
BALTIC STATES LIKE LATVIA ARE WARY OF WHERE TRUMP'S OVERTURES TO RUSSIA COULD LEAD

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The Baltic states are among the countries Russia once termed its "near abroad" □ after it could no longer call them "Soviet Republics" when they regained independence in 1991. Now Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are all members of both the European Union and NATO but that hasn't stopped Russian President Vladimir Putin from reminding those governments he's got his eye on them, with heavily-financed pro-Russian propaganda campaigns and beefed-up military resources. President-elect Donald Trump's friendly overtures to Russian President Vladimir Putin have been a troubling development for many in the Baltics. Ben Nimmo, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, says the fear is a return to living under Russian influence.

"[The Baltics] were an example of how well you can do when you break away from Kremlin rule and the Kremlin really hates that," he says.

Nimmo, who studies and dissects Kremlin disinformation campaigns, expects to see increased Russian efforts to destabilize the Baltics and undermine NATO solidarity in the near term.

Nimmo says while a physical attack is unlikely, the Kremlin now tries to win influence through character assassination, whereby the Baltic states are portrayed as "corrupt, incompetent and oppressive."

"I think we'll also hear more accusations from the Kremlin that NATO is being aggressive by moving reinforcements to the Baltics and that Russia has to take countermeasures to defend itself," he explains. "So I think we'll see this building up of a narrative that the Baltics are troublemakers and they're not worth protecting. We've seen that for many years and I'd expect it to get worse now."

When ominous headlines portend a pending "World War III," Latvia is often mentioned as ground zero. But these doomsday predictions long ago grew tiresome for Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics, who notes he's navigated through several waves of prognostication that the next global military conflict would begin on his doorstep.

"Everyone outside Latvia should calm down," Rinkevics says. "I would really suggest not to look at scenarios that we don't find plausible. 'WWIII' is not a plausible scenario here." He insists Latvia is not going to be "another Ukraine" or any other kind of problem spot for Europe.

Still, comparisons with Ukraine are not entirely the imagination of international media. A third of the Latvian population is ethnically Russian, and Putin occasionally announces he may need to

intervene, including militarily, to "protect their interests." That was his pretext before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which Putin insisted was the wish of the Russian-speakers there.

Watching his troops drill in Latvia's Adazi Training Area with combat vehicles newly purchased from Britain, Army Major Uldis Gutmanis says the significance of the Crimea annexation for Latvia can't be overstated.

"Crimea changed all our thinking about our future," Gutmanis said. "Crimea showed we need a stronger army, more money. We should invest into these capabilities and we should work together with all NATO forces."

Crimea was a rude awakening for NATO itself, as the alliance had always presumed the Kremlin would follow the basic tenets of international law respecting state sovereignty. After that, NATO moved quickly to create a rapid-reaction force designed to respond with more agility to Russia's snap exercises popping up uncomfortably close to the alliance's borders. At its July 2016 summit in Warsaw, NATO additionally approved the creation of four standing battle groups of about a thousand international troops each that will deploy to the Baltic states and Poland early this year.

A couple hundred soldiers from the US 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team have been exercising in each of those same buffer-zone countries since the Crimean takeover.

A few weeks ago, 1st. Sgt. Christopher Riley was among the US paratroopers practicing their aim on a long shooting range at Adazi, which used to be a valuable Soviet practice ground. Riley wouldn't speculate on what kind of "enemy" the Americans may be preparing to fight here, but he said it doesn't matter.

"We can unleash the fury, the hammer of justice," he said, "against any adversary that we might come up against"

But Latvia is facing another threat that paratroopers and combat vehicles can't touch: the use of information as a weapon. Kremlin-funded media outlets such as Russia Today and Sputnik are heavily targeting Baltic-dwelling Russians with pro-Moscow propaganda.

Antti Sillanpaa is with NATO's Strategic Communications Center of Excellence (Stratcomcoe) in Riga, a facility originally set up by the Latvians that identifies ☐ and seeks ways to counter ☐ Moscow-manufactured narratives against the Latvian government and society.

Sillanpaa says these are dangerous incursions into the minds of the population. "If we look at what is the Kremlin's big view on this, they try to seed mistrust in these individual countries but also among nations," he explained from the Stratcomcoe office. "If there is more mistrust in this country or there is mistrust like that towards, let's say the EU or NATO, then those organizations or those governments themselves are not as efficient for their citizens."

At Latvia's Ministry of Defense, State Secretary Janis Garisons puts an even sharper point on it, noting that all it takes is for an enemy to break down a society's willingness to protect the values of their country. Without that will, Garisons explains, "You don't need military capabilities anymore, because you can beat your enemy without a battle."

But while there may be some residents of Latvia who can be persuaded by such tactics, there are growing numbers motivated to act against them.

Local resident Laina Ziedina watched the US election with trepidation, worried that Russia will be empowered by the Trump victory. Some of her friends have joined the voluntary National Guard, which has expanded to more than 8,000 people, and beyond that they are putting their faith in Western alliances.

"Latvians still believe that being in NATO and being in the European Union, it means something," she said.

But Nimmo at the Atlantic Council explains those memberships are also part of what makes Moscow target them. The Baltic states are strong advocates of maintaining EU sanctions on Russia, which were extended six months on December 15. They urge NATO to send ever more military reinforcements to their territory. Nimmo says that makes it easy for Putin to paint them as enemies of Russia.

"Putin's built his domestic reputation on the idea that he 'made Russia great again' after the chaos of the Yeltsin years," Nimmo points out. "At the moment, oil is doing badly, mainly because of the collapse of the oil markets. He needs something to give his voters, and the cheapest thing to give them is 'patriotism'."

Nimmo also notes that, despite some more recent massaging of rhetoric, ahead of his election Donald Trump spoke warmly of Putin and coldly of NATO. That will keep a shiver in the Baltic air as the world waits to see what will happen next.

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