
RUSSIA'S NEIGHBORS RESPOND TO PUTIN'S 'HYBRID WAR'

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13.10.2017

FP, 13 Oct 2017

On Aug. 30, the western Latvian region of Kurzeme suddenly lost cellular service for seven hours, an unusual event in the tech-savvy Baltic nation.

Though the Latvian government has yet to say just what caused the disruption, the country's intelligence services announced last week that they are investigating if the unusual loss of service resulted from a Russian electronic attack; a Russian ship equipped for electronic warfare was reportedly just offshore at the time.

They're not alone: Norwegian intelligence services declared last week that their country suffered an electronic attack in September that they say came from Russia, with GPS signals on flights in northern Norway being jammed just as Moscow was carrying out its massive Zapad military exercise in the neighborhood.

Latvia's concern is a reflection of the growing array of hybrid war capabilities in Russia's arsenal — from the use of disinformation and propaganda to sow internal discord within a country, to crippling cyberattacks, to old-fashioned military power. Those capabilities have been honed in recent years in the Russian campaigns in Ukraine and Syria. But the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and their Nordic neighbors, have increasingly become a testing ground.

Lithuania has said that it has faced a constant stream of cyberattacks against its government departments since 2014, while Russian jets routinely violate national airspace in the Baltic. Estonia said that Russia abducted one of its intelligence officers in September 2014 in a high-profile incident involving smoke grenades at a customs post near the border; he was later released in a prisoner swap. Finland has also weathered a flood of false information about the war in Ukraine, fake stories about the abuse of ethnic Russians in Finland, and real threats from Russian President Vladimir Putin that Moscow will be forced to take countermeasures if the country joins NATO.

The traditional response has been to field tanks and train troops; earlier this year, NATO deployed

four battalion-sized battle groups to Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to deter the Russian military. But amid the heightened tensions, officials across the region say that they are moving fast to counter and adapt to Russias new generation of war capabilities in an emerging defense doctrine that increasingly relies on investing in brainpower as much as it does firepower.

What we need to change is our attitude and see that this isnt just about Russia. Its about us, Janis Bergmanis, the state secretary at Latvias Ministry of Defense, told Foreign Policy in an interview. Russia is exploiting our weaknesses.

Those weaknesses include the usual suspects, from pregnable electricity grids to porous cyber defenses. But they also include societys vulnerability to information warfare. Russian-directed misinformation uses fake stories, doctored photos, and propaganda to confuse and distract everyday citizens and policymakers alike. In Latvia, these stories have centered around undermining the countrys membership in the European Union and NATO, but they also increasingly look to create and amplify divisions in society, whether on wedge issues like LGBT rights or discrimination toward Latvias ethnic Russian population.

Sun Tzu said that the best victory is a victory won without weapons, Bergmanis said, referring to the ancient Chinese military strategist, and that is whats been happening. Now, the government is looking to education to fortify everyday Latvians against this multifaceted barrage.

Our aim is now to build societies that are resilient to these kinds of threats, Bergmanis said.

Currently, Latvias ministries of defense and education are working out how to beef up the countrys school curriculum to emphasize media literacy and critical-thinking skills at the lowest levels to inoculate future citizens against misinformation. Later, that will be complemented by elements of military training as the students get older. The goal, Bergmanis said, is to raise awareness of the whole spectrum of threats facing Latvia across the entire population.

This is the new normal, and we need to adjust ourselves, Bergmanis said. This is the new normal, and we need to adjust ourselves, Bergmanis said.

In the meantime, Latvia still has to fend off more immediate threats — especially cyber and electronic attacks that are increasingly hard to attribute and require years of planning and investment to defend against.

In the case of the mysterious cellphone outage in August, Latvia's intelligence services are still investigating whether it was the result of a deliberate Russian attack. But Latvia may not even have been the main target. Officials suspect Latvia's western region may have been collateral damage in a broader disruption aimed at Sweden's Oland Island, a strategic spot commanding the central Baltic and the entry to the Gulf of Bothnia. Sweden — a non-NATO member — was hosting large military exercises with the alliance in September. (A spokesperson from Sweden's Armed Forces told FP that they had no information to offer about such an incident.)

Across the Baltic Sea, Finland has also been moving quickly to fortify itself against both old threats and new ones. Across the Baltic Sea, Finland has also been moving quickly to fortify itself against both old threats and new ones. Helsinki is spending heavily on defense, maintains a large conscript army of 280,000 soldiers, and has a growing array of civil defense initiatives. But Helsinki is also beefing up resources outside the barracks, launching a public diplomacy program to train government employees about what disinformation is and how fake news goes viral. The Nordic country has also looked to boost its already close ties with NATO, opening an EU and NATO-linked center in Helsinki in early October dedicated to researching how governments can push back against information warfare.

A shooting war is probably unlikely — it would mean World War III, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö told journalists last week — but a quiet one is already underway. In addition to a flood of fake news, including stories designed to inflame ethnic tensions, pro-Russian activists have targeted and harassed a Finnish journalist who was investigating the activities of troll farms in Finland. (Russian internet trolls routinely spread disinformation and amplify societal divides, in Europe as in the United States.)

So far, Finland has proven more resistant than most to the information onslaught. Finnish officials point to the prominent role that their investment in education and limiting income inequality have played in curbing the scope for outsiders to exploit divides. Foreign Ministry officials note that media literacy in the school system helped Finns turn away from fake news or propaganda sites, such as the Russian state outlet Sputnik, whose Finnish-language bureau closed in March 2016 due to low readership.

Training well-informed citizens is becoming as important as training a large conscript army that can hopefully deter invaders, Finnish officials say.

These ideas sound robust, but it's also about deterrence, Mikko Kinnunen, director for security policy and crisis management at Finland's foreign ministry, told FP. By investing in education and awareness about new types of risks, Helsinki hopes it can take away the incentive for a future cyber or large-scale disinformation attack.

We need to have these in our toolbox in case we need to use them, Kinnunen said.

Kaynak/Source: