

WANING KREMLIN SHADOWS: THE DECLINE OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE BALTIC STATES (1991–2025) - 01.09.2025

Şerif SAV

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Uep Rapor No: 1
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Şerif Sav

AVİM

Traineeship Program Report Participant

Abstract:

In the decades since the Baltic states regained independence in 1991, Russias once-formidable influence and power over Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania has steadily diminished which is a trend dramatically accelerated after 2022. This study examines the multi-dimensional decline of Russian influence in the Baltics, balancing necessary historical context with a focus on post-2022 developments. It argues that deep integration into NATO and the EU, combined with the fallout from Russias wars, notably the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, have severed many of the remaining ties that Moscow once exploited. The paper analyzes how Russias military deterrent power has waned in the face of bolstered NATO defenses, how Moscows economic and energy power has been largely eliminated by Baltic diversification and decoupling, and how Kremlin propaganda and cultural influence are faltering amid resilient Baltic societies and strict information controls. Across domains from security to media to politics the central finding is that Russias capacity to shape Baltic trajectories is at its lowest point since 1991. The decline of Moscows influence in these frontline states offers a compelling case study in how small democracies can successfully resist great-power pressure through collective security, strategic policy, and societal resilience.

Introduction

Small states survive not by their power to coerce, but by their capacity to adapt. Few regions illustrate this more clearly than the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Since regaining independence in 1991, the Baltics have faced the persistent shadow of Russian influence: military, economic, cultural, and informational. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have always maintained a vulnerable stance along Russia's western border. After being forcibly integrated into the USSR, they re-emerged in 1991 as separate nations resolute in their desire to evade Moscow's influence. This article examines the erosion of Russia's influence in the Baltics over time, particularly noting its significant decrease since 2022. The importance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding resilience in an age of hybrid warfare. Much of the existing literature focuses on Russias ability to project power, through energy dependency, military coercion, or propaganda; yet pays less attention to how target states can actively dismantle those dependencies. By examining the Baltic trajectory across security, energy, information, and identity, this study highlights not only Russias decline but also the proactive strategies of small democracies.

Central inquiries directing the study encompass: Which dimensions of Russian influence, military, economic, informational, cultural, and political, have diminished, and by what mechanisms? The article argues that Moscow's capacity to coerce or influence the Baltics has declined with the Baltics' strengthening connections to Euro-Atlantic institutions and their intentional measures to mitigate vulnerabilities. Russia's aggressive maneuvers, from the 2008 conflict in Georgia to the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have resulted in unintended consequences, inciting NATO's

increased presence and unifying Baltic society against Russian hegemony.[1] By 2025, the Baltic republics had attained unparalleled security and autonomy from Russia, characterized by military fortification, energy independence, and control over the digital sphere, despite Russia's ongoing use of hybrid tactics.[2] An interview with Dr. Ieva Bērziņa, a prominent Latvian security specialist, offers further insight into how these nations see and counteract Russia's waning influence. This study posits that the Baltic republics have methodically eradicated Russia's diverse influence over them, grounded in the notion of asymmetric interdependence and regional security. By aligning with NATO and the EU, diversifying energy sources, implementing effective counter-disinformation measures, and enhancing sociopolitical resilience, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have substantially diminished Moscow's influence across military, economic, media, cultural, and political spheres, a process significantly expedited by Russia's aggression post-2022. This thesis contests the assumptions of great-power hegemony by demonstrating how a traditionally "spheres-of-influence" country such as Russia can experience a significant diminishment of its impact when faced with cohesive, well-prepared smaller nations.

Historical Context (1991–2022): From Soviet Legacy to Western Integration

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 liberated the Baltic countries from Moscow's direct governance, however it significantly impacted their demography, economics, and security conditions.[3] All three republics confronted the urgent task of restoring national sovereignty following fifty years of occupation. Soviet forces persisted in the Baltic region until the early 1990s, and their departure signified the end of Russia's direct military involvement. Nonetheless, Russia's influence did not vanish directly. The infrastructure and energy systems from the Soviet era continued to connect the Baltics to Russia, while significant Russian-speaking minorities, particularly in Estonia and Latvia, hindered the process of nation-building.[4] Moscow initially aimed to maintain a certain level of influence through these mechanisms. Initially, the newly independent Baltic administrations enacted measures to counteract Soviet Russification, reinstating the dominance of national languages, mandating citizenship examinations for Soviet-era settlers, and eliminating certain Soviet symbols. These initiatives, intended to foster a sense of "Baltic unity" and national identity, were perceived by Moscow as discriminating against ethnic Russians.[5] Tensions regarding the position of Russian-speaking people and Soviet legacy concerns influenced relations in the 1990s. Notwithstanding these tensions, by the end of the 1990s, Russia had reluctantly acknowledged the Baltics' independence as a fait accompli, while simultaneously indicating that their sovereignty was ostensibly "limited," a sentiment reflected in occurrences such as a 1995 episode where Russian legislators contemplated the legality of Baltic independence, or the symbolic reassessment of the 1991 recognition by the Russian Prosecutor Generals Office in 2015.[6] Such actions underscored that, from Moscow's perspective, the sovereignty of the Baltic republics would perpetually remain contingent upon Russian interests.

