Policy Paper

Examining Russia's Gray Zone Tactics in the Baltic Region

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines Russia's historic and continued use of Gray Zone Engagement in the Baltic Region and its justification for doing so. Since the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 2001, post-Soviet states spanning Eastern and Central Europe have been faced with focused, enduring political and socio-economic pressure from the Russian Federation, in some form or fashion. Over time, the tools and methods employed to exert this pressure have evolved, drifting away from "traditional" conflict, threatening overwhelming conventional military operations, and gravitating towards what is known today as "gray-zone" conflict, threatening a wide array of operations, often ambiguous and non-violent in nature. During this same span of time, many of these same post-Soviet states have efforted to distance themselves from the union with which they had long been associated. To that end, action, sometimes swift and unforgiving, has been taken in many forms, spanning the political and socioeconomic spectrum. The Central and Eastern European regions currently face two important questions of policy: Is Russia justified in the focus and implementation of its diaspora strategy, at the expense of overstepping social and political boundary via operations within independent nations? Are post-communist republics justified in their application of minority rights policies, in the interest of ensured national independence and freedom from foreign influence? Through thorough examination of these dueling policies and chief examples of their employment, this paper aims to explore the justification of Russia's use gray zone engagement in the Baltic Region, through the lens of foreign policy strategy aimed at leveraging targeted social issues via soft power financial, educational, and cultural activities. This political approach undertaken by Russia of gray zone engagement in the near abroad is one requiring major focus and concern from policymakers worldwide.

Since the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, post-Soviet states spanning Eastern and Central Europe have been faced with focused, enduring political and socio-economic pressure from the Russian Federation, in some form or fashion. Over time, the tools and methods employed to exert this pressure have evolved, drifting away from "traditional" conflict, threatening overwhelming conventional military operations, and gravitating towards what is known today as "gray-zone" conflict, threatening a wide array of operations, often ambiguous and non-violent in nature. In this case, Russia's use of non-conventional operations, both military and political, through protracted engagement and at all three levels of planning and analysis: tactical, operational, and strategic, is aimed at gradually and fundamentally revising the regional system of international norms (Carment and Belo, 2018).

During this same span of time, many of these same post-Soviet states have efforted to distance themselves from the union with which they had long been associated. To that end, action, sometimes swift and unforgiving, has been taken in many forms, spanning the political and socioeconomic spectrum. This push away from historical ties has largely left ethnic-Russian and Russian-speaking inhabitants of these nations feeling out of place or even unwelcome.

The Central and Eastern European regions currently face two important questions of policy: Is Russia justified in the focus and implementation of its diaspora strategy, at the expense of overstepping social and political boundary via operations within independent nations? Are post-communist republics justified in their application of minority rights policies, in the interest of ensured national independence and freedom from foreign influence? Through thorough examination of these dueling policies and chief examples of their employment, this paper aims to explore the justification of Russia's use gray zone engagement in the Baltic Region, through the lens of foreign policy strategy aimed at leveraging targeted social issues via soft power financial, educational, and cultural activities.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, it did not take long before Eastern European states within the Soviet Union began to revolt against their Soviet rule, forever altering the long-standing regional order. In just a matter of months, all Soviet states had declared independence from Moscow. "By the summer of 1990, all the formerly communist Eastern European officials had been replaced by democratically elected governments, setting the stage for the region's reintegration into Western economic and political spheres" (Norwich University Research Library, 2024). Come the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 26th, 1991, 15 newly independent states had been recognized: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

The impact of the Soviet Union's dissolution would be swift and far-reaching. Within Russia, itself, government infrastructure became largely non-existent, allowing for the nation to become a widespread breeding ground of corruption and crime. For the numerous, suddenly independent states the new landscape was primed for major cultural, economic, and social shock to its governments and those they represented. An entire region of states who had long

been cogs in a larger world-power machine, were now faced with the burden of economic and political independence, severed from historical ties they had largely been reliant on. While economic collapse was most anticipated and likely front of mind for those affected, larger societal concerns began to take shape across the region over the coming years. Facing identity crises, former-Soviet states have displayed wide-ranging efforts of change, realized through their foreign policy development and, often, dramatic shifts in domestic social norms and practices. While some underwent national transformation, rapidly shifting to Western ideals and political leanings, others remained politically unsettled and unable or unwilling to distance themselves from their previous affiliations (Norwich University Research Library, 2024). Nowhere may this drastic transformation and its subsequent complications be more apparent than within the Baltic states.

