RUSSIA’S GEOSTRATEGIC ACTIVITIES IN EASTERN EUROPE

A STUDY OF RUSSIAN ACTIONS TARGETING BELARUS, GEORGIA, ESTONIA, LATVIA, LITHUANIA, MOLDOVA, POLAND AND UKRAINE
Russia’s Geostrategic Activities in Eastern Europe

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Introduction

Russian geostrategic activities in Eastern Europe have a structure and a clear unifying purpose constituting a coherent set of long-term policies directed at maximizing Russian geopolitical influence. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness on this matter by providing a holistic overview of these activities.

A group of researchers representing the Eastern European Studies Centre (Lithuania), the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” (Ukraine), the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies/Rondeli Foundation (Georgia) and the Warsaw Institute (Poland) joined their efforts to do so. This paper is the product of their efforts.

Executive Summary

The research behind this paper focused on Russia’s political influence, subversion, military activities, diplomatic activities and economic influence within the geographic area spanning Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland and Ukraine.

Russian political influence in many of the targeted countries is conducted with the help of local openly pro-Russian parties and politicians. These political organizations push the same narratives within society as does Russian propaganda, strive to legitimize a potential transformation of a given nation’s foreign policy to make it more amenable to Moscow’s interests and generally function as supporters of Russian geopolitical influence and imperial ambitions. Many of them maintain close relationships with the Russian political elite and frequently visit Russia to meet with the Russian leadership and officials. There also are more complicated cases when politicians who nominally are not pro-Russian support policies and use rhetoric beneficial to Moscow’s geopolitical interests. In the cases of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, another lever of Russian political influence is Moscow’s de facto effective control over the occupied and breakaway regions of these nations.

Pro-Russian parties in Ukraine are the Opposition Platform – For Life and the Opposition Bloc. Support for the former is limited (it got 13 percent in the 2019 parliamentary election and polled at 14 percent in June 2020) and that for the latter is negligible. Support for pro-Russian stances used to be considerably more robust in Ukraine, especially in its eastern and southern parts until early 2014. Russia’s extreme hostility towards Ukraine after the revolution of 2013-2014, including the occupation of Crimea and the aggression in Donbas, has resulted in a dramatic decrease of pro-Russian sentiments in the country. As a consequence, openly pro-Russian parties have trouble gathering the number of votes that could make them contenders for governing Ukraine. On the other hand, some narratives amenable to Russia are supported by some of the mainstream Ukrainian politicians who generally are not considered pro-Russian.

In Georgia, the main openly pro-Russian political forces are the Alliance of Patriots and the Democratic Movement – United Georgia. Both have rather small electoral support with Russia’s aggression against Georgia and its occupation of Georgian territories making it hard to gain many votes with overtly pro-Russian messages. At the same time, while officially the ruling Georgian Dream party supports the country’s Western vector, some of its policies conform to Moscow’s interests.

Among examples of such policies was the Georgian Dream government unconditionally releasing convicted Russian intelligence operatives from prison, cooperating with pro-Russian disinformation and propaganda assets in Georgia, undermining the strategic Anaklia port project that Russia does not want completed and doing its best to refrain from political rhetoric that Moscow finds disagreeable. The leader of the Georgian Dream and Georgia’s informal ruler, Bidzina Ivanishvili, speculated about Georgia’s potential future connection with Russia’s Eurasian geopolitical project, made factually incorrect accusations against Georgia regarding the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and praised some of the pro-Russian assets in Georgia. A combination of numerous instances of this trend has caused some US Members of Congress and voices in the American mainstream media to accuse the Georgian Dream and Ivanishvili of having ties with the Russian ruling regime and pushing Georgia under the sway of Moscow.
Moldova’s society is profoundly divided on account of the country’s historical identity and desirable foreign policy. Pro-Russian sentiments are stronger than either in Ukraine or Georgia as of 2020. Nevertheless, pro-European views are strong as well, hindering the consolidation of Russian influence even during the periods when pro-Russian political forces have an upper hand in Moldovan politics.

The primary pro-Russian party in Moldova is the Party of Socialists (PSRM). It enjoys strong electoral support, having come first in the 2019 parliamentary election. Its leader, Igor Dodon, is the main pro-Russian political leader in the country and has held the presidency since 2016 – an important position despite Moldova being a parliamentary republic. Dodon, whose brother has business connections to the Russian Kremlin-aligned oligarchy, has been consistently pushing pro-Russian agenda, including support for the Russian military presence in Transnistria, anti-Western rhetoric and political positions, subscribing Moldova to observer status in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, support for Russian companies operating in Moldova and other important items of Russian interests.

Dodon and the PSRM are locked in a continuous struggle against pro-European politicians and other active members of society with the pendulum of advantage periodically swinging from one side to another. This struggle is complicated by the existence of local plutocratic forces that maneuver in the geopolitical divide within Moldova aiming for a share in power. In various periods, these groups seek cooperation with either pro-Russian or pro-European politicians depending on the political environment at the given time.

Besides Russian influence in the central politics of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, Russia also exercises de facto political control over five proxy regimes in various parts of the three nations. These include the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” in the Donbas region of Ukraine, the proxy regimes in Georgia’s Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions and the regime in Transnistria, Moldova.

In Latvia, Russian political influence is mainly represented by the Harmony party whose strong presence in the parliament is provided by the support of the Russian ethnic minority. There are indications of some of Harmony’s funding coming from Russia and it had a formal cooperation agreement with Vladimir Putin’s United Russia party until 2018 when the Harmony ended it due to demands of political expedience. Other Latvian parties have been able to prevent Harmony from entering the government by creating coalition governments that exclude it. There are also a number of smaller pro-Russian organizations in Latvia.

The primary pro-Russian party in Lithuania is the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance (EAPL-CFA). Although it has been a member of Lithuania’s coalition government since 2019, its political influence is limited (it received 5.72 percent of votes in the 2016 parliamentary election). The Lithuanian public and the political elite are resilient to suggestions of potential cooperation with Russia under its present regime, limiting opportunities for Russian political influence to expand in Lithuania.

As of 2020, Estonia did not have an openly and consistently pro-Russian major political party. The ruling coalition’s leading Centre Party, however, is striving to accommodate the interests of the ethnic Russian minority in Estonia and has enjoyed its electoral support while having cooperation ties with the United Russia party.

In the politics of Poland, Russia exercises probably the least influence among the countries covered in this paper. There exists a firm consensus in Poland that the country’s policies need to be free from Russian influence. Exceptions to this consensus have normally inhabited the margins of Polish political life. The Confederation party, which received about 6.8 percent of votes in the 2019 parliamentary and the 2020 presidential elections, employs some narratives amenable to Russia.

Belarus was a peculiar case among the countries of Eastern Europe targeted by Russian influence activities. It was firmly within the Russian geopolitical camp under the regime of Alexander Lukashenko and probably more closely integrated with Russia than any other nation. While limitations that this same dictatorship imposed on the local political scene inhibited the operation of other pro-Russian forces and politicians, Moscow had arguably less need for such forces in Belarus than in the other countries addressed herein. Overall, Russian influence in Belarus was profound and limited only by periodic disagreements on issues between the Kremlin and Lukashenko, sometimes caused by...
the Russian desire to integrate Belarus ever more closely, undermining its sovereignty. At the time of writing, Belarus was engulfed in an attempted democratic revolution with its outcome and the country’s political future unclear.

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There are a number of common characteristics in the Russian subversive activities employed against the targeted Eastern European states. An information war is waged aggressively in the form of an incessant stream of propaganda and disinformation with fake news being used routinely. Anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives are systematically pushed forward through various types of outlets including traditional media, websites and social networks, nominally non-government organizations, politicians and other opinion makers.

The messaging of these assets unfailingly includes the demonization of the West, including both anti-Americanism and a condemnation of Europe with its values, promising disaster to come from the given nation’s Western political affiliation. The notion of traditional values being under threat is exploited to aid this propaganda. Political values associated with liberty are vilified. The very internal coherence of the nations in question is targeted in this information war as its perpetrators seek to sow division and amplify existing splits and grievances within the societies.

Russia is engaged in espionage against the Eastern European states, gathering information and recruiting local assets. Cyber attacks and cyber espionage are another type of instrument employed by Russia, particularly in the cases of Ukraine, Georgia and the three Baltic nations. A more blatant form of subversion is the provision of Russian citizenship to residents of the Russian-controlled occupied and breakaway territories. This was used very aggressively against Georgia, including as a pretext for the military aggression in 2008, has been partly implemented in Moldova and, at the time of writing, is being done in Ukraine.

In Ukraine, Russian propaganda narratives beyond the usual collection also include the supposed necessity to protect the rights of Russian-speakers, Ukraine’s internal division between west and east, the promotion of the status of the Russian language, provoking ethnic and religious tensions, and a special status for the Donbas region with wide prerogatives that could allow Russia’s local proxies to block Ukraine’s foreign policies that Moscow opposes.

The Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine has been acting as one of the Kremlin’s geopolitical tools. It has used its influence and moral authority with parts of the Ukrainian people to support Russian interests, including its opposition to the Ukrainian revolution of 2013-2014. Its members helped separatist militants in Donbas.

Russia has targeted other Eastern European nations with cyber attacks but some of the attacks against Ukraine have been particularly aggressive and dangerous, involving the subversion of critical infrastructure such as the power grid.

Meanwhile, Moscow has been altering the demographic picture in the occupied Crimea. Hundreds of thousands of Russians have moved into Crimea since it was occupied by Russia in 2014. At the same time, many ethnic Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars have left the peninsula following the occupation.

In Georgia, a number of groups promote pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda in combination with routinely employed hate speech. Some of them also make threats of violence, and actual attempts to commit violence, against the pro-Western forces and minorities. Some members of the Georgian Orthodox clergy, including several bishops, have been promoting the messages that conform to Russian propaganda.

One of the peculiar characteristics of the situation in Georgia is the failure of the government under the Georgian Dream to offer any visible opposition to the Russian espionage. In contrast to many other Eastern European states, no Russian intelligence assets have been arrested during the eight years of the Georgian Dream’s rule. In addition, the authorities have been transferring public funds to media outlets engaged in anti-Western propaganda by making advertisements contracts with them. Inauthentic Facebook pages and accounts linked to the Georgian Dream took part in anti-Western messaging while some pro-Kremlin Facebook accounts gave support to Georgian...
government agencies. Pro-Russian trolls on Facebook attacked Georgian anti-government protesters in the summer of 2019.

The media in Moldova is to a large extent dominated by Russia, making this country particularly vulnerable to the Russian propaganda and disinformation efforts. Russian propaganda and general influence are helped by the Moldovan subdivision of the Russian Orthodox Church that promotes anti-Western messages. Both the Russian-dominated media and the Orthodox Church supported the election of the pro-Russian President, Igor Dodon, in 2016.

Russian information warfare in Moldova seeks to exploit existing identity splits within Moldovan society in order to keep it divided. At the same time, Russia works to maintain its very strong influence in the autonomous Gagauzia region within Moldova.

In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the Russian information war effort also seeks to exploit existing internal weaknesses, especially the weak integration of parts of the Russian-speaking minorities. It consistently tries to portray the Baltic nations as failed states and to deepen divisions within their societies. One of the directions of Russian propaganda that is particularly pronounced in the case of the three Baltic states is Moscow’s systematic effort to rewrite history. Russians seek to glorify the Soviet occupation of the Baltic nations, which they interpret as liberation from Nazism, and to dismiss Soviet crimes against them in order to enhance the image of modern Russia seen as the successor of the Soviet Union.

Poland is relatively resilient to the Russian subversion due to reasons of history and modern popular attitudes in the country. Nevertheless, such subversion does exist. Among its expressions are non-governmental organizations that promote pro-Russian narratives and, more importantly, anti-Western propaganda. While openly pro-Russian narratives are somewhat subdued in Poland, Russia-affiliated actors promote anti-NATO, anti-American and anti-liberal views. They also try to use historical grievances to target Polish society with anti-Ukrainian and anti-Lithuanian messages in order to sow division between these Eastern European states and hinder their cooperation against Russia’s foreign strategy.

Russian intelligence agencies have maintained a very robust presence in Belarus as a result of this country being closely geopolitically aligned with Russia. Meanwhile, much of the content on Belarusian TV is Russian-made. At the same time, the regime of Alexander Lukashenko to some extent has been doing the Russians’ job for them by trying to limit the development of a Belarusian national identity. One of the major examples of this tendency is the de facto secondary status of the Belarusian language in Belarus. As the Belarusian identity has been developing regardless, Russian propaganda has sought to belittle it. At the time of writing, Belarus was experiencing an attempted democratic revolution with its political future unclear. Reports of Russian involvement were emerging, raising the possibilities for new kinds of Russian subversion in Belarus in the future.

* * *

Russian military is present on the territories of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova against the will of these nations. In all cases, Russian troops are located in the occupied and breakaway territories.

In Ukraine, Russia has a wide specter of capabilities in occupied Crimea, including land, naval, air, air defense and anti-ship missile units. These forces frequently conduct various types of military exercises and continue to grow. In Donbas, despite Moscow’s refusal to acknowledge its military presence, Russia is militarily involved, including control of the nominally separatist forces by Russian officers. In addition, Russia conducts a maritime harassment of Ukraine in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, periodically closing off maritime areas for exercises, claiming additional territorial waters, harassing commercial ships going to the Ukrainian Azov ports and engaging in other provocations, a major one being the capture of Ukrainian ships and their crew members in November 2018. Russia is also engaged in a large-scale military build-up on its own territory adjacent to the Ukrainian border. After 2014, Russia established two new armies that include three new mechanized divisions with units in every administrative region of the Russian Federation that borders Ukraine.

In Georgia, Russia has placed a mechanized brigade in each of the two occupied regions — Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. Strategically, the two regions constitute bridgeheads into Georgia for Russia, across
the natural barrier of the Caucasus mountain range. As a result, core areas of Georgia would be immediately exposed to the Russian armed forces in the case of another military aggression. Russian occupation forces in both regions conduct frequent exercises, keeping up their state of battle readiness.

Russia has about 1,500 troops based in Moldova’s breakaway Transnistria region. Despite repeated calls by the Moldovan authorities to withdraw them, Moscow has expressed no intention of doing so. Due to the weakness of the Moldovan armed forces, the combination of relatively well-prepared Transnistrian forces with the Russian military presence amounts to a potential military threat for Moldova despite the country’s geographic separation from Russia.

Regarding Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, a serious threat is caused by the significant Russian forces based in the Kaliningrad Oblast. Russia continues to increase these forces. This is considered a threatening factor for the Baltic nations because the Kaliningrad Oblast and the Russian-influenced Belarus are located on the both flanks of the so-called Suwalki gap which is the only land connection between the Baltic states and Poland — in other words, the rest of NATO. In the case of a Russian aggression against any or all of the Baltic nations, this could potentially be a significant factor.

Belarus is a member of the Russian-led CSTO military alliance. It is also the only nation among the ones addressed in this paper that host Russian military bases willingly. While there were no Russian combat troops permanently stationed in Belarus at the time of writing, the country hosts the Russian Aerospace Forces’ early warning radar in Hantsavichy and the 43rd Communications Node of the Russian Navy in Vileyka. Russian and Belarusian militaries have close relations that include regular joint exercises. The political situation in Belarus was in flux at the time of writing with unknown implications for possible future changes in the Russian military presence in Belarus.

* * *

Russian diplomatic efforts targeting Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova support Moscow’s general strategy of undermining these nations’ sovereignty.

In both Ukraine and Moldova, Russians push for federalization or “special status” formulas in the negotiation formats regarding these nations’ Russian-dominated breakaway regions — Donbas and Transnistria. Federalization projects on the conditions that could get the Kremlin’s backing would become an institutionally guaranteed lever for Moscow to influence and, whenever necessary, block independent policy-making in Ukraine and Moldova. In the case of Georgia, Russia pushes for Tbilisi to sign non-use of force agreements with Moscow’s proxy regimes in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia in order to present them as sovereign international actors, undermine the concept of Georgia’s territorial integrity and avoid Russia itself being designated as a side of the conflict with Georgia.

Russian diplomacy works internationally to legitimize the occupations that Moscow has formalized by its official actions. Regarding Ukraine, it seeks international support for the annexation of Crimea while regarding Georgia it tries to achieve recognition of “independence” for the proxy regimes in Georgia’s two Russian-occupied regions.

Russia has been accusing the Baltic states of violating the rights of their Russian-speaking residents. Another direction of Russia’s diplomatic activities is historical revisionism with the purpose of cleansing its name of crimes against the Baltic nations during the Soviet occupation in the 20th century, and an effort to legitimize that occupation.

Russia maintains a rather large diplomatic presence in Belarus. Russian diplomats in the country have been used to support the Kremlin’s general policy of undermining Belarusian sovereignty within the framework of its “integration” with Russia.

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Russia has been routinely using economic measures against the Eastern European states as one of the instruments in its geostrategic arsenal. In a number of cases, however, such measures, and Russia’s hostile policy in general, have decreased the targeted nations’ economic dependence on Russia, thus limiting the Russian influence.
In Ukraine, Russian economic influence has decreased since the launch of Moscow’s military aggression in 2014 with decreased trade and manufacturing ties. In the case of Georgia, the share of exports to Russia has never fully recovered since the introduction of the Russian boycott against the country in 2006. Trade between Russia and Poland dropped after the European sanctions against Russia and Moscow’s measures in response following the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

Russian economic influence remains considerable in Ukraine and Moldova. In both countries, Russians have attempted to help the standing of local pro-Russian politicians through their communication with Russia on economic matters. Such influence in Georgia is lower in comparison and importantly does not much concern energy resources but nevertheless does exist.

In the three Baltic nations, an important part of the Russian activities are attempts to hinder these nations’ efforts to reconfigure their infrastructure to enhance the energy and transportation connectivity with the European Union instead of Russia.

In Belarus, Russia has been heavily using this nation’s close economic ties with and energy dependence on Russia to attempt strong-arming it into conceding more of its sovereignty to Moscow.

* * *

Russian geostrategic activities against various states in Eastern Europe do have common characteristics. Nevertheless, the states addressed in this paper can be divided into four categories according to the Russian approach and immediate objectives: 1) Belarus; 2) Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine; 3) Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; 4) Poland.

Belarus was the only among the addressed nations firmly incorporated into the Russian sphere of influence at the time of writing. Instead of being satisfied with such a state of affairs, Moscow has been trying to use this close association with Belarus to further diminish its sovereignty.

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have been the main targets of Russian aggression for many years. Due to their unwillingness to submit themselves to the Russian sphere of influence, Moscow has been engaged in a sustained effort to structurally shatter these states.

In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Russia has not yet attempted to achieve decisive geostrategic results. Nonetheless, they are not safe from the Kremlin’s aggressive designs. Russia’s attitude towards the three Baltic states is characterized by possessiveness that makes it different from Moscow’s stance towards other NATO and EU member states. At the same time, Russia has been seeking to undermine the internal coherence of the Baltic nations.

While Russia does conduct activities targeting Poland, its objectives there do not appear to involve subjugating it. In these terms, the Polish case is considerably different from those of other nations discussed in the paper.

A crucial feature of Russia’s objectives in Eastern Europe is their uncompromising maximalism. In the cases of Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, particularly, Russia has consistently shown that it is not satisfied with just pro-Russian policies or even regimes, always attempting to undermine the targeted country’s sovereignty further at any given moment. Evidence provided by many years of Russian activities suggests that Russia is not satisfied with a mere influence over these nations but, rather, aims for complete hegemonic dominance instead.
Since 2014, Ukraine has remained the main target of malign Russian influence in all spheres. Even if many trends have their roots in a much earlier period (like in the economy and energy) or are changing tactics, their goals stay the same. Undermining Ukrainian sovereignty, questioning Ukrainian statehood, breaking the international coalition against Russian aggression, manipulating public opinion and interfering in domestic affairs are just a few to be named.

Studying the Ukrainian case is important as practice has shown that it is often a testing ground for the tools and the methods that the Russian Federation's actors later use in different countries around the globe. The subversive, first of all in the information sphere, and the military domains remain the top priority of Russian activities. The change of the president and the parliament in Ukraine in 2019, in general, did not influence Russian methods and the scope of the activities; however, one can notice a more active use of the pro-Russian narratives of some anti-Maidan politicians and more active Russian actions in the international arena to minimize the sanctions in response to their continued anti-Ukrainian policies.

Political Influence

Since 2014, the Ukrainian political domain had two critical points that had a chance to influence the orientation of the country and the public opinion concerning the Russian Federation. The Revolution of Dignity or the mass public protests of the winter 2013-2014 had not been initially anti-Russian; however, they sparked an aggressive Russian reaction and the active use of all possible methods and political influence both in support of pro-Russian politicians and pro-Russian (anti-EU, anti-Western) narratives. The dramatic change of power actors in 2014 and the attempted annexation of Crimea, as well as the military assault in Eastern Ukraine, decreased the influence of the pro-Russian politicians and minimized their open support for the Kremlin’s policies. With many escaping to the Russian Federation, still, the public’s support for some anti-Maidan politicians, who presented opinions within the Russian-dominated discourse (Soviet-nostalgic, anti-EU, economic dependency with Russia, etc.), remained stable in the eastern regions. Moreover, their support from Moscow increased. For a period of time, the Russian activities changed from a direct involvement in politics to work through local proxies.

The general tactic of the pro-Russian forces was to blame the Ukrainian government for initiating the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by choosing the Eurointegration course, talking about the economic collapse without economic ties with Russia and calling for the lifting of anti-Russian sanctions, just to name few. While their position has been slightly evolving due to the active military actions, they still continued keeping close contacts at the inter-parliamentary level between the political parties, participating in TV show on Russian TV channels, supporting the Russian Church and promoting the idea of the Ukrainian post-Maidan government as fascist or the Ukrainian state as a failed state.

The second point was the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections that changed the Maidan elite to novices. Both elections demonstrated two ways of Russian influence that are currently present. The first one is support of the openly pro-Russian parties while the second one is more complicated – support for the Russian favored narratives within the political programs of individual politicians or the victorious Servant of the People political party. Among those “shared” narratives are ideas of the wider use of the Russian language, lifting restrictions to Russian social networks and the entertainment industry, Church autonomy, negotiations with the separatist regions, etc.

Currently, two political parties from the top ten openly support pro-Russian sentiments, the Russian discourse and coordinate their activities with Moscow: the Opposition Bloc and the Opposition Platform - For Life. Both parties are remnants of the Party of the Regions of former President Yanukovych. The OPFL had 13 percent support in the July 2019 parliamentary elections, predominantly in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine. The Opposition Bloc has much weaker support and failed to enter the Parliament. In June 2020, the Opposition Platform demonstrated a stable 14 percent support and the Opposition Bloc – 1.7 percent, according to a recent public survey.
The leaders of the OPFL, Yuriy Boyko and Viktor Medvedchuk, are regularly traveling to the Russian Federation and meeting with its leadership (including during the elections campaign). The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, is a godfather of Medvedchuk’s daughter and both are good friends. Some experts consider that “during the early years of the undeclared Russo-Ukrainian War that erupted in the wake of the Euromaidan Revolution, Medvedchuk continued his political comeback by serving as the Kremlin’s preferred contact for negotiations on prisoner exchanges.” Medvedchuk has always been known for his pro-Russian, anti-EU position, creating different political movements, supporting pro-Russian NGOs and promoting the Kremlin-friendly agenda.

According to the research by “Ukrainian Prism,” the Opposition Platform — For Life is the exception among the political parties that came to the Parliament in 2019 considering their foreign policy objectives listed in the platform. They are presented as the protection of citizen interests and include the abolition of bilateral sanctions and the restoration of mutually beneficial trade and economic relations with Russia and the CIS countries. Economic cooperation with Russia is mostly viewed from the perspective of the losses suffered by Ukraine’s economy.

The Opposition Platform benefits considerably from the favorable coverage of three news TV channels with good ratings, indirectly owned by Medvedchuk – 112, ZIK and Newsone. These TV channels have played a prominent role in recent campaigns to discredit Ukraine’s reform agenda and promote a spate of anti-American narratives. For example, according to the research done by UkraineWorld, in spring 2020, a huge spike in activity promoting anti-Western narratives was noticed at these channels. “According to anti-Western actors, globalists organized Euromaidan in 2013-2014 to overthrow the legitimate government in Ukraine and replace it with their pawns. They succeeded in this, anti-Western actors say, and Ukraine has been ruled from the US ever since. According to this narrative, the end goal of the ‘external governance’ is to drain natural resources from Ukraine, control all state-owned enterprises, and turn our state into a colony.”

Another fact that should be considered while analyzing Russian influence in the political sphere is the support for Soviet nostalgic narratives that influence the political discourse and the perception of Russia. Despite a decrease in numbers from 48 percent in 2013 to 33 percent in 2020, the amount of people who feel sorry that the USSR collapsed is still high. This nostalgic attitude is higher in Eastern Ukraine – 41 percent as compared to 15 percent in Western Ukraine. These sentiments are well correlated with the support of the respective political parties and the pro-Russian vs. the pro-EU orientation of citizens. For example, 83.2 percent of the Opposition Platform — For Life supporters feel sorry, compared to 2 percent of those who voted for former President Poroshenko’s European Solidarity political party.

Last but not least, there are the Russian calls for the federalization of Ukraine which is done both via separatist entities and directly within peace negotiation formats. Article 11 of the Minsk Agreement (II) stipulated: “Realization of constitutional reform in Ukraine, with the new constitution to enter into force by the end of 2015, and assuming as a key element the decentralization (taking into account the peculiarities of certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as agreed with representatives of these districts), and the enactment of permanent legislation on the special status of certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions in accordance with the measures specified in the footnotes, until the end of 2015.” As is clear from this article, the Minsk Agreement envisaged a ‘decentralization’ rather than a ‘federalization’ of the state.

In January 2016, the representatives of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic submitted their proposals for constitutional reform in Ukraine. In addition to the request to have a quota for their members in the Parliament of Ukraine, to use Russian as an official language and to have close economic ties with Russia, they also insisted on the right to approve all Ukrainian laws as well as the right to veto foreign policy decisions. They also demanded the right to form their own police, security services, judiciary, prosecution, border guard service and other agencies without the approval of the authorities in Kyiv. Considering the total control of Moscow over separatist authorities, one can easily discern the roots of these initiatives. These demands faced two crucial difficulties. One was the possibility that, if conceded, the separatists could paralyze any state activity, rendering the country completely dysfunctional. Bearing in mind the opposing visions of the foreign policy orientation between the conflicting parties (pro-Russian vs. pro-European), reforms, trade agreements, political arrangements and foreign policy activity could be completely blocked. The second problem relates
to the initial conflict of the administrative structure and the division of powers. As Ukraine has not dissolved nor had the two separatist entities constructed a new state (they are not even recognized as independent by Russia), other regions of Ukraine would have the full right to request similar privileges. Thus, not only would this not prevent a new conflict, it would create additional conditions for further ones.\(^\text{18}\)

**Subversion**

The Russian Federation is actively using subversive methods against Ukraine. Most of them have been in place for decades. Among them, the most actively used and publicly known are those from the information, religious and cyber spheres.

There are **two directions of the Russian information malign influence** – the domestic one (aimed at the Ukrainian audience) and the international one (aiming to create an image of Ukraine and events in Ukraine for the international audience). The international one is not less important for Ukraine itself as it affects international support within international organizations and in foreign states, facilitating talks on lifting sanctions and spoiling Ukraine’s relations with third states. For example, the closing of the Ukrainian edition of Euronews and the Russian edition being sponsored by the Russian State TV company had its negative impact.\(^\text{19}\) The Russian edition was accused of propaganda and anti-Ukrainian content numerous times.\(^\text{20}\) Another striking example is a “Markiv case” in Italy when a Ukrainian national guard was prosecuted for a crime for which he is not guilty – killing an Italian journalist in the warzone, but a proper media background was created in support of the court’s dubious actions.\(^\text{21}\)

Since 2014, direct Russian propaganda in Ukraine has decreased while indirect or covert influence has been strengthening. The most dangerous way of influence became **promoting Russian narratives** through Ukrainian opinion-makers, media and political parties. Among such narratives, first of all, are:

- If Ukrainians had not initiated Maidan, there would never be a war in Donbas.
- The West would like to control Ukraine.
- The necessity of a dialogue and trade renewal with Russia, otherwise the Ukrainian economy will collapse.
- Traditional values are important (Church, traditional family, gender inequality, etc.), while “European values” (first of all LGBT rights) comprise a danger.
- The Russian language should be the second state language in Ukraine.
- Special status for Donbas with wide autonomy and control over militia and the right of veto on foreign policy decisions.

The two “traditional” and most actively used Russian narratives in the political discourse in Ukraine are the necessity to support/protect the Russian-speaking population and Ukraine’s “division” into East and West.

Notions about the “East-West division” and “Donbas that should be heard” appeared in 2004 during the presidential campaign that led to the Orange Revolution and were actively used by Russian political technologists who worked for Viktor Yanukovych. At the same time, the notion of a South-East Ukraine was introduced and politicians in both Ukraine and Russia still actively use it. The term South-East Ukraine had never been in the discourse before 2004 concerning the territory that pro-Russian forces name now. What was a mostly cultural notion in 2004 turned political in 2014 and still presents a security risk as these regions are subject to the strongest effect from Russian actions, have support from pro-Russian politicians, and they are claimed by Russia to be its historical lands.\(^\text{22}\)

The issue of the Russian speaking population and its separate rights and needs had also been dominant till 2014. It remains among the top topics promoted by Russia in Ukraine.

According to the UkraineWorld analysis, after the 2019 presidential elections, anti-Western and anti-democratic messages have become more widespread in the Ukrainian information space. They have identified the five most popular ones in 2020.\(^\text{23}\)
• George Soros has numerous servants in Ukraine.
• Ukraine is under external governance.
• Ukrainian land will be sold off - the greedy West wants to buy up all Ukrainian agricultural land on the cheap, stealing it from ordinary Ukrainians
• The IMF has enslaved Ukraine.
• The US curates the Ukrainian media, activists and politicians.

Even if anti-Western narratives do not always mean pro-Russian ones, it is still important to identify them in this context as well because of those actors who communicate them most actively. Pro-Russian politicians and the pro-Russian media have been noticed articulating these narratives while building anti-Western and anti-European discourse in Ukraine.

In 2014, there was also an attempt to use anti-Semitic sentiments and promote the idea about fascist anti-Semitic nationalistic forces in Ukraine being the main forces behind Euro-Maidan. These messages, however, collapsed due to Jewish volunteers fighting in the east, a rabbi and far-right activists cooperating and cleaning buildings from swastikas and the presence of Jews among the country’s leadership. At the same time, active work with the ethnic diversity of Ukraine has continued. It is manifested in both using the existing difficulties (like changes to the Law on Education and the claims of the Hungarian minority) and organizing provocations.

Media. Even though Ukraine has blocked Russian television channels to stop them from spreading war propaganda, there is a certain number of pro-Russian TV channels, standalone websites and journalists who continue the subtle dissemination of pro-Russian messages in the Ukrainian media. The TV channels NewsOne, 112, ZIK and Inter are actively involved in spreading the Russian discourse and supporting pro-Russian political parties. Numerous websites like strana.ua or vesti.ua are leading promoters of Russian messages. However, the media landscape in Ukraine is influenced by both the domestic political discourse and Russian information influence with some journalists becoming useful proxies while others receive direct financing.

Fake or unchecked news still pose a serious danger. A huge number of websites presenting themselves as news ones but being just a reposting website create an information bulb. Appearing on such websites, the information is then widely shared by other similar websites and social media networks while also ultimately being published by some real media or reported on TV as real news. Additionally, fake websites imitating the existing media appear from time to time. Such websites also fill the media space with a lot of conflicting messages and facts that lead to confusion and uncertainty, and as a result make it possible to manipulate the audience. The methods of Russian disinformation have changed from false photos, videos, quotes and comments to exaggeration, the manipulative representation of different kinds of data, using the most popular stereotypes and false conclusions. One of the most popular kinds of misinformation has become a story with real facts and quotes but with a manipulative and misleading headline.

The problem remains with broadcasting Ukrainian TV and radio channels to the occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as well as Crimea. These territories are jamming the broadcast. The Russian Federation is blocking Ukrainian TV and radio signals to these occupied regions thereby isolating their population from the Ukrainian information environment.

Russian TV programs and certain movies have been prohibited in Ukraine. Most of the programs and stations are prohibited on the basis of the “violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine” norm, meaning that they state that Crimea is a territory of the Russian Federation or due to the promotion of the aggressor state Russia. In 2014-2017, 648 rental film licenses for the right to distribute and show films in Ukraine were canceled and 80 foreign satellite TV programs, including Russian ones, were restricted for retransmission.

The issue of Russian passports became relevant in 2008 after the Russian-Georgian war and Russian arguments for intervention. However, until 2014, it had not been seriously tackled despite the prohibition of having double citizenship in Ukraine according to the legislation. The issue rose high on the agenda again in April 2019 when Russia simplified procedures for residents of the uncontrolled territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In July 2019, President Putin expanded this right to all persons registered in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions prior to 2014. According to the Vice-
Prime Minister of Ukraine, Oleksiy Reznikov, around 200,00 of the million-and-a-half inhabitants of the occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions had received Russian passports by May 2020. This information is confirmed by the Russian Ministry of the Interior.

This comes in line with changing the demographic picture in Crimea. According to official Russian statistics, since the annexation some 247,000 Russians had moved to Crimea by 2018. At the same time, about 140,000 people have left, mostly Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars, who moved to the Ukrainian mainland. At the same time, according to Mustafa Dzhemilev, the long-time leader of the Crimean Tatars, Russia has relocated up to one million people to the annexed Ukrainian region of Crimea. These numbers can differ due to the official movement and those who remain with registration in other regions - an enormous number of bureaucrats are moving in with their families, the military as well and a large number of “guest workers” who come to Crimea for major construction projects.

The Church autocephaly issue in Ukraine is not a purely religious one but is also political. In January 2019, Ukraine received Tomos, an official document granting autonomy (autocephaly) to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Constantinople Patriarchy, thus breaking ties with Moscow. As the Russian Orthodox Church has always been deeply involved in Ukrainian politics, with priests being members of local councils and having moral authority and close connections with politicians, the dispute about the establishment of the Ukrainian autocephaly became political. Provocations and fights near churches in villages were organized as well. Additional problems resulted from the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine rejected Euro-Maidan, many of their priests supported separatism and allowed the militants to be based on the territory of churches in Donbas. Member of the Parliament, Vadym Novinskiy, from the Opposition Bloc party, is one of the most well-known protagonists in support of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine and keeping contacts with the Moscow Patriarchy. He actively used lawsuits as well as a legislation initiative against the creation of the Ukrainian Church.

Cyber-attacks became a trademark of the Russian actions against Ukraine, targeting several goals:

- Interference in the elections process occurred regularly but was not successful as Ukraine has actively cooperated with NATO and other partners to prevent it.
- Virus attacks such as the “Petya” and “NotPetya” malware.
- Attacks against critical infrastructure – first of all, energy systems. Famous case – December 23, 2015 power grid cyberattack in the western regions of Ukraine.
- Possible interference in military equipment; first of all, “blinding” radar systems, sending wrong GPS coordinates, etc.

Russian covert agents inside the Ukrainian military and security agencies were the main problem back in 2013 and 2014 constituting a significant percentage. They conducted sabotage and transferred secret information, etc. While the scope of the problem has decreased, it is still a top issue for counterintelligence and internal security bodies. Bribery, blackmailing, sleeping agents, ideological belief and dissatisfaction about the current events in Ukraine are used to recruit Ukrainian soldiers and officers.

Military Factor

Russian military activities towards Ukraine have three dimensions – Crimea, Donbas and the Black Sea. Sometimes a fourth dimension is named - military exercises happening close to the borders that threaten Ukrainian security or use scenarios that can be employed against Ukraine. Regular military exercises and the demonstration of force on the border with Ukraine are usually accompanied by media campaigns and the acceleration of the aggressive rhetoric by Russian politicians.

The open military aggression in Donbas, Russian heavy weaponry, arms supply and control by Russian career officers of the separatist forces have a significant impact on the security situation. Numerous reports of international governmental and non-governmental organizations are still ignored by the Russian Federation which insists its forces are absent in Ukraine. A cease-fire is not being observed despite being repeatedly negotiated almost every month.
The Russian Federation is predominantly working through its local proxies in the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk among whom have always been a lot of Russian citizens serving as mercenaries. According to the intelligence data, more than 10,000 Russian troops are present in Eastern Ukraine; however, the exact number is impossible to calculate. Further, Donbas has been transformed “into a ‘gray zone’ that is not covered by the OSCE regime of arms control and confidence and security-building measures.”

Increase of aggressive and semi-legal actions in the Azov Sea and the Black Sea. The Kerch bridge construction, the constant closing of the sea for exercises, the checking of commercial ships coming into Ukrainian ports in the Ukrainian territorial waters of Azov, the demonstration of naval forces, the illegal capture of 24 Ukrainian navy crew members on November 25, 2018—these are just a few to name among the long list of Russian military and navy actions in the basin of the Azov Sea and the Black Sea. Considering the special status of the Azov Sea, the proximity of the Mariupol port to the front line and the shore’s easy access for landing operations—the risks remain high.

The illegal capture of Ukrainian navy ships and sailors on November 25, 2018 and the later refusal to release them despite a decision of the International Tribunal in Hamburg is a bad sign for future developments. The maritime domain is becoming a new priority for Russian actions that can negatively influence the security and safety of navigation in the Black Sea region. Provocations at sea, the closing of significant areas and claiming territorial waters around Crimea can lead to the widening of a zone of confrontation in the Black Sea.

Moreover, the Russian Federation continues to militarize Crimea, turning it from a touristic area to a military base. In addition to the general increase in troop stationing, the nationalization of the Ukrainian military enterprises and the modernization of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, there are also regular threats expressed by the Russian leadership about a possible nuclearization of the peninsula. In 2020, a new potential threat has been mentioned by experts - a possible military assault from Crimea to the Kherson region aimed at reaching water reservoirs that used to supply Crimea with fresh water before the attempted annexation.

The demonstration of force is also used as a classical tool of assault. Since 2014, the Russian military build-up has been happening near the border with Ukraine. In 2018 it accelerated and the process has been developing both in Crimea and on the eastern borders of Ukraine in the South Military District of the Russian Federation.

By 2020, Russia has already created three groups of troops near the border with Ukraine. According to the information presented by the General Staff of Ukraine at the OSCE meeting in July 2020, “28 battalion tactical groups are deployed along the state border of Ukraine. Today, the creation of three new formations is being completed – two Armies and an Army Corps, which plan to reach full operational capability in 2020-2021.” In general, the strength of the land task force of the Russian Armed Forces along the border of Ukraine amounts to about 87,000 military personnel, up to 1,100 tanks, up to 2,600 armored fighting vehicles, up to 1,100 artillery systems, up to 360 MLRS and 18 mobile short-range ballistic missile systems. The air component continues to be re-equipped with modern and upgraded models of aircraft. In total, about 330 combat aircraft and 230 helicopters are deployed at base airfields near the Ukrainian state border.

Massive military exercises, especially snap drills have become a new normal. The latest example – on July 15, 2020, President Vladimir Putin ordered snap military drills involving 150,000 personnel and hundreds of aircraft and naval vessels to ensure the “security in Russia’s southwest.” At the same time, regular navy exercises or those covering the maritime domain have been organized with a negative impact on the safety of navigation and the activities of the Ukrainian seaports and the navy as the extensive closing of the maritime zones for a long period of time has been happening. For example in July 2019, Russia closed five zones in total comprising one-quarter of the Black Sea area. The next important moment is expected in Autumn 2020 when Russia is planning its next strategic command and staff exercises, Caucasus-2020. Importantly, it will not only have a land component but also a maritime one.
Diplomatic Activities

Russia is actively working against Ukraine in the diplomatic domain. The following are the main dimensions of these activities:

1. Working with third countries to minimize Russia’s isolation caused by the annexation of Crimea. These efforts are aimed at both the big players, like Germany, France, the USA and Turkey, and the small countries around the globe. Big players are targeted under the idea of the necessity to deal with grand issues — terrorism, arms control, ISIS, Syria, Libya, etc., in order “to ignore” Russian misbehaving in Ukraine. Smaller states are predominantly targeted to cause them to stop their support of anti-Russian sanctions and anti-Russian resolutions in international organizations.

2. Disruptive work within international organizations. Here we see four vectors: playing as “a mediator,” blocking pro-Ukrainian resolutions, preventing anti-Russian monitoring and sanctions, and presenting Ukraine as a country that violates the law. The best examples are a return of the Russian delegation to the PACE, initiating meetings of the UN Security Council (e.g., on language law) and Russian observers in the SMM OSCE.

3. Manipulation with the MH–17 case investigation and court hearings.

4. Legitimizing the annexation of Crimea by inviting European parliamentarians to visit it on different occasions (elections, referendums, etc.) or inviting Crimean “representatives” to speak at international fora.

The newest initiative coming from Moscow is an attempt to lift the sanctions applied due to the annexation of Crimea and the aggression in Donbas on the pretext of fighting COVID-19. The Russian Federation has actively worked to adopt the United Nations General Assembly Resolution about solidarity in times of COVID-19 with the idea to eliminate all sanctions except those adopted by the UN Security Council (where the Russian Federation could veto any decisions). The Ukrainian delegation to the UN managed to prevent the adoption of this resolution but further Russian activities can be expected.

The Russian Federation is also acting through third parties and actors to promote its agenda concerning Ukraine; first of all, in issues of Donbas autonomy, federalization, etc. The latest example is a promotion of the so-called Steinmeier formula. One of the conditions for a personal (first in three-years) meeting of the Normandy Four in December 2019 was the adoption within Ukrainian legislation of a number of concessions, including the approval of the wording of the so-called Steinmeier formula which largely complicated the strategy of preventing the inclusion of dangerous legal clauses into national legislation – a special status of the uncontrolled territories after the local elections.

Economic Influence

Russian influence in the economic sphere has decreased since 2014. While previously stable economic and trade contacts had been observed, many of which had roots in Soviet manufacturing ties, in recent years the conflict, sanctions and the negative perception of the Russian brand have had their influence. At the same time, since many Russian companies have been investing through off-shore companies, it is not always possible to calculate the real economic involvement. The biggest Russian assets in Ukraine still remain in banking, energy, telecommunications, heavy industry and media.

Energy and the economy have always been the most actively used mechanisms of Russian power in Ukraine. The idea of Ukrainian dependency on Russian energy sources and trade links with the Russian market has been promoted for decades. Since 2014, active work has been done to minimize both the energy and the economic dependency on Russia. However, a number of steps taken in 2019 by the new political team to politically condemn the aggressiveness and militancy of the previous authorities, the haste in fulfilling the Russian requirements for the signing of a transit contract, preserving Naftogaz of Ukraine to be a partner of Gazprom, the creation of preconditions for Russian electricity import and appeasement rhetoric have been perceived by a part of the society and the expert community as a high level of readiness for a possible strategic vision change.
Before 2014, the Ukrainian economy was heavily dependent on Russian energy sources. Many spheres of the economy developed only because of the cheap energy prices and were not modernized. All attempts to diversify sources were unsuccessful due to Russian opposition or the pre-buying of Central Asian gas, so limiting options. The so-called energy wars of the winters 2005-2006, 2008-2009 and 2013-2014 influenced not only the energy security of Ukraine but also that of the European states. Since 2014, the state policy towards the rejection of buying Russian gas has been in place. However, still, there are issues through which the Russian Federation is influencing the situation:

- The Nord Stream 2 pipeline construction.\(^{71}\)
- Transit of energy resources via Ukrainian territory.\(^{72}\)
- Control over energy enterprises by pro-Russian businessmen.\(^{73}\)

As a result of five years, Ukraine won a short-term victory in the field of gas relations but failed to change Russia’s long-term plans for the political application of the energy policy instruments. Winning a case in Stockholm arbitration was one of the biggest victories for Ukraine;\(^{74}\) however, the later trade-off imposed by Russia in a December 2019 transit deal minimized the significance of this victory. Initially, President Zelensky’s official position was to avoid direct involvement in gas negotiations. However, in December 2019, the gas issue became a key subject of the Normandy format meeting agenda\(^{75}\) that was expecting to be only about Donbas settlement but became one of the additional pre-conditions that Russia had initiated.

Ukrainian oligarchs are becoming “double agents” in the energy sphere as at least some of them are not open supporters of the Russian Federation but in the energy market they put their business interests higher than the national one.

In parallel, pro-Russian politicians have been actively working in this domain, organizing their own “negotiations” to decrease prices for Russian gas to Ukraine (not even having any official powers to do so). The opposition political forces and their leaders, V. Medvedchuk and Y. Boyko, showed high activity, in particular, having held several meetings with Russian high-rank officials and Gazprom’s top management.\(^{76}\) These trips and “agreements” were actively used in promoting the image of the pro-Russian parties during the 2019 parliamentary elections as the only one that can negotiate with Moscow on substantial issues.

Russia significantly decreased its share in Ukrainian foreign trade. In 2018, a slight growth was observed with one decrease in 2019. Ukraine’s trade with Russia almost halved since 2014, down to USD 10.22 billion (87 percent of 2018 – USD 11.74 billion). It is necessary to mention, however, that even in the years of the highest trade between Ukraine and Russia, the status of the top trade partner was predominantly caused by energy resources.

The export of Ukraine to Russia has decreased from being one-fifth of the total in 2013 to 6.2 percent in 2019.\(^{77}\) This had positive political consequences; some companies searched for alternative markets and used all of the opportunities of the Association Agreement. At the same time, some enterprises lost their previous connections and income, being unable or unwilling to diversify and became open critics of Maidan and the Ukrainian government. This dissatisfaction and the notion of the necessity to renew economic connections with Russia are used continuously in the pro-Russian media and political campaigns.

The sanctions that have been introduced between Ukraine and Russia have a certain influence. First of all, a lot of Ukrainian military and air companies lost their contracts, including Yuzhmash (the biggest producer of missiles and engines for strategic weapons), while Russia is still unable to compensate Ukrainian engines and spare parts for weapons, consequently losing contracts with third states or not being able to modernize its own military equipment. However, Ukrainian export to Central Asia has deteriorated due to the Russian ban on transit through its territory for Ukrainian tracks and goods. Also, Ukraine is suffering losses as its air companies have been prohibited from crossing Russian airspace since 2015 so many routes to the east are becoming commercially disadvantageous and Ukraine also loses transit passengers (Kyiv was a hub for many Central Asian and Caucasus states).
Notes

1. See for example: www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYGj2mOW2Y (30.04.2020); www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FSJ-FIVHc (23.11.2018);
3. See for example: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rOA1BTClpY (28.06.2020);
6. See for example: “Реванш на марші” Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", July 2019.;
10. Taras Kuzio, “Russia is quietly occupying Ukraine’s information space,” UkraineAlert, 27.05.2020, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-is-quietly-occupying-ukraines-information-space/
12. Taras Kuzio, “Russia is quietly occupying Ukraine’s information space,” UkraineAlert, 27.06.2020, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-is-quietly-occupying-ukraines-information-space/
16. The text of the Minsk-2 clauses is provided according to the unofficial translation: www.ibtimes.com/minsk-ceasefire-deal-full-text-agreement-between-russia-ukraine-germany-france-1814468;
17. “‘DPR’ offers special view of amendments to Ukrainian Constitution,” Censor, 27.01.2016, www.en.censor.net.ua/n371293;

24. See examples of coverage here: www.lenta.ru/articles/2019/03/24/zakarpatie/ (24.03.2019)


27. The Moscow Times


35. “Ukraine charges Moscow has brought up to 1 million Russians into Crimea,” RFE/RL’s Crimea Desk, 27.05.2018, www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-charges-moscow-has-brought-up-to-1-million-russians-into-crimea/2925357.5.html


40. Ministers of Ukraine, 22.02.2019, p.50


55. “Russia troops build up on Ukraine border,” 05.08.2014, www.ft.com/content/fae9bde0-1ca2-11e4-88c3-00144feabdc0
64. “Russia Tried To Hinder, Influence Mh17 Investigation On Multiple Fronts: Report,” 05.03.2020, www.nltimes.nl/2020/03/05/russia-tried-hinder-influence-mh17-investigation-multiple-fronts-report


Georgia

By David Batashvili (GFSIS/Rondeli Foundation, Georgia)

Georgia is a geopolitically important state from the perspective of Moscow’s ambitions that envision establishing and consolidating a sphere of influence in the regions where Russia used to exercise control in the past. Due to its location on the map, Georgia controls a number of key geopolitical communication lines, including the South Caucasus east-west transportation corridor, the route connecting Russia to its strategic outpost in Armenia, the route that connects Turkey to its ally Azerbaijan and the connection of the Central Asian states to Europe and Turkey.

For Russia, strategic domination over Georgia entailing control of its foreign and, to a large degree at least, internal policies would mean controlling the South Caucasus transportation routes. Moscow would then be able to either use them for its own purposes or cut them off in order to kill the competition for the east-west transportation lines that run through the territory of Russia itself. Moscow would also be able to fully consolidate its influence over Armenia. At the same time, it would cut off Azerbaijan from Turkey and the West, placing Baku in the kind of geopolitical isolation that might leave it no other choice but to join the Russian sphere of influence. Overall, control over Georgia means control over the South Caucasus. In addition, Moscow would eliminate any chance of the Central Asian states to develop a connection to Europe independently from Russia. Georgia, therefore, holds keys for the whole southern geopolitical flank from Moscow’s perspective.

The majority of Georgians strongly reject the notion of going back under Russian influence. As a result, such a geopolitical realignment of Georgia cannot occur through a democratic and peaceful process. The end states in Georgia that would satisfy Moscow’s purposes could be its proxy non-democratic regime in Tbilisi or Georgia’s collapse into a failed state (or possibly both of these outcomes simultaneously). It makes sense, therefore, that Russia has been consistently deploying a wide-ranging arsenal of activities aimed at undermining Georgia’s sovereignty, internal coherence and independent foreign policy.