The main strategic decision of the Baltics' post-Soviet path was clear Western integration. Due to their small size and historical recollection of Soviet hostility, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania regarded participation in NATO and the European Union as essential assurances

of security and prosperity.[7] Russia strongly resisted NATO expansion, with President Yeltsin and subsequently Putin perceiving it as a direct danger; yet, the Baltic states remained resolute.[8] They implemented extensive reforms, established professional military forces, and enacted difficult economic adjustments to align with Western standards. In 2004, the three Baltic states acceded to NATO and the EU, solidifying their departure from the post-Soviet sphere. This represented a pivotal point in diminishing Russian influence: by integrating into NATOs security framework, the Baltics significantly increased the costs associated with any Russian military intimidation, and by participating in the EUs single market, they diversified their commerce and investment away from Russia.[9] The Kremlin perceived these accessions as a diminution of its influence in the "near abroad" and a security concern; in Russian strategic culture, the Baltics constituted an essential buffer zone, and their alignment with the West was viewed as Western encroachment.[10] In the 2000s, Russia predominantly utilized soft power and economic instruments instead of overt aggression: energy exports, commercial relationships, media dissemination, and allied political parties served as mechanisms to maintain influence. The Baltic governments, cognizant of these vulnerabilities, commenced gradual decoupling prior to 2014; for example, Lithuania constructed an LNG terminal in 2014 to dismantle Gazproms gas monopoly,[11] while Estonia and Latvia pursued alternative suppliers and implemented stricter media regulations. By the 2010s, a generation has emerged in an independent, EU-integrated Baltic context, exhibiting diminished appeal to Soviet nostalgia or Russian paternalism.

Despite the ongoing decline of Russian influence, two significant geopolitical events, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the 2014 Ukraine crisis, including Crimea's annexation and the conflict in Donbas, acted as catalysts that substantially intensified the threat perceptions and defense strategies of the Baltic states.[12] The 2008 incursion of Georgia by Russia indicated that Moscow was prepared to employ military force to assert dominance over its former Soviet counterparts. Baltic leaders made clear comparisons to their own situations; as frontline NATO states, they advocated for contingency measures and an increased presence within the Alliance.[13] In 2014, Russia's annexation of Crimea and provocation of conflict in eastern Ukraine were particularly concerning. It not only disrupted post-Cold War conventions but also sparked particular anxieties on Russia's potential to execute a comparable hybrid operation in the Baltics, such as utilizing the local Russian minority as a pretext for intervention or deploying "little green men" to incite turmoil. A 2016 RAND Corporation wargame infamously indicated that Russian forces might capture the Baltic capitals within 60 hours, based on the current NATO posture.[14] This stark evaluation pushed NATO to implement an Enhanced Forward Presence, deploying rotating battlegroups in each Baltic state by 2017, and encouraged the Baltics to increase defense expenditure and readiness.[15] The events of 2014 intensified the resistance of Baltic societies to Kremlin propaganda. Public sentiment in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania has shifted to perceive Russia as the primary danger.[16] Numerous Russian speakers in these nations, despite their cultural affiliation with Russia, exhibited "no enthusiasm now for exchanging membership of prosperous, democratic European states for Kremlin rule" after observing Ukraine's situation.[17] The events of 2008 and 2014 served as a clarion cry, demonstrating that Russian revanchism was tangible and catalyzing developments such as NATO integration, energy independence,

and information vigilance, which significantly diminished Russian influence. The diminishment of that influence did not commence in 2022; nevertheless, as subsequent sections will illustrate, the escalatory impact of Russia's comprehensive invasion of Ukraine in 2022 served as the pivotal impetus for dismantling Moscow's residual influence in the Baltics.

Military and Security Dimension: Diminishing Deterrence and Defensive Authority

An essential early measure in diminishing Russian influence was the elimination of Russia's military presence from Baltic territory. Following five decades of Soviet military presence, the final Russian forces withdrew in August 1994, compelled by significant Western pressure and Baltic demands. This concluded Russia's position as an on-site security authority and held psychological importance: the Baltics were no longer obligated to accommodate the very troops that had previously repressed them. The early post-withdrawal period witnessed the Kremlin's continued efforts to intimidate, exemplified by extensive military drills near Baltic borders and ongoing border treaty disputes. However, in the absence of bases or forces within the country, Moscow's hard-power influence diminished. As Götz (2019) notes, in the late 1990s Russias threats about NATO expansion were largely bluster; it launched a barrage of threats against Baltic NATO aspirations, but beyond rhetoric, the assertive rhetoric of Russian officials corresponds well with the growing level of external pressure. Words, however, were not matched by deeds.[18] The Baltics, despite their little military capacity and initial susceptibility, utilized this opportunity to modernize their modest armed forces and align with Western standards. They became members of NATOs Partnership for Peace, supplying troops for foreign missions as net security providers instead of relying on Russia. By the early 2000s, each Baltic state had restructured its military plan to encompass complete defense and guerilla resistance, thereby adopting a porcupine strategy to increase the costs of any potential invasion.[19] Research posits that extensive volunteer troops and armed reserves in the Baltics function as a deterrence by posing a danger of lengthy insurgency in the event of an assault.[20] Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania therefore jumped at the opportunity to strengthen their autonomy after the direct Soviet/Russian military presence ceased, staking their claim that, despite their modest size, they could prevent a greater power from winning with ease.

Russia's military coercion has been severely limited since the Baltics joined NATO in 2004 and partner forces were stationed there. All three nations now have credible Article 5 security guarantees thanks to NATO membership, meaning that any Russian invasion may result in war with the Alliance as a whole. This transformed the psychological deterrence factor that Moscow had long exploited - previously, Russia could menace the Baltics with relative impunity, but now Russias conventional threat is largely contained by NATOs umbrella.[21] Priority was given to host-nation support and integration with NATO structures since, even prior to 2014, Baltic defense planning was predicated on the idea that national forces alone could only stall a Russian attack until allies arrived.[22] NATO's eastern flank posture was significantly improved following the Russian invasion in Ukraine.

As a symbol of the Alliance's dedication to Baltic defense, multinational battlegroups began rotating in each Baltic state by 2017. A continuous reimagining of the regions security occurred, whereby formerly neutral neighbors also moved towards NATO: Finland and Swedens decisions to join in 2022 further ended [any] agnosticism about Russia in the region.[23] This broad Baltic Sea security framework undermines any local advantage held by Russia. The previously dominant regional superiority of Moscow has been counterbalanced by the continuous deployment of modern Western forces and regular military exercises in the Baltic region. Analysts note that by the mid-2020s, the military equilibrium has significantly deteriorated for Moscow; the Baltics are supported by NATO's full might, whilst Russia's forces are depleted and weakened due to engagements in Ukraine.[24] In March 2022, as conflict intensified to the south, the Alliance swiftly dispatched supplementary battalions and air defenses to the Baltics, emphasizing that any aggressive action would provoke a fast alliance response. As the Estonian Foreign Minister put it, NATOs unity means you cant replace security; being in the same system keeps trouble away.[25] This credible tripwire has sharply curtailed Russias room for military coercion.

In February 2022, Russia made a strategic mistake by launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which not only strengthened NATO but also diminished Russia's ability to discourage other countries in the Baltic region. Russia's conventional military has suffered significant losses as a result of the conflict; thousands of tanks, armored vehicles, and elite units that formerly posed a danger to NATO's eastern flank have been destroyed or stranded in Ukraine.[26] As a result, Moscow has far less power to project force toward the Baltics. As long as Ukraine continues to fight, Baltic leaders now publicly believe that Russia's ground troops will be degraded or confined for years, making a Baltic attack unlikely (Schulze 2025, 70 □□□□□ Additionally, allies like the United States and Britain quickly deployed more soldiers into Eastern Europe, and plans have been made to reinforce the Baltics with brigade-sized formations if necessary.[27] This war brought NATO together to a level not seen since the Cold War. In the words of a Lithuanian official from the Foreign Ministry, we have been proven right ☀□□□□□ is a factor that does not let you relax. We must improve our security ☀□□□ [tell others] that the threat is real.[28] This sense of urgency resulted in tangible defense improvements: the Baltics themselves pushed toward increased military self-reliance alongside NATO assistance and expedited the purchase of Western armaments, such as HIMARS rockets and anti-tank missiles.[29] To strengthen local defenses, each Baltic state declared plans to increase defense spending by well over 2% of GDP by the middle of 2022.[30] Additionally, after the 2025 NATO Summit, allies agreed to spend 5% of their GDPs on defence and military spending which potentially lead to the militarization of NATO against Russian threat.[31] As a result, Russia's ability to intimidate the Baltics is at an all-time low; its saber-rattling today seems insignificant in comparison to the reality of a beleaguered Russian army and an emboldened Baltic area. Although Russia continues to offer non-linear threats such as cyberattacks, airborne intrusions, and nuclear posturing,[32] the Allies are also responding to these threats with increased vigilance. According to a member of the Swedish Foreign Ministry, Russia's aggressive actions in 2022 will make the Baltic maritime "more tense," but Finland and Sweden's NATO membership will increase airspace and maritime security by filling collective defense gaps.[33] All things

considered, the Kremlin's once-dominant military power has diminished: the Baltic front has essentially stiffened, and Moscow has little chance of intimidating or extorting these nations without running the risk of a disastrous escalation.

Economic and Energy Power: From Dependency to Decoupling

The Baltic economies were closely tied to Russia after gaining their independence, creating a structural weakness that Moscow could take advantage of. In 1991, Russia was the principal trade partner and energy provider for the Baltic states, which depended almost exclusively on Russian natural gas and oil.[34] Their electricity grids were interconnected with the Russian system, and a substantial portion of Baltic rail and port traffic relied on the transit of Russian goods.[35] The Kremlin originally utilized these connections to apply political pressure which can be considered as a method of hard power. In the early 1990s, it intermittently curtailed oil supply and postponed the repatriation of ex-Soviet assets to get concessions (e.g., regarding citizenship for Russians). The Mazeikiai oil refinery in Lithuania experienced dubious supply disruptions, highlighting the energy vulnerability of the Baltic states. Over time, the Baltic republics developed strategies to alleviate these dependencies through deliberate policy decisions. A significant option was to abstain from engaging in Russia's ruble zone or reintegration efforts such as the CIS Customs Union in the 1990 - actions that shielded their economies from Russian dominance at the cost of immediate hardship. By anchoring their new currencies to the euro and directing commerce westward, the Baltic states diminished Russia's economic influence. Energy continued to be a contentious issue: during the 2000s, all three nations were compelled to buy gas from Gazprom, utilizing Soviet-era pipelines, and Russia was unabashed in employing energy as a geopolitical instrument.[36] For instance, Russia's abrupt prohibition on Latvian sprats, a significant export, in 2015, along with its choice to redirect oil exports from Baltic ports to its own terminals, revealed a deliberate intention to impose economic repercussions. Each such action, however, compelled the Baltics to expedite diversification. They established new markets for their products (e.g., Latvia and Lithuania increased grain exports to the EU and Asia following Russian embargoes)[37] and sought international investment to diminish dependence on Russian capital. The proportion of commerce between the Baltic nations and Russia significantly diminished, with Russia declining from the primary export market for the Baltics in the 1990s to a substantially lower position by the 2010s. For example, Russia's share of Estonian exports decreased from about 20% in 1994 to approximately 10% by 2010 as Estonian companies shifted their focus westward.[38] The prolonged reorientation resulted in a gradual reduction of the economic impact of a Russian squeeze. At the onset of the Crimea conflict in 2014, the Baltic states were far less economically vulnerable to Russia compared to other Western European nations.