Following their declared independence, the Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, were quick to take action in a move towards Western political and social structures, fulfilling their long-held aim to 'return to Europe' (Bergmane, 2020). Those actions would lay the groundwork for eventual inclusion in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in 2004, to which they maintain strong ties to this day. With this move away from all evidence of Soviet incorporation, a shared challenge would emerge among the states, social cohesion. In the years and decades to follow, a rise in the identification of the 'Russian-speaking nationality' would be experienced in the Baltic states (Cheskin, 2014). This division, created along social, cultural, and even linguistic lines, has been the premier focus of contention in the realm of Baltic integration and social inclusion.

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union scholars were unclear how to label the non-Estonian/Latvian/Lithuanian populations of the Baltic states (Cheskin, 2014). Questions surrounded to whom these populations identified, culturally, socially, and politically. Significant numbers proved to maintain ties to Russian culture and language. By 2011, overall ethnic Russians in the Baltic States comprised 19.4 percent of the total population; 27 percent in Latvia, 25.1 percent in Estonia, and approximately 6 percent in Lithuania (Alijeva, 2017). Similarly with linguistic makeup, Russian-speakers made up north of 30 percent of populations in Estonia and Latvia, while Lithuania is limited to 8 percent (Alijeva, 2017). Attempts to draw societal lines of division among segments consisting of nearly one-third of the national population creates major social cohesion issues and opens up ruling governments to external pressure and exploitation.

Although the Baltic states are far from alone when it comes to dealing with issues related to ethnic-minority societal inclusion and integration, historical context gives added weight to their cause. "There Russian-speaking minorities are perceived as a part of a complex social problem that result from their recovering from years of Soviet oppression of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian culture and language" (Alijeva, 2017). In a move towards reestablishing a unified national identity, these states, consciously or unconsciously, have enacted Soviet-aimed reprisal through the marginalization and even ostracization of the 'Russian-speaking nationality' within

their borders. Language would largely contribute to distinguishing 'in' and 'out' societal groups (Muiznieks et al., 2013). Social integration and inclusion policies in Estonia and Lativa have largely led to the alienation of the minority population and renewed identification with their external homeland of Russia (Muiznieks et al., 2013). In Lithuania, examples of more liberal policy related to minority societal and political inclusion were implemented at early stages, leading to a greater sense of belonging to Lithuania, by Russian-speakers (Muiznieks et al., 2013). In short, Estonia and Latvia were the only post-Soviet states to not grant the resident former Soviet population a status as an original citizen (Alijeva, 2017).

In Estonia, explicit domestic minority rights are limited in nature, therefore, conditions set by other facets of domestic policy have great impact on the Russian-speaking minority. Citizenship was initially withheld from the majority of its Russian speakers, grounded in the principle of illegal Soviet occupation and, therefore, illegal Soviet-era immigration (Cheskin, 2014). More recently, citizenship laws have evolved to become inclusive and attainable, relative to their predecessors. However, integration is heavily reliant on knowledge and everyday use of the official state language for the acquisition of employment opportunities and education (Alijeva, 2017). For instance, "The Estonian Cultural Autonomy for National Minorities Act specifies that individuals belonging to national minorities have to be Estonian citizens in order to have access to the privileges specified in the law;" (Alijeva, 2017), privileges such as voting for and fulfilling appointed positions in the fields of cultural, educational, and religious institutions. This presents a significant barrier for many who for generations had no need or desire to be proficient in any language other than Russian, the official language of the Soviet Union. Even by today's policy standards, roughly 6 percent of the Estonian population maintains an undetermined citizenship status (Bergmane, 2020).

In regards to the minority youth population, the Estonian government adopted educational law in 2007 obligating minority schools to teach a minimum of 60 percent of its subjects in Estonian, with the goal of stabilizing and standardizing education nation-wide (Alijeva, 2017). Effects are felt up to the highest levels of education, with public universities operating entirely in Estonian. Naturally, this mandate has led to a division in young adults, spelling a continuation of social cohesion issues for Estonia and its future generations. Legislature such as this highlights Estonia's view of itself as a 'nationalizing state,' striving for the level of unification it desires. In reality, it quite often serves the opposite purpose, "further separating the linguistic minority population from the ethnic majority population in such a way that they mostly live separate lives in Estonia without interaction between the two groups" (Alijeva, 2017).