Political Influence

Russian efforts to maintain political influence in Georgia follow two tracks. One is Moscow’s political control over the two regions of Georgia that the Russian military forces occupy. Another one concerns Russian influence within the body politic of Georgia as a whole.

Moscow’s proxy regimes in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali are comprehensively dependent on Russia. Not only does Russia control Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia militarily, but also the regimes in both regions are politically subservient to Moscow and effectively cannot exist without its funding.

Russian government agencies micromanage governance in the occupied regions and define the “laws” adopted by both proxy regimes. The Kremlin’s written agreements with these regimes spell out the “establishment of a common defense and security space” and a “common social and economic space” in the case of Sokhumi as well as the “formation of a single defense and security space” in the case of Tskhinvali. Among many other integration measures in Tskhinvali, Moscow included integration of the local customs agencies with those of Russia in the text of the agreement.

Moscow is also engaged in the political management of the occupied regions of the occupied regions that ensures the political balance and outcomes that strictly conform to the Russian strategic objectives. The latest major manifestation of such management occurred in January 2020 when a political crisis in Abkhazia was resolved and a new political balance in this region was established with the direct participation of Russian officials led by the Deputy Secretary of the Security Council, Rashid Nurgaliyev, and the then assistant to the President of Russia, Vladislav Surkov. Another vivid example of the environment of Russian political control in both occupied regions occurred during the preparation for the Russian presidential election of March 18, 2018. Moscow’s “ambassadors” in both regions personally organized the local voter mobilization for this Russian election with the full cooperation of the proxy regimes. On June 30 and July 1, 2020, during Vladimir Putin’s referendum on the constitutional
changes to extend his rule in Russia to 2036, leaders of both proxy regimes in Georgia’s occupied regions cast ballots.\(^9\)

The occupation line\(^*\) between Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia has been officially\(^10\) controlled by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) border guards since 2009. The head of the Tskhinvali regime’s security service has traditionally been a Russian FSB officer, including the one at the time of writing, Oleg Shiran.\(^11\) The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs has also been establishing its institutional presence in both occupied regions through the so-called Joint Information-Coordination Centers of Internal Affairs Agencies in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali.\(^12\) At the same time, Moscow has formalized the military integration of the two occupied regions with the Russian armed forces.\(^13\)

Russian state funding comprises a major portion in the budgets of both of the proxy regimes, reaching 82 percent in the Tskhinvali regime’s budget for 2020.\(^14\) Moscow closely manages how its money is spent in the occupied regions with Russian officials conducting inspections as well as detailed analyses and audits on the matter.\(^15\) When these Russian officials are dissatisfied with how the locals follow the designated spending plans, they highlight their control by engaging in harsh and public criticism.\(^16\)

In Tskhinvali Region’s case, the measure of Russian political control is also underlined by the fact that the local proxy regime consistently and publicly declares that it would like this region to be officially annexed by the Russian Federation.\(^17\)

In the political realm of Georgia as a whole, Russian influence is promoted by a number of openly pro-Russian political forces and public figures. With regard to the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, while its foreign policy remains officially anti-occupation and pro-Western as of May 2020, there are certain indications of Moscow’s interests being given serious consideration in the development of the GD government’s policies and rhetoric.

The main political forces in Georgia openly promoting pro-Russian stances are the Alliance of Patriots (AP) and the Democratic Movement-United Georgia (DM-UG), the latter led by the former parliamentary Chairperson, Nino Burjanadze. Leaders of both parties periodically visit Moscow, including visits in 2019. The pro-Russian parties, especially the AP, are among the actors in Georgia actively engaged in anti-Western messaging.\(^18\) Their electoral influence in Georgia is limited, however. The AP received five percent of votes in the 2016 parliamentary election and 6.56 percent in the 2017 local election. The DM-UG got 3.53 percent in 2016 and 2.59 percent in 2017.\(^19\) The AP and Burjanadze both refused to take part in the 2018 presidential election\(^20\) with the AP supporting the Georgian Dream-backed candidate Salome Zurabishvili in the second round of the election.\(^21\)

A number of concerns have been raised regarding the policies and the stances of the Georgian Dream itself. One of the prominent ones is about the release of individuals convicted as Russian spies shortly after the GD came to power following its victory in the parliamentary election of October 1, 2012 — an act welcomed by the Russian Foreign Ministry.\(^22\) Since then, as of May 2020, no one has been known to be arrested in Georgia for being a Russian intelligence asset. Given the high geopolitical interest that Moscow continues to exhibit towards Georgia, this raises concerns that Russian intelligence agencies have been able to operate on Georgian soil with a very high degree of comfort and ease since the fall of 2012. By contrast, numerous arrests of Russian intelligence assets have been made in various Eastern European and Western countries during the recent years.

Prominent Russia-aligned Georgians have also found Georgia under the GD rule to be more welcoming. Instances of this trend included arrivals from Russia of figures such as Tengiz Kitovani,\(^23\) the former commander of the National Guard who led a bloody coup d’état in the winter of 1991-1992 widely seen in Georgia as backed by Moscow, or Temur Khachishvili,\(^24\) the Minister of Internal Affairs in 1992-1993, later convicted for organizing an attempt to assassinate the head of state, Eduard Shevardnadze, in 1995. Both Kitovani and Khachishvili arrived in Georgia in December 2012.

In 2016, Khachishvili associated himself politically with Lado Bedukadze, the former prison guard who had recorded prison abuse videos that caused an immense scandal in Georgia when they emerged

\(^*\) Which Russians and their proxies frequently push deeper into the Tbilisi-controlled territory.
in September 2012, shortly before the October 1 parliamentary election, and are believed to have contributed to its outcome. Khachishvili and Bedukadze’s political messages included promising Russian pensions for the elderly and Georgia joining Moscow’s Eurasian Union. The incoming GD government made a controversial move when, after the electoral victory in 2012, it appointed Lasha Natşvlishvili to the position of Georgia’s Deputy Prosecutor General. Natşvlishvili is a person known for the following statement to the Russian media made in the spring of 2009 only months after the Russo-Georgian War of August 7-12, 2008: “Sometimes I think that, perhaps, it would be best if Russia had captured Tbilisi.”

The GD leader Bidzina Ivanishvili has made various statements causing uncertainty about his stance on Russia. In one such instance, during a visit to Armenia in January 2013, Ivanishvili said that the Armenian foreign policy of the supposed balancing between Russia and the West “gives a good example for Georgia.” Given that Armenia is in the Russian sphere of geopolitical influence and a member of the Russian-led CSTO military alliance, Ivanishvili’s remarks caused consternation in Georgia. On September 4, 2013, the next day after Armenia had made its unexpected decision to join Russia’s Customs Union (later the Eurasian Economic Union), Ivanishvili said on Georgian TV: “I am keeping a close eye on it [the Eurasian Union] and we are studying it. At this stage we have no position at all. If in perspective we see that it is in our country’s strategic interest, then, why not? But at this stage we have no position at all.”

The lack of clarity in Ivanishvili’s foreign policy approach led to the resignation of Nikoloz Vashakidze, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, on January 21, 2013. Vashakidze specifically stated that he had resigned because of the differences between Georgia’s traditional foreign policy and Ivanishvili’s stance. This was followed the next month by a presentation of the GD’s foreign policy vision which included a thesis that “it is in Georgia’s interests for it to no longer exist in the list of controversial issues between the West and Russia as a factor.” This concept was criticized for promoting Georgia’s isolation while the country faced relentless Russian pressure which arguably would be of more benefit to Moscow than to Tbilisi.

The GD’s rhetoric concerning the Russo-Georgian War of August 7-12, 2008 has been deeply problematic. Bidzina Ivanishvili used his first press conference (on November 1, 2011) after declaring he was entering politics to attribute much of the responsibility for the war to the Georgian government at the time. Ivanishvili continued making controversial remarks regarding the war of 2008, including a false claim that Georgian units “began military operations before Russia crossed the border.” In fact, the opposite was the case with the Georgian operation starting many hours after the attacking units of the Russian armed forces had crossed the Georgian border. Many GD politicians followed Ivanishvili’s example in blaming the Georgian government for the war of 2008 throughout the GD’s period in power. With the Kremlin waging a relentless information campaign from 2008 to transfer the responsibility for the war from Russia to Georgia, the GD leaders’ rhetoric has given rise to concerns it might effectively aid Russia’s diplomatic and disinformation efforts against Georgia.

This problem was exacerbated in 2018 when the ruling party backed Salome Zurabishvili in the presidential election. Zurabishvili has been known for a large number of highly controversial statements regarding the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 as well as for falsely suggesting, after a Russian air strike that occurred one year prior to the war on August 6, 2007, that the Georgian government bombed its own territory. Journalist Edward Luce wrote in the Financial Times regarding Zurabishvili’s comments about the war that they “were a gift to Kremlin propagandists.” During the war of 2008 itself, Zurabishvili alleged that America might bear “a part of the responsibility” for the war. Shortly after the war, in late August 2008, Putin referred to Zurabishvili in his interview with CNN while alleging the US involvement in the conflict. Zurabishvili continued making accusations against the Georgian government in the context of the war of 2008 during her 2018 presidential campaign.

* Irma Inashvili and Giorgi Lomia have both stated that they had organized the prison videos leak together with David Tarkhan-Mouravi. All three are now leaders of the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots party. See the Netgazeti report from October 18, 2012 (in Georgian), www.netgazeti.ge/news/15511/
Zurabishvili is also known for criticizing the US-led international Noble Partner military exercise held in Georgia in 2017. At the time, Zurabishvili said: “It is not clear to me what purpose is served and what is gained by the appearance [in Georgia] of the American military vehicles.”

A similar lack of clarity has also affected Georgia’s support for Ukraine – its key partner in resisting Russia’s imperial ambitions. The GD representatives have made controversial statements since the start of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine in early 2014. Foreign Minister Maia Panjikidze said in August 2014 that the West’s Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia “are not the solution of this crisis.” In November 2014, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili also expresses skepticism towards the sanctions in a conversation with the Financial Times, adding that “mooted steps such as providing Western lethal arms to Ukraine risked only escalating the war there.” In December 2014, Garibashvili equated calls for individual Georgian soldiers to volunteer for the fight against Russia on the Donbas frontline in Ukraine to “direct treason.” On February 20, 2015, at the end of the Battle of Debaltseve in Donbas, the Georgian Dream MP Zaza Papuashvili used the war in Ukraine to mock the Georgian opposition, saying: “Go to the frontline [in Ukraine] and fight there. Fall there heroically, the Ukrainian people will recognize you as heroes and then we, and all of Georgia, can have a rest.”

A symbolically problematic event occurred on March 20, 2014. At the time, Moscow had already been waging its hybrid operation to achieve Ukraine’s disintegration. One of the slogans the Russians were actively employing was the protection and strengthening of the so-called ‘Russian world’ (russkiy mir in Russian). Against the background of the ongoing pro-Russian unrest in Ukraine, Bidzina Ivanishvili’s Kartu Foundation and the Russkiy Mir Foundation, established by Vladimir Putin’s decree in June 2007 and employed as a tool for the Kremlin’s international purposes, co-financed a festive meeting in Georgia to celebrate the 100th issue of a Russian-language magazine.

The situation with the Georgian government’s stance on Russia has not improved since the start of protest rallies in Georgia on June 20, 2019 that were caused by this stance. After a privately owned Georgian TV channel host verbally insulted Vladimir Putin during his show on July 7, 2019, the Georgian Foreign Ministry issued a special statement saying the host’s actions had “nothing in common with the freedom of speech.” In an unusual move, the Ministry also called on the “international community and all international organizations working on the press freedom” to “give proper appraisal” of the actions of the TV channel and the journalist “who massively ignored the international professional norms and standards.” The Ministry’s call was not met with any apparent response.

On July 17, 2019, Ivanishvili downplayed the June 20 incident that had sparked protest rallies when a Russian pro-occupation MP, Sergei Gavrilov, sat in the chair of the Georgian Parliament Chairperson. Ivanishvili stressed the importance of the Russian market for Georgia and blamed the opposition UNM party for the Russian occupation of Georgian territories. The GD Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze also repeated accusations against the previous Georgian government in his statement on August 7, 2019, the 11th anniversary of the start of the Russo-Georgian War. So did other Georgian Dream leaders.

The GD’s stance on the pro-Russian groups and disinformation in Georgia has also been controversial. Ivanishvili personally “repeatedly praised” the violently anti-Western and xenophobic Asaval-Dasavali newspaper “as a ‘patriotic’ publication,” He has also at times expressed sympathies for the openly pro-Russian political forces – something he has never done for the pro-Western opposition. Meanwhile, under the GD, the government has been transferring public funds to “media outlets which use hate speech and promote anti-Western sentiments” through “the placement of advertisements and other contracts from state institutions.” In another expression of the same trend on July 1, 2020, the GD Members of Parliament elected Bondo Mdzinarashvili, a prominent pro-Russian, anti-Western propagandist and editor-in-chief of the Alliance of the Patriots-aligned Obieqtivi TV, to a vacant seat on the board of trustees of the Georgian Public Broadcaster – a taxpayer-funded media organization. Among those who voted for Mdzinarashvili were the Georgian Parliament Chairperson, Archil Talakvadze, as well as Irakli Kobakhidze, Mamuka Mdinaradze and other GD parliamentary leaders.

When Facebook removed the GD-linked pages and accounts for “coordinated inauthentic behavior” in December 2019, the Atlantic Council’s DFRLab research found that these pages “attempted
to discredit Georgia’s Western allies, particularly the United States.” According to the DFRLab, “in addition to promoting Ivanishvili, the removed pages also shared articles that had a specifically anti-American sentiment.” On May 4, 2020, the Georgian watchdog organization, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), issued an investigative report raising concerns that the recently removed pro-Kremlin fake accounts on Facebook had been engaged in enhancing “the public profile of two [Georgian] government entities—the Central Election Commission and the Pension Agency.”

Another issue is the widespread perception that the GD government has been undermining the strategic Anaklia deep sea port project. The problem could not be resolved despite the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo directly expressing American support for the Anaklia port project after his meeting with the then Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhidze. Russia opposes the construction of Anaklia deep sea port and pro-Russian actors in Georgia have been attacking the project. On January 9, 2020, the day when the Georgian government terminated its contract with the Anaklia Development Consortium, Georgian Dream MP and Parliamentary Committee Chair, Roman Kakulia, said that in his opinion the government attacked the primary Georgian backer of the Anaklia project, Mamuka Khazaradze, as a part of its “policy of avoiding the Russian threat.” In a July 2020 interview, the former Commander of the US Army Europe and currently a senior member of the Center for European Policy Analysis, Ben Hodges, stated: “Moscow has blocked any progress in the Anaklia port project. If it were completed, Georgia would become a logistical hub between Europe and Asia. Therefore, all involved countries would be interested in Georgia’s security.”

While officially Georgian foreign policy remains pro-Western, concerns have been growing both within the country and among its foreign partners that some of the policies and stances of the Georgian Dream government could make it easier for Russia to increase its clout in Georgia. A prominent expression of such concerns was delivered in December 2019 by the editorial board of the Wall Street Journal which dedicated an article to Georgia, writing: “Acknowledging the country’s West-leaning public, the ruling party says the right things about good ties with Washington and aspiring to join the European Union and NATO. But it has steadily pushed Georgia back under the sway of Moscow.”

On May 15, 2020, four US Members of Congress, including the former presidential candidate, Senator Ted Cruz, issued a letter to the Secretary of State that spoke of “reported ties between Bidzina Ivanishvili, the chairman of the Georgian Dream party, and the Russian government.” The Republican Study Committee’s National Security Strategy from June 2020 listed Bidzina Ivanishvili among “Putin’s foreign cronies who undermine the sovereignty of former-Soviet countries” and said he “is a close ally of Putin and involved in destabilizing Georgia on Russia’s behalf.”

**Subversion**

It is beyond reasonable doubt that Russia is conducting espionage and covert subversion on Georgian soil. Russia seeks to include Georgia in its sphere of influence while espionage and covert subversion are among the tools that Moscow most actively employs—both traditionally and, emphatically, under the present regime in the Kremlin. It is, therefore, troubling that there has not been any indication during the recent years of the Georgian state resisting Russian covert efforts in a meaningful way—in sharp contrast with many other Eastern European as well as Western states.

Certain elements of the Russian active measures in Georgia can be seen on the surface, however. A number of organizations and public figures in Georgia aggressively push anti-Western and pro-Russian messages as well as virulent hatred towards pro-sovereignty, pro-democracy and pro-Western Georgian political forces and activists. They also engage in xenophobic and homophobic messaging and actions. Some of them have frequently made threats of physical violence and, in some cases, actually attempted to commit violence.

One such organization is the Georgian March, among leaders of which, as noted in the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service report of 2020, “are several individuals with ties to Russia and its influence activities.” The Georgian March has figured prominently in threats and actual attempts of violence against pro-Western forces and minorities. It also participated in the establishment of a grouping of pro-Russian and extremist forces called the Agreement of National Powers. Other organizations participating in this grouping included: the Georgian Demographic Society XXI, Rights
Defenders’ Union,* and the Eurasian Institute.** Other groups connected to the Georgian March include Erovnulebi [“Nationals”],76 Georgian Idea and Georgian Mission, among others.77 A prominent figure in the pro-Russian and extremist forces in Georgia is a Russian businessman of Georgian origin, Levan Vasadze.

The Russian government-backed Russkiy Mir Foundation conducts influence activities in Georgia.79 Its local collaborators include organizations such as the Eurasian Institute, Historical Heritage, New Socialist Movement, National Congress of Slavic Peoples of Georgia and the Anti-Fascist Coalition of Multinational Georgia80 as well as Tristan Tsitelashvili81 who had been convicted for spying for Russia before being released by the GD government shortly after its victory in the 2012 election82 and who has also taken part in Georgian March activities.83

Another partner of the Russkiy Mir Foundation in Georgia is the Yevgeny Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center84 which is a branch of the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund (established by the then President of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, in 2010) and “acts as an instrument of Russian influence activities.”85 The Primakov Center was established by the Gorchakov Fund in August 2013.86 The connection between the extremist pro-Russian organizations and Russia’s soft power influence NGOs in Georgia has been highlighted by the appointment of Dimitri Lortkipanidze as the head of the Primakov Center in March 2018.87 Lortkipanidze participated in establishing the abovementioned Agreement of National Powers in May 2018 together with the Georgian March leaders88 and has been leading activities and rallies along with them.***

As the Media Development Foundation (MDF) monitoring has shown, many of the aforementioned organizations have been engaging in anti-Western propaganda. Among the more active ones in this regard are: the Eurasian Institute, Yevgeny Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center, Rights Defenders’ Union, Georgian March and the Society of Defenders of Child’s Rights. Other organizations engaged in anti-Western messaging in Georgia include: the Development Laboratory of Georgia,89 Public Assembly,90 Global Research Center,91 Stalinist, Strategic Institute of Management, Terrorism Research Center and Former Prisoners for Human Rights.92

The Russia-affiliated disinformation and propaganda activities in Georgia constitute a sustained and systematic effort. The strategies employed include pro-Russian messages and the demonization of the West with it being portrayed as an option worse than Russia for Georgia. As the MDF notes in its study on the subject, the sustained spread of homogenous messages of this sort “provides the ground to think that this process is centralized.”93 Moreover, this information warfare has been getting more intense over the last few years.94 Significantly, the MDF research covering 2017, 2018 and 2019 showed that the most widespread theme among the anti-Western messages was anti-Americanism.95

Along with the pro-Russian organizations and political parties mentioned above, a number of media outlets conduct a disinformation and propaganda effort, the leading ones being Obieqtivi TV and radio (closely affiliated with the Alliance of Patriots party), the Asaval-Dasavali and Alia newspapers, the online outlet Georgia and the World and the Saqinformi agency.96 Other outlets, websites, Facebook pages and accounts are also engaged in this effort. Lately, it has been extended to Twitter as well.97 One such page, News-Front, was removed by Facebook on April 30, 2020. As the ISFED reported: “News-Front and inauthentic accounts that acted in coordination with News-Front were employing a range of tactics to spread anti-Western, pro-Russian messages.”98 News-Front is only a single example from among other resources of its kind, although it is a significant one. ISFED found that: “News-Front content was being spread in 31 open Facebook groups with a total of 521,240 members.”99 In addition, the Russian international propaganda outlet Sputnik has a Georgian edition complete with an “inauthentic coordinated network [on Facebook] for the dispersal of materials published on the Sputnik website.”100

This Russia-affiliated composite information warfare apparatus is engaged in daily attacks on pro-sovereignty, pro-democracy and pro-Western actors in Georgia, including political parties, NGOs, the media and activists. In a disturbing instance of these activities, during the protest rallies that

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* Alternatively translated from Georgian as the Association of the Defenders of Rights.
** Alternatively translated from Georgian as the Association of Child’s Rights.
*** It is worth noting here that pro-Russian actors in Georgia named in this paper by no means constitute an exhaustive list of such actors.
were taking place in Georgia from June 20, 2019, pro-Russian trolls joined the Georgian government
trolls on Facebook in attacking the protesters.\textsuperscript{101}

Some members of the \textbf{Georgian clergy} have been participating in anti-Western propaganda\textsuperscript{102} with
"separate religious servants" being "distinguished for their aggressive obedience to narratives of the
Russian Orthodox Church."\textsuperscript{103} Clerics engaged in pro-Russian messaging include some of the bishops.
One of them, Bishop of Skhalta Spiridon Abuladze, is known for saying that Belarusians, Russians and
Ukrainians are “the same people” and calling to pray for the “unification of the Slavs of the Russian
tribe – Ukraine, Belarus and Russia.” Abuladze said that it would be “a very great state under a single
strong rule.”\textsuperscript{104} The Metropolitan of Urbnisi and Ruisi, Job (Iob) Akiashvili, became famous when a
religious magazine affiliated with him claimed in September 2008 that Russian bombs falling on
Georgia during the Russo-Georgian War of August 7-12, 2008 were a punishment “from heaven”\textsuperscript{105}
because “God in no way allowed Georgia get too close to Western countries but blessed its coming
under Russia’s protection.”\textsuperscript{106} In May 2020, the Metropolitan of Vani and Baghati, Anton Bulukhia,
suggested that Georgians might need to “re-evaluate” their Euro-Atlantic foreign policy choice and
that another referendum on this matter might be in order.\textsuperscript{107} There also are other prominent clerics
deploying pro-Russian and anti-Western rhetoric.

The \textbf{cyber} space is yet another dimension of Russian subversion in Georgia. During the Russo-
Georgian War of 2008, Russia conducted what was probably the first major cyber offensive by one
nation against another that went in parallel with a conventional military offensive.\textsuperscript{108} As of May 2020,
the latest publicly known Russian cyber-attack against Georgia took place on October 28, 2019,
damaging numerous private and government assets in Georgia. The Georgian government as well as
Georgia’s foreign partners attributed the attack to the Russian GRU military intelligence service.\textsuperscript{109}
Mike Pompeo’s statement identified the GRU’s Unit 74455 specifically as the one responsible for the
cyber-attack.\textsuperscript{110}

\textbf{Military Factor}

Russia maintains a strong military presence within Georgia. Two parts of Georgia, Abkhazia and
Tskhinvali Region - altogether about one-fifth of the country’s territory - are occupied by the Russian
military. In each of these regions, Russia has a permanently based mechanized brigade. The brigade
in Abkhazia, officially called the 7\textsuperscript{th} Military Base, belongs to the Russian 49\textsuperscript{th} Army (HQ in Stavropol,
Russia). The brigade in Tskhinvali Region, officially called the 4\textsuperscript{th} Military Base, belongs to the 58\textsuperscript{th}
Army (HQ in Vladikavkaz, Russia). Both armies have numerous other units based within the territory
of the Russian Federation. Along with the mechanized brigades, Russian forces also have Iskander-M
ballistic missile systems in Tskhinvali Region\textsuperscript{111} as well as S-400\textsuperscript{112} and S-300\textsuperscript{113} surface-to-air missile
systems in Abkhazia.

Russia also has strong military forces on its own territory in the North Caucasus, close to the Georgian
border. This includes mechanized, Special Forces, air assault, Iskander-M ballistic missile and
artillery units, among others.\textsuperscript{114} The two occupied regions, and the Russian forces within, constitute
bridgeheads into Georgia for Russia across the natural barrier of the Greater Caucasus mountain
range. Due to the geographic location of the occupied regions, these bridgeheads would provide the
Russian military with an almost immediate access to the northern outskirts of the country’s capital
Tbilisi, the core areas of Western Georgia and the main highway and railroad connecting the eastern
and western halves of the country in the case of another Russian military aggression against Georgia.

Russians conduct frequent military exercises in Georgia’s occupied regions, keeping their forces
there in a state of battle readiness,\textsuperscript{115} while further developing the infrastructure for the permanent
presence of the Russian military servicemen and their families.\textsuperscript{116}

It is concerning in this context that over the last decade Russia’s proxy regime in Tskhinvali Region/
South Ossetia has been systematically making statements claiming additional strategically important
territory presently under the Georgian government’s control\textsuperscript{117} - something it would be highly
unlikely to do, with such consistency, without Moscow’s guidance.