Between 2014 and 2022, the Baltic states effectively eradicated the majority of Russia's remaining economic influence, particularly in the energy sector. Motivated by Russia's "weaponization" of energy commerce amid the Ukraine conflict, all three nations made substantial investments in alternative infrastructure.[39] Lithuania pioneered the establishment of an LNG terminal in Klaipėda in 2014, aptly titled "Independence," which

dismantled Gazprom's monopoly and facilitated the importation of non-Russian gas.[40] By 2015, Lithuania significantly reduced its gas expenditures following negotiations with Gazprom from a position of strength, bolstered by the liquefied natural gas (LNG) alternative. Estonia and Latvia implemented regional gas market reforms including storage-sharing, and by 2020, the Baltic Gas Connector to Finland established a more extensive network capable of receiving gas from Western sources.[41] The Baltics concurrently advanced initiatives to align their power grids with continental Europe. They were integrated into the antiquated Soviet BRELL grid with Russia and Belarus; however, in 2018, an accord was established to connect through Poland and sever ties with the Russian system by 2025.[42] The project became urgent following Russia's 2022 invasion; testing and preliminary decoupling measures have been implemented to guarantee the Baltics can operate stably in the event of an abrupt cessation of power from Moscow. Trade and transit relations have deteriorated: in the past decade, Russia intentionally redirected its oil shipments from Baltic ports such as Ventspils and Klaipėda to its own ports, prompting the Baltics to adapt by repurposing their ports for alternative cargo or partners. In 2021, Belarus, supported by Russia, ceased potash exports via Lithuania as a political reprisal.[43] Vilnius endured the repercussions and secured EU assistance to restructure its logistics sector. These developments highlight that the Baltic economies have predominantly "decoupled" from the Russian market. In 2022, Russia represented merely approximately 5% of the overall commercial turnover of the Baltics, a portion that might be offset by trade with the EU and new partners.[44] In spring 2022, all three Baltic nations declared a complete cessation of Russian natural gas imports, becoming the first EU countries to undertake this action, aided by the Klaipėda LNG terminal and storage facilities in Latvia. Estonias Prime Minister remarked that if we can do it,then so should other NATO and EU member states. highlighting the political will behind the decoupling.[45] Moscows economic power in the Baltics has been virtually eliminated. Moscow's economic and energy influence in the Baltics has been nearly eradicated. Gazprom pipeline cut-offs can no longer freeze Baltic residences, nor can Russian trade embargoes incapacitate Baltic industries. As one assessment notes, the perceived threat of Russias energy coercion has been a major factor in the construction of electricity and gas connections with Western countries over the last couple of decades, ensuring that the Baltics are not left in the dark.[46] In 2022, Russia's attempt to apply pressure by halting power supply to the Baltics had a negligible and transient effect, as alternate sources were accessible. The Baltics and Poland are set to completely detach from the BRELL grid ahead of schedule, thereby enhancing energy sovereignty.

Other than energy, Baltic-Russian trade has declined dramatically, especially after 2014 and again after 2022. Trade volumes were drastically lowered as a result of the Western sanctions placed on Russia and the retaliatory measures taken by Russia. Some agricultural exporters in Latvia and Lithuania suffered when Russia banned some food imports from the EU in 2014 as a result of sanctions brought on by the Crimea crisis; nonetheless, these sectors adapted by looking for other markets.[47] The Baltic countries have historically made money by handling Russian freight (oil, coal, fertilizers, etc.) through their ports and railroads. This is just one aspect of transit which has also decreased. In order to avoid transiting via the Baltics, Russia made investments in its ports, including Ust-Luga. Transit then decreased even further when political relations

worsened; for instance, in 2018, Lithuania banned the purchase of Belarusian electricity and later stopped the transit of Belarusian fertilizer because of human rights issues.[48] Russian coal and oil exports through Baltic ports came to a near-complete halt in 2022 as a result of EU sanctions.[49] As a result, Russia no longer has the ability to use trade as a tool of pressure because the amounts and risks are much lower. Baltic industries can no longer be harmed by a Russian boycott, and Baltic supply networks won't be choked by a delay in Russian rail transportation. Once a sophisticated tool such as many Russians visiting Baltic resorts, spending money and possibly spreading influence, tourism declined after 2020 as a result of COVID-19 and the ensuing travel restrictions associated with the conflict.[50] As EU members, the Baltic states now trade more with each other and the EU as a whole than they do with Russia due to the uneven nature of their economic ties. From Moscow's perspective, the Baltics went from being economically dependent to being shut out of Russian channels. This loss is partly a result of Baltic strategy and partly a self-imposed consequence of Russian policies. The main takeaway is that the Baltic republics turned their Soviet-era reliance into a situation of relative resilience through strategic infrastructure development, intentional diversification, and alignment with EU energy markets. Due to its current lack of economic might, Russia is less able to punish or exert influence on the Baltic republics.

Information Warfare and Media Influence: Crumbling Propaganda Pillars

Russia's influence operations in the Baltic nations have consistently utilized the information domain, targeting Russian-speaking people, promoting pro-Kremlin narratives, and using historical memory. In the 1990s and 2000s, Russian official media maintained a significant influence in Baltic information environments.[51] A significant number of ethnic Russians, as well as others, in Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania accessed Russian television stations, including First Baltic Channel, RTR Planeta, and NTV Mir, which were readily available and frequently featured Kremlin-aligned content.[52] Moscow perceives the Russian language and media as strategic instruments; the Kremlin regards the "promotion of the Russian language beyond its borders" as a method to exert influence and further its objectives.[53] Indeed, scholars observed that one goal of Russian propaganda abroad was undermining public trust ☀ and eroding trust in Western institutions in target countries.[54] Within the Baltic context, Moscow's media continuously propagated narratives asserting that the Baltic governments exhibited Russophobia, that Russian speakers faced persecution, or that Western integration had been detrimental to these nations. Nevertheless, a significant paradox arose: Baltic societies demonstrated greater resilience to deception than Moscow anticipated. Notwithstanding substantial consumption of Russian media content, particularly in Latvia and Estonia, adherence to the most polarizing Kremlin storylines remained very minimal. A 2018 survey in Latvia revealed that merely a "small proportion" of the population, including Russian speakers, genuinely believed in the notion that Russian speakers face systematic discrimination.[55] Historical experience has certainly fortified many individuals: as Dr. Ieva Bērziņa observes, Baltic audiences possess an immunity to Soviet-era clichés, having endured decades of allegations labeling them as Nazis or traitors - we are familiar with all those

