRT, 13 October, 2023, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2099452/coordinated-attack-schools-in-lithuania-flooded-with-bomb-threats.

Instrumentalization of migration

Russia, along with Belarus as its proxy, has been instrumentalizing migration as a means of exerting influence and pressuring neighbouring countries for years. They achieve this by turning asylum seekers or people looking for a better life abroad into tools of destabilization. The issue is two-pronged – not only is it about the number of people trying to cross national borders, but also the fact that the Russian and Belarusian authorities decide who is pushed to the borders of foreign countries, as well as where and when this will occur.

Belarus has been using instrumentalized migration against **Latvia, Lithuania and Poland** on a large scale since 2021. All three of its neighbours have since been establishing fences and other border protection infrastructure on their borders with Belarus and have started to apply strict measures against irregular crossing attempts. This has made irregular border crossings more difficult, and has helped to keep the number of crossings under control. However, Belarus's neighbours continue to face constant migratory pressure, which is directed and assisted on the ground by Belarusian services.

The majority of irregular crossing attempts in 2023 took place on Belarus's borders with Poland and Latvia, with the number of attempted crossings on both borders more than doubling compared to the previous year.[51] The route for irregular migrants generally starts in Moscow, from where they arrive in Belarus in an organized manner, and then attempt to enter neighbouring EU countries with the help of Belarusian special services. Belarusian security personnel are known for repeatedly displaying aggressive behaviour at the border, including damaging the border protection infrastructure of neighbouring countries and engaging in other activities that violate standard norms.

In autumn 2023, on the Latvian-Russian border, Russia came close to creating a different kind of border emergency. In October of that year, the Russian authorities suddenly decided that Ukrainian citizens wishing to enter Russia from EU countries could only do so via Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport or a small border crossing point at Vientuli on the Latvian-Russian border. In response, the Latvian government had no option but to close the border crossing point completely. If it had remained open, according to the new Russian procedure, it could have led to masses of Ukrainian citizens flocking to a crossing point with very limited facilities and capacity, which could have had severe consequences for the humanitarian situation and public order.[52]

Russia also began to instrumentalize migration at the **Finnish** border in autumn 2023. A sudden change in the behaviour of Russian border guards was observed – they began allowing people, primarily of Middle Eastern origin, to cross into Finnish border points without the required entry documents. Some of the arrivals had been residing in Russia, while others came directly from the Middle East, where social media outlets began to promote Finland as an

51 'Polish border guard report shows scale of migrant pressure from Belarus', Notes from Poland, 2 January, 2024, https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/01/02/polish-border-guard-report-shows-scale-of-migrant-crisis-from-belarus/.

52 'Latvia says Russia trying to disrupt border with Ukraine passport ruling', Reuters, 13 October 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/latvia-says-russia-trying-disrupt-border-with-ukraine-passport-ruling-2023–10–13/.

open country. By the time the Finnish government announced the closure of all border crossing points in November, more than 1,300 asylum seekers had arrived via Russia. When Finland briefly reopened some of the border crossings in December, the instrumentalization of migration immediately resumed. This forced the Finnish government to close the entire border again after only two days. The government has since decided to keep its eastern border closed, justifying the closure on the grounds of a threat to national security. The Finnish authorities consider it likely that instrumentalized migration would start again if the border crossings were reopened, citing reports that thousands of migrants from third countries are waiting in Russia to cross the border into Finland.[53]

The Finnish authorities have also indicated that they have information that the Russian authorities not only tolerated but also facilitated the movement of these individuals to the border. An investigative media publication, which communicated with both migrants and smugglers, also stated that the Russian FSB security service helped migrants to reach the Russian-Finnish border.[54] The Finnish Ministry of the Interior pointed out that such immigration is one of Russia's ways of exerting pressure and

influencing the security and social stability of Finland and the EU. In response, Finland is preparing a tough border law to strengthen border security and counter Moscow's pressure. It will also speed up the construction of a protective fence at key locations along the border.

As expected, Russia has denied responsibility for the border crisis, propagating disinformation that Finland had closed its eastern border to make life difficult for Russians and dual citizens. Russia has described the border closure as another step by Finland to cut all ties with Russia.

In addition to exerting pressure by instrumentalizing migration, the Russian security services are keen to employ the situation they have created for different purposes. The Finnish security police have confirmed that the Russian security services have been trying to recruit asylum seekers heading to Finland to work for them.[55] The same was observed when Russia sent migrants to Norway in 2015, as these groups also included people who had been hired by Russian intelligence, coerced or tricked into carrying out intelligence missions.[56] Furthermore, men who failed to cross the border could be sent to fight for Russia in Ukraine instead, as has already happened.[57]

53 'Finland says thousands of migrants are seeking to enter via Russia', Reuters, 20 February 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finland-says-thousands-migrants-seek-enter-via-russia-2024–02–20/.