The Russian military posture within and around Georgia is threatening,\textsuperscript{118} giving Moscow greater
leverage for its political and diplomatic pressure on Tbilisi and providing the Russian leadership with
ready contingencies if, at some point, it makes the political decision to conduct another military operation against Georgia.

**Diplomatic Activities**

Russian officials apply constant diplomatic pressure against Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration and its partnership with the West. Moscow reacts to Georgia’s security cooperation with the United States and NATO with a consistently menacing rhetoric. In 2018, Putin called Georgia and Ukraine potentially joining NATO “a direct and immediate threat for our national security,” adding that Russia’s “reaction would be extremely negative.” He also said that those who are seeking to include “Ukraine and Georgia in the orbit of the alliance should think about the possible consequences of such an irresponsible policy.”

The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, has also attacked Georgia-NATO relations and so has his ministry (MID). According to the MID, the partnership between the alliance and Georgia presents a “real threat of the escalation of tensions” and is “the key challenge for the regional security in the South Caucasus” while the US and NATO should “seriously consider” the Russian warnings and “stop, in fact, pushing Tbilisi towards a confrontation with Russia.” The MID has also been attacking the international military exercises taking place in Georgia, calling them “a serious threat to the stability and peace in the region” and “a provocation aimed at the purposeful destabilization of the military-political situation in the South Caucasus region.”

Moscow has been using both of the existing Georgian-Russian negotiation formats to attack Georgia’s partnership with the United States and NATO. One is a bilateral format between the Russian representative, Grigory Karasin, and the Georgian one, Zurab Abashidze. Another is a multilateral format called the Geneva International Discussions. According to the Russian MID’s official statements, during his talks with Abashidze, Karasin has been targeting Georgia’s military cooperation with NATO and the US and the international military exercises held in Georgia as well as the Western arms sales to Georgia and the training of its troops. Russian statements regarding the Geneva talks have been repeating the same kind of messages, the difference being that in this case the MID has been presenting them as delivered “together with Abkhazia and South Ossetia” in order to highlight Moscow’s recognition of the independence of these two occupied regions.

One of the most persistent Russian strategies in the Geneva talks is the effort to push Georgia towards signing the non-use of force agreements with Moscow’s proxy regimes in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia (but not with Russia). That would facilitate Russia’s reaching its key diplomatic goal of avoiding being designated as a side of a conflict with Georgia, instead presenting its proxy regimes as such. Russian tactics in this regard have been first to achieve the adoption of a general joint statement on the non-use of force in the Geneva talks which would then become the basis for pushing Tbilisi into bilateral negotiations with the proxy regimes on this matter. Moscow has also been pushing forward the proposal for “delimitation and demarcation” of the Tskhinvali Region occupation line in order to provide it with the official status of an “international border.”

Russia formally recognized the two regions it occupies as independent states on August 26, 2008 following the Russo-Georgian War of August 7-12, 2008. Since then, Russian diplomacy has been trying to achieve the recognition of these regions by other states as well. This effort has met with very limited success. As of May 2020, the only other states recognizing Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia as independent were Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and (since May 2018) the Assad regime’s Syria. Besides, Russia has made it another point of its Geneva talks agenda to demand access for the representatives of the two proxy regimes to international forums, first of all the UN.

A separate issue where Moscow has been putting particular pressure on Tbilisi is the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research at Georgia’s National Center for Disease Control and Public Health. Russian diplomats, other officials, Vladimir Putin himself and Russia-affiliated propaganda and disinformation assets have been continuously making unsubstantiated allegations and accusations concerning supposed illicit activities at the Lugar Center.
Economic Influence

As Transparency International’s useful report from May 4, 2020 states, there is a degree of Georgia’s economic dependence on Russia “through tourism, foreign trade and remittances [from Georgian emigrants]” with a “high dependence of Georgian wine export on Russia market, Russian tourists visiting Georgia and the import of Russian wheat” being “particularly problematic.”

67 percent of wheat consumed by Georgia came from Russia in 2019 and “Russia’s share in Georgia’s wheat imports is over 90 percent.” The share of consumed wheat that comes from Russia is greater than it was in 2012 (54 percent) but smaller than it was at its peak in 2015 (82 percent). In 2019, Georgian wine exported to Russia amounted to “57 percent of Georgia’s total wine exports” after standing at only 0.04 percent in 2012. In terms of tourism, the share of Russians among foreign visitors to Georgia was 16.2 percent in 2018 and 15.7 percent in 2019.

On the other hand, there has been a significant decrease in the share of remittances to Georgia (from Georgian emigrants) that come from Russia with this share decreasing from 56 percent in 2012 to 25 percent in 2019. At the same time, Russia “does not play a significant role in Georgia’s import of electricity and natural gas.” Only four percent of the total electricity consumed by Georgia in 2019 came from Russia. In 2018, natural gas from Russia amounted to just 1.7 percent of Georgia’s gas consumption that year. Georgia also does not significantly depend on Russian investments.

The huge Russian shares in Georgian wheat consumption and wine exports are vulnerabilities since Russia has demonstrated on many occasions it is ready to use economic measures as a weapon in its geostrategic pursuits. A halt of wheat imports from Russia “can cause a shortage of wheat in Georgia for some time and increase the price of bread” while the high share of wine exports to Russia means Moscow can strike at Georgia’s wine producers by prohibiting wine imports.

Russia has a history of taking hostile economic actions against Georgia. The most prominent one was a major trade boycott introduced in 2006. The latest of such actions (as of May 2020) came on June 21, 2019 when Putin introduced a ban for Russian airlines to fly from Russia to Georgia (the ban came into force on July 8). The ban was an attempted hit at Georgia’s tourism industry in response to the protest rallies in Georgia that started on June 20 and were directed against Russian occupation and influence. The Russian MID’s comment from November 2019 highlighted the decreased flow of tourists from Russia to Georgia and said in this regard it is important “that in Tbilisi they take lessons from what has happened.”

While Russia’s hostile economic actions can damage certain sectors of the Georgian economy and living standards for segments of Georgia’s population, the overall strategic effect from such actions has its limitations. It is a case in point that the greatest annual growth of Georgia’s GDP in its recorded history occurred in 2007 — the following year after the introduction of the major Russian trade boycott in 2006. Moreover, the boycott decreased Georgia’s dependence on Russia in terms of its exports. In 2006, Russia’s share in Georgia’s total exports stood at 18 percent. It has never recovered to the same level since the boycott, amounting to 13.2 percent in 2019 after having peaked at 14.5 percent in 2017.

The processes in the regional and global economy that have started as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 can alter the existing economic patterns, including the economic dynamic between Georgia and Russia and, therefore, can have an impact on the issue of Russia’s economic influence in Georgia.
Notes


5. Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Южная Осетия о союзничестве и интеграции, Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/2_contract/-/storage-viewer/bilateral/page/40/43957


27. “Ivanishvili Speaks on Ties with NATO, Russia,” Civil.ge, 18.01.2013, www.civil.ge/archives/122540


For some examples see this Tabula report in Georgian, from 07.08.2019, www.tabula.ge/ge/story/135589-ertibombi-shevarda-sakshi-da-raghac-kedeli-dazinda-da-gartuli-okneba-agvistos-omze

Hyperlinked sources of Salome Zurabishvili's statements are available at: David Batashvili, "A Candidate from the Opposite Team," On.ge, 25.10.2018 (in Georgian), www.on.ge/story/29353-


Neil Buckley, “Georgia calls on west to condemn Abkhazia treaty with Russia”, Financial Times, 25.11.2014, www.ft.com/content/0898a824-74a6-11e4-b30b-00144feabdc0


“Ivanishvili on Current Affairs, Future Plans; Civil.ge, 17.07.2019, www.civil.ge/archives/313557

“One on War Anniversary PM Talks of UNM Responsibility,” Civil.ge, 07.08.2019, www.civil.ge/archives/316155

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Moldova

By David Batashvili (GFSIS/Rondeli Foundation, Georgia)

Russia’s major strategic goal is to re-establish some form of control over its former imperial territories that used to be parts of the Soviet Union. Moldova is one of them and controlling its fate is among Moscow’s objectives. It is probably less critical to Russia than strengthening its grip on Belarus, the de-sovereignization of Ukraine or control of the South Caucasus through dominating Georgia, but it is an objective nonetheless.

Unlike Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine, Moldova is geographically separated from Russia. On the other hand, it is very weak both militarily and economically. The stark divisions that exist within Moldova’s society concerning its historical, cultural and political identity, however, comprise an even more important weakness. These divisions are reflected in endless fundamental disagreements on the nation’s foreign policy among both the population and the political elite. Russia capitalizes on these divisions, using various tools to keep the country weak and divided domestically, and helpless internationally, while working to increase Russian political influence. The ultimate purpose of Russia’s activities in Moldova is effectively to bring its foreign and, in large part at least, domestic policy under Russian control.

Political Influence

Moldova’s political spectrum reflects the profound divisions that exist within Moldovan society with pro-Russian forces exercising strong political influence in constant competition against pro-Western politicians. This struggle is complicated by local forces frequently characterized as oligarchic or plutocratic which strive to maneuver in the geopolitical divide within Moldova to gain and maintain power in their own hands.

While Russia has so far been unable to consolidate its influence over Moldova, pro-Russian forces in the country have managed to maintain strong political positions and prevent the formation of a coherent Moldovan pro-Western orientation. At the same time, for all practical purposes, Russia exercises political control in Moldova’s eastern breakaway Transnistria region through Moscow’s local proxy regime.

A key political post held by pro-Russian political forces in Moldova as of May 2020 is the presidency. Igor Dodon, of the Party of Socialists (PSRM), won the presidential election in November 2016, coming into office on December 23 of that year. Since then he has been the leading figure of the Russian political influence in Moldova, known for both his anti-Western stance and disproportionately numerous visits to Russia. Dodon “justifies the Russian invasion of Ukraine, supports the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria and offers economic licenses to Russian companies, including the takeover of Moldavian airports and the Danube port.”

One of Dodon’s prominent pro-Russian actions was to subscribe Moldova to the status of observer state within the Eurasian Economic Union which is a Russian project aiming to institutionalize its geographic sphere of influence. Dodon did so despite “requiring special authority for this step from the parliament which he did not have” since Moldova is a parliamentary republic with the body responsible for implementing foreign policy being the government formed by the parliament rather than the president. At the same time, Dodon has been engaging in anti-Western rhetoric, including attacks on Moldova’s Association Agreement with the European Union. He was “adamantly opposed” to a civilian NATO Liaison Office that opened in Moldova in December 2017 and retained his antagonistic stance in the later period. When the US provided aid to Moldova to improve training spaces for the Moldovan military, Dodon alleged that Americans were trying to involve Moldova in foreign military operations.

Dodon did not support the Moldovan government’s calls for the withdrawal of Russia’s “peacekeeper” troops from breakaway Transnistria and their replacement with international observers. He has called Russian troops “a factor of stability” in the area. In September 2019, Dodon said that “Russian peacekeepers do their job, do everything right and with high quality.” In general, Dodon
consistently employs messages essentially meaning that Russia must keep its troops in Moldova’s Transnistria region for as long as it deems suitable.

In addition, Dodon and his PSRM party have expressed support for the project of assigning Transnistria a so-called “special status.” In practice that would mean the federalization of Moldova on Russian terms, giving Moscow a high degree of control over Moldova’s foreign policy while permanently weakening it internally.

Against the background of such policies, Igor Dodon’s family connection to the Russian Kremlin-aligned oligarchy might be of some additional significance. His brother, Alexandru Dodon, has developed close business ties with Igor Chaika, the son of Yury Chaika, who is Putin’s representative in the North Caucasus at the time of writing after having served as Russia’s Prosecutor General from June 2006 to January 2020. One of the companies owned by Igor Chaika and Alexandru Dodon was founded just two days before Igor Dodon went to Russia for one of his official visits there on September 2, 2019. As of the fall of 2019, Igor Chaika was developing plans for investments in Transnistria as well as Moldova’s pro-Russian autonomous region of Gagauzia.

Dodon’s presidency is an important asset for Russia’s political influence in Moldova. Since it is a parliamentary republic, however, control over the government is required to really rule the country. Prior to June 2019, that de facto control had been in the hands of Vladimir Plahotniuc for several years (even though he has never held the prime minister’s post himself) — a local tycoon whose agenda was largely personal rather than geopolitical and aimed at continuing his own political domination of Moldova indefinitely.

Plahotniuc strived to present himself and his Democratic Party (PDM) as the main pro-European force in Moldova. Indeed, under his rule the Moldovan government took some actions directed against the Russian influence, including, among other steps, blocking Russian TV broadcasting in Moldova in early 2018, and expelling five Russian diplomats in May 2017.

From the fall of 2018, however, Plahotniuc and the PDM began to substitute their pro-European messaging with the geopolitically non-committal “pro-Moldovan” one. Plahotniuc called this new approach the “Fourth Way” (the other three being pro-European, pro-Russian and pro-Romanian policies) and dismissed the foreign policy orientation choices as “geopolitical mythology.”

More importantly, despite his claim of a pro-European policy, Plahotniuc, in fact, cooperated with Dodon’s pro-Russian PSRM party when he felt it was politically expedient. Plahotniuc’s method of remaining in power involved presenting himself to both Moldovan society and the West as the only guarantor of Moldova remaining outside of Russia’s sphere of influence. Therefore, Plahotniuc saw Moldova’s genuinely pro-European, pro-democracy and anti-corruption political forces as a threat. He treated these pro-European forces as his main political adversary and acted against them in tandem with Dodon and the PSRM.

Plahotniuc is, in part, responsible for Igor Dodon’s presidency itself. He dominated Moldova’s media landscape and his “media conglomerate campaigned against” the pro-European presidential candidate, Maia Sandu, who was Dodon’s opponent in the 2016 presidential election. In the end, Dodon defeated Sandu 52.11 to 47.89 percent in the election’s second round on November 11, 2016. In the summer of 2018, another pro-European politician, Andrei Năstase, “won the election for mayor of [the capital] Chișinău against a Socialist [PSRM] candidate supported again by Plahotniuc’s media, but Plahotniuc-controlled courts invalidated Năstase’s victory.” In 2017, Plahotniuc and Dodon collectively pushed through new election legislation designed to artificially diminish the electoral chances of the pro-European politicians, ignoring warnings not to do so from Moldova’s foreign partners and the protests of Moldova’s own civil society.

The Moldovan parliamentary election on February 24, 2019 shifted the political balance in the country. Dodon’s pro-Russian PSRM was first with 35 seats. The severely under-resourced and, as has been noted above, artificially disadvantaged pro-European ACUM (NOW) bloc led by Sandu and Năstase took 26 seats. Plahotniuc’s PDM got 30 seats, although together with his satellite Shor Party, Plahotniuc actually controlled at least 37 seats.

During the election, Russian proxies in Transnistria transported, “in an organized fashion,” over 37,000 people to 47 voting stations in the Moldovan government-controlled territory who “voted
as instructed for certain Moldovan candidates, obscure figures completely unknown to Transnistrian voters.”

Over half of them voted for the PSRM and “the remainder divided their votes mostly between Vladimir Plahotniuc’s Democratic Party and Ilan Shor’s ‘Shor Party’ (allied with Plahotniuc though widely seen as russophile).”

The election result made it impossible for Plahotniuc to retain power without the support of another parliamentary group aside from the MPs under his control. The pro-European ACUM bloc was not an option since their platform was to fight precisely against the plutocratic agenda which Plahotniuc personified. The natural choice for Plahotniuc would be to build on his previous cooperation with Dodon and the PSRM to develop a partnership in the new parliament. Russia, however, apparently decided to seize the moment to get rid of Plahotniuc. Although his pro-European credentials were hardly genuine, Plahotniuc was an actor independent from Russia and thusviewed as either a current or a potential hindrance for the consolidation of Russian influence over Moldova.

On March 31, 2019, “one of the Kremlin’s top propagandists, Dmitry Kiselev, called... for regime change in Moldova. Speaking on Russian state television, he urged russophile Moldovan President Igor Dodon’s Socialist Party and the pro-Western bloc NOW [ACUM] to form a situational alliance in order to replace the informal ruler, Vladimir Plahotniuc’s, government.” As Vladimir Socor observed at the time, Moscow’s message proposed “in effect, to extricate the Socialists” from their cartel with Plahotniuc.

The Russians and the PSRM did try to extract enormous concessions from the embattled Plahotniuc in exchange for a coalition government. On June 7, 2019, Dodon met Plahotniuc and “demanded control over ministerial chairs such as foreign affairs, defense, interior and finance, the reintegration portfolio dealing with the Transnistrian conflict negotiations, the head of the intelligence service, as well as seats on the Constitutional Court. Dodon also revealed that his Socialist Party was receiving monthly payments from Russian high-level officials in the amount of $600,000–700,000, and demanded that Democrats [Plahotniuc’s PDM party] take over these payments, at the suggestion of [Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Putin’s special representative for economic relations with Moldova, Dmitry] Kozak.”

Also, “Dodon indicated that Russia wanted part of the joint governance deal to be a secret agreement, signed between him and Plahotniuc in the presence of the Russian ambassador in Moldova, and which would include the federalization of Moldova,” linguistically masked under the term “special status,” to be applied to the regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia. Other Russian demands to be included in the secret deal were “Moldovan participation in all Moscow-led regional arrangements (including observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union), trilateral EU-Moldova-Russia negotiations on trade arrangements, an official status for the Russian language in Moldova, permission for the Russian media to freely broadcast on Moldovan territory and more autonomy for the Gagauz region, among others.”

The total sum of the Russian demands, if satisfied, would amount to Moldova effectively becoming a Russian satellite. Plahotniuc, however, chose instead to release the video footage of his June 7 meeting with Dodon that had been secretly recorded by his people in an attempt to mobilize support and stay in power.

This last-resort measure failed to bring the targeted result. In the end, a “situational alliance” against Plahotniuc between pro-European and pro-Russian parties was precisely what happened. On June 8, 2019, the PSRM and the ACUM reached an agreement to jointly form a government headed by Maia Sandu, thus ousting Plahotniuc from power who then immediately left the country. The formation of the ACUM-PSRM coalition was supported by the pro-Russian head of Gagauzia autonomous region, Irina Vlah, and by Dmitry Kozak. Vladimir Putin himself praised the coalition, saying in an interview published on June 13, 2019: “What has now been done by President Dodon and his recent opponents, let us say from the pro-Western parties, is a step in the direction of building a functional, civilized, modern state.”

Dodon and his party worked to increase their clout and strengthen the pro-Russian agenda during the period of their coalition with the ACUM. This included the ACUM yielding control to Dodon over Transnistrian matters and the de facto commanding influence over Moldova’s principal intelligence agency, the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS).
In August 2019, Dodon received the Russian Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoygu, in Moldova. During the visit, Shoygu proposed a three-year cooperation plan between the Russian and Moldovan defense ministries. In September 2019, Dodon announced to the Russian media that the governing coalition in Moldova had agreed “to discontinue the practice when they were prohibiting to the Russian journalists, Russian investors, to come to Moldova,” saying there would be no more “systemic anti-Russian approach” in the country. Also in September 2019, Dodon “effectively disavowed Moldova’s sponsorship of the United Nations General Assembly’s (UNGA) resolution” that had been adopted in 2018 at Moldova’s initiative and called “for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Moldova’s Transnistria region.” In his address at the UNGA, Dodon called “for international recognition of Moldova’s neutrality” without demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from the country which “could imply that their presence is compatible with Moldovan neutrality.” In general, Dodon strived to insert messages and stances into the policy-making process during the coalition period which were beneficial for Russia despite lacking formal constitutional prerogatives to do so.

Meanwhile, Dodon’s PSRM party “revealed intentions to take over key posts in the judiciary and prosecution systems, replacing Plahotniuc’s appointees at the top.” Dodon’s advisor “became the new head of the National Anti-Corruption Center.” The PSRM also “obtained new broadcast licenses for several party-affiliated media outlets, including a television channel to rebroadcast Russia’s Channel One TV.”

At the first serious attempt of the ACUM to resist the PSRM’s steady push for greater influence conducted under the cover of the coalition, which the ACUM made on the matter of the selection of a new head of the General Prosecutor’s Office, the PSRM aligned with the formerly Plahotniuc’s PDM members of parliament to bring down the Sandu Cabinet on November 12, 2019. With the PDM’s support, Dodon appointed a new cabinet headed by his Economic Advisor, Ion Chicu, and filled with Dodon’s other presidential advisors transferred to ministerial posts.

Moldova now had its first clearly pro-Russian government in years under Dodon’s own de facto control. While no drastic geopolitical moves occurred in its first few months in power, there were changes in the media landscape beneficial to Russia. In one of those, the aforementioned Igor Chaika – son of Putin’s high-level functionary Yury Chaika and business partner of Igor Dodon’s brother – became the owner of the Primul in Moldova TV channel. In April 2020, the PSRM’s Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Vlad Batrincea, accused Western countries of giving “millions of euros” to some media outlets in Moldova.

The nature of Dodon’s rule evidently disturbed some of Moldova’s European partners. In January 2020, Romania, one of Moldova’s biggest donors, suspended assistance to Moldova’s government due to its pro-Russian nature with the Romanians looking for ways to distribute their aid “through pro-Romania local governments, bypassing the government in Chișinău.” On February 14, 2020, Dodon “accused several EU ambassadors to Moldova (without providing their names) of blocking dialogue between the new authorities and the EU, and of providing the European capitals with disinformation on the real situation in the country.”

During the first half of 2020, the political balance in Moldova began to shift once again. On February 19, the former Speaker of the Parliament and Vladimir Plahotniuc’s godson, Andrian Candu, split from the PDM along with five other MPs, establishing a new Pro Moldova faction in the parliament. Candu then proceeded to cause further transfers of PDM parliamentarians to Pro Moldova while also “co-opting many local branches of the Democratic Party and party-affiliated mayors.” Some other governing coalition MPs deserted to the Shor Party, controlled by Ilan Shor – another Moldovan tycoon and Plahotniuc’s satellite, who had also fled the country following the fall of Plahotniuc in June 2019.

On May 2020, Candu announced the formation of an anti-government bloc in the parliament, consisting of Pro Moldova and Shor Party MPs. His stated purpose was to remove the pro-Russian government and “restore Moldova’s European course.” By May 20, Candu’s bloc included 19 MPs, reducing the government’s majority to 52 seats in the 101-seat parliament. Meanwhile, Candu began to seek cooperation with the ACUM bloc against Dodon and his government.

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* In March 2020, the PDM was granted several ministerial positions as the PSRM’s coalition partner.

** In January 2015 - February 2019.
The ruling coalition was reduced to a parliamentary minority with 50 MPs on June 17, 2020 when yet another PDM member joined the Pro Moldova faction and to 49 MPs on June 30 when a PSRM member left the party.

Beyond the maneuvers of the politicians, the potential for Russia’s political influence in Moldova is fundamentally sustained by a political identity split that exists across Moldovan society. As a result of this division within the public, there is no consensus in Moldova about what its foreign policy should be. For years, Russia has been trying to benefit from this with varying degrees of success.

This societal division is demonstrated by responses to some of the questions in the polls conducted by the Republic of Moldova Public Opinion Barometer in recent years. Just after the Russian annexation of Crimea, Moldovan respondents were asked in April 2014 whether or not they supported the annexation. A total of 43.5 percent answered they did not while 39.6 percent said they did. In November 2017 and May 2018, the Barometer’s respondents were asked to say whether or not they would support Moldova’s own “unification” with the Russian Federation. A total of 40.3 percent were against, 33 percent were in favor in November 2017. A total of 47.8 percent were against and 31.8 were in favor in May 2018.

There has been an apparent change in the balance of Moldovan opinion during the last few years according to the Barometer’s polls. It is still quite close but while in the past Moldova joining Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union had more supporters than joining the European Union, from 2017 onward the situation has reversed. Figure 1 shows how the results of the Barometer polls have changed in this regard in recent years.

Figure 1. Republic of Moldova Public Opinion Barometer Polls from November 2014 to January 2019. The answer to the question: If you had to choose in a referendum between Moldova’s accession to the European Union and Moldova’s accession to the Customs Union (Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan), which would you opt for?

Another measurement available thanks to the Barometer comes from the questions about the respondents’ support for Moldova joining the European Union and Russia’s Customs Union/Eurasian Economic Union, asked separately rather than competitively, as was in the case of answers to the question shown in Figure 1. The results, within the same 2014-2019 timeframe, are similar with a lasting change in the balance of the Moldovan public opinion regarding the two international unions in question also occurring between April and November 2017.

* Presently, the Eurasian Economic Union.
This apparent change in the balance of public opinion in Moldova regarding the European and Russian geopolitical projects can have an impact on the political balance in the country and, ultimately, affect Russia’s ability to exercise its political influence in Moldova.

Aside from the Russian political influence in the part of Moldova controlled by its government, Moscow exercises overwhelming influence over the breakaway Transnistria region. There are about 1,500 Russian troops permanently based in Transnistria despite repeated Moldovan demands to withdraw them. The region’s de facto authorities are subservient to Moscow. An estimated half of the population in Transnistria has Russian citizenship. The Russian Federation elections are held in Transnistria without the Moldovan government’s consent and Russia provides large parts of the region’s budget. In another symbolic demonstration of Russian control, the Russian Federation Defense Ministry’s military youth organization, Yunarmia, is active in Transnistria, recruiting local children into its ranks.

Russia’s push for the federalization and special status regions projects in Moldova indicate that Transnistria’s primary function for Moscow is to use it for political control over Moldova as a whole which could be achieved through reintegration on conditions dictated by Russia. With institutionalized Russian-controlled elements within Moldova’s body politic, the Kremlin would be able to effectively control Moldova’s foreign and domestic policies.

Subversion

Moldova is subject to a considerable Russian propaganda effort. The country’s media space is largely dominated by Russia. This includes Russian media outlets which have very strong presence in Moldova and are being followed and trusted by a large portion of Moldovans as well as the Russian or Russia-aligned ownership of Moldovan media outlets. Consequently, the country’s media space is highly permeable to Russian propaganda which is exacerbated by “the strong linkages between politics, the media and the Moldovan Orthodox Church” that help Russians push their messages in Moldova.

The Russian propaganda arsenal in Moldova includes the Internet as well. Russian trolls and pro-Russia groups with tens of thousands of followers are very active on social media accessed by...
Moldovans with an especially strong presence on the Russian social networks of Odnoklassniki and VKontakte.” In addition, the local branch of the Russian propaganda outlet Sputnik “accounted for 12.5 percent of Internet traffic and audience in Moldova in October 2017.”

Russia uses this strong position to conduct information warfare in a “targeted, intelligible and comprehensive” manner, employing a wide range of narratives to target Moldovans with propaganda that benefits Russia’s objectives in the country. Strategically, the Russian propaganda effort seeks to capitalize on the existing political and identity divisions within Moldovan society, keeping it in “a split state,” and further undermining social cohesion along with public trust in democracy and the West. Unsurprisingly, during the 2016 presidential election, the Russian media was “active in spreading fake news” “to benefit the pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon.”

A group of Moscow-aligned NGOs in Moldova are also actively participating in this constant push of pro-Russian messages among the Moldovan public.

Another major pro-Russian actor in Moldova is the Moldovan Orthodox Church (the Metropolis of Chișinău and All Moldova). It is a subdivision of the Russian Orthodox Church and “an active vector for Russian influence and propaganda in Moldova.” The Moldovan Orthodox Church promotes anti-Western messages in society and openly supports Dodon, including during the 2016 presidential election.

Aside from the separatist Transnistria region, Moscow engages with the autonomous Gagauzia region within Moldova. The head of the region, Irina Vlah (elected in the spring of 2015, re-elected in the summer of 2019), openly fosters close ties with Russia and Vladimir Putin personally. The region, however, had been heavily pro-Russian before Vlah. In 2014, the local authorities held a “consultative referendum” in which over 98 percent of voters supported Moldova joining Russia’s Customs Union. Russia supported the referendum. Moscow cultivates its influence in the autonomous region – after Moscow had engaged in an economic embargo against Moldova, it made an exception for products from Gagauzia, the same as from Transnistria. Russia made the decision to make this exception the following month after the region’s “consultative referendum” about Russia’s Customs Union.

Given that Moldova is one of Russia’s geopolitical targets, naturally there are also Russian covert espionage activities going on within the country. In some cases, information about such activities has trickled into the public domain.

Military Factor

Russia has about 1,500 troops permanently based in Moldova’s breakaway Transnistria region with the headquarters in the region’s main city of Tiraspol. Russia designates 400 of these troops as “peacekeepers.”

Moscow maintains its military presence in Moldova despite the repeated demands of the Moldovan authorities to withdraw Russian troops and the commitments to do so that Moscow undertook at the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit. In August 2019, the Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoygu, said during his meeting with the Transnistrian leader, Vadim Krasnoselsky, that Russia “has never questioned, and will not question” its “peacekeeping” mission in the region.

Unlike Ukraine and Georgia, Moldova is geographically separated from Russia. Nevertheless, it is not secure from a military standpoint. No foreign country has a formal obligation to help Moldova in the case of a foreign aggression. Moldova’s own armed forces are weak. Transnistrian forces, on the other hand, although similarly small in number, are relatively well-trained and have the support of the Russian military. Needless to say, they would operate together with the regular Russian troops based in Moldova in the case of a serious Russian military escalation in the country.

Diplomatic Activities

Following the fall of Plahotniuc and the formation of the ACUM-PSRM coalition government in June 2019, Moscow started a diplomatic “outreach campaign” to bring Moldova closer to Russia. It included the resumption of the work of the Russia-Moldova Inter-Parliamentary Commission and
the Russian-Moldovan Inter-Governmental Commission on Economic Cooperation. The Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, proposed developing a three-year plan of cooperation between the Russian and Moldovan defense ministries when he met Dodon during his visit to Moldova (the first ever by a Russian minister of defense) in August 2019. During the Russia-Moldova Economic Forum in September 2019, the two countries signed eight cooperation agreements and memoranda with Dodon saying: “Today, we can confidently say that there is a reset of the [Russian-Moldovan] relations happening on all levels. I will do everything possible for the internal political consensus [in Moldova, in this regard] to remain.”

When Dodon and the PSRM ousted the pro-European ACUM from power in November 2019 and became the dominant force in the government, Russia and Dodon’s “reset” activities continued. More deals were signed and Dodon said Moldova was considering joining the Russia-led Eurasian Development Bank.

It appears that Dodon would produce as much diplomatic alignment with Russia as is politically feasible. The question of feasibility, however, is a pertinent one. The splits within Moldovan society on matters of politics, foreign policy and historical identity mean that not just pro-European but pro-Russian forces also have difficulty bringing their agenda to the full logical conclusion. A large part of the Moldovan public does not want their country to join the Russian sphere of influence. This means that any political dominance by pro-Russian forces in Moldova has shaky foundations and might only prove temporary. Therefore, Russians seek to create structural conditions that would make it impossible for Moldova to conduct its foreign policy freely.

The federalization of Moldova on Russian terms would provide for such conditions. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Russian diplomacy has been pushing for it, trying to impose the project of “special status” for Transnistria on Moldova in the OSCE-run negotiation process. At the same time, Russia has been working to promote Transnistria’s status as a de facto independent entity.

**Economic Influence**

Russia has considerable economic influence in Moldova. As pointed out in a 2018 report, “Moldovan enterprises controlled by Russian capital dominate practically all sectors of the national economy, from gas and petroleum products, to telecommunications, banks, the media, to the food industry and on-line payment terminals,” with many other markets “controlled by rent-seekers/ political cronies with strong links to Russian groups of interests.” This Russia-aligned capital has been “able to exercise broad illicit control over Moldova’s judiciary system,” using it to maintain its market position and “squeeze out competitors.”

Moldova is totally dependent on Russia for its natural gas supply which is used for all kinds of purposes, including heating, domestic consumption, industrial use and electricity generation. As for electricity, about 70 percent of Moldova’s demand comes from a power plant that is located in Transnistria and belongs to the Russian firm, Inter RAO. Gas pipeline projects and an electricity supply from Romania might relieve Moldova’s energy dependence on Russia in the future. Another point of leverage for Russia is the fact that it is a source of a considerable portion of remittances coming to Moldova from its citizens working abroad.

On the other hand, the European Union is by far a more important trade partner for Moldova than Russia. In 2019, the EU “was the destination for 65% of Moldovan exports and the source of 49% of imports while trade with Russia accounted for 9% of exports and 12% of imports.” EU states are also “responsible for over 80% of all investment in the Moldovan economy.” At the same time, it is the Western countries and institutions that are providers of most of the foreign aid Moldova is receiving.

As has been the case with other countries, with regard to Moldova, Russia is using economic measures as a geostrategic tool. In 2013-2014, Russia restricted Moldovan exports in response to the country initialing and then signing the Association Agreement with the EU. Moscow’s measures “to sanction Moldova for acting against Russia’s interests” have also involved deporting Moldovan migrant laborers and natural gas price manipulations.
Russia has also been reported employing a tactical use of temporary economic measures designed to improve the PSRM’s electoral prospects. In April 2020, Moscow and Moldova’s PSRM-led government attempted to arrange for a EUR 200 million Russian loan for Moldova, by some assessments designed to help Dodon’s presidential re-election bid in 2020 and increase Moldova’s dependence on Russia. The loan agreement was signed in Moscow on April 17 and ratified by Dodon’s majority in the parliament on April 23. The opposition, however, appealed to the Constitutional Court to stop the loan. On May 7, 2020, the Constitutional Court ruled that the loan agreement was unconstitutional in a new demonstration of limits to the influence of the pro-Russian as well as the pro-European political forces within Moldova.

Notes


18. Ibid.


22. Ibid.


24. Ibid.


28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.


45. Ibid.


55. Ibid.


59. All results of Moldovan opinion polls presented in the paper come from the Republic of Moldova Public Opinion Barometer website: www.bop.ipp.md/


69. Ibid, p. 29

70. Ibid, p. 32

71. Ibid, p. 32

72. Ibid, p. 29

73. Ibid, p. 30


77. Ibid.


Ibid, p.6


84. “‘От виноделов Гагаузии требуют не слать в РФ вино из ‘сопредельной’ Молдавии,” Regnum, 15.05.2015, www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1924843.html


87. Anna Maria Dyner, The Importance of Foreign Military Bases for Russia, Polish Institute of International Affairs, 25.05.2020, www.pism.pl/publications/The_Importance_of_Foreign_Military_Bases_for_Russia


93. Ibid.


Belarus is not regarded by Russia as an entirely independent state nor is it an effectual part of Russia. Knowing well that Belarus is Russia’s only formal ally to the West, Belarus maintains these close bilateral ties with Russia at the expense of relations with the states on negative terms with Russia; namely, most members of the EU and NATO. The President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, therefore, argues that this should not come at a suboptimal arrangement for Belarus.

However, for Lukashenko, staying in power seems to go hand in hand with but is de facto separate from close relations with Russia. Bilateral Belarus-Russia relations have been worsening over time since about 2004 and have noticeable fluctuations of increased tensions over disagreements regarding economic cooperation; namely, gas and oil pricing or contracts. Its dynamic shifted in 2014 after Russia annexed Crimea and began its hostile activity in Donbas. To Russia’s dismay, Belarus did not support its policy in Ukraine nor did it previously in Georgia’s South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Instead, Belarus took some precautionary notes for potential parallels that would be implied for Belarus.

The domestic situation in Belarus situation does seem to continue to function as a mutually enforcing vicious cycle with Russia’s political influence over it domestically as much as Belarus strives for a balancing act between Russia and the West. In the big picture of Russia’s intentions for its immediate neighbors, Belarus is likely the exemplary scenario for Russia where the head of state is overtly pro-Russian and is able to hold on to power domestically albeit by authoritarian means although at the same time is clearly unable to thrive without Russia.

Belarusians make up 83.7 percent of the citizenry of Belarus while Russians, as the largest minority, comprise 8.3 percent. Further, Poles concentrated in the north-westernmost part of Belarus, aligning with Poland’s previous border up to 1939, make up 3.1 percent of the population. Finally, Ukrainians, concentrated in the south-westernmost part of Belarus, comprise 1.7 percent of the country’s inhabitants. This makes Russia’s approach towards Belarus to be focused on the whole of the country through the central government rather than nit-picking or addressing particular regions.

Hence, subversive measures are utilized primarily in the sphere of language with limited strides having been made in asserting the necessity for a Belarusian national identity or speaking Belarusian instead of Russian. There is also Russia’s deep integration into the military and security architecture of Belarus which provides rather overhauling grip of Belarus that is slowly becoming less absolute, given the steadily increasing problems in the relationship between Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin. However, Russia’s permeated political influence in Belarus enjoys some disproportionate position of leverage which comes from the pre-existing closeness between the two.

Political Influence

Russia’s political strategies with regard to engagement in Belarus are orbiting around political rhetoric and altering the civil sector. Russia’s background political influence in Belarus is amplified by the existing mechanisms or arrangements which facilitate its intents. A particularly clear but not the sole format is the Soyuz. On April 2, 1996, the Commonwealth of Belarus and Russia was established and soon followed up with various bilateral agreements culminating on December 8, 1999 with the Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus or referred to colloquially as the Union State or Soyuz. Being passed by the State Duma on December 22, 1999 and the Parliament of Belarus on January 26, 2000, it became formalized, complete with a Secretary General, a shared legislature as well as a currency and even its headquarters at 8/5 Staraya Square, Entrance 3, 103132 Moscow, although both Russia and Belarus were to maintain their own sovereignty. While not much has progressed in the physical integration of the Soyuz since then, politicians in Russia have begun to pay more attention to it since 2018.
Meanwhile, it is not an exaggeration to argue that the authoritarian nature of the government of Belarus is in effect an enabler and then, in turn, a cause of Russia’s influence in the country, creating a mutually enforcing symbiosis. Nevertheless, as Lukashenko is a pivotal aspect of this, his strides to display some autonomy and leverage within the relationship between Russia and Belarus are noticeable; particularly, in those exchanges of words which are deliberately brought to the public’s attention, including statements on his readiness to cooperate with the West vis-à-vis Russia.

Such rhetoric has not been met with much enthusiasm from EU member states and US diplomats given Lukashenko’s increasingly authoritarian policies that follow, beginning with the October 17, 2004 referendum, removing the two-term cap on the presidency in the Constitution of Belarus. Particularly within the context of the “colour revolutions” in neighboring regions and others, it set the tone for Lukashenko’s presidency in Belarus as well as for relations with Russia. This pertains predominantly to the active hostility towards the press as well as the forceful removal of political opponents, typically prior to elections and under the circumstances that could be described as dubious, at best, but more commonly as outright political repression.

Given the closeness of the relations between Lukashenko and Putin within this context, Russian influence is also exerted in a top-down approach from the presidential level. Nevertheless, the relations between the two leaders have not been simple throughout their tenures. Lukashenko decided to inform the public about Russia’s attempts to leverage subsidies as a means of integrating Belarus into Russia territorially or at least to make steps towards that end. On December 14, 2018 at a press conference, Lukashenko stated: “I understand what all those hints mean: You get the oil but you break up your country and join Russia.” In the meantime, Maxim Oreshkin, the Minister of Economic Development of Russia, was appointed as the head of a newly created working group on Belarus-Russia relations established by Dmitry Medvedev. However, on January 10, 2019, Lukashenko stated more assertively that Russia could lose its only ally to the West if the energy dispute is not resolved and that claims regarding the Soyuz formalizing into one state are completely baseless.

Yet about a month later on February 15, 2019, Lukashenko came back to the topic: “Listen, tomorrow we can unite together, we have no problems, but are you, Russians and Belarusians, ready for this? As far as you are ready, we will fulfill your will,” thus hinting that if there were enough broad support from Russian and Belarusian citizens, then it could be an option that he would consider. On September 6, 2019, the Prime Ministers of Russia and Belarus initialed the intent in an undisclosed plan to form a close economic union by 2022 which was published in Kommersant on September 16, 2019. However, on September 17, 2019, Minsk announced plans for the US and Belarus to finally reintroduce personnel to fill the positions of each other’s ambassadors for the first time since 2008, upping the dynamism in Lukashenko’s balancing act to the furthest and most sudden swing of the pendulum so far.

On December 7, 2019, Lukashenko and Putin met in Sochi to discuss the ‘integration deal’ with this date being almost exactly 20 years since the Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus was put forward. The talks were guided by a 31-item roadmap regarding bilateral cooperation, including various economic aspects although Lukashenko stated that as many as 16 of the items still needed reconciliation. The negotiated documents are classified as are many elements surrounding the negotiations. Nevertheless, these negotiations are likely to have yielded no results as suggested by the absent press conferences afterwards. Feeling that Belarus is still in an unfairly suboptimal arrangement with Russia whilst simultaneously considering the trade-off with the EU and NATO, Lukashenko’s aim at this meeting was to better the terms – to put them where he thought they should have been all along – primarily through improved economic deal, with regard to oil passing through Belarusian pipes into the rest of Europe as well as oil imports. In short, his aim was making the integration deal less expensive. The refusal of anything that resembled foregoing sovereignty within the Soyuz was upheld by Lukashenko. During these talks, protests broke out in Minsk against intensified ties between Russia and Belarus.

Insofar as the relations and ensuring their longevity are in the interests of both Moscow and Minsk, which is outweighing these public clashes, the desire to maintain the status quo will persist. Since the creation of the position of president, Belarus has not yet had truly free and open elections. On May 8, 2020, the presidential elections in Belarus were formally planned for August 9, 2020. Lukashenko will seek his sixth term, having won each election since 1994, each time stirring controversies including crackdowns on dissidents.
Since then, the most recent of Lukashenko’s challengers, Valery Tsapkala, former Ambassador of Belarus to the US, was unable to register despite his collection of signatures. Then another challenger, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, a popular blogger, was detained and put in custody. Then on June 13, 2020, some 15 executive officials of the Belgazprombank, a commercial bank, were detained after a search. The opposition leader, Viktar Babaryka, who had previously led Belgazprombank, was jailed on June 18, 2020. The next day on June 19, 2020, protests followed. In the meantime, Lukashenko made a Cabinet reshuffle, favoring those with ties or experience in the security sector.

Undeterred, the wife of Tsikhanouski, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, continued the campaign and was able to get her candidacy registered at the Central Electoral Commission. The wife of Tsapkala, Veranika Tsapkala, being in a similar situation, was joined by Tsikhanouskaya as well as Maria Kalesnikava, the campaign manager of Babaryka, into a united front. On July 23, 2020, in the small town of Barysaŭ, some considerable thousands went to the streets to express support for Tsikhanouskaya. From the announcement of the upcoming presidential elections to the rally in Barysaŭ, more than 700 supporters of figures opposing Lukashenko and 17 journalists were detained. Indeed, Lukashenko’s domestic policies make it difficult for the EU, the US or other actors to build closer relations with Belarus and give it some wriggle room to slide away from Russia which makes Russia’s case for demanding closer integration more difficult to resist.

Subversion

In accompaniment to the political engagement Russia conducts within Belarus, subversive operations serve to enforce the version of the arrangement that Russia sees as more favorable to itself. On December 14, 2018, Lukashenko said to the press: “If someone wants to break [Belarus] into regions and force us to become a subject of Russia, that will never happen.” The reference was to discussions regarding Ukraine but it is difficult to see a parallel in the case of Belarus as Russia’s subversive objectives seem to be nation-wide across Belarus rather than targeting specific regions, save for the areas with more Polish, Ukrainian and Lithuanian minorities.

In the view of some intelligence circles in Russia, the manner Russia is to approach Belarus is that of more of an enemy than a complicated ally. Belarus is thence treated by Russia as a potential long-run threat and is not viewed as a de facto friendly country any longer. Espionage operations, correspondingly, are predominantly purposed to obtaining information that could help limit the influence of other actors in Belarus or actors that oppose Lukashenko or closeness with Russia. Russia’s FSB, GRU and FIS do not operate in tandem with the KGB of Belarus but work independently within Belarus, although supposedly they do inform the local authorities when operations are taking place. However, the FSB maintains complete control of the Belarusian-Russian border and customs, allowing for the manipulation of the travel data of certain individuals.

Belarus differs from other countries in the region in terms of potential subversive Russian operations as some of these subversive actions come from the Belarusian government itself. Specifically with regard to the upcoming presidential elections on June 25, 2020, Lukashenko explicitly conveyed his displeasure of foreign interference in the country’s elections. He clearly cited Russia the key culprit whose agents were allegedly acting from Poland. The first sentence of the Interfax article may be a tad misleading as it might imply that both Russia and Poland were behind the interference. The writing would nevertheless appear consistent with Lukashenko’s general references to foreign meddling alongside the explicit naming of Russia. Lukashenko also specifically referred to “fakes,” referring to deliberate disinformation activities. Finally, he stated plans to discuss this difficult topic with Putin as it would be a disservice to show inactivity following his accusation.

It is a strange situation that the Government of Belarus has ordered the arrest of individuals whom Lukashenko has accused of being Russian “puppets;” namely, Babaryka, who the Belarussian Government alleges had his campaign financed by high-level officials from Gazprom. Simultaneously, the arrest of these “puppets” has drawn harsh criticism from both the EU and the US. These elections are the first where Belarus has made accusations of foreign intervention that include Russia. Previously, all of the accusations have been directed against Western states. This is likely because the relationship that Belarus has with Russia is gradually becoming increasingly uneasy as compared to the one with the EU or the US.
Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has relocated her two children to a location somewhere in the EU which purposefully remains undisclosed. Tsikhanouskaya has received threats from an anonymous source on the possibility of taking away her children. Interestingly, it would be difficult to describe all opposition candidates as definitely pro-Western as some seem to favor maintaining positive ties with Russia.\textsuperscript{21}

Tsapkala had previously established the Belarus High Technologies Park (HTP), inspired by Silicon Valley, after serving as the Belarusian ambassador to the US. Yet, a few days after Tsikhanouskaya moved her children to an undisclosed location within the EU, Tsapkala fled to Russia together with his children on July 24, 2020 following threats of prosecution from the General Prosecutor Office.\textsuperscript{22}

National identity within Belarus is growing\textsuperscript{23} as is the anticipation of Belarusians of how the country will change in the coming years.\textsuperscript{24} In response, the Russian news outlets belittled notions of the Belarusian identity such as, for instance, in 2015 and 2016 after Lukashenko began raising this notion from 2014. A key part of this is the Belarusian language. The government of Belarus has responded to those who prefer Belarusian over Russian as likely political opponents. The 1995 referendum ensured that Russian joined Belarusian as the country’s formal language. In effect, Belarusian has been largely sidelined in place of Russian. The Frantsishak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society has reported about violations of the rights to education and access to legislation, public and private services, media presence and others in the Belarusian language. At present, Minsk University offers courses in Belarusian in addition to Russian. The Society, together with various other NGOs, has advocated for the increased use of Belarusian in all aspects of social and political life, and for the cessation of the suppression of the language and the academic and cultural groups that promote it. At the time of writing, efforts to raise the status of the Belarusian language over the Russian language de facto, not just cosmetically, are still in their early stages. To a considerable extent, this is due to the environment in Belarus that Lukashenko has enforced that impedes civil society to flourish independently from the government.

A web portal, nn.by, surveyed television programs in Belarus and found that about 80 percent of the content of the state television channel ONT is actually Russian-made with about 10 percent being Belarusian-made and a final 10 percent, predominantly for entertainment, from the US and EU member states, noting that other state controlled channels have similar composition mark-ups. Sputnik Belarus seems to be the pivotal and increasingly active media outlet in Belarus.\textsuperscript{25} However, as of the beginning of 2020, according to similarweb.com, about 74 percent of visits from desktop devices are actually from Russia with 17 percent of visits from desktop devices being from Belarus.

The combination of Russian-dominated material and state censorship by the government of Belarus interestingly creates a situation where most of the feed is closely associated to Russia’s perspectives while removing any criticism on the part of Russia towards the government of Belarus. Here, the subversion of closeness to Russia without the holistic picture makes the balancing act more of juxtaposition. With increasing technological literacy beyond television, as is the case with 80 percent of Belarusian citizens, they are able to increasingly differentiate between Belarus state rhetoric and the one from Russia, yet still being deprived of a holistic view with lacking media pluralism.

One would think ethnic Russians in Belarus are targetable groups that may be inclined to be more supportive of such notions as the integration of the Soyuz, especially if the disinformation is effective. However, a recent poll suggests that only 8 percent of Belarusian citizens have a favorable view of Belarus joining with Russia in the Soyuz or becoming a part of Russia\textsuperscript{26} which may or may not be linked to the ethnic proportionalities. From Russia’s perspective, it is rather clear that Belarus does not wish to forfeit its sovereignty; however, the subversive actions, in a large part facilitated by Lukashenko’s government’s own policies, encumbered the notions of solidifying a national identity that would with certainty resist Russian occupation. To be sure, this is increasingly changing with new vigor but at a still lethargic pace resulting from the background conditions and the public’s complicated relation to both Lukashenko and Russia.

Military Factor

Russia’s approach towards Belarus with regard to security and military cooperation, including maneuvers and exercises as well as military industry ties and operational activity occurring in
Kaliningrad, is unique and reflects the state of affairs between the two countries. Russian military personnel operate, at times dominantly, in military facilities in Belarus and there are also the issues of Russia's lease of military facilities on Belarusian territory.

There are two in question. Firstly, there is the Hantsavichy Radar Station, a ‘Volga’ type early warning system which is operated by the Russian Aerospace Defense Forces and is intended to anticipate ballistic missiles that are launched in the vicinity and in the north-west. The agreement, signed on January 6, 1995, made it payment-free and transferred authority to Russia for 25 years; that is, until 2020. Secondly, the 43rd Naval Communication Centre, in Vileyka, is purposed for the frequencies of an ultra-long character that the General Staff of the Russian Navy uses; namely, to get in touch with nuclear submarines active on combat duty in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans. In the meantime, the agreements have been prolonged until June 7, 2021. It is not explicitly clear whether or not the transfer back to Belarus has been actually contemplated although it is clear that Putin will want to hold onto them.27

Regardless of the transfer status, Russia is deeply embedded in the military and security architecture of Belarus. It would likely be not an exaggeration to suggest that Russia could use this to remove Lukashenko if it wanted to with the support of the aforementioned subversive means. International backlash and resources for a military invasion of Belarus would be high and the benefits would have to outweigh the costs for such a decision to be made. The Belarusian general public does not wish for the country to be absorbed by or merged into a single state with Russia.28 Yet, it is difficult, in general terms, to describe their resistance to the idea as fervent or adamant enough, particularly in the precarious situation within the armed forces as being willing to take up arms and fight against the Russian armed forces entering Belarus.29

Belarus and Russia are founding members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), other members being Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Within the CSTO framework, if conflict were to break out with a party outside of it, the Armed Forces of Belarus would be supposed to respond and operate under the command of the Russian Armed Forces. In 2014, the events in Donbas and Crimea exacerbated the worries of Belarus over potential annexation.30

Lukashenko’s increasingly frantic pendulum swinging is also becoming noticeable in military cooperation. In September 2017, the large-scale Russian Zapad military exercises involved 4,000 military personnel from Belarus. There have also been other joint Belarus-Russian military exercises. On March 2, 2020, a joint drill, entitled the ‘Winter Partisan,’ was launched in Vitebsk Oblast between the UK and Belarus with participants including a peacekeeping company from the 103rd Airborne Brigade of Belarus as well as 29 personnel from the 42nd Naval Infantry Battalion of the UK, a NATO member state. The implications of how Russia will take this into its calculus can be significant considering the obligations under the CSTO.

Diplomatic Activities

Russia’s diplomatic influence in Belarus works through bilateral relations involving embassies as well as Russian engagement with other embassies or diplomatic outposts within Belarus. Russian diplomatic engagement is also orbital around multilateral platforms; namely, via the OSCE Monitoring Mission and the Minsk accords with regard to Ukraine as well as Russia’s influence as a permanent member in the UN Security Council.

The nature of the diplomatic conduct is insightful. The Embassy of the Russian Federation in Minsk is one of the biggest diplomatic facilities in the region and its Consulate-General in Brest is also considerable. Previously, Russia had not wanted to signal that it sees its neighbors as the USSR saw the Warsaw Pact states and carefully conveyed this through its representatives that were high-level party officials rather than career diplomats.31 However, Mikhail Babich was appointed as the new Ambassador of Russia to Belarus32 on July 20, 2018 upon confirmation from the State Duma. As a former KGB and FSB officer, the change in tone was clear.

Babich exercised greater authority than traditional ambassadors, including plenipotentiary means to negotiate trade and economic agreements. At times, Babich criticized Lukashenko in the media and made statements that implied Belarus was a region of Russia rather than a sovereign state. He
also made references to how ‘Belarusianisation’ should not come with ‘de-Russification,’ citing the need to protect Russian elements in Belarus. However, Russia recognized that this was an overstep and Babich was replaced by Dmitry Mezentsev on April 20, 2019. Mezentsev had previously been a regional governor.

The pattern seems to be that when deals behind the scenes – as is the predominant and opaque manner of Belarusian and Russian bilateral diplomacy – go unfavorably for Belarus, then Belarus tends to be explicit in its public criticism as a bargaining piece. At the Minsk Forum on September 8, 2019 when speaking about the conflict in Donbas, Lukashenko distinctively described it as a conflict between Ukraine and Russia and not between Ukraine and the separatists which was met with a rebuttal from the Russian side. Similarly on December 8, 2019, the Ambassador of Belarus to Russia, Vladimir Semashko, said after a meeting between Lukashenko and Putin in Sochi that Belarus sought roughly USD 70 million in compensation for the uneven gas and oil deals. On June 26, 2020, the following day after Lukashenko’s statements accusing Russia of interference in the election, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, was featured in an interview with the opposition-orientated media.

The rhetoric conveyed by the Belarusian government to the US and EU member state diplomatic representatives in Minsk is that the detentions are a countermeasure against Russian interference in Belarus and not a repression of political opponents. However, simply because the rhetoric is against Russia it does not mean that it is going to become acceptable to those US and EU member state diplomatic representatives given that the repression is remarkably harsh.

**Economic Influence**

In effect, Russia is silently waging “a secret economic war” against Belarus which is felt predominantly with imports and transit contracts regarding gas and oil, and is the cornerstone of all of Russia’s strategic engagement towards Belarus. A main actor is Beltransgaz, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Gazprom, which controls the Belarusian gas transmission system. At the same time, the after-effect of the sanctions on Russia and the sanctions placed on certain Belarusian individuals and entities are also a key factor for the processes in the Belarusian economy.

The economy of Belarus is susceptible to such moves from Russia because it is not robust independently, encumbered with a high level of foreign debt, an unfavorable credit rating that impedes the country from international loans at acceptable rates and, of course, the recession that COVID-19 brought about with it. Russian moves may become more effectual if the COVID-19 pandemic weakens Belarus relatively more than it does Russia and they will have implications on tarnishing Lukashenko’s position. Even though Russia’s economy was declining in the COVID-19 period, the oil and gas pipes were still running and Belarus did not have such a luxury. While Belarus maintains that the current level of integration is significant enough to merit equal terms for consumers as within Russia itself, Russia insists that further integration would be needed for this to happen.

An oil price decrease correspondingly saw a painful decrease in state revenue. About 20 percent of the state revenue of Belarus is derived from importing and selling on elsewhere oil from Russia as well as petroleum products that can be traded and which are derived from Russian sources. As disputes pop up periodically, with increasing sourness since 2004, including a sudden price hike from Gazprom in 2007 right after the elections in 2006, the general direction is also changing for the planned Russian “tax maneuver” to be drastically sterner with Belarus.

Transport tariffs for gas comprise a pivotal element when negotiating these prices. Putin has argued that member states ought to adopt a single system within the Eurasian Economic Union which would make the price of the purchase or the sale at the end of the chain more predictable. However, for Belarus this is a clear threat to its sovereignty, and in the view of Lukashenko, his grip on power, and Russia has little incentive to give in to a partner that is 29 times smaller.

After the Lukashenko- Putin meeting in Sochi on December 7, 2019, the agreed price at the time for which Belarus purchases natural gas from Russia remained at USD 127 per 1,000 cubic meters which is lower than the international market price and yet actually higher than what is paid by Russian households and businesses. If the “tax maneuver” were agreed upon, Belarus could lose
about USD 2 billion yearly from the changes, foreseen as USD 8 billion or USD 12 billion by 2024, not to mention the Druzhba pipeline’s contamination that makes things worse overall. Discussions regarding the price were set to continue as no agreement was reached.

On February 1, 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Minsk and met with Lukashenko in the first high-profile visit in 20 years. An attempt at rapprochement was made to normalize relations but not in a zero-sum manner against Russia. The visit also saw an offer for Belarus to begin diversifying its oil and gas supplies and decrease its dependence on Russia. Shortly after, and also not coincidentally, the CEO of Gazprom and the ambassador of Belarus to Russia agreed to the aforementioned price of USD 127 per 1,000 cubic meters which is a higher sum than what other states pay, including Germany.

For the month of April 2020, Belarus imported two million tons of oil where 1.56 million tons were from Russia. For the month of May 2020, however, Belarus also imported two million tons of oil but only 1.13 million tons were from Russia and Belarus is set to continue to get crude from alternative suppliers, including Saudi Arabia, Norway, and Azerbaijan via Klaipėda. From Klaipėda, the deliveries travel by rail to the Novopolotsk refinery. Other amounts are anticipated to be sent in the originally planned direction from Odesa to Brody and then using a part of the Druzhba pipeline from Brody to the Mozyr refinery in Belarus.

On May 14, 2020, the Prime Minister of Belarus stated a consideration to settle for a fairer price from Russia, suggesting USD 80 per 1,000 cubic meters even though Lukashenko had previously asked for an even steeper deduction. The Russian Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishustin, and his Belarusian counterpart, Syarhey Rumas, instructed their energy ministries to continue negotiating over the prices for the natural gas Belarus buys. The Energy Minister of Belarus, Viktor Karankevich, noted that the issue of cutting the gas prices it buys from Gazprom this year is in the books, although the CEO of Gazprom, Alexei Miller, asserted that “as soon as Minsk pays off a USD 165.6 million debt, the Russian side will be ready to schedule talks on the terms of gas supplies starting from 2021.” On May 29, 2020, the Ministry of Energy’s press service clarified their view that “Belarus does not have a debt for the imported natural gas,” signaling an ongoing incongruity of the status quo, namely that “there are disagreements between business entities on determining the cost of natural gas supplied, taking into account its calorific value.”

As a direct result of Pompeo’s visit, the first US crude oil shipment made its way to Belarus through a deal with United Energy Trading as well as Getka, a US firm, and UNIMOT, a partner from Poland. On June 5, 2020, the first tanker carrying 77,000 tons of US Bakken oil was received at the Klaipėda port in neighboring Lithuania. Belarus has noted that other ports are also viable alternatives. This symbolic shipment comes with the encouragement to further explore access to US markets. Not coincidentally, after a hiatus of three months, Russia resumed deliveries of large oil cargoes to Belarus.

Settling the dispute, the Belarusian state oil company Belneftekhim said in a statement that the imports of Russia’s oil to two Belarusian refineries had been set for 5.75 million tons for July to September 2020, split evenly between both refineries, supplied by a total of ten companies from Russia, namely: Rosneft, Lukoil, Surgutneftegas, Gazprom Neft, Tatneft, Bashneft, RussNeft, Zarubezhneft, Yangpur and Neftisa.

Nonetheless, the intent for diversification in Belarus remains. Lukashenko said Belarus could lessen its energy dependence on Russia by at least a quarter after its Astravyets nuclear power plant becomes fully operational. Belarus has begun talks with Poland on a more technical level on part of the Druzhba pipeline, potentially considering the Gdansk port as a third route option for oil shipments. When the new pipeline between both Belarusian refineries is completed in 2023, it sets the scene for diversification away from Russia, citing Azerbaijan and Norway.
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Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

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This chapter aims to assess and compare Russian influence in the Baltic states. It also looks into the measures applied by the three countries to build resilience and mitigate the consequences of Russia’s interference in their political, social, economic, security and informational spaces.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania share a common past of Soviet occupation. Their resistance and liberation movements, particularly the Baltic Way in 1989, further instilled the usability of the term - Baltic - when talking about these three countries. In practice, the Baltic states do not always act in unison. Despite shared challenges, the unique internal situation in each country might dictate a different behavioral approach. This is applicable to some of their actions aimed at countering Russian influence.

The European Union and NATO memberships for the Baltic states meant a return to a European family united by shared democratic principles, ideals and values. Such actions, particularly NATO membership, provided security guarantees and gave an opportunity for economic prosperity. Being the ones to achieve rapid transformation, they wish the same for other former Soviet countries, including Ukraine and Georgia. As a result, they oppose Russia’s actions to divert these countries from their pro-European and pro-NATO aspirations and include them in the zone of Russian influence. The Baltic states strongly support the existing EU sanctions against Russia over the occupation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine. However, they do differ in their rhetoric towards Russia.

If the Lithuanian president is able to call Vladimir Putin’s Russia a ‘terrorist state’ when addressing the United Nation’s General Assembly, the Latvian and Estonian rhetoric is more pragmatic. Their approach is influenced by a consistency of their population - in Lithuania, ethnic Russian speakers comprise about 15 percent¹ of the population while there are 36 percent² in Latvia and in 30 percent in Estonia.³ Moreover, Poles comprise the largest ethnic minority in Lithuania, not Russians, as in Latvia and Estonia. Russia has less chance to influence the internal processes in Lithuania than in Latvia and Estonia with its so-called ‘compatriot’ policies. This makes the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian leadership look for different approaches to counter Russia’s malign influence by avoiding alienating their Russian speakers and incurring political, but more importantly national security, losses.

Russia is leading intense disinformation and propaganda campaigns inside the Baltics and at the international level which include calling the Baltics ‘failed states,’ Russophobic and Nazi. With its increasingly aggressive historical revisionism, Russia seeks to erase the horrors brought upon the Baltic people by the Soviet occupation and promote nostalgia for Soviet times.

Anything that helps to project influence over the Baltics is actively used by Russia. In response, the Baltics focus on building societal resilience and further integrating into the Western structures, including into European energy and transport networks. In the security area, the main achievements include securing the presence of NATO enhanced forward presence battalions and a NATO defense plan for the Baltics.

**Political Influence**

Since regaining their independence, the Baltic states have been always cautious about Russia’s attempts to influence their internal politics. For this reason, Estonia and Latvia chose not to automatically give citizenship to former Soviet citizens, mostly Russian speakers, living on their territory. Instead, they possess a non-citizen or alien passport. Over 216,000 or 10.4 percent of all inhabitants have such passports in Latvia and over 76,000 or around 6 percent of all inhabitants possess them in Estonia with these numbers regularly decreasing. Lithuania gave citizenship to all residing former Soviet citizens.

Holders of a non-citizen or alien passport cannot vote in national elections or work in the civil service. They cannot elect pro-Russian political forces or jeopardize the security of public institutions by, for example, leaking sensitive information. However, they comprise only a share of all Russian
speakers. The other much bigger share with their full citizen rights, including voting and assuming public service positions, is a useful target for Russian influence.

Latvia’s political arena is the most outstanding as for many years a pro-Russian Harmony party has been receiving over one-fifth of all seats in the National Parliament Saeima. In the 2018 parliamentary election, such a level of support was enough to come out as the winner and shake up Latvian internal politics. The 2019 parliamentary election in Estonia significantly increased the influence of the national-conservative and right-wing populist Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE). It joined a governing coalition and is causing a serious risk of alienating Russian speakers with one of its objectives being increasing the use of the Estonian language. Lithuania is to hold a parliamentary election in October 2020. This will test public support for the current governing coalition which includes a pro-Russian party - the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance.

The Latvian Harmony party enjoys broad support from the Russian ethnic minority and always receives a similar number of seats. The fact that it came first by receiving 23 seats out of 100 (-1 seat if compared to the 2014 election) in the 2018 parliamentary election is related to a fall in public trust of the ruling parties not to an increase in its supporters. Before the election, the country faced major corruption and money laundering scandals and people wanted new faces in politics. As a result, the current Latvian government coalition includes three newcomers - the New Conservative Party (15 seats out of 100 in the Saeima), For Development/For! (13 seats), Who Owns the State? (KPV LV, 10 seats) - and two parties from the previous government, the National Alliance (12 seats; -5 seats if compared to the previous term) and the New Unity (8 seats; - 15 seats if compared to the previous term). The Latvian government is led by Krišjānis Kariņš from the New Unity.

The Harmony party is a result of a merger among several left-leaning and pro-Russian parties in 2010. Its electorate is mainly Russian-speaking voters, although, there were attempts to attract ethnic Latvian voters by, for example, inviting Pēteris Sproģis, a former bishop of the Latvian Baptist Union, to be the party’s candidate for the presidential election. Shortly after agreeing, Sproģis withdrew his candidacy because of pressure he received for aligning with a pro-Kremlin party which denies Latvia’s Soviet occupation. Up until the 2018 parliamentary election, the Harmony party was in a cooperation agreement with Vladimir Putin’s United Russia party. It was clear that the agreement prevented the party from joining the ruling coalition and so it got severed. At the local level, Harmony was more successful with its former leader, Nils Ušakovs, having held the position of the mayor of Riga from 2009 until 2019 when he was elected to the European Parliament. He left Riga’s municipality in a scandal and a criminal investigation over several procurement projects with a company where he was involved as a shareholder.

During Ušakovs’ mayoral tenure, public events for Russian speakers in Riga boomed with the most controversial one being the annual celebration of Victory Day on May 9 as is done in Russia. In all three of the Baltic states, this day is not affiliated with a victory but with the beginning of their Soviet occupation and is, therefore, a very painful day for ethnic Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. The celebration in Riga gathers around 100,000 local Russian speakers, including members of the Harmony party. Two organizations, which are among the organizers of the event - young.lv and 9.maijs - receive support from Harmony. There are indications about funding for Harmony coming from Russia. It was revealed that a major donor of the party, Aivars Bergers, has received payments from offshore companies used in well-known international money laundering schemes - the Magnitsky affair and the Azerbaijani laundromat. While serving as the mayor of Riga, Ušakovs often travelled to Russia, met with the United Russia party members and also invited Russian officials, including the mayors of St Petersburg and Moscow, to events in Riga. He was brought under investigation several times and fined by the State Language Center for delivering speeches in his capacity as mayor in the Russian language and for using Russian for the municipality’s official communication on social media. Despite repeated attempts to change it, Latvian remains the only official language of Latvia.

There are a few other less popular pro-Russian parties in Latvia which find ways to damage Latvia’s reputation at the international level or shake up its internal politics. At the end of 2019, a momentum of public dissatisfaction with the current government over insufficient budget allocations to the
healthcare sector was used by several anti-establishment political groups including the pro-Russian Democratic Centre Party and the far-right Power to the Latvian Nation party. They initiated a collection of signatures in order to dismiss the Saeima by a referendum but managed to collect only one-third of the required 150,000 signatures. The campaign was run and signatures were collected by using social media which allowed a rapid outreach and the manipulation of opinion while providing a safe haven for the activists. The initiative died out quickly but it illustrates the occurrence of reappearing initiatives with the aim of further polarizing Latvian society.

The Latvian Russian Union was among the supporters of the initiative to dismiss the parliament. It is significantly smaller than Harmony, defends the interests of Russian speakers, seeks to preserve public education in the Russian language and has such unique ideas in its program as the privatization of Latvia’s public television and radio and abolishing the broadcasting regulator for electronic media. The party is led by a former member of the European Parliament, Tatjana Ždanoka. The Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism Re:Raltica reports that Ždanoka received EUR 30,000 to advocate official EU status for the Russian language. She is a regular attendee of the World Congress of Compatriots, Russkiy Mir (Russian World) assemblies and other similar events in Russia. Moreover, she was strongly criticized for traveling to Crimea as an ‘international observer’ during the 2014 referendum on secession and for using European Parliament funds for the trip.

The political situation in Estonia is different as its political parties managed to integrate most of the Russian community leaders and there is no party formed by a Russian minority. The current Prime Minister, Jüri Ratas, is of the Centre Party where Russian-speakers comprise a significant part of voters. The Centre Party holds 26 seats out of 101 (-1 seat if compared to the previous term) at the National Parliament Riigikogu and governs in coalition with the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE) with 17 seats (+10 seats) and Isamaa - 12 seats (-2 seats).

While in Latvia, in order to avoid pro-Russian policies, the political parties unite against Harmony and exclude it from a coalition, in Estonia the presence of the national-conservative and right-wing populist EKRE in the coalition forced the Centre Party to tone down its policies representing the interests of Russian-speakers. Therefore, cooperation with the EKRE is likely to have a negative effect on the Centre Party’s popularity, particularly losing the support of its Russian-speaking electorate. Moreover, an increase in national-conservative views might inspire the creation of a Russian party in Estonia.

Before entering into the coalition, the leader of the EKRE, Mart Helme, raised the condition for the Centre Party to sever its ties with Putin’s United Russia party. The EKRE fancies a Finnish approach when it comes to relations with Russia which, in the words of Mart Helme, means ‘not to parlay every minor incident into a drama.’ Among the EKRE’s priorities is finalization of the border treaty between Estonia and Russia but not in its current version which, according to EKRE, would cost Estonia 5.2 percent of its territory. The party is of traditional values, strongly anti-LGBTI and is against settling in refugees or other migrants. It even tried to appeal to Russian speakers by using anti-LGBTI and anti-same sex marriage rhetoric. Such an approach did not deliver results as EKRE’s policies, particularly aiming to instil only the Estonian language at schools, are against the position of Russian speakers.

Kristi Raik, Director of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, rightly notes that even if the EKRE is not pro-Kremlin, its actions are fostering polarization and instability within Estonian society which is in the interests of Russia. Right-wing populism actions by the EKRE, such as marches with torches on the occasion of Estonia’s Day of Independence, anti-establishment rhetoric and criticism towards the European Union, are out of the Kremlin’s toolkit used to destabilize and reduce public trust in democratic institutions and the state authorities. Furthermore, although the EKRE is not pro-Russian, it hosted Marine Le Pen when she was on her European tour to accumulate support for the far-right ahead of the 2019 European elections.

The EKRE is a liability for Estonia, not only because its actions and comments by party members feed Russian propaganda but also because its nationalism and propagation of everything Estonian might provide a pretext to Russia to take more active measures to ‘protect’ its compatriots.

Estonian President, Kersti Kaljulaid, often has to act as a moral compass for the ruling coalition as well as to mitigate damages caused by the EKRE at the international level. During the swearing-in
ceremony of the current government, Kaljulaid wore a sweatshirt with the words “speech is free” as a reaction to the EKRE’s pressure against media outlets and journalists critical towards the party. She also left the room when the incoming Minister for IT and Foreign Trade, Marti Kuusik, was to make his oath. It was her reaction to Kuusik being suspected of domestic violence. At the international level, she had to apologize to Finnish colleagues after EKRE’s leader called the new Finnish Prime Minister, Sanna Marin, a ‘salesgirl’ in a radio interview.\(^\text{11}\)

**Lithuania** is the only one of the Baltic states with a political party of ethnic minorities in the ruling coalition. However, its political environment and ethnic composition is not favorable for a pro-Russian party to accumulate significant influence. The inclusion of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance (EAPL–CFA) in the governmental coalition occurred because of the necessity to accumulate the majority. Lithuania is to elect its new parliament in October 2020. Since the EAPL–CFA has its stable and limited-in-size electorate, its stakes of staying in the coalition will depend upon the performance of the coalition partners.

In order to pass the election threshold, the Polish party used to join forces with the Alliance of Russians. For the 2016 election, instead of forming an alliance, the party incorporated a significant number of former members of the Alliance of Russians into its list of candidates. Even before such a merger, the Polish party was reaching beyond the interests of the Polish minority and was known for its pro-Russian leanings.

The 2016 parliamentary election was won by the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, a center left party, which gathered 22.45 percent of the popular vote and received 54 out of 141 seats in the Seimas. During the previous parliamentary term, the party had only one seat; therefore, its victory and leadership in forming the government significantly changed the Lithuanian political landscape. It formed a coalition together with the Social Democratic party which received 17 seats (-22 compared to the previous election). After the presidential election in 2019 when, according to the Constitution the newly elected president, Gitanas Nausėda, had to re-appoint the government, the ruling coalition expanded with two new parties: the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance (8 seats; 8 seats in the previous term under a slightly different party name) and the Order and Justice (9 seats; 12 seats in the previous term) although the latter was soon removed from the coalition.

Lithuanian political discourse tends to electrify each time when suggestions for some kind of cooperation with Russia emerge. Two years ago, the Lithuanian Prime Minister, Saulius Skvernelis, faced harsh criticism over his comments to the media about a possible renewal of political contacts with Russia. After the occupation of Crimea in 2014, Lithuania took a strong stand towards Russia and conditions the renewal of political contacts upon Russia showing signs of goodwill. Skvernelis had to repeatedly explain and reassure that he does not seek to change the country’s foreign policy line towards Russia. According to him, a straightforward and principal communication is better than no communication as is the current case.\(^\text{12}\)

Lithuanian foreign policy draws a strict line between Putin’s Russia and Russian citizens. The country does not want to deal with President Putin and his closest circle but supports engagement with ordinary citizens. Over the past years, Vilnius, as well as Riga and Tallinn, has become a safe haven for Russian civil society, political opposition, media and culture representatives who wish to freely exchange ideas and continue their work without state control and restrictions.

The Lithuanian political elite, the media and opinion makers expose, name and shame, and call any cooperation with Putin’s Russia as criminal. A target of such naming and shaming was also a leader of the main ruling party, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, Ramūnas Karbauskis. He is a major agrarian actor and got into a scandal when business links between his agricultural enterprise and a Russian factory producing fertilizers were revealed, especially that the chair of the factory is a member of Putin’s United Russia party. Karbauskis denied knowing anything about his enterprise’s links with Russian politicians.\(^\text{13}\) To some extent, the approach of zero tolerance to any dealings with Putin’s Russia works as a prevention from having high-ranking officials influenced by Russia. Lithuania learned this lesson when then President Rolandas Paksas was impeached over his links with and receiving financial support from a Russian businessperson in 2003.
However, naming and shaming does not affect the leader of Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance, Valdemar Tomaševski. As Nils Ušakovs in Latvia, he proudly attends the Victory Day celebration on May 9 where he wears the St George ribbon which gained a particularly negative pro-Russian association after the annexation of Crimea.