insinuations ☀ we know it historically.[56] Consequently, although Russian media wielded influence, it mostly resonated with an audience of older or already pro-Moscow individuals and did not significantly change the pro-Western stance of the majority. During the 2000s and early 2010s, Russia's informational influence remained a significant concern; incidents such as Estonia's Bronze Soldier (2007) and the previously mentioned Latvian language referendum (2012) were exacerbated by vigorous Russian media campaigns depicting the Baltic states as fascist or failing entities.[57] These episodes demonstrated the disruptive capacity of Kremlin propaganda to incite protests or cyber-attacks. Analysts identified the Baltic republics as "among the most concentrated targets of sophisticated disinformation in Europe," due to Russia's intent to maintain influence over them.[58] In response, the Baltic governments commenced investments in strategic communications and media literacy initiatives, with NATOs StratCom Centre in Riga, formed in 2014, emerging as a focal point for comprehending and refuting misinformation. Civil society contributed as well; for instance, Lithuanian volunteers initiated efforts to verify misinformation on social media.[59] These initiatives established a foundation for resilience, despite the ongoing broadcasts from Russian outlets.

By mid-2022, Latvia removed the licenses of numerous Russian television channels, including RT and the previously accessible PBK, citing national security concerns. Lithuania and Estonia implemented similar measures, virtually ceasing the transmission of Russian official television broadcasts. This was a remarkable transformation - content that had been available to Baltic audiences for decades was suddenly terminated. The prohibitions were accompanied by EU-wide penalties against Russian media figures and networks, which received robust support from the Baltic states. Furthermore, Latvia's official broadcaster declared intentions to cease all Russian-language programming, in accordance with a new national security framework that perceives the Russian language as a conduit of influence to be curtailed.[60] Dr. Bērziņa elucidated that imposing restrictions is logical, as Moscow overtly used the concept of the "Russian world" and the dissemination of its language as instruments; yet, she also recognized the necessity for Baltic governments to devise alternative strategies to engage their Russian-speaking populace.[61] These policy changes have significantly diminished the Kremlin's direct influence. Overnight, viewers who previously relied on Channel One from Moscow were compelled to transition to local or Western media for news updates. Many Baltic Russians had already diversified their media intake, utilizing internet news and seeing both local and Russian television; hence, the bans did not render them uninformed, although they did diminish the pervasive pro-Kremlin propaganda. Simultaneously, social media platforms emerged as the new arena where Russian propaganda, frequently in more nuanced forms, continued to disseminate.[62] The Baltic governments have addressed this issue by strengthening counter-disinformation groups that monitor and refute online falsehoods, and by collaborating with major technology companies to eliminate egregious phony accounts.[63] The findings are encouraging: a quantitative research by Morkūnas (2023) revealed that although Russian misinformation initiatives in Lithuania sought to foster suspicion in the government and instill fear of war, their tangible impact on public sentiment was little.[64] In recent years, the Baltic public's trust in their institutions has increased, despite sustained exposure to Russian media till 2022.[65] This indicates a resilience derived from effective national narratives and the credibility of Baltic

governments' pro-EU and pro-NATO positions. Ultimately, the Kremlin's propaganda foundations are deteriorating in the Baltics, not solely because of prohibitions, but also because Russia's actions have significantly undermined its narrative. The overt aggression toward Ukraine facilitated Baltic authorities in garnering community consensus that Russian official media disseminates falsehoods and animosity. Numerous Russian speakers in the Baltics were appalled by the conflict and rejected Kremlin rationalizations. [66] Consequently, Moscow's narratives encounter diminished receptivity, and the few staunch adherents become progressively alienated. The information battle is perpetually ongoing; Russia will evolve its strategies, such as employing proxy websites or influencers. The Baltic nations are similarly adapting by implementing truth campaigns, enhancing independent local Russian-language material, and, when required, exercising regulatory authority to eliminate harmful foreign influence. Latvia's recent policy decision to cease broadcasting Russian on publicly sponsored media exemplifies a strategy aimed at undermining Russia's soft power by prioritizing integration and the dominance of the official language.[67]

In many respects, the Baltics were early adopters of the wider Western reaction due to their expertise combating misinformation. They have created methods that are being imitated in other places. For instance, myth-busting campaigns: Lithuanian civil society frequently dispels circulating myths using "Lithuanian Debunk" articles, such as the one that was planted and swiftly disproved in 2017 about "NATO soldiers could rape Swedish women without fear of prosecution as they are immune from it."[68] Every year, the Latvian security services raise awareness by releasing public reports that identify prevalent propaganda themes.[69] In order to create solidarity and resiliency, all three nations actively promote their own narratives through the integration of strategic communication into their governmental systems. In order to prevent an information gap that Russia could take advantage of, Baltic politicians frequently visited Russian-speaking populations during crises, like the 2022 conflict, to explain policies such as why aiding Ukraine is essential in their mother tongue.[70] It's interesting to note that the diaspora and family ties are one source of feedback that the Baltics rely on. Since many Baltic Russians have relatives in Russia or Ukraine, hearing firsthand stories from those affected by the conflict, such as a friend who was drafted into the Russian army, provided different viewpoints that countered the propaganda that was broadcast on television.[71] One interesting statistic is that, according to a 2022 Latvian study report by Bērziņa, exposure to Kremlin media, lack of knowledge about Latvian army and a favorable perception of Russia's military were the main reasons why Russian-speaking people had lesser trust in the Latvian Armed Forces than Latvians.[72] It implies that faith in national institutions can increase as Kremlin media dominance declines. In summary,