Of the three Baltic states, Latvia maintains perhaps the most stringent post-Soviet era policies with regard to issues of citizenship and language and their effect had on domestic minority populations. As with Estonia, the Russian language became a foreign language in Latvia, as of 1992. On 5 May 1989, the Law on Language of the Latvia was passed (Alijeva, 2017). In the section on 'General Provisions', the law explicitly addresses the use and defense of Latvian language as the only official language within the Republic, therefore requiring public officials to

maintain sufficient fluency of the Latvian language (Alijeva, 2017). While the law guaranteed that the state would make the attainment of language skills possible through state financing, in practice, these programs have not proven to be as wide-reaching and accessible as intended. The Latvian Law 'On the Unrestricted Development and the Rights to Cultural Autonomy of Latvia's National and Ethnic Groups' did not draw a clear distinction as those who belong to a national or ethnic group, but provided certain rights to all permanent residents of Latvia to include an environment promoting educational, cultural, and linguistic practices of all ethnic groups, in contrast to the case of Estonia (Alijeva, 2017). However, the law did clearly afford more privileges to some minority identities than to others, namely the Balto-Finn identity over the Russian-speaking.

Lativa continues to maintain a strong connection between language and citizenship policy. Perhaps the greatest example as to the importance of language within Latvia's national identity is displayed in the overwhelming rejection of the 2012 constitutional reform. The reform, centering on a proposal to institute the Russian language as the nation's second official language, was voted down by nearly 75 percent of voters. Furthermore, voter participation in this matter was shown to be the second highest in the history of the republic, signaling the level of importance with which Latvians held the matter. Following the Soviet collapse and the formation of a new Latvian constitution, nearly 700,000 people became 'non-citizens' in Latvia. As of 2020, more than 190,000 remained in that status (Bergmane, 2020). These persons retained the right to form political parties but are not allowed to vote in local elections nor may be elected into parliament and other civil service positions. Furthering the minority struggle is the extent to which those desiring to obtain citizenship must go in order to achieve naturalization. Applicants for Latvian citizenship must complete an exam on the Latvian language, the basic knowledge of Latvian history and culture, the basic principles of the Latvian Constitution, and the text of the Latvian national anthem.

With respect to the minority youth population, amendments made in 2013 eased requirements for non-citizen parents' application of citizenship for children born in Latvia. However, Latvia falls short of Estonia's efforts to reduce children born into non-citizen status, a persistent issue that continues to go largely unresolved. In similar vein to Estonia's education policy, Latvia has evolved its policy over the past two decades to require more and more Latvian instruction, with little room for minority language in the curriculum. Early on, reformed policy introduced the idea of graduation examination in the state language, which was an idea not found in either Estonian or Lithuanian language laws (Alijeva, 2017). Educational reform implemented in 2004 required secondary schools of state and municipal institutions to teach a minimum of 60 percent of the curriculum in Latvian. Today, a push exists for all levels of public schooling to transition to instruction exclusively in Latvian, with Russian being phased out entirely in a few short years. Even among those ethnic non-majority youth who have well integrated via command of the state language, exists a meaningful portion who continue to feel alienated, excluded, and even discriminated against within their home state. Latvian social policies in place with the stated intention of integration, towards achieving a greater unification of

national identity, instead tend to have lasting, damaging effect on coexistence among its diverse populus.

In the modern-day globalist system of international relations, now more than ever are external perceptions of interest and importance to the socio-economic well-being and overall stability of a nation's ruling governance. Shortly following the sovereignty of the Baltic states, international guidelines were brought forth, first, in the form of the 1991 European Community 'Declaration on the Guidelines on the Recognition of New States in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union' to implement guarantees for the rights of ethnic and national groups and minorities in accordance with Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe norms (Alijeva, 2017). The three nations also became signatories to a number of international human rights and minority rights treaties (Alijeva, 2017). This international support for protection of minority rights and pressure against those that would restrict them led to the Baltic states' creation of initiatives aimed at making the official language more accessible to minority populations, promising to provide assistance in acquiring proficiency of it (Muiznieks et al., 2013). Similarly, with issues surrounding the large non-citizen population, external pressure brought about new citizenship laws which intro¬duced allowing Russian speakers to naturalize if they could meet certain requirements, including language knowledge and having a basic grasp of the country's history (Cheskin, 2014). It was quickly realized, however, the distinct difference between the international community's ability to exert pressure and implement such guidelines vs its ability to enforce the application of those same guidelines.