As previously mentioned, the EAPL–CFA list of candidates was enriched by former members of the Alliance of Russians for the 2016 parliamentary election. Many of the new members are of questionable reputation. The most scandalous is Irina Rozova who was elected to the Seimas and was refused access to secret information owing to her connections with Russian diplomats and politicians, and her own pro-Russian activities, including discussing financial support for the Alliance of Russians with the Russian embassy. In 2019, Rozova attended a session of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy in Tbilisi. The event incited massive protests in Georgia because it took place at the National Parliament and was chaired by a Member of the Russian Duma. According to the State Security Department of Lithuania, the Assembly is highly exploited for the execution of Russia’s foreign policy. Rozova was also invited to the Eurasian Women’s Forum, another event supported by Russia and used for spreading Russian influence, without receiving the approval of the Seimas for participation.

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15 The EAPL–CFA was also joined by the Executive Secretary of the Klaipėda Region Compatriots Consultative Council, Tamara Šuklina. Such ‘compatriots councils’ are directly funded by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Another controversial new member is Romualda Poševeckaja, a former employee of Pervyj Baltyskij Kanal (PBK) which spreads Russian propaganda. She maintains close links with PBK leadership and passes information to Tomaševski. Furthermore, she is responsible for contacts with Russian schools in the Vilnius municipality and for utilizing them for the EAPL–CFA organized rallies.

16 The Tomaševski phenomenon in Lithuania is an interesting case study. He is the head of a party established to represent the Polish minority but plays both pro-Polish and pro-Russian sides. He is serving his third term as a member of the European Parliament and uses the platform openly for criticizing Lithuania’s policies towards its minorities. For years, he would travel to Warsaw and report to Polish politicians about the alleged mistreatment of the Polish minority in Lithuania. This would have a significant impact on Polish-Lithuanian relations as the agenda of bilateral relations would be dominated by issues such as writing Polish names in Lithuania issued passports in letters not existing in the Lithuanian alphabet which would prevent discussions of other important issues, including security-related ones. The trouble-making behavior of the EAPL–CFA is in line with Russia’s interests and since the Russian parties (in addition to the Alliance of Russians there is one more – the Lithuanian Russian Union) in Lithuania are weak, influencing internal and regional politics via the Polish party serves a purpose. The incorporation of former members of the Alliance of Russians in the EAPL–CFA were among things that changed the attitude and lowered the support of Polish politicians for Tomaševski.

Subversion

Russia is the main threat for all three of the Baltic states as stated in their annual reports assessing national security threats. Russia’s subversive goals and actions are very similar in all three countries. A part of these actions focuses on gathering information on domestic and foreign policy, the economy, energy and security policy. Various methods from recruiting Baltic residents, preferably public servants or military personnel, to gathering secret or publicly unavailable information and cyber-attacks are actively employed.

Another part of Russia’s subversive actions includes disinformation and propaganda campaigns. The key aim is to portray the Baltics as ‘failed states’ and seed division and discontent about the state authorities within the Baltic societies. Such a narrative is developed around existing weaknesses such as, for example, the insufficient integration of ethnic minorities or the social-economic disparities among different parts of the Baltic states, including the troubled economic situation of areas inhabited by Russian-speakers. Russian propaganda also divides the society by contrasting traditional values allegedly protected by Russia against the liberal and ‘immoral’ European values. Russian disinformation and propaganda feeds populist and radical movements, which are not
necessarily pro-Russian, with narratives which these movements reuse in their activities. In addition, Russia is willing to support these movements notwithstanding contradicting positions such as, for example, embracing the Polish party in Lithuania because it is more influential than the parties of ethnic Russians.

Russia seeks to rewrite history and goes beyond nurturing a feeling of Soviet nostalgia among the populations of the Baltic states. It seeks to cleanse Soviet history; particularly, its crimes, and create a new narrative in which Russia, the successor of the Soviet Union, is a savior and a hero. Furthermore, Russia seeks to lift Western sanctions which were imposed in reaction to the annexation of Crimea and the hostilities in Eastern Ukraine. For this purpose, Russia approaches those Baltic politicians who can advocate for the removal of the sanctions at both national and international levels. After Russia’s meddling in the US presidential election in 2016, the Baltic states took measures to secure their election process and avoided any significant Russian interference in the national and the European Parliament elections. So far, pro-Russian parties and candidates who were elected are not enough in their numbers to alternate the stance of the Baltic states towards Russia.

There are positive results in the efforts of the Baltic states to fight Russian espionage. The numbers of Russian spies who have been charged and convicted have been increasing which does not necessarily mean that Russia has become more active. The Baltic states have been updating their legislation in order to be better equipped in addressing the current threats and methods being used nowadays by hostile special services. Previous articles of the criminal codes made it very difficult to convict persons of spying. For example, Estonia’s Penal Code was updated in a way that any assistance to a foreign intelligence service would be punishable under criminal law if it damages the country’s security. Additionally, the information transmitted to foreign special services no longer has to be a state or a trade secret in order to apply criminal punishment.

Since the restoration of their independence, Estonia convicted 20 people for spying for Russia with four of them having been convicted in 2019. Lithuania investigated 12 people and convicted six (three of them were convicted in 2019) and Latvia convicted two with a third case in the court. The convicted persons were collecting very similar information in all three Baltic states. In Latvia, a convicted farmer living nearby a military base and an employee at Latvian Railways were gathering information about Latvia’s military infrastructure, NATO’s military technology movements, petroleum product warehouses and the local border point. In Estonia, the objects of interest for Russian security services and military intelligence were the border guard operations of the South Prefecture of the Police and Border Guard Board, the Defense Forces, including their movements and allied forces’ equipment, and the staff and infrastructure of the Estonian Internal Security Service (KAPO).

According to a former major with the Estonian army convicted of treason in 2019, Deniss Metsavas, Russians were most interested in the allies; particularly, the US and the UK, and their weaponry in Estonia. They also wanted to learn everything possible about US activities outside of Estonia. In Lithuania, the convicted persons were also gathering information about the country’s military infrastructure. In 2017, a Russian security official was sentenced for attempts to recruit local officials to wiretap the office and residency of Lithuania’s president.

In 2019, Lithuania convicted 67 citizens of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The charges stemmed from the defendants’ activities in relation to the January 13, 1991 events when the Soviet troops killed 14 civilians and injured hundreds by the TV tower and the Radio and Television Committee building in Vilnius. The majority of the defendants were sentenced in abstention as Russia and Belarus refused to cooperate and extradite them. In retaliation, Russia opened a criminal case against judges and prosecutors working with the January 13 case accusing them of the “unlawful prosecution of Russian citizens.” Even intentions to request the issuance of international Interpol arrest warrants for Lithuanian judges and prosecutors were voiced.

The Baltic states stood along the UK after poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury and expelled four Russian diplomats. Two diplomats were expelled by Lithuania and another two by Estonia and Latvia. The Baltic states have also adopted laws similar to the US Magnitsky Act and actively use them against Russian citizens involved in human rights violations and money laundering activities. The most popular measure against such individuals is the refusal of entry into the Baltic states.
In several cases, convicted Russian spies, mostly citizens of Russia, were used to retrieve Baltic citizens from Russia. In 2015, by exchanging a former KAPO official convicted of spying for Russia, Estonia was able to bring home another KAPO officer who was abducted at the border checkpoint and imprisoned in Russia. Three years later, Estonia exchanged Russian citizen for Estonian businessmen. Both persons had been sentenced over espionage charges.\textsuperscript{26}

The first ever prisoner swap took place between Lithuania and Russia in 2019. Lithuania handed over two convicted Russian intelligence officials in exchange for three persons convicted in Russia: one Lithuanian citizen, one dual citizen of Lithuania and Russia and a Norwegian citizen. Among the exchanged Russian agents, one was convicted of attempts to recruit Lithuanian officials from the State Security Department able of installing listening devices in the office and residency of Lithuania\’s president. The second Russian agent was active in Lithuania for a long time and succeeded in recruiting a Lithuanian military officer who supplied secret, including NATO-related, information.\textsuperscript{27}

Following the events of the removal of the Bonze Soldier of Tallinn in 2007 when Russian hackers launched a massive attack against Estonian public services, including the parliament, ministries, banks, newspapers and broadcasters, the Baltic states paid great attention to strengthening their cyber-security capacities. For example, Estonia established the Cyber Defense Unit of the Estonian Defense League which involves IT experts-volunteers and is an example of a public-private partnership. Lithuania integrated several government agencies into the National Cyber Security Centre under the Ministry of Defense. Estonia also hosts the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence. According to the annual national security threats assessment reports of the Baltic states, Russian cyber espionage targets key institutions; particularly, the ministries of foreign affairs and defense, military forces, paramilitary organizations, units of NATO allies based in the Baltics, businesses, academia, non-governmental organizations and media. Phishing campaigns remain the most widely used form of cyber-attack when the attacker is able to access the target\’s data via an infected e-mail sent to the target.\textsuperscript{28} The personal data of Baltic citizens is also being collected by Russian security services via such platforms as Yandex taxi services and so for this reason the platform is prohibited in Estonia.

**Russian disinformation and propaganda** seeks to deepen divisions within the societies of the Baltic states. It takes any existing weakness or occurred wrong-doing and turns them into an argument why the Baltics are \textquote{failed states.} A significant part of the populations of the Baltic states are Russian-speakers: 36 percent of all inhabitants in Latvia,\textsuperscript{30} 30 percent in Estonia\textsuperscript{30} and 15 percent\textsuperscript{31} in Lithuania. These numbers include not only ethnic Russians but also ethnic Belarusians, Poles, Ukrainians and other. Therefore, these minorities as well as ethnic Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians with a good use of the Russian language are to a various extent exposed to Russian disinformation and propaganda via Russian language TV channels, radio, social media and other information platforms. Lithuania and Latvia took measures to apprehend malign Russian media sources by applying the suspension of TV broadcasting over content inciting war and hatred and distorting historical facts. On these charges, Latvia banned ten Russian TV channels in 2019 and the next year both Latvia and Lithuania banned all RT TV channels on their territory over Western sanctions applied against the Head of the Russian State News Agency, Dmitry Kiselyov.\textsuperscript{32} Estonia decided to establish a national Russian-language TV channel but has cases when Russian media channels were closed like in Latvia and Lithuania, for example, the Sputnik office in Tallinn was closed due to Western sanctions against Kiselyov as the news agency he led is controlling Sputnik.\textsuperscript{33}

An investigation by Re:Baltica reveals that in addition to Sputnik, Russia Today established Russian-language news sites in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 2014, just a few months after Russia\’s annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine. All of the sites were named the same – Baltnews but only with different country codes. They were promoted as independent media portals for Russian language speakers. A local partner responsible for the creation and promotion of media projects was an Estonian non-governmental organization, Altermedia. The payments for services came from the Netherlands-based and Russia Today owned group Media Capital Holding B.V. Consecutive payments were paid by companies based in Cyprus and Serbia. The news portals were active until 2018 and published articles on topics dictated by Russia Today. Among the priorities were highlighting the tensions inside the EU and the US and the promotion of narratives about the
EU’s dependency on the US such as, for example, the US pushed the EU into imposing sanctions against Russia and NATO would not help in the case of an attack.\(^\text{34}\)

Another investigation by Re:Baltica exposed Russian funding of non-governmental organizations in the Baltic states. Even the names of these organizations speak about their suitability and capacity to aid Russian disinformation and propaganda and portray the Baltic states as Russophobic, Nazistic and ‘failed states’ as well as distort history. For example, the names of the organizations in Estonia are: the Legal Information Centre for Human Rights and Estonia Without Nazism. In Lithuania they are: the Independent Human Rights Center, Lithuania Without Nazism and the Centre for Research and Defense of Fundamental Rights. In Latvia they are: the Centre for European Democracy Studies, the Latvian Human Rights Committee, the Centre of Baltic Historical and Socio-Political Research and the European Research Institute. The organizations, among other activities, organize events for Russian compatriots, including marches and children’s competitions to commemorate Soviet soldiers fallen in Europe’s defense against Nazism and various anti-fascist protests, conferences and discussions.\(^\text{35}\)

Since 2014, numerous initiatives have been implemented in the Baltic States, most often by civil society, with the aim of strengthening the media literacy skills of the population and increasing societal resilience. In Riga, the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence was established to facilitate professional journalism and boost the resilience of the media audience to propaganda. Some experts say that after so many initiatives, people became tired and indifferent to the word - propaganda, thus, it is difficult to continue speaking about it in public.

While fighting Russia’s malign influence, the Baltic states realized that it is not enough to expose Russian lies but it is also important to eliminate any weakness exploited by Russian disinformation and propaganda. For this purpose, initiatives for strengthening the sense of belonging among Russian speakers and advancing their integration were launched. Estonia is setting an example by reviving the city of Narva which is situated by the border with Russia and is mostly inhabited by ethnic Russians. After the occupation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine, Narva was identified as an opportune spot for the invasion of the ‘little green men.’ Estonia seeks to revive the city by investing in culture and opening a new theatre venue which is to house theatre groups from St Petersburg and Moscow and organize theatre workshops for local children. Another aim is to relocate the offices of the Estonian Integration Foundation, which promotes learning the Estonian language, to Narva. Finally, the office of the Estonian president was reallocated to Narva for a month in a gesture on the highest level reiterating Estonia’s commitment to all of its citizens notwithstanding their ethnicity or mother tongue.\(^\text{36}\)

**Military Factor**

From the military point of view, there are several issues of particular interest for Russia in the Baltics. Most important are NATO-related developments; particularly, the enhanced forward presence battalions in all three Baltic states and the Baltic air-policing mission located in Lithuania. Both establishments are a direct consequence of Russia’s security provocations and military actions against neighboring states. NATO exercises in the Baltics and Poland are closely followed by Russia as well as answered by military exercises between Russia and Belarus. Of a particular importance for the Baltics is securing a passage via the Suwalki gap and preventing hybrid attacks in their border regions and via the special train transit route connecting the Kaliningrad Oblast with inland Russia through Lithuania.

As previously mentioned, Russia leads an intensive disinformation and propaganda campaign against NATO. It seeks to discredit NATO’s name and weaken the support of the Baltic populations for NATO membership. Latvia’s annual assessment of threats for national security provides the following summary of messages disseminated by Russia: “NATO is preparing a military strike against Russia/ if there would be a war between NATO and Russia, it would take place on the territory of the Baltic states and destroy these countries/NATO has a high cost for the Baltic states and it is covered at the expense of socially vulnerable groups/NATO soldiers are immoral drunks who create disorder/the US and NATO are unreliable and will not help the member states in a conflict with Russia/the actions of NATO, Poland and the Baltic states in increasing their military capabilities will provoke a backlash
Despite these messages, the Baltic societies remain supportive of NATO. In Estonia, 74 percent of the population support the country’s NATO membership, 77 percent of Lithuanians have a favorable view of NATO and 78 percent believe that the NATO battalion helps to deter hostile countries and around 60 percent of Latvians support NATO and agree that the Alliance contributes to its security.

The decision to station the NATO enhanced forward presence battalions in the Baltic states and Poland was made at the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw. The Baltics for a long time sought the permanent presence of the NATO troops as a measure of deterrence and strengthened defense. After the 2014 events in Ukraine, their arguments gained a stronger ground and were approved. Before this, NATO’s Baltic Air Policing mission was the only NATO establishment on the ground. The mission has been active since 2004 when the Baltics joined the Alliance and is responsible for guarding the airspace of the Baltic states. The intensity of airspace violations fluctuates as, for example, the number of times when NATO fighter aircraft had to identify and escort Russian military aircraft in international airspace over the Baltic Sea deviated from two to eight times per week in June 2020.

In the case of the need for NATO’s military reinforcement, there is only one way to deliver it by land to the Baltics - via the Suwalki gap, a 110-115-kilometer-wide land border between Lithuania and Poland. This stretch of land also connects Kaliningrad with Belarus, a close military ally of Russia. The Baltics have been long advocating for the NATO Baltics defense plan which would address their security concerns. The idea was endorsed by all NATO members and approved in June 2020.

Every four years, Russia together with Belarus hosts the Zapad military exercise by the borders of the Baltic states and Poland. The last exercise took place in 2017. Since it was the first one after the 2014 events in Ukraine, tensions in the Baltics were high, including a fear of potential land invasion. Russia does not comply with the international transparency obligations and the exact number of troops that took part in the exercise remains unknown. Only Belarus extended an invitation to the international community to observe the part of the exercise that took place on its territory.

Another issue of security concern for the Baltics, particularly for Lithuania, is a possible Russian attempt to use the transit train going via the territory of Lithuania between mainland Russia and Kaliningrad. The transit is regulated by an EU–Russia special transit scheme under which Russian citizens travel under simplified rules but the transit of military equipment is closely regulated by Lithuania. Upon entrance to Lithuania’s territory, the train runs non-stop and is under strict surveillance. However, it is feared that the route can be used for hybrid attacks such as, for example, delivering the ‘little green men.’

In addition to strengthening and developing their defense capabilities, the Baltic states aim to promote a positive public view towards the armed forces, including NATO troops. For example, in Lithuania, Lithuanian and NATO troops join various celebrations and events during which they engage with civilians and show their military equipment. Every year people are invited to commemorate Lithuania’s accession to NATO at the airbase hosting the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission and participate in a three-kilometer-long runway run.

Diplomatic Activities

The Baltic states are united on the issue of the potential removal or softening of the Western sanctions against Russia. They wish to see changes in Russia’s behavior and the results of the implementation of the Minsk Agreements before considering any softening of sanctions. They are against Russian attempts at historical revisionism as the Soviet occupation, particularly the massive deportations of Baltic citizens, represents some of the worst events in history.

Current bilateral relations among the Baltic states and Russia are marked by different exposures. The Estonian President, Kersti Kaljulaid, has been the first Baltic state president to meet President Putin since 2014. Their meeting took place in April 2019 in Moscow. Not much information is available about this meeting but it was noted as a respectful one. When criticized over meeting Putin, President Kaljulaid kept a position of the importance to be able to talk with the neighbors. The meeting took place when Estonia was in the run for a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council which she won and this might have been among the topics of discussion.
In 2010, the former President of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė, had a less pleasant meeting with then Prime Minister Putin. She received a list of demands for Lithuania to fulfil and refused any such patronizing bilateral relations. Like the Estonian president, she was supportive of relations among the neighbors but on an equal basis.\textsuperscript{43} In the next years of her presidency, Grybauskaitė led a firm foreign policy towards Russia and did not avoid calling Russia a ‘terrorist state.’

Russia uses the situation of Russian speakers in the Baltics to accuse the three states of violating their rights in such international formats as the UN, the OSCE and even in the EU institutions. Much of this is done by using local pro-Russian politicians and activists. For example, a member of the Russian Union of Latvia, Ilya Kozyrev, addressed the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights several times over Latvia’s language policies. According to him, Latvia leads ethnocratic policies and is abusing the rights of Russian speakers in order to build a “Latvia for Latvians.”\textsuperscript{44}

The European Parliament members from the Latvian Russian Union, the Latvian Harmony party and the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance are openly criticizing their countries for violating the rights of ethnic minorities. They attack educational reforms aimed to increase the share of the lessons, as well as the high-school exams, to be taught in the national languages of the Baltics for Russian or Polish speaking students. Some pro-Russian members of the European Parliament go further and engage in activities meant to restore Russia’s reputation. For example, in 2018 Latvian member of the European Parliament, Miroslavs Mitrofanovs, hosted the annual European Russian Forum in Brussels which was used to deliver a message that Russia would be ready to go to war should Europe ignore its interests in its near abroad. Despite Mitrofanovs’s role as host, the actual organizers were Russian authorities.\textsuperscript{45}

Russia is stepping up its efforts of historical revisionism. The year 2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II and 2019 marked the 80th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Baltic states associate both of these historical events with the events that led to the Soviet occupation and repressions that followed. Russia seeks to cleanse its name and portray itself as a hero and Europe’s liberator from Nazism. In June 2020, the foreign ministers of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania coordinated their reaction amid Russia’s attempts to revoke resolution No. 979-1 of December 24, 1989 adopted by the Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR that condemned the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. It is interesting that Estonian and Lithuanian ministers chose the word - summoning - when inviting the Russian ambassador for an explanation while their Latvian counterpart chose the word - inviting - for his invitation.\textsuperscript{46} According to Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Linas Linkevičius, it is an attempt to whitewash totalitarian crimes and manipulate the current political agenda.\textsuperscript{47}

Another problem is posed by the parties and the movements in the Baltics that, intentionally or not, support the Russian narrative. For example, the Latvian Harmony party on its Facebook page shared a message saying that in Stalin times life in Latvia was better.\textsuperscript{48} The Estonian Minister of Finance, Martin Helme, from the EKRE party compared the country’s membership in the EU with the Soviet Union by stating that both were set up so that no member state could leave.\textsuperscript{49}

Russia equally smears the Baltic states’ reputation inside Russia. For many years the public surveys by the Levada Centre showed that Russians see the Baltics among the five biggest enemies of Russia. In 2009, 38 percent of Russians were of the opinion that the Baltics are the enemies of Russia but in 2017 only ten percent were of the same position.\textsuperscript{50} Although Russian tourists are often visitors in the Baltics, some of them arrive with a fear of facing Russophobic behavior such as, for example, getting attacked for speaking Russian. They soon realize that nothing of such sort takes place in the Baltics.

The Baltic states are supportive of a Russian democratic thought. Due to Russian law, they cannot fund civil society activities in Russia. Instead, they have become a safe haven for Russian intelligentsia, including opinion makers, media and culture representatives and members of opposition parties where they can gather, share ideas and even live and continue their work without state-imposed restrictions and control. In support of Russia’s democratic ambition, Vilnius city renamed the square in front of the Russian embassy after Boris Nemtsov. One could think that it is a subtle way of trolling Putin’s regime.
Economic Influence

The integration of the Baltic states into European structures was not completed with their accession to the EU. It is a continuous process with ambitious projects aimed to, firstly, increase the interoperability of the energy and transport corridors in the Baltics and then fully integrate them into the European networks. Since these actions lead towards the economic and energy independence of the Baltic states from Russia, the latter is active in launching parallel competing projects or applying other destructive methods. There is a saying that the key export commodity of Russia is not oil but corruption. Recent scandals in the banking sector of the Baltics, which was used by the Russian elite to launder stolen funds, support the argument.

The Baltic states are rapidly developing energy connectivity projects to integrate into the European networks and decrease dependency upon energy supplies from Russia. In the electricity sector, they seek to disconnect from a shared electricity system with Russia and Belarus and synchronize with the European one by 2025. In order to boost independence from Russian gas, Lithuania has built the liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal at the Klaipėda seaport. Currently, it supplies gas to Estonia, Finland and Latvia, and from the end of 2021, if the completion of the gas connector goes as planned - to Poland. In 2016, the Baltic states and Finland agreed to establish a common regional gas market which would simplify and lower the cost of the regional gas trade. The completion of project was delayed, however, over disagreements about whether or not the neighboring countries should contribute to the maintenance of the Lithuanian LNG terminal in Klaipėda.

When negotiating its accession to the EU, Lithuania committed to the decommissioning of its Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) and as a result from producer became a consumer of electricity with most of it coming from Russia. Later, a plan to build a new NPP in Visaginas emerged but was voted down in a national referendum. In reaction to Lithuania’s attempts to increase its own energy independence as well as that of the other Baltic states, Russia together with Belarus started constructing a Belarusian NPP. The project is funded by a Russian loan to Belarus. It is being built by the Atomstroyexport company, an affiliate of Russia’s state-owned Rosatom, and it is deemed as a security and a safety threat because of its close proximity to Vilnius, only 40 kilometers away, and its incompliance with the international requirements for environmental protection, nuclear safety and stress tests. Lithuania has passed a law banning the purchase of electricity from the Belarusian NPP and is hoping for support from its neighbors. So far, only Poland supports the position.

Another ambitious project aiming to connect the Baltics with the rest of Europe is the Rail Baltica project. The aim is to integrate the Baltic states into the European rail network by 2026. It will be the first Baltic rail line built in accordance with the European rail gauge measurements as the existing ones are of the Russian rail gauge measurement system. It will enable not only a faster movement of people and goods but also the movement of NATO military equipment from Poland to the Baltics. The project is strongly attacked by Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns using arguments such as the following: “Almost all of the new infrastructure projects in the Baltic states have failed while during the USSR period, the countries were at the forefront because the USSR’s management was more effective than that of the current EU. Baltic transport is still closely intertwined with the Russian economy and freight flows from Russia to seaports of the Baltic states.”

Instead of taking advice and guidance from the Russian side, the Baltics rely on the qualified expertise provided by, for example, the NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence in Vilnius. They are also very careful when selecting contractors for their strategic and national security projects important for independence, with the latter having to pass a thorough vetting process.

The banking sector in the Baltic states is dominated by foreign capital holding. In Estonia and Lithuania, the foreign capital reaches 90 percent and is dominated by three Nordic banks - Swedbank, SEB Bank and Luminor Bank. In Latvia, the banking sector is also dominated by the same Nordic banks, although to a smaller extent of 60 percent. Such a high presence of Nordic banks in the Baltic states is usually associated with their stability, effectiveness and better services. However, staring from 2017 money laundering scandals involving the assets of Russian citizens started unravelling in Estonia and Latvia with the Nordic banks at the forefront.
Investigations revealed that during the period of 2007-2015, the Estonian branch of the Danish capital Danske Bank processed EUR 200 billion in transactions for high risk customers. These customers were mostly from Russia and citizens of other former Soviet states. The Estonian branch of the Danske Bank did not have the same anti-money laundering checks as, for example, the head office in Copenhagen. The head management was aware about the related risks but chose profits generated by non-resident clients over security. For example, in 2013 non-residents generated 99 percent of the branch’s profit. Shortly after the scandal in 2018, the bank ceased its activities in the Baltic states and Russia.

Another money laundering scandal due to poor anti-money laundering risk control unraveled in the Estonian branch of the Swedish Swedbank. It is estimated that between 2010 and 2016 the bank handled EUR 135 billion in money flows for the same contingent of non-resident customers.

In reaction, another Swedish SEB Bank assessed its non-resident customers and informed that EUR 8 billion was transferred via its Estonian branch between 2008 and 2016.

The Latvian banking sector received worldwide attention in 2018 when the US Department of Treasury imposed sanctions against country’s second biggest bank, ABLV Bank. The bank was accused of managing accounts related to illicit activities in Azerbaijan, Russia and Ukraine, and even for executing transactions for parties involved in North Korea’s nuclear program, therefore, violating the US sanctions regime. The ABLV Bank was liquidated but an investigation of over EUR 100 million of frozen assets is undergoing in order to determine their true origin.

Investigations reveal that money laundering transactions carried out in Estonia and Latvia included members of President Putin’s family; particularly, his cousin Igor Putin, and people associated with the Federal Security Service (FSB). 52 Both countries took active measures to eliminate the weaknesses within their banking sectors and also launched criminal investigations. But the effect of the money laundering crimes is far greater than that of the corruption. They pose a national security threat; particularly, influencing the political life of the countries via lobbying and corrupting officials and politicians while directing the funds into inward investments. Moreover, damage has been done to the reputation of the countries.

The Lithuanian banking sector avoided scandals of a similar scale but there are discoveries about Russian money floating via local banks, particularly via the Ūkio Bank, which was closed by authorities in 2013. The Ūkio Bank was a part of a money laundering system led by the Russian investment bank, Troika Dialog. The system was created to channel billions of dollars out of Russia. It also allowed Russian oligarchs and politicians to execute business and private transactions such as the purchase of real estate, luxury yachts and artwork, and to cover medical bills and tuition at prestigious Western schools for their children. It was discovered that the Ūkio Bank was used by a close friend of Putin, Sergei Roldugin, and by a former Russian Senator and businessperson, Valentin Zavadnikov. Russian companies, which were exposed over massive tax fraud by Sergei Magnitsky, were also taking part in the Troika Dialog-led system. 53 The main shareholder of the Ūkio Bank is out of reach of Lithuanian law enforcement since he is hiding in Russia.
Notes

6. Ričards Umbrāko, “Who is behind plot to topple the Latvian parliament?,” New Eastern Europe, April-May No 3 (XLI)/2020
21. Ibid.


29. The Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, “Latvian is mother tongue of 60.8 % of the population of Latvia”


44. Ibid.


Poland
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Political Influence

Poland’s stance towards Russia, to a considerable extent due to historical conditions, has been rather assertive since the democratic transformation following the 1989 free elections that put an end to the People’s Republic of Poland (PRL). Nevertheless, the relations have distinctly and drastically worsened after the 2010 plane crash in Smolensk that killed the President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, and many other high-rank officials. The tragedy was followed by reactions that caused a division within Polish society where some people and politicians even accused the Russians of shooting down the plane and some also accused the then-government led by the Civic Platform party (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) of “collaborating with Putin in the assassination and covering the truth” afterwards.

Bilateral relations further worsened after the events in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation which led to sanctions being imposed on Russia. Since then, Russian officials are trying put forward a notion that the Polish authorities are irrationally Russophobic and unwilling to cooperate. In the Kremlin’s narrative, the Polish stance is not motivated by reason but purely by anti-Russian sentiments. Similarly, the sanctions were imposed not because Poland supports Ukraine and its territorial integrity but because Poland is “anti-Russian.” In this way, Russia consequently puts the blame solely on the Polish government for the worsening of bilateral relations and undermining any form of a mutual dialogue. The Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, said earlier in December 2019 that the “aggressive rhetoric and the demolition of monuments to fighters against fascism and playing the first fiddle in imposing the EU’s anti-Russian sanctions are the direct evidence of this.”

Similar views were also expressed by the Ambassador of Russia to Poland, Sergey Andreev, when talking about the state of current relations: “It is the Polish authorities that have decided to freeze political contacts, support anti-Russian sanctions, and cultural contacts are also experiencing a decline. All you need is good intentions. But these good intentions are lacking on the Polish side, that’s why it is as it is.”

By presenting the Polish government as the one with an “aggressive rhetoric” and “lacking good intentions,” the Kremlin aims to undermine its position in the international community as an unreliable and biased partner in terms of subjects related to Russia. It is worth mentioning, however, that a slightly different approach than usual could be observed recently. On April 21, 2020, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, made some friendly remarks concerning cooperation with “Polish neighbors and friends” but this can be interpreted in the light of an oil price war with Saudi Arabia.

The Russian rhetoric on Poland frequently touches upon historical issues; mainly, the Second World War. The reason is that there are many discrepancies between how the historical narrative is presented in Poland and in Russia. For example, in general Polish opinion regarding the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, an agreement made between the German and Soviet foreign ministers in August 1939, was a de facto prelude to WW2 and a plan to divide Poland and the rest of the region between Germany and the USSR. The pact was also condemned by the EU Parliament resolution as “dividing Europe and the territories of independent states between the two totalitarian regimes and grouping them into spheres of interest, which paved the way for the outbreak of the Second World War.” From the Russian perspective, however, it was simply a non-aggression pact, similar to other agreements that had been concluded between Nazi Germany and other European states, including Poland. According to this, the Soviet troops never “invaded” Poland as on September 17, 1939 it was already a failed state and so the Red Army entered eastern Poland to “protect” its population.

The Russian rhetoric on Poland during WW2 often suggests that prior to September 1939, Warsaw and Berlin were allies. In his statements in December 2019, President Putin himself accused the pre-war Polish authorities as being pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic and partly responsible for the outbreak of the World War. He also called a Polish Ambassador in Nazi Germany at the time “a bastard and an
anti-Semite pig that promised to put up a statue of Hitler in Warsaw for his pledges to send Jews to Africa."5 Such allegations fit into the long-time Russian narrative about WW2 that whitewashes the USSR’s role, especially the aforementioned Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, and accuses other nations, including Poland, of colluding with Hitler’s regime.

In fact, any form of disapproval towards the official Russian interpretation of history is being linked to pro-Nazism and neofascism. This is especially visible when talking about the current Polish government’s “decommunisation” policy which also concerns the “monuments of gratitude for Soviet liberators” that were built during the PRL era. Many of them are being removed, motivated by the fact that for many Poles the “liberation” was in fact another “occupation.” Russia openly criticizes such actions as attempts to rewrite history that are motivated by right-wing extremism, although this is not always expressed directly. Such a stance, for example, can be deduced from the “Excerpt from the annual report of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the situation with heroising Nazism, the spread of neo-Nazism and other practices leading to the escalation of modern forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance” published on the website of the Embassy of Russia in Warsaw on May 6, 2019. The paper starts with remarks that Poland seeks to “remove from the national consciousness the memory of the decisive role of the USSR in liberating Poland from the Nazi partitioners and justifying the thesis about the ‘Soviet occupation’ of Poland in the post-war period” which are later mixed with reports about various current Polish far-right groups activities and xenophobic acts.6 This could create an impression that refusing to view history only through Russian lenses is almost a pathway to glorifying Nazism.

**Subversion**

It is no exaggeration to suggest that with this overarching attitude, Poland differs from other countries in the region in terms of potential Russian subversive operations, particularly in terms of the aims and approaches. Unlike the former Soviet republics, for example, it lacks a significant Russian minority (only around 8,800 Polish citizens declared Russian nationality according to 2011’s census7) and the Polish Orthodox Church has an independent, autocephalous status. Furthermore, as compared with other V4 countries, for instance, with similar experiences of being the USSR’s satellites for most of the second half of the 20th century, Poland remains the most “Russian-assertive” state, partly because the political scene is dominated by a former anti-Communist opposition. It is difficult to find politicians who openly proclaim slogans directly in line with Russian interests. Since the 1990s, the general consensus among the political elite, with minor exceptions, was to remain on a pro-Western course and reduce rather than bolster Polish dependence on Russia. Even the currently ruling Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) that often finds itself in disagreement with the EU on certain sensitive issues, cannot be described as being pro-Russian, either de facto or unintentionally. There are only marginal groups or individuals that can be described as such.

Among them is a quasi-political party, Change (Zmiana), that, for example, describes itself as “the first non-American party in Poland” and calls for exiting NATO. Its leader, Mateusz Piskorski, was arrested on espionage charges in favor of Russia and China in 2016 and released on bail in May 2019. His trial, that started two years after his arrest, remains classified. Piskorski and the community of Zmiana are also associated with a research institute known as the European Centre for Geopolitical Analysis (Europejskie Centrum Analiz Geopolitycznych) that runs an Internet portal, geopolityka.org, with significant reach in social media and presenting a Western-sceptic and pro-Russian content. Another linked organization is the Kursk Association whose main field of activity is the renovation of the previously mentioned Soviet-era monuments in Poland. Together they form a core of the marginal but openly pro-Russian environment in Poland, often being invited to Russian media to present the “point of view of Polish experts and ordinary Poles” that is contrary to the supposedly Russophobic actions of the Polish authorities and prominent politicians in various political circles. The ECAG was also reported as serving as a “hub” for other activities such as recruiting observers on the election monitoring missions organized by the Commonwealth of Independent States – Election Monitoring Organization in post-Soviet space that includes the so-called “breakaways republic” or the separatist republics in eastern Ukraine.8 Still, the described circles are marginal and lack common recognition and influence in Polish society. Another politician whose statements could be considered as “pro-Russian” is Janusz Korwin-Mikke, one of the leaders of the right-wing and
eurosceptic Confederation (Konfederacja) party that entered the Polish parliament following the last elections in 2019. He spoke in Russian media on many occasions and has also made many statements in favor of the Kremlin’s policy (towards Ukraine, for example) and Vladimir Putin. Although famous for his many controversial opinions especially among the youth, he nevertheless enjoys only minor support.

The possibilities of the Kremlin’s soft power are, therefore, very limited in Poland, yet still significant. Instead of openly supporting direct pro-Russian activities, Russia-affiliated actors are focused on promoting anti-NATO and anti-liberal views or “defending Christian values” mixed with disinformation campaigns and the spreading of fake news. Especially vulnerable for such influence are the conservative and nationalist circles where also anti-Ukrainian and anti-Lithuanian antagonisms are exploited. For example, minor and marginal anti-Polish events that happen in Ukraine or Lithuania are often covered and exaggerated by misinformation campaigns in order to present some behavior as common in the aforementioned countries. In this way, they are addressing anti-Ukrainian and anti-Lithuanian sentiments and stereotypes in order to increase their negative image within Polish society. Such narratives are often presented in the “patriotic” and nationalist media.

The same portals also express anti-Western views about the “degeneracy” of the EU (especially in terms of LGBTQ related issues or migration policy) or “NATO-occupation of Poland.” Therefore, although not explicitly pro-Russian, these serve the Kremlin’s interest indirectly. This applies also to left-wing propaganda that shares the anti-NATO views wrapped as “opposing American imperialism.” As of the Russian media operating in Poland, the most significant one is Sputnik Polska, a Polish branch of the Sputnik News Agency. It generally operates as a regular news agency that presents Moscow’s point of view on various events and its narrative. Sputnik Polska also publishes opinions of people linked to the previously mentioned Zmiana party.

The global pandemic crisis of COVID-19 also gave the opportunity for another type of Russian disinformation activity that has not omitted Poland. In late March 2020, the Russian senator, Aleksey Pushkov, reportedly informed via his Twitter account that Poland had denied permission for passage through its airspace to a Russian military aircraft flying to Italy with medical supplies and so it was forced to take a longer route through Turkey and Greece. The information was also shared by the Russian newspapers, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Moskovsky Komsomolets and Novye Izvestia. Following the accusations, the Embassy of Poland in Moscow released a statement where it rejected that any such “denial” took place since no Russian authority addressed Poland for this permission in the first place and that commentaries like this should be considered as disinformation. Subsequently, the post on Twitter was deleted but the articles in newspapers are still available. Again, such actions are part of a long-time campaign of portraying Polish authorities as irrationally (or even dangerously) Russophobic.

On a separate note, potentially worth noting is that there are unconfirmed rumors that the locale of the former Soviet Embassy at 100 Sobieski Street remains closed and guarded. Russia has refused to return the building lease, leading to the speculation of the possibility that it is still used by Russian intelligence circles.

Military Factor

Since Poland borders the Kaliningrad region and this is the only land connection between Polish and Russian territories, any act of the additional militarization of the region is being looked at with concern in Poland and considered as a form of military pressure. This is so especially because of the exclaves’s strategic location in terms of the so-called Suwalki Corridor. Since 2016, there has been a significant increase of the “stronghold’s” military potential, including the restoration of regiments and brigades, the deployment of new arms, vehicles and equipment and the development of infrastructure and its modernization. Although it still has not reached its level from the USSR era, recent developments suggest that Russian military forces in the exclave can perform not only defensive but also offensive activities in the case of war. Additionally, it remains a strategic base for carrying out intelligence tasks in Poland and Lithuania.

Russian authorities claim that the increasing militarization of Kaliningrad is a response to a growing NATO presence in the region. The same narrative is used to justify military drills that are, for example,
performed together with Belarus on its territory. Such military exercises and maneuvers are often performed close to Polish borders as was the case in October 2019 during the “Poisk-19” drills or on many other occasions such as the large-scale Zapad exercise in 2017 which are met with critical observation from Poland.

Diplomatic Activities

The Embassy of the Russian Federation in Warsaw is one of the biggest diplomatic facilities in Poland. Apart from regular diplomatic activities, it frequently publishes press releases, articles, speeches of Russian officials and other statements. It also keeps a regularly updated list of places in Poland where monuments of “Soviet liberators” were dismantled. Within the Embassy’s premises, there is the Consulate, the Trade Representation, the Russian Centre for Science and Culture (Rosyjski Ośrodek Nauki i Kultury, RONiK) and a Russian school. Besides Warsaw, there are Consulates-General in Kraków, Poznań and Gdańsk where the latter also hosts its RONiK branch (Rosyjskie Centrum Nauki i Kultury w Gdańsku, RCNK). RONiK is a part of Rossotrudnichestvo – that is, the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, an agency operating under the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – and it mainly organizes language courses and various events aimed at promoting Russian culture. It is also a partner of two Polish NGOs, the Association for Polish-Eastern Cooperation (Stowarzyszenie Współpracy Polska-Wschód) and the Association for Polish-Russian Cooperation (Stowarzyszenie Współpracy Polska-Rosja).

Economic Influence

The Russian energy industry has always been a tool of the Kremlin’s political pressure and Poland was no exception. Therefore, Poland adopted the policy of diversification of energy resources import and since then, the dependency on Russian-imported gas is being systematically decreased. Various initiatives were adopted in order to do so such as the construction of the LNG terminal in Świnoujście (2015) that is capable of receiving transports from the USA and Qatar or the construction of the Baltic Pipe. Therefore, Polish authorities were in a position to decide not to renew the Yamal contract signed in 1996 (it will expire on December 31, 2022) that was highly unfavorable for Poland in terms of gas prices. Even the arbitration court in Stockholm ruled in March 2020 that Gazprom has to pay PGNiG (Polish dominant gas company) USD 1.5 billion as a result of a pricing dispute case from the aforementioned contract. Nevertheless, it is not certain if Gazprom will comply with the verdict quickly and may instead stall the payment.

The Polish-Russian trade exchange was systematically increasing between 2004 and 2013. Its worth grew from EUR 7.3 billion in 2004 to EUR 27.2 billion in 2013. After the sanctions on Russia were imposed, and in return Moscow issued an embargo on Polish agri-food products, there has been a significant drop (to EUR 18 billion in 2015) that only recently began to recover. In 2019, Polish export to Russia accounted for EUR 7.4 billion (3.2 percent of total Polish export, an increase of 0.2 percent since 2018, 7th partner), and import - for EUR 14.4 billion (6.2 percent of the total, a decrease of 0.9 percent, 3rd partner). Since the most imported goods are energy resources, the fact of decreasing import is no surprise due to Poland’s diversification in this regard. Nevertheless, the numbers show that Poland and Russia are significant, although not crucial, trade partners, with mutual importance for each other despite the turnover drop. It also shows that there is not much place for Russian economic pressure on Poland.

Even the agriculture sector that plays a major role in Polish export to Russia did not suffer significantly overall. Although its worth in 2013 was EUR 1.3 billion and in 2018 only EUR 440 million, at the same time the value of the Polish agriculture export was subsequently growing. This proves that Polish producers were able to adapt to the situation and transfer to other markets without suffering notable loses or bypass the embargo through cooperation with Belarusian companies. The myth of Polish dependency on exports to Russia and the assumptions of using it as a leverage to influence the Polish stance were, therefore, negatively verified as the sanctions and embargos did not hurt Poland’s economy in the long term and only small branches of the agriculture sector met with difficulties. The rural Polish People’s Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL) did raise the issue...
of the possible lifting of the economic sanctions in 2016 due to alleged losses suffered by farmers but at the same time stressed that political restrictions must be maintained. This, however, did not change the opinion and public debate around the sanctions as the majority of Poles supports them (68 percent in 2015). Therefore, the Russian counter-embargos did not only fail in achieving their political goals but in fact contributed to the diversification of Polish export markets, which in the long term has a very positive impact.

Notes

8. Until now Zmián has not been officially registered as a political party.
9. Andrzej Turowski, United We Stand, Divided We Fall: The Kremlin’s Leverage In The Visegrad Countries, Prague Security Studies Institute, November 2017, p. 23
17. Twierdza Kaliningrad. Coraz blizej Moskwy, Centre for Eastern Studies, October 2019, p. 67


Conclusion

Russian activities against various states in Eastern Europe do have common characteristics. Russians seek to cultivate pro-Russian parties and politicians wherever possible. They are engaged in espionage. Everywhere they conduct propaganda and disinformation with narratives and themes that are in a large part similar.

Nevertheless, Russia's approach and immediate objectives in different countries vary considerably. The nations covered in this paper can be divided into four categories: 1) Belarus; 2) Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine; 3) Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; 4) Poland.

Belarus is the only country in this list that was a formal Russian ally and firmly within the Russian sphere of geopolitical influence at the time of writing. Moreover, the balance of public opinion there appeared to be more favorable to Russia than in any other of these nations. This has not, however, led to Belarus being insulated from hostile Russian geostrategic activities. Instead, it has left it exposed to Russia's imperial designs. Moscow has used this geopolitical proximity and the high level of integration between Russia and Belarus as an opportunity to undermine Belarusian sovereignty. The willingness of Belarus to be within the Russian sphere turned out to cause weaknesses in the context of the Kremlin's attempts to "integrate" the country even more closely. The penetration of Belarus by various types of Russian state assets was deep while the country had rather limited foreign support in the face of Russian imperialism because most foreign powers had been resigned to Belarus being dominated by Russia.

At the time of writing, Russian activities in Belarus differed from those in any other country because Russian interests there had already been more advanced than anywhere else. Other nations were more resilient to the Russian influence and, therefore, had to be weakened by various types of attacks using the wide range of instruments in Moscow's geostrategic arsenal. Belarus, on the other hand, was perceived to be ripe for the taking from the perspective of the Russian ruling regime's imperial ambitions – hence the attempts to completely undercut Belarusian sovereignty that used to cause protests even by a pro-Russian regime in Belarus.

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have been the main targets of Russian hostility for many years. Their refusal to enter the Russian sphere of influence, in combination with the lack of international security guarantees such as the NATO membership, has resulted in very aggressive Russian actions against them. These actions are conducted in the general context of Moscow's strategic effort to build a territorial sphere of influence around Russia.

The three countries have in common the systematic targeting of their sovereignty and territorial integrity by Moscow. Russia has occupied Crimea and for all practical purposes controls a part of the Donbas region ruled by its two proxy regimes. It has occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia in Georgia. It de facto controls Transnistria in Moldova, also through a local proxy regime.

Russian military units are officially permanently based in all of these regions except in Donbas where the Russian military presence is unofficial but nonetheless is real. Ethnic cleansing has been committed against Georgians in both Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region. Russia is overseeing an ongoing demographic change in Crimea while many Ukrainian citizens have left the parts of Donbas that are under de facto Russian control. In all of the occupied and breakaway territories, Russia is "creating" new citizens by either distributing Russian passports or bringing residents from Russia into the occupied region as it does in Crimea. Russian diplomacy is working to coerce all three countries into entering agreements that could permanently compromise their territorial integrity.

The common distinct feature in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine is Russia's sustained effort to structurally shatter these states. They will not accept Russian geopolitical dominance willingly. An outright permanent military conquest is not feasible for a host of reasons. The only practical way for Russia to dominate them, therefore, is to eliminate them as cohesive international actors. Completely failed states would be unable to have a meaningful partnership with the Western and other foreign powers. Russia, on the other hand, could manipulate the chaos within such failed states in ways that would conform to Moscow's strategic objectives. To achieve this end state, Russia has been using a wide array of tools to divide the three nations and deny them the ability to function as proper states.
In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Russia has not yet attempted to achieve decisive geostrategic results. Their NATO membership makes such a potential enterprise very risky and Moscow has been concentrating the bulk of its strategic attention on the other nations discussed above.

Nonetheless, the three Baltic nations are not safe from Russian geopolitical designs. There is a notable difference between Moscow’s behavior towards them and its behavior towards other NATO and EU member states. Elsewhere, the aim of Russian subversive, diplomatic and other activities is to lessen the Western states’ willingness and ability to oppose Russia’s policies, including the attempts to dominate its neighborhood. The Baltic nations, on the other hand, are within the neighborhood in question. Moscow does not try to act decisively against them yet but its actions and attitude indicate that it wants the ground to be prepared if at some point it takes robust steps in the Baltic region. Russia has been trying to deepen divisions within the Baltic states, seeking to exploit the factor of the Russian-speaking minorities there to the fullest extent.

The case of Poland is different from the other nations addressed in this paper. While Russia employs subversive and other measures against Poland, their purpose appears to be akin to those used against other NATO and EU member states, aside from the Baltic nations. Russia’s immediate objectives regarding Poland do not appear to include subjugating it, setting them aside from the Russian objectives with regard to the other nations discussed above.

One common feature of Russia’s policies towards the nations it targets, certainly in the cases of Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, is their rigidly uncompromising maximalism. The regime in the Kremlin is not satisfied with merely pro-Russian policies or regimes in these countries. Instead, it aims for complete domination.

In Belarus, the Lukashenko regime was founded on Soviet nostalgia. It opposed overly strong expressions of Belarusian patriotism and the country’s pre-Soviet identity. It participated in Russia’s regional geopolitical projects including the Eurasian Economic Union and the CSTO military alliance. It went even further, forming the so-called Union State consisting of Russia and Belarus. Overall, Lukashenko conceded immense influence over Belarus to Moscow. None of this turned out to be enough for the Russian regime which has kept seeking ways to gain even more direct control over Belarus.

Moldova does not seek NATO membership, deep splits within its society preclude a robust pro-Western foreign policy in general and the pro-Russian PSRM party is a major force on the political scene. The country’s neutrality and international helplessness do not satisfy Moscow, however. When a Moldovan constitutional crisis in June 2019 appeared to create an opening for Moscow, it attempted to extract enormous concessions that would surrender Moldova to Russian dominance.

In Ukraine, the administration of Viktor Yanukovych also did not pursue NATO membership. Again, a neutral international stance was not enough for the Kremlin. It strong-armed Yanukovych into rejecting the association agreement with the EU in the fall of 2013 which was justifiably seen by Ukrainian society as the country’s geopolitical turn towards the Russian sphere of influence. The revolution of 2013-2014 was the result.

Georgia’s government under the Georgian Dream did its best to accommodate Russia and avoid irritating its rulers. This has not resulted in a positive change for Georgia. Russian military occupation of Georgian territories, subversive activities in the rest of Georgia and diplomatic hostility continue unabated. Moreover, in recent years, Russians have started to move the occupation line deeper into Georgian territory. Numerous Georgian citizens have been illegally detained at the occupation line while some have been murdered.

Moscow’s maximalism in the pursuit of its geostrategic objectives does have unintended consequences. It causes backlashes and tends to stiffen the resistance to Russia’s designs within the countries it targets. Ultimately, the very totality of the domination over its neighbors that Russia is trying to achieve decreases the chances that its efforts will be successful. Yet the jury is still out regarding the outcome of this struggle and the fate of the Eastern European nations remains on the line. For the time being, Russia continues its systematic activities aimed at achieving regional hegemony.