Societal and Cultural Front: Eroding Linguistic and Identity Influence

One of Russia's most enduring methods of influence has been through the substantial Russian-speaking communities in Estonia and Latvia, and to a lesser degree, Lithuania. Under Soviet governance, a significant influx of Russians and other Russophones was established in the Baltics, resulting in ethnic Russians constituting over 30% of the

population in Latvia and Estonia by 1989.[73] The Kremlin has historically regarded these populations as compatriots to safeguard and potentially as a means to exert pressure on Baltic governments. In the 1990s, Estonia and Latvia's choice to withhold automatic citizenship from Soviet-era settlers, thereby establishing a category of "non-citizens," became a source of tension that Moscow used internationally.[74] Russia alleged that the Baltic states are discriminating against ethnic Russians, seeking to mobilize local Russian communities and worldwide sentiment against the Baltic administrations. This situation temporarily induced internal tensions: the alienation of certain Russian speakers, the rise of pro-Moscow political forces, and sporadic protests regarding language in school.[75] Over the subsequent decades, Baltic national policies progressively incorporated numerous minority people while simultaneously reinforcing national identities. Language legislation mandated proficiency in Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian for citizenship and public sector employment, thus promoting integration. Despite initial controversy, these policies effectively enhanced proficiency in state languages among younger Russian speakers. The proportion of non-citizens in Latvia has decreased to below 10%, since numerous individuals choose naturalization or emigration.[76] Over time, the Kremlin's portrayal of a besieged "Russian world" community in the Baltics became increasingly implausible. Many young Russian speakers in Estonia and Latvia identify as proud citizens of their respective countries and reject the notion of serving as a fifth column for Moscow.[77] Surveys indicate that a significant segment of Russian-speakers in the Baltics has confidence in their national institutions; for example, a 2022 survey revealed that numerous Latvian Russian-speakers demonstrated growing trust in the Latvian Armed Forces, a trend that Dr. Bērziņa views as a favorable indication of loyalty.[78] This undermines a fundamental Kremlin notion that Russian nationality equates to automatic loyalty to Moscow. Nonetheless, the Kremlin did not relinquish its stronghold readily. It perpetuated a "soft power" approach by financing Russophone NGOs, cultural initiatives, and media in the Baltics, with the objective of maintaining the diaspora's alignment with Russia.[79] Russian Orthodox churches and compatriot organizations were occasionally politicized to contest Baltic regulations regarding education or citizenship. The Baltic states maintained vigilance, with security services monitoring and revealing instances of Moscow's agents attempting to recruit local activists or incite separatist sentiments, as detailed in a leaked 2013 Kremlin strategy document that proposed "support of separatist actions to promote chaos" in targeted states.[80] These extreme ideas gained no support in the Baltics, nevertheless they demonstrate Russia's intentions. The impact of local pro-Kremlin political factions diminished over time. In Latvia, the historically Moscow-aligned "Harmony" party, which has had substantial backing from Russian speakers, has modified its stance and opposed Russia's aggression in Ukraine; by 2022, it saw electoral decline, indicative of the war's impact on public sentiment. The Centre Party in Estonia, previously regarded as the representative of Russian speakers, has unequivocally supported Estonia's pro-Ukraine position, undermining Moscow's anticipated proxies. In summary, although Russian minorities formerly offered the Kremlin a legitimate means or rationale for intervention, that means has significantly diminished as these populations assimilate and Russia's actions estrange even its former supporters. As one Lithuanian diplomat observed, We are Russia-skeptics and have been proven right. We see things as they are, not because we dont like Russians or are scared of them,[81] experience has taught the

Baltics to separate people from the regime, welcoming minorities as part of the nation while rejecting the Kremlins machinations.

The Baltic nations have used intentional strategies to establish a unified national identity that withstands Kremlin narratives. Language and education reform has been pivotal to this. In Latvia and Lithuania, legislation currently requires that public secondary education be predominantly delivered in the state language, reversing the significant Russian-language instruction that has been in place since the Soviet era. In 2022, Estonia declared a shift to Estonian-language instruction in all educational institutions.[82] The reforms have sparked controversy; yet, they are motivated by security concerns, since officials argue that a unified linguistic framework is essential for national cohesion and diminishing the impact of adversarial propaganda.[83] The modifications are incremental and supported for educators, aiming to prevent the marginalization of Russian-speaking kids while affirming the dominance of local languages. A notable campaign has been the eradication of Soviet-era emblems and monuments that exalt the Red Army or Soviet authority. Following the 2022 incursion into Ukraine, Estonia dismantled the remaining Soviet tanks and memorials in the predominantly Russian-speaking Narva region, while Latvia destroyed the huge Victory Park statue in Riga, a Soviet WWII memorial that had served as a cause of contention.[84] The resolution to remove these symbols was presented as a means to conclude historical pain and prevent their utilization as focal areas for Kremlin-inspired narratives. Moscow vehemently objected to the removal of monuments, although the Baltic states remained steadfast in their conviction that statues representing an occupying authority were inappropriate in their public spaces within the contemporary European environment. The Baltic republics have prioritized the promotion of their native languages in media and popular culture to prevent the dominance of Russian in leisure and information sectors. Latvia's choice to eliminate Russian programming from public radio and television, as previously noted, aligns with the trend of establishing an information environment that emphasizes the national language. Shifts in popular sentiment are arguably the most compelling evidence of Russia's diminishing cultural influence. Older generations in the Baltics, raised in the USSR, may possess sentimental attachments to Russian culture, whilst younger generations are inclined towards European and global culture. Even in sports, traditionally a domain of Russian influence, the Baltics have seen a transformation; for example, Baltic athletes and teams no longer participate in Russian leagues, as they previously did in hockey or basketball, but have instead aligned with Western circuits.[85]The conflict in Ukraine acted as a moral delineator: several individuals who may have previously maintained neutrality or appreciated Russian culture were horrified by the Kremlin's savagery and united in their nations' backing of Ukraine. This societal coherence constitutes a setback for Moscow's endeavors to exert identity-based influence. The removal of Soviet legacy symbols has served as both a catalyst and a consequence of these attitudinal shifts. During the spring and summer of 2022, Baltic populations urged their governments to expedite the "decolonization" of public places.[86] The dismantling of Riga's 79-meter Victory Monument in August 2022 was celebrated by numerous ethnic Latvians as a conclusion to a distressing symbol of Soviet occupation; significantly, despite occasional demonstrations, there was no prolonged disturbance among the Russian community.[87] This indicates that numerous local Russians comprehended the rationale or, at the very