Even today, the broader international community expresses its concerns on the inefficient and largely ineffective minority protection in the Baltic States, but international and regional law, at its core, remains limited on matters concerning linguistic diversity accommodation (Alijeva, 2017). While Estonian and Latvian legislation continue to implement minority rights norms at a national level, contradictory domestic legislation works to undermine those expressed protections, in reality (Alijeva, 2017). Current policies in the Baltic states are considered to serve as a countermeasure to the culturally, politically, and linguistically repressive Soviet regime, however, the strive for Baltic nationalism cannot be the force that acts to restrict freedom and participation of all residents in its host-states (Alijeva, 2017).

From a historic United States (US) perspective, while there is no clear evidence as to official recognition of the Baltic states' inclusion in the Soviet Union from 1940 until their reclaimed independence several decades later, it is surmised that at the time it was largely viewed as a forced absorption of territory. Thus, today, significant elements of the US political structure as it relates to foreign policy are sympathetic to the strong desire of the Baltic states to recapture their national identity and of their fear of social regression into foreign influence by the Russian Federation. In truth, both the US and NATO maintain further interest in remaining sympathetic to Baltic national interests as it relates to political, economic, and collective security motivations. As previously stated, the Baltic states quickly made a concerted effort to shift both politically and economically towards Western interests, as the Soviet Union was dissolving. This,

combined with the newfound collective security concerns brought about by Russia's incursion into Ukraine, lends itself to both a US and a NATO lean towards Baltic support over that of condemnation towards their perceived minority population injustices. In short, the collective security concerns now facing much of Eastern and Central Europe, and by association the entirety of NATO, seems to have suppressed the subject of social issues for the time being. With that security element, comes into play the geographical proximity to Russia and the strategic military value innate to the land occupied by the collective Baltic states. These factors play large part in the US and NATO desire to maintain majority Western interests and provide visible show of support in this region. In the same token, ignorance to the minority issues long having endured throughout the Baltic states, could quite possibly lead to deeper issues in the event or crises or conflict, such has been evidenced in eastern Ukraine. Furthermore, this open support has only deepened the resolve of the Baltic states and their political emphasis on resisting a regression to Russian influence and maintaining a unified and independent national identity (Alijeva, 2017).

The concept seemingly held among the Baltic states is that of an independent nation being that of a homogenous entity, drawing on the idea that it housed a single nation: united by a single culture, language, heritage and set of interests (Alijeva, 2017). That, of course, has proven out to be an antiquated and far less accepted viewpoint in today's global climate. With the promotion of minority rights as part of the overall human rights, now there is a recognition of the need for diversity accommodation and nation building that includes and promotes all ethnic, religious, linguistic and many other characteristics of a population (Alijeva, 2017). It is quite understandable why states formerly under Soviet control would take measures, sometimes drastic and unyielding, to ensure a complete independence from formal influence and control. It likely was easy for these newly independent states to imagine a path leading to de facto Russia leadership; a molding into a proxy state for Russian influence. But, while the ethnic Estonian and Latvian communities view government policies such as an increase in use of their official languages in public and private as a measure countering a century of oppression, the Russian-speaking minority likely see these measures as assimilationist and intolerant (Alijeva, 2017). Historical context, of course, plays large part into modern societal decisions made by policymakers and views expressed by majority populations, but what is clear is that the opposition of diversity most assuredly polarizes societies and fuels social tension (Alijeva, 2017). The clear, yet elusive, solution is one which identifies the key to balance between state sovereignty and minority rights.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were twenty-five million people living in the Russian diaspora residing outside the Russian Federation (Alijeva, 2017). Although reeling from nationwide political and economic recession, Russia would not stand by idly for too long, while its former residents now fell under another flag. Terms such as 'citizens' and 'those who left' were temporary assigned to these groups of ethnic-Russians abroad, because the terms indicated that the Russian state is their respective homeland (Alijeva, 2017). Russia would from here grow to claim itself responsible for 'citizens' in its near abroad. On 11 August 1994, a

Presidential Decree on the Main Directions of Government Policy in Relation to Compatriots, Living Abroad No.1681 signed by Boris Yeltsin, obligated the government to swiftly develop a strategy on measures to protect compatriots abroad, specifically focusing on the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltic countries (Alijeva, 2017). The political apparatus would go as far to claim that Russia had a moral obligation to pose as the protector of Russian communities abroad, that compatriots were always welcome to regain their Russian citizenship and return to Russia as it is their historical homeland (Alijeva, 2017).

