



RUSSIA'S MOTIVES IN THE BALTIC STATES

By Agnia Grigas



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Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and subsequent war in eastern Ukraine prompted discussions in the Baltic States and among their allies of whether a similar Russian hybrid warfare intervention in these NATO member states would be possible. Certainly the Baltic States also have a sizable Russian minority and have long been objects of Russia's historic imperial ambitions. But does Russia have motives in the Baltic States that could lead it to risk confrontation with NATO and challenge the collective security guarantees of Article 5? This article will examine Russian minorities, Moscow's historic and economic interests, and what is possibly the greatest motive of all—using the Baltic States to destabilize the NATO alliance.

More than any territorial gains, Russia's greatest motive vis-à-vis the Baltic States is to undermine the NATO Alliance and the collective security guarantees provided by Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. Certainly, any success Moscow achieves in destabilizing Estonia's, Latvia's, or Lithuania's territorial integrity or fuelling separatism will either elicit an effective response from NATO or discredit the authority of the alliance and in turn the entire international system built on its security guarantees. Indeed, many have argued that this is precisely Moscow's aim as it ratchets up pressure on the Baltic States through airspace violations, the kidnapping of an Estonian border patroller, and calls to persecute former Lithuanian Soviet draft dodgers.

Within the Baltic States, the main factor that could both motivate and facilitate Russia's policies of interventionism or aggression is a large, concentrated population of Russian ethnic minorities and Russian speakers that reside on Russia's border. Estonia and Latvia have particularly large ethnic Russian minorities, with about 24 percent and 27 percent of the general population respectively, while Lithuania's Russian population is just under 6 percent. Percentages of Russian speakers—a figure that includes other Baltic minorities such as the Polish, Ukrainians, and Belarusians—are much higher. Latvia's Russian speakers make up nearly 34 percent of the population, Estonia's approximately 30 percent, while Lithuania's totals almost 8 percent.¹

In Latvia, Russian minorities are mainly concentrated in two locations: Riga, the capital city, and the region of Latgale that borders Russia. Likewise Estonia's sizable Russian minorities are concentrated in the capital of Tallinn and Ida-Viru County on the border with Russia. The region's largest city of Narva, for instance, is 82 percent Russian and 97 percent of the populace is Russian speaking. About a third of the population also holds Russian citizenship. In Lithuania, Russians and Russian speakers

¹ "PHC 2011: 157 native languages spoken in Estonia," *Statistics Estonia*, 30 August 2012, http://www.stat.ee/64629?parent_id=39113; Final results of the Population and Housing Census 2011 in Latvia; "Gyventojai pagal tautybę ir gimtąją (-ąsias) kalbą (-as)," *statistics.bookdesign.lt*, p. 164, http://statistics.bookdesign.lt/dalis_04.pdf. The total Russian speaking population in Lithuania might be up to 15 percent. Meilutė Ramonienė (ed.), "Miestų gyventojai, gimtąją įvardiję rusų kalbą," *kalbuzemelapis.flf.vu.lt*, <http://www.kalbuzemelapis.flf.vu.lt/lt/zemelapiai/miestu-gyventoju-gimtoji-kalba/miestu-gyventojai-gimtaja-ivardije-rusu-kalba/>.

are concentrated in the capital of Vilnius, the port city of Klaipėda (near the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad) and the small city of Visaginas close to the border of Belarus.²

In addition to the common ideological driver to unite the Russian diaspora of the near abroad under the Russian flag, Moscow has a number of historical motives to reincorporate the Baltic States into Russia's "empire" or sphere of influence. Russia has been pursuing a consistent policy of imperialization and Russification of the Baltic territories since the 18th century. Russia's power grab began in 1721 under the Tsar Peter the Great, establishing control over some territories of modern day Estonia and Latvia. During the rule of Empress Catherine the Great, Lithuania was incorporated into the Russian Empire following three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1772, 1793 and 1795.

Equally important are Russia's economic interests in the Baltic States. Like Crimea, which serves as the base of Russia's Black Sea Fleet and a pathway to the Mediterranean, the Baltic States possess ice-free ports and a window to the West that have made them targets of Russia's expansionism since the times of Peter the Great.³ Despite Baltic increasing trade and ties with the EU, the Baltic and Russian economies still have many legacy links. The ports of the Baltic States have historically served to transport Russian oil and oil products to European markets. For instance, throughout the 1990s until the opening of an oil terminal in Russian port of Primorsk in 2001, Latvia's Ventspils Nafta was the second largest exporting terminal of Russian oil, and the largest exporter outside Russian territory.⁴ Since the 2000s, Russia has directed its energy flows away from the Baltic States by building up its own ports, terminals, and new pipeline systems on the northern Baltic and North Sea.⁵ Nonetheless, Baltic territories and ports continue to serve as transit routes for Western goods that Russia imports.

Finally, while generally the Baltic States are energy-poor counties, Estonia's Ida-Viru county, is energy rich. The county is located in the eastern part of the country near the border with Russia, nestled between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Peipus, and is predominantly inhabited by Russian speakers. The region's large deposits of shale oil are used for heating and electricity production, meeting 80 percent of Estonia's electricity needs. For a country with few natural resources that is still 100 percent dependent on Russian gas, Ida-Viru shale oil is strategically important. Like eastern Ukraine's coal mines, it could be a tempting target for Moscow.

It is clear that Russia's interests in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are not limited to the presence of significant populations of Russian minorities and Russian speakers that reside there, but is also related to the considerable historic, economic and energy interests. However, what makes the current situation particularly concerning not only for the people in the Baltics, but also for everyone in the world, is the implication for the entire international system. If Russia challenges these countries' territorial integrity and NATO fails to honor its Article V security guarantees, this would spell the end of the post-World War II international security order.

² Agnia Grigas, "Compatriot Games: Russian-Speaking Minorities in the Baltic States," *World Politics Review*, 11 October 2014, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/14240/compatriot-games-russian-speaking-minorities-in-the-baltic-states>.

³ "The Russian Quest for Warm Water Ports," *Globalsecurity.org*, 9 July 2011, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/warm-water-port.htm>.

⁴ Agnia Grigas, "The EU's unresolved issue of the Russian embargo against Lithuania's oil refinery," *EurActiv.com*, 31 October 2014, <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/energy/eus-unsolved-issue-russian-embargo-against-lithuanias-oil-refinery-309661>.

⁵ Agnia Grigas, *The Politics of Energy and Memory Between the Baltic States and Russia*, (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), p.45.