least, did not feel compelled to oppose, which starkly contrasts with the Bronze Soldier confrontations in Tallinn in 2007. Russia's aggression has arguably obliterated the remaining sympathy for its historical narrative in the Baltics. Consequently, Moscow's references to collective WWII triumph or Soviet nostalgia resonate with diminishing authenticity. Rather than dividing society, these problems (language, monuments, etc.) have predominantly led society to align with the state's viewpoint that allegiance to the democratic nation must take precedence. Jennie Schulze (2025) describes Latvia's strategy as a variant of "neo-militant democracy," imposing limitations on individuals perceived as pro-Kremlin to protect sovereignty.[88] She observes that this approach is largely endorsed by the populace due to challenging historical legacies and the necessity to avert external influences that could compromise democracy.[89] Consequently, through the integration of citizenship and robust nation-building, the Baltic nations have effectively mitigated Russia's previous dominance through identity. The influence of Moscow on Russian culture in the Baltics has diminished, and Soviet nostalgia is now confined to private recollection rather than public commemoration. Identity issues necessitate ongoing meticulous management; trust and participation of minorities must be fostered while simultaneously diminishing Russian official dominance. Baltic governments recognize this balance: for instance, Latvia is investigating methods to communicate successfully with its Russian-speaking population in Latvian and to offer content that discourages them from seeking Kremlin alternatives.[90] Nonetheless, with Russia's reputation undermined, the cultural and linguistic Russification of the Baltics is unequivocally regressing. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are currently more linguistically cohesive and patriotic than at any point since their post-independence, thus challenging Moscow's presumption that these countries could be internally fragmented and culturally influenced.

Political Networks and Influence Operations: Cracking Down on Kremlin Proxies

As a means of subtly influencing decision-making, Russia fostered pro-Baltic political leaders and parties in the 1990s and 2000s. Parties with a majority of Russian-speaking people were represented in parliaments in Latvia and Estonia, and they frequently supported closer relations with Moscow or opposed NATO membership. Russia allegedly gave these groups financial support through NGOs and businessmen, as well as rhetorical support.[91] The Latvian Harmony Centre party (later just called "Harmony"), for instance, had a long-standing cooperation arrangement with Putin's United Russia party and took a cautious approach to geopolitical matters, occasionally denouncing Latvian foreign policy's tough position on Russia.[92] Similar arguments were made about "antagonizing" Moscow by some leaders in Lithuania, who were either former communists or pro-Russian sentimentalists.[93] The power of these "Kremlin-friendly" networks, however, gradually diminished as a result of both internal (generational shifts, voters giving domestic concerns precedence over ethnicity) and external (Russian aggression undermining pro-Moscow viewpoints) causes. A turning point was Russias 2014 invasion of Ukraines Donbas: Baltic public opinion, including many minority members, largely condemned the aggression, isolating any politicians who tried to justify it. The main Russian minority-

oriented parties in Estonia and Latvia had either changed their positions or were shut out of office by the late 2010s. Notably, despite Harmony regularly winning the largest share of votes in Latvian elections for a decade, it was kept out of governing coalitions by a cordon sanitaire of other parties, wary of its ties to Moscow.[94] The leadership of Harmony eventually took action to improve its reputation by condemning the annexation of Crimea. Due in large part to the disintegration of its traditional base, which was frustrated that the party denounced Russia's 2022 war and disgusted that it had ever been indecisive about Moscow, Harmony's support completely collapsed in the 2022 Latvian election, and it failed to win any seats.[95] This sharp decline in popularity serves as an example of how Russia lost its political pawns. The Center Party in Estonia also experienced internal strife and lost the prime ministership in 2016 as a result of corruption allegations involving a person close to Russia and growing public mistrust of any ties to the Kremlin.[96] By 2022, regardless of the ethnic makeup of the voters, Estonia's major parties united on foreign policy in the face of conflict. The political landscape in Lithuania is strongly Atlanticist and pro-EU/NATO across the board, and overtly pro-Russian parties never had much success beyond the early 1990s.[97] Thus, it can be concluded that Moscows overt political proxies have been marginalized. The open association with the Kremlin became more of an electoral liability than an asset in Baltic politics. Unlike in the past, when Russian influence was exerted through "agents of influence" in local councils or parliaments, today's Baltic political elites, including those from minority communities, are largely in agreement that Russian aggression must be stopped. Although this change did not occur suddenly, the difficult decisions made in 2014 and 2022 have solidified it. In conclusion, Russia's influence has been methodically undermined on both the political and institutional fronts. Instead of finding spies in ministries or sympathizers in Baltic parliaments, Moscow today faces strong counterintelligence obstacles and mostly steadfast Euro-Atlanticists. By the 2020s, the "cracking down on Kremlin proxies," which started out slowly in the 1990s, had advanced to the point where the Baltics had not only taken the fox out of the henhouse but also strengthened the door. The idea that Moscow's influence in these republics is at its lowest level since they earned their independence is supported by this crucial but unappreciated feature of Baltic resilience.