54 Mikhail Kalinin, 'Officers without borders: FSB orchestrates influx of refugees into Finland', *The Insider*, 26 December, 2023, https://theins.ru/en/amp/politics/267911.

55 'Supo: Venäjä pyrkii värväämään Suomeen tulevia turvapaikanhakijoita tiedustelijoikseen' [Supo: Russia is trying to recruit asylum seekers coming to Finland as its agents], YLE, 16 January, 2024, https://yle.fi/a/74-20069662.

56 'PST: Migranter som kom over Russland-grensen hadde fått spionasjeoppdrag' [PST: Migrants who came over the border from Russia had been tasked with espionage], NRK, 5 January, 2024, https://www.nrk.no/norge/pst_-migranter-som-kom-over-russland-grensen-hadde-fatt-spionasjeoppdrag-1.16698626.

57 '7 Indian tourists from Punjab, Haryana "tricked" into joining Russian Army, seek help', *Hindustan Times*, 6 March, 2024, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/7-indians-from-punjab-haryana-claim-russian-agent-tricked-them-into-joining-ukraine-war-101709693051330.html.

Threats to energy and communications infrastructure

Energy and communications infrastructures are considered one of the most probable targets should Russia decide to escalate its subversive activities in the Baltic Sea region. The geographical location of Finland and the Baltic states limits the possibilities for connecting their energy and communications infrastructure to the rest of Europe, with many of these connections passing through the international waters of the Baltic Sea. This makes them more vulnerable to the threat or even execution of sabotage. As senior NATO officials have noted, the underwater network of cables and pipes around European waters was not built with the threat of hybrid warfare in mind.[58]

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) presents challenges when it comes to safeguarding security-sensitive objects, as it severely limits the right of intervention in international waters. At the same time, Russia is clearly less concerned than other countries about adhering to international law.

Russia's activities and interest in mapping maritime energy and communications infrastructure around Europe are well known. There have been a number of reports of suspicious activities by various Russia-linked vessels in the vicinity of maritime (critical) infrastructure, including in the Baltic Sea.[59] Emerging technologies such as maritime drones, effectively deployed by Ukraine in the Black Sea, may soon be adopted by Russia, raising further security concerns.

On 7 October 2023, the underwater communications cable connecting **Estonia** and Sweden was damaged. The next day, the Balticconnector gas pipeline between **Estonia and Finland** was damaged on the seabed in the Gulf of Finland, while damage was simultaneously inflicted on the underwater telecommunications cable connecting Estonia and Finland. While the data cables were quickly repaired, the damage to the Balticconnector was extensive and the pipeline was out of action until April 2024.

At the time of writing, investigations into the incident were still ongoing. It is suspected that both the gas pipeline and the data cables were ruptured by the Hong Kong-registered vessel Newnew Polar Bear dragging its anchor on the seabed during a voyage from Kaliningrad to St. Petersburg. There is widespread consensus among experts that such prolonged dragging of a heavy anchor could not have happened accidentally.[60]

While the incident was a clear reminder of the risks to undersea infrastructure, its real-world effects on security of gas supply remained limited. However, had the incident occurred just one year earlier, Finland in particular would have faced a serious supply problem.

58 Miranda Bryant, 'Undersea "hybrid warfare" threatens security of 1bn, Nato commander warns', *The Guardian*, 16 April, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/16/undersea-hybrid-warfare-threatens-security-of-1bn-nato-commander-warns.

59 Stefan Hedlund, 'Nordic media take aim at Russian threats', Gisreportsonline, 7 June, 2023, https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/russia-nordic-threats/; Sidharth Kaushal, 'Stalking the Seabed: How Russia Targets Critical Undersea Infrastructure', RUSI Commentary, 25 May, 2023, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/stalking-seabed-how-russia-targets-critical-undersea-infrastructure.

60 'Balticconnector case more sabotage than an accident, experts say', ERR, 16 February, 2024, https://news.err.ee/1609255413/balticconnector-case-more-sabotage-than-an-accident-experts-say.

Until early 2023, when a floating LNG storage and regasification unit starting operating in the Finnish port of Inkoo, the Balticconnector pipeline was the only major gas delivery route from outside Russia to Finland.