As of 23 July 2010, the concept of 'compatriots abroad' has been broadly expanded to include: citizens of the Russian Federation who reside on a permanent basis outside the Russian Federation; individuals who were citizens of the USSR and live in states or become stateless persons; expatriates or emigrants from the Russian state, the Russian Republic, the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic, the USSR and the Russian Federation, who had the corresponding citizenship and have become citizens of a foreign state, have a residence permit in one of these states or have become stateless persons; those who are or have direct descendants of historical nations that lived in the territory of the Russian Federation who freely decided to spiritually, culturally and legally establish a link with the Russian Federation (Alijeva, 2017). Over time, this policy would be used as a form of bonding with Russian speakers in the near abroad, asserting the idea that Russia continues to this day to play an important role in their quality of life. Russia believes it has a right and a duty to protect the interests of compatriots abroad, even at the expense of other states' sovereignty. A cynical view of the compatriot policy would highlight a nationalist concept that claims the existence of an imagined Russian-speaking community, scattered around the post-Soviet space, united by a heroic past, orthodox faith, and language. It asserts a special connection between the Russian state and Russian speakers, regardless of their place of residence or citizenship (Molodikova, 2017). Countries with large Russian-speaking communities are part of the Russian World, whether they want to be or not (Molodikova, 2017).

It seems logical that Russia would want to protect its former Soviet Union citizens, many of whom hold deep historical, cultural, and socio-economic ties with Russia. It has repeatedly accused the Baltic states of 'gross violations of human rights' for enacting restrictive domestic policies that mostly target Russian-speakers who took up residence in those countries after 1940 (Alijeva, 2017). Of course, it is widely speculated that the ulterior motive existing within this foreign policy is one focused on security, not humanitarian aid. Difficulty also lies in the acceptance of Russia's expanded definition of 'compatriots abroad' among the international community, namely within the former-Soviet states, given the broad mandate it seemingly provides Russia for intervention in the affairs of an independent state (Molodikova, 2017). Although, a case can be made that some widely-held perceptions among the Baltic states, in some way, aid Russia's claim for inclusion of 'compatriots' under their care. Quite often, these minority groups are seen by their host-state as loyal to their kin-state, or to the state whose citizens they are, as long as they are not absorbed into the national body through assimilation or naturalization (Alijeva, 2017). In this case, a presumption is made that ethnic-Russians and

Russian-speakers within the Baltics are inherently Russian. In this way, it seems that the dominant discourse in the Russian political and legal setting as well as in the minority's country of residence, expresses that Russia is where the really belong (Alijeva, 2017).

Today's sustained climate of social divide within the Baltic states has paved the way for calculated Russian intervention. This is seen not only through the evolved Russian foreign policy concerning its diaspora within the region, but via more aggressive, and often unconventional means. While use of conventional tactics and military resources are not disregarded by Russia in this case, its willingness and ability to rely heavily on the unconventional lends itself to targeted and prolonged efforts touching below the threshold of significant military response. This process of achieving regional political change and fulfilling national interests through conflict is typically recognized as gray-zone conflict (Carment and Belo, 2018). The concept is by no means new to the international landscape of conflict. It has been used it some form or fashion by nations spanning the globe, employed by democracies and authoritarian regimes alike. From the perspective of application, with the expansion of technological and communicative platforms seen today, gray-zone conflict knows no limits beyond the imagination of its applying entity. As will later be discussed, the most prominent and recognizable example of these techniques have been realized through Russia's ongoing conflict with Ukraine. However, from a regional perspective, Russia has amplified its reliance on gray-zone conflict for the past two decades.

Around 2004, Russia, noticeably, began to show signs of increasingly assertive near abroad policy (Gotz, 2017). With this escalation came an uptick in targeted gray-zone efforts and a seeming expansion of utilized techniques, from cyberattacks to information campaigns to energy diplomacy (Mazarr, 2015). Theories as to the causation of this escalation are numerous, with many attempting to focus on a factor singular in nature. While in reality, the truth likely lies in a blend of several complex socio-political issues. Of the reasons most argued, four factors separate themselves: Vladimir Putin's mindset and worldviews; the Kremlin's interest in preventing internal unrest and democratization spillover; Russia's national self-understanding and desire for international status; and power disparities and external pressure (Gotz, 2017).