Baltic Dependence on the West: Strategic Rationale and Vulnerabilities

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have purposefully rooted their security and prosperity in Western institutions since regaining their independence. A key component of Baltic strategy has been deep integration with the EU and NATO; EU membership provides market access, financial support, and political backing, while NATO membership provides a formal security guarantee from the United States and its allies (Article 5). But there are disadvantages to this unbalanced reliance as well. Due to their small size and lack of resources, the Baltics are very dependent on Western powers; any rift in NATO/EU unity brought on by internal issues or declining U.S. involvement might expose them. This is the exact risk that recent criticism focuses on: withdrawal of American forces or skepticism over NATOs Article 5 can create windows of opportunity to test the alliances

determination to protect Baltic states.[98]

This dynamic can be explained by the theory of international relations. According to Hirschman/Keohane-Nye's theory of asymmetric interdependence, when an actor in a relationship is highly dependent on the other, the dependent party tries to lessen vulnerability.[99] This is demonstrated by the Baltics, who have deliberately diversified away from Russia (particularly in the energy sector and cultural influence) and aligned themselves with more powerful nations. As Vilpišauskas points out, fears of Russian energy "weaponization" have prompted Baltic initiatives to connect to Western grids and import terminals in place of the exclusive gas provider, which provided Russia with decades of dominance in the region.[100] These actions demonstrate a traditional power shift: the small states take advantage of the understanding provided by interdependence theory, in which governments that are vulnerable would look for alternatives (new alliances, suppliers) to strengthen their position.[101]

Similarly, according to the Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan & Waever), Russia has shaped a larger European security complex that includes the Baltics. In reality, the Soviet "sub-complex" has disintegrated, despite Buzan's initial prediction that the security links between the Baltics would remain post-Soviet in nature. Currently, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia are deeply integrated in a Western security subcomplex.[102] Their EU integration was a true "return to Europe and the West," and they effectively act as a buffer zone between Russian and European/Atlantic spaces. The Baltics' decision to join NATO and the EU significantly limits Russia's influence, which is advantageous for Baltic security.[103] However, it also means that Baltic governments need to invest in resilience and diversification to protect against any change in this asymmetry.

As discussed in this article, the Baltics have prepared by strengthening their own defenses, economies, and worked on creating social cohesion within their own states. However, the combined population of three Baltic states is around 6 million and compared to their perceived threat, Russia and Belarus with around 150 million people and extremely developed military, NATO might be reluctant to face Russia. But the core lesson is that the strength of NATOs commitment, and the unity of the alliance, directly defines Baltic security.

Considering their geopolitical disadvantages such as proximity to Russia, energy dependency of Europe on Russia, and Russias close relationships between countries such as Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria in EU and NATO, can challenge NATOs cohesion and as well as Baltic security. This shows that these Baltic states need to build a pragmatist relationship with Russia. Additionally, roughly a quarter of Latvias and Estonias populations are Russian-speakers, which is a reality of the region and a demographic legacy of the Soviet era. Their integration remains a critical dimension of Baltic resilience: alienation risks pushing them into Russias information sphere. Due to the restrictive language policies and hostility to Russia or the current Russian government, Russian-speaker citizens may feel alienated from the society and it can lead these people to be affected by the Kremlin media. Russia's soft influence in the Baltics was seriously undermined by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which brought people together against Moscow and discredited its propaganda. It is currently believed that Russian influence is

at its lowest level since 1991.[104] From an economic and geopolitical standpoint, the Baltics have severed almost all trade and energy connections, synchronized their power grids with Europe, constructed LNG terminals, and benefited from increased security due to NATO reinforcements and the membership of Finland and Sweden.

This change opens the door for Baltics: Russian-speaking minorities may be more receptive to integration if they are less afraid of Moscow and if they trust their own government more. By encouraging civic engagement, fostering a democratic "Baltic" identity, and growing dual-language media, Baltic governments can improve unity. However, as Russia continues to use disinformation and cyber methods to take advantage of domestic divisions, vigilance is still crucial.

Conclusion

Small democracies may withstand pressure from great powers if they are rooted in solid alliances and dedicated to internal resilience, as demonstrated by the collapse of Russian influence in the Baltic republics. Through NATO fortification, economic diversification and decoupling, and social integration and identity-building, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have systematically undermined Moscow's influence. This trend was sped further by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which brought Baltic societies together against Moscow and undermined Kremlin propaganda. From an analytical perspective, the Baltics today serve as a prime example of how strategic alignment with larger allies can restructure unequal interdependence to the advantage of the weaker actor.

However, the story is one of persistent vigilance rather than ultimate triumph. Russias military deterrent may be blunted, but hybrid tactics (cyberattacks, disinformation, political interference) remain active. Baltic resilience's longevity will rely on resolving internal weaknesses as well as maintaining NATO and EU unity. Integration of Russian-speaker minorities is especially important since Moscow may still have sway if alienation continues. Therefore, policies should place a high priority on school reforms that promote inclusion rather than exclusion, investment in dual-language media that represents democratic values, and inclusive civic identity. At the same time, the Baltics and their allies have to get ready for changes in U.S. commitment and European divides that might put collective defense's legitimacy to the test.

The Baltic example shows that resilience is a dynamic process of adaptation rather than a static accomplishment. Maintaining unity, avoiding complacency, and making sure that integration and deterrence work together are now the challenges. As policymakers reflect on this trajectory, one central question arises: can the Baltic model of resilience, anchored in alliances, inclusion, and vigilance, serve as a sustainable blueprint for other frontline democracies confronting authoritarian pressure, or is it a unique success that will be tested by the next strategic shock?

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About the author:

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Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Posta: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

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