The regional gas market in the **Baltic Sea countries** used to be heavily dependent on Russia for supplies. In 2021, 74% of the gas needs of Estonia, Finland and Latvia were met by imports from Russia. After the launch of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the countries invested heavily in energy independence from Russia and made other arrangements to ensure security of supply. Investment in LNG reception capacities has been a major step towards ending all energy dependence on Russia in the Baltic Sea region.[61]

At the time of writing, the only remaining energy-related link with Russia was the Baltic states' electricity grid's link to the Russian electricity system, which enables Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to maintain the stability of their electricity grids.[62] This raises the question of whether Russia could aim to destabilize the Baltic electricity systems by unilaterally severing this connection. This concern is aggravated by the fact that in its war against Ukraine, Russia's strategies have prioritized attacking the Ukrainian electricity system. In September 2022, Estonia's Prime Minister Kaja Kallas publicly warned the nation about the possible risk of power outages due to Russia's actions.

Recognizing this vulnerability, the Baltic states have been preparing for some time to disconnect from the Russian grid and become part of the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E). In 2023, a trilateral decision was made that the desynchronization from Russia would take place by February 2025 at the latest. Should Russia decide to unilaterally disconnect the Baltic states from its grid before then, contingency plans are in place to establish a connection with continental Europe right away.[63] Similarly, Ukraine's grid was connected to Europe in March 2022.

61 'Energy without Russia: How do European Countries adapt?', Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2023, https://eastern-europegrowth.fes.de/energy-studies.

62 For more information on the technical issues, please see https://elering.ee/en/faq-synchronization#tab0.

63 'Baltics would switch to European grid in a day if Russia cuts power – Lithuania', Reuters, 13 July 2022, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/litgrid-says-baltics-can-connect-european-grid-within-24h-if-russia-cuts-power-2022–07–13/.

Conclusions

The hybrid threat activities that Russia has launched in parallel with its war against Ukraine challenge the regional and international security order, as well as the European security architecture. Russia has become more aggressive towards the West in general, and the five countries in the Baltic Sea region, described in this paper, are at the forefront of Russia's hostile actions in many ways. Their location on the eastern edge of the EU, their geographical proximity to Russia and its vassal Belarus, and the various connections they have had with these two states provide avenues for hostile exploitation. However, this also makes them valuable sensors for identifying growing threats.

Russia has employed a variety of tools to pressure and destabilize these nations, aiming to exploit friction points, sow fear, and undermine societal resilience. Its tactics include the continuous spread of disinformation, the employment of agents of influence, the use of cyber tools, exerting psychological pressure, engaging in physical attacks and vandalism, and utilizing instrumentalized migration pressure. Russia's hybrid threat actions now encompass activities that have not been seen before, and are more frequent and brazen.

Russia also leverages specific systemic vulnerabilities in different countries. In the Baltic states, for instance, it recruits and utilizes agents from the local Russian-speaking population. In Poland, where the Russian population is small, it has been targeting newly arrived Ukrainians. Russia also exploits knowledge of national laws and procedures. It started to use instrumentalized migration pressure against Finland, which had previously taken a more liberal approach to asylum seekers before closing its eastern border.

Despite Russia's increasing efforts, its tactics in the Baltic Sea region have yet to yield significant results. Hybrid influencing efforts require fertile ground to be effective, but this is lacking in the region. The societies are well aware of the threat of Russian influence operations and have developed a certain immunity to them. The strong political and societal consensus across all five states to resist Russian aggression and support Ukraine contributes greatly to their defence. The states' internal security authorities have also demonstrated their resolve in preventing and stopping hybrid threat attacks.

At present, Russia lacks significant leverage over the internal politics of the countries studied, as its influence is limited to marginal figures due to its toxic reputation among the majority of the population. Since Finland joined NATO in 2023, all of the countries studied are members of the Alliance, and NATO's overall conventional defence posture in the region has duly been strengthened. Disentanglement from Russia in all spheres of life in recent years has made it possible to greatly diminish the leverage it could exert.

All five countries have shown that while hybrid threat tactics are a constant threat, it is crucial not to show signs of being susceptible to Russian pressure, but to demonstrate decisiveness instead. By maintaining self-confidence, internal coherence, and vigilance, nations can effectively counter and mitigate the impact of Russia's subversive hybrid threat tactics aimed

at destabilizing their societies and undermining their security. This requires the ability to defend against any attack and to maintain strong alliances with other nations to collectively confront such threats. Politicians must be prepared to take proactive measures and make difficult decisions to address security challenges effectively, even if they entail significant consequences, such as the closure of borders.

However, Russia will continue to test the reactions of targeted nations and their allies, adjusting its hybrid threat toolbox accordingly.

It will look for new vulnerabilities to exploit and seek new ways to undermine stability. As it raises the stakes in its confrontation with the West, it may be tempted to resort to even more escalatory and dangerous actions. In this context, it is important for the EU, NATO and their member states to closely monitor and resist Russian attempts to shift the boundaries of acceptability. At the same time, it is necessary to raise collective awareness of Russia's new tactics, while finding ways to enhance deterrence against them.

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