Along with the inherent economic and political collapse that came along with the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia faced significant loss of influence in the realm of international policy, best exemplified through the significant and continued enlargement of NATO and the EU (Molodikova, 2017). These losses, understandably, took a massive toll on social well-being and national self-image, challenging Russia's then and current administration in ways never before experienced. These factors would later be compounded with immense external pressure brought upon as a result of its Crimean incursion and eventual war with Ukraine, forcing Russia to pursue all available means for protecting its border against NATO encroachment of Russian territory. In Putin's assessment, a viable path towards achieving two goals simultaneously, combating of external threats and deflecting of domestic failure concerns, was laid out across its bordering nations. Rising socio-economic tensions in post-Soviet republics created

permissive conditions for Russia to engage in gray-zone conflict against these states. Russia's justification for engaging in both soft and hard power tactics, through the 'compatriots policy' and other national frameworks, would be rooted in national security concerns, while outwardly being expressed as righteous humanitarian action, addressing the issue of a "divided nation." This idea of a divided nation, which Putin then and now purports, speaks to the preservation of culture, history, language, and identity (Molodikova, 2017). More importantly, it forwards the concept of a broken Russia, needing to be put back together (Molodikova, 2017). Herein we find the true aim of these efforts, regional political goals and national interests.

Russia has been able to gain a foothold in neighboring countries with uneasy Russian-speaking populations; distressed, quasi-independent provinces; and weak or corrupt local or central governments (Mazarr, 2015). The combination of socio-economic tension and instability is a key sign of potential vulnerability to gray-zone tactics. As previously discussed, the Baltic states, namely, Estonia and Latvia, fit the definition laid out above. Today, 25 percent of both Estonian and Latvian residents are of Russian descent, with Russian being the first language of 30 percent and 34 percent of Estonia's and Latvia's population, respectively. Additionally, a large majority of ethnic Estonians and Latvians understand the Russian language, making Russian media accessible to large numbers of Baltic citizens (Bergmane, 2020). Russia has long efforted to develop targeted campaigns, leveraging these populations.

Of the soft power tools utilized in gray-zone operations today, complex cyberattacks are among the most devastating and difficult to combat. In 2007, Estonia's infrastructure experienced such an attack. A long-standing socio-political debate came to a head, when in April 2007, a decision was made by the Estonian government to relocate a Soviet WWII monument, leading to the almost immediate reaction of Russian speakers rioting in Tallinn, as well as large-scale cyberattacks against Estonian government institutions, banks, and media outlets, originating from Russia (Bergmane, 2020). Although initial protesting turned rioting was quelled by police within a day, subsequent and coordinated targeting of Estonian internet-facing information systems quickly ensued, lasting a span of 22 days (Ottis, 2008). The technological crisis would be unparalleled in modern Estonian history. Clear indications were of Russian origination, surrounded by political motivation, with many of the targeted entities connected to the Estonian government and security apparatus.

The event can be succinctly explained as a Russian information operation against Estonia (Ottis, 2008). Not only did the technique used fit the definition of unconventional, it was executed in a way to leverage the internal population and its social strife against its governing but it was also through technical analysis, it was likened to the digital version of the Chinese concept of people's war, where the government motivates people to attack its enemies by any means at their disposal (Ottis, 2008). In this case, the "government" was that of Russia and the "enemy," the Estonian government.

The challenges faced in this instance well exemplify the damaging effects such attacks can have in undermining a population's confidence in their government's ability to protect their interests

and well-being. It also demonstrates the distance a perpetrating nation can put between itself and the action, creating great opportunity for plausible deniability in the matter. The space in which these actions operate is uncontrolled to such a degree that the odds of a responsible nation facing tangible reprimand are quite low; odds lowered further with the likelihood of a non-state proxy utilized as the executing arm of the action.

If cyber threats are known for their shock and awe value, information campaigns are known for their methodical approach and permeating effects. Of the grey-zone techniques most employed by the Russian government against the Baltic states, invading and manipulating the information space may be the most extensively utilized and well-developed. At this point, not only is Russia extremely experienced in implementing this technique, but the communication landscape of the modern world most lends itself to extortion by malicious actors. Modern technologies and communication methods, alternative sources of information and limited government control over the media made cross-border social communication pos¬sible (Kuczyriska-Zonik, 2016). Russia has identified opportunities to leverage this landscape, through both traditional and modern communication platforms, ranging from news media to social media to official government. It is well proven that the ability to control streams of information to shape evolving narratives is of critical importance and can have great impact perceptions within a society. In this way, Russia uses this control of information to affect recipients' emotions and have negative influence on rational decision-making pro¬cesses (Kuczyriska-Zonik, 2016). A ruling government's loss of such control, signifies a threat to national security.

This is perhaps exampled best in Latvia, where large portions of the population, well beyond the ethnic-Russian minority, comprehend the Russian language and reside in relative proximity to Russian media sources, assuring accessibility and exposure to distributed material. Russia information campaigns targeting Latvia work to deepen tense relations between ethnic communities through media distortion and influencing techniques. These campaigns aim to reach "compatriot" populations, pushing nostalgic themes and messaging, asserting alternate perceptions of history and the "Russian World" concept (Bergmane, 2020). They prey on Russian speakers' discontent with citizenship laws and diverse understandings of the role that Russian language should play in Latvian society. Ultimately, Russian tactics intend to sew unrest among the population and delegitimize the ruling governments' policies and efforts, creating internal strife and a yearning for Russian influence and dependency (Gotz, 2017).

These efforts have been demonstrated in recent years through persistent malign influence and misinformation efforted at discrediting NATO military presence in Latvia, fostering notions of a foreign occupation, while also criticizing the ability of Latvia to defend itself from threats, labeling it a failed state (Isupova and Golbeck, 2024). Alongside this messaging exists a central theme of Latvian Russophobia, leveraging social issues surrounding perceived violation of human rights of minority populations and alleged government suppression of their collective voice. Russian led information manipulation, disinformation and hatred incitement of this sort have become increasingly more evident during the war in Ukraine (Kuczyriska-Zonik, 2016).

To fully understand the impact of operations affecting the Baltic states today, a referencing of the Russia-Ukraine gray-zone precedent is necessary. In many ways, the situation as it unfolded in Ukraine is the ultimate case study to be examined for not by Baltic leaders, but the wider Western community. Lessons learned from this ongoing conflict and the handling of crisis management pre- and post-military incursion should be of extreme interest to all international stakeholders. While these efforts are regionally specific in this case, no world powerbrokers are exempt from the long-term ramifications of this engagement or are immune from similar, future conflict.

In the context of Ukraine, Russia spent many years propagating disinformation, undermining the ruling law and depreciating the value of the Ukrainian governing authority (Kuczyriska-Zonik, 2016). This manipulating of the narrative and sensitizing of the population to Russian influence was eventually accompanied by traditional military operations. Apart from the existing, deep cultural ties among the two nations, Russia was able to lean heavily on skewed legal interpretation to justify its annexing of Crimea, aimed at appeasing Russian-speaking communities in Ukraine and suppressing any opposition to its righteousness (Kuczyriska-Zonik, 2016). Despite overwhelming pushback from the international community and recognition of this act as one illegal and aggressive in nature, the damage had been done in the information space. Truth has little merit in propaganda and the received opinion on what is true depends largely on how specific information is presented (Kuczyriska-Zonik, 2016). In this case and others within this engagement, the affected population receives the information in a way that already fits their perceived narrative and is validating of the feelings they have regarding their faced social injustices, brought upon by the government under who's rule they reside.

Apart from legal justification for Russian intervention, claims of threats to security, both to Russia and the region at large, was largely used to rationalize eventual military incursion. As with messaging seen in the Baltics today, themes of NATO expansion and perceived Western intrusion into Russia's sphere of influence, and even its borders, were propagated. Additionally, within the theme of security threats, Russian-led initiatives arose to counteract modern Nazi movement claimed to be spreading across Ukraine and the Baltics. Through organizations like the World Without Nazism, these initiatives were forwarded, again aimed at reaching the hearts and minds of Russian-speaking minorities in the near abroad (Kuczyriska-Zonik, 2016). With the use of these and many other similarly aimed techniques, over a number of years, Russia had created an environment of informational chaos and a sense of subjective threat, enough so that it would seize the opportunity through military action.

Perceptions of gray-zone conflict among the international community are likely to be heavily tied to perspective. Few sovereign nations in the modern global landscape are entirely absolved of their use or of their impact. Russia's extensive use of such tools and techniques are judged no differently. There exist many international peers, notably the US and NATO, who outwardly challenge Russia's use of gray-zone conflict towards its near abroad. Disapproval has largely been met with via wide-sweeping economic sanctions and publicized political-shaming. This

economic hampering is quite often bypassed via illegal or 3rd party maneuvers and any degradation of international reputation desired tends to hold little weight to the accountable nation when considered against motivations to action, such as threats to regional security (Carment et al., 2019). Overall, exists a lack of swift and effective justice from the international community.

While entities exist with the charge of instituting agreed upon guidelines for conflict and enforcing international law, in reality, the are often toothless in response to gray-zone aggression. This is not entirely a sign of these entities failure to operate as intended. What it does it to highlight the immediate need for a re-shifting of international focus towards politically aimed techniques employed in today's definition of conflict. Not only is there a lack of common understanding of what gray-zone conflict entails, but a further lack of agreement on how and when thresholds of state-level aggression are crossed. Furthermore, because these collections of tools are not unique to authoritarian rules, concepts of which are legitimate and which operate out of bounds are not expressly states. For instance, within this unshared perspective of gray-zone conflict exists a dichotomy between 'black' and 'white' propaganda; the idea of forced information stemming from the rules of democratic values, retaining system transparency, law and the freedom of judgement vs that obtained from 'illegal' sources, not striving to follow those same democratic values (Kuczyriska-Zonik, 2016). It becomes abundantly clear that a need exists for coordinated and coherent strategy for the handling of operations deemed threatening to regional security and/or pose significant risk to unbalancing political and economic interdependency on a globalized level (Mazarr, 2015).

As with any international policy issues, strategies proposed for the collective identification and handling of gray-zone conflict are rooted in complexity. As are recommendations for effective mitigation. Ultimately, the two challenges become intertwined. Highlighted among the solutions are some combination of political, economic, societal, and technical changes to be implemented across a broad spectrum. In short, collective security is the answer (Carment and Belo, 2018). Cooperation between all parties invested in the continued, long-standing world peace should be a given, to include Russia. A noticeable growth in informational security would be possible (Kuczyriska-Zonik, 2016). But, the collective aspect should not stop at the nation-nation level. It must be one that permeates the societies of those collectively aligned. This security is to be counteracting in a way that incorporates public and private sectors alike, with inclusion of the civil sector and its cooperation in information exchange (Kuczyriska-Zonik, 2016). This exchange strengthens civil societies and instills faith in government. Without a common operating picture and transparency of the information space, opportunity for growth of misinformation will always exist. Building this collective resilience or strong state capacity, authority and legitimacy is vital to effective mitigation (Carment and Belo, 2018).

In the sense of handling perpetrating nations, lies the concept of reinforcing elements of the existing rules-based international order, combined with creating a more shared sense of inter-national ownership of rules, norms, and institutions so that long-term trends can reflect

deepened order and strengthened consensus against belligerence (Mazarr, 2015). The more credible entities who share a stake in the system, the higher the likelihood of a forceful response and the greater an impact to the aggrieving party. A strengthened, multilateralized approach can force those who wish to overstep recognized bounds to face the proposition of true geopolitical isolation. A semblance of forced assimilation, as it relates to acceptable political, economic, and military action taken against sovereign nations, is required for the betterment of the interdependent, international system. In reaching its potential, these efforts would result in the inclusion of Russia, rather than its isolation.

After much consideration given, the Russian Federation holds a certain justification in respect to its foreign policy strategy as related to the Russian diaspora in post-communist republics. Policy written and actions taken in response to perceived violations of minority rights are in many respects altruistic and not unique to Russia alone. However, to ignore the clear ulterior motives and the vigor with which Russia has pursued these initiatives would be an injustice to those sovereign states infringed upon. It is clear that in so much as the Russian diaspora can be aided or “rescued,” Russia’s broader regional goals can more easily be achieved. Out of this justification, the use of non-traditional, non-military means has grown in pursuit of near and long-tern regional political goals. The political approach undertaken by Russia, incorporating gray-zone engagement in the near abroad, is one requiring major focus and concern from policymakers worldwide. With the continued rise of this practice of undeclared conflict, a blurred line between war and peace, the measure of success for policymakers and the nation-states who’s interest they represent becomes exponentially more complex and elusive in nature.

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ABOUT THE GLOBAL POLICY HORIZONS RESEARCH LAB

Webster University's Global Policy Horizons Lab is a policy-focused research entity where students, Lab researchers, affiliated faculty, as well as members of the policy community from across disciplines, can explore national and global security issues, generate original research, as well as produce peer-reviewed policy papers and commentaries. The Lab pursues innovative research focusing on unconventional threats, identity and security, role of technology in security, economic security, as well environmental and food security. The goal of the Lab is to become a knowledge hub that informs national governments and other members of the global policy community on contemporary and future security challenges.

The current Director of the Lab is Professor Dani Belo, PhD.