



## Cross-domain Coercion as Russia's Endeavor to Weaken the Eastern Flank of NATO: A Latvian Case Study

*Rosław Jeżewski*

**Abstract:** Cross-domain coercion is tangible on NATO's Eastern flank and characterized by the use of derogatory propaganda, fake news, financial assets in the Latvian banking system, Russian-based organized crime, and various military elements. This study on cross-domain coercion, however, concentrates on the cohesion of the Latvian population, existing gaps within society, and its susceptibility to being exploited by Russia. To acquire data for this study, the author conducted interviews with representatives of the Eastern flank countries and performed an extensive literature review. To determine the root causes of vertical division in the society, the "5 WHYS" method was used. This study proved that the presence of a Russian minority and the Russian-based organized crime minority can be a good base to create unrest and that Russia is able to influence the internal policy of a country when the Russian economic footprint exceeds 12 % of GDP. The demographics and the cohesion (including vertical and horizontal divisions) of the society are factors determining the resistance of Latvia. The triumph of the populist parties during the October 2018 parliamentary elections reflect the trend that the nation is tired of the corrupt and ineffective government rather than that it is drifting towards Russia. In a broader scope, it is expected that cross-domain coercion will increase and Russia will test the cohesion of NATO.

**Keywords:** NATO, Eastern Flank, Latvia, cross-domain coercion, Russia, organized crime, economic footprint, Latvian resistance, corruption.

### Introduction

Vladimir Putin said that he wished the Soviet Union had not collapsed; for him and many Russians, this had been a geopolitical hecatomb, which removed East-

ern Europe from Russian hegemony.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the Baltic countries and the majority of the former Soviet zone of influence are now part of NATO makes Russia furious. The Kremlin has been bombarding them with fake news, and with accusations of fascism and Nazism, hoping to find a weak point in the structure of the Alliance. The Eastern flank of NATO is not homogenous, especially when it comes to the Baltic States. The question is which of the three Baltic countries is the most vulnerable?

A brief quantitative analysis of a few indexes helps to find an answer. The European Quality of Government Index for 2017 ranks Estonia in the 90<sup>th</sup> position (score: 54.4 points), Lithuania in 114<sup>th</sup> position (score: 43.6 points), and Latvia in 142<sup>nd</sup> position with the score of 38.2 points. Another indicator can be the Human Development Index, where, again, Estonia has the best position among the Baltic states (30<sup>th</sup> position with the result of 0.871), then Lithuania (35<sup>th</sup> position with the result of 0.858), and again Latvia was the last country, ranked as 41<sup>st</sup> with the result of 0.847. The same sequence was observed in two other indexes: the Social Justice Index for 2016 (Estonia: 6.15, Lithuania: 5.69 and Latvia: 5.04) and the Social Cohesion Index (Estonia: 5.85, then Lithuania: 5.69, and finally Latvia: 5.10). There are also qualitative indicators that help in giving Latvia the lowest rank, such as 26% of the Latvian population are ethnic Russians, there are numerous non-citizens, the society is troubled and is still recovering from the 2008 financial crisis. This makes Latvia especially vulnerable to New Generation Warfare and cross-domain coercion, which has been a challenge to the security of the Baltic States.

Russia is very unhappy about Latvia's membership of NATO and will attempt, by any means below the threshold of war, to both undermine the country's stability and to affect the cohesion of its population, hoping also to weaken the unity of NATO. The National Security Concept<sup>2</sup> of the Latvian Ministry of Defense states that in this pursuit Russia will coerce all accessible domains, especially social, economic, and military.

There are several examples of Russian coercion in Latvia<sup>3</sup>: derogatory active propaganda from Russian sponsored mass media, Russia's live-fire drill within the Latvian Exclusive Economic Zone in April this year and the activities of Russian-based organized crime. These are difficult to counter by conventional

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Taylor, "Putin Says He Wishes the Soviet Union Had Not Collapsed. Many Russians Agree," *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2018, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/03/03/putin-says-he-wishes-he-could-change-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union-many-russians-agree/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/03/03/putin-says-he-wishes-he-could-change-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union-many-russians-agree/).

<sup>2</sup> "The National Security Concept (Informative section)" was released to public in 2014. The details about possible Russian Course of Action can be found on pages: 4 (hybrid activities), 15 (threats to the unity of the society) and 18 (propaganda), [https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/NDK\\_ENG\\_final.pdf](https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/NDK_ENG_final.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Also in Estonia. For details see: Rachel Marie Casselman, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare: The Prowess and Limitations of Putin's (in)Visible Hand in Estonia and Latvia," Master of Arts Thesis (University of Oregon, June 2017), [https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/22759/Casselman\\_oregon\\_0171N\\_11972.pdf](https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/22759/Casselman_oregon_0171N_11972.pdf).

means, as the Russian idea of waging low-level conflict gives it an advantage over the formalized response system, especially when it comes to Article 5 scenarios for NATO countries.<sup>4</sup>

The employment of New Generation Warfare against Latvia is unlikely to lead to any form of conventional war. Russia has been employing the tactics of raiding, which is especially lucrative and efficient in a confrontation with a stronger opponent.<sup>5</sup> It is a cheap and efficient form of warfare; it crosses many domains (cyber, informational, financial), includes infiltration and surprise attack, leverages agility, and helps to achieve the desired political result.<sup>6</sup> The literature study<sup>7</sup> made for this article leads to the conclusion that it can be successful in targeting the various vulnerabilities that exist or will be existing within Latvian society, undermining the government's credibility, and thus weakening the cohesion of the society.

Firstly, Latvia has the biggest population of ethnic Russians in Europe (nearly 26%). Many of these people are non-citizens who are deprived of voting rights and cannot possess any land or property. This makes them the target for Russian psychological operations, with Russian propaganda in the lead, trying to convince the Russian ex-patriots that Latvia is such a bad ally of the West and does not protect their rights. Secondly, there is evidence of Russian-based organized crime operating in Latvian society. Criminal gangs are suspected of money laundering and close cooperation with the Kremlin during covert operations against Latvia's society and government (for example, participation in intelligence operations). The scope and size of this factor have not been publicly disclosed, but the available data indicates that, despite being barely visible, it has had a profound effect on the Latvian security system. Thirdly, the country has a grave social problem, which is an amalgam of income inequality, an aging population (due to low fertility rates), and emigration.

This qualitative study will explore questions like: Is the presence of the Russian minority in Latvia a threat to the country's cohesion? What is the impact of Russian-based organized crime on Latvia's stability? What is the nature of Russian hostile activities against Latvia? What possible countermeasures can be

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<sup>4</sup> Dmitry Adamsky, "Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy," *Proliferation Papers* 54 (French Institute of International Relations, November 2015), 39, <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pp54adamsky.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Kofman, "Raiding and International Brigandry: Russia's Strategy for Great Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, June 14, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/raiding-and-international-brigandry-russias-strategy-for-great-power-competition>.

<sup>6</sup> Kofman, "Raiding and International Brigandry."

<sup>7</sup> The vulnerabilities theme as Russia's target is reflected in works of: Janis Berzins, "Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy," *Policy Paper* no. 2 (Riga: National Defence Academy of Latvia, April 2014), 12, <https://sldinfo.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/New-Generation-Warfare.pdf>; "The National Security Concept;" James K. Wither, "Making Sense of Hybrid Warfare," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 15, no. 2 (2016): 73-87.

used against these factors? To find the answers to these questions, it is necessary to start with a survey of the Latvian people, without which it would be difficult to determine what gaps and vulnerabilities may exist in the population and how cohesive that population is. The next step will be an assessment of the susceptibility of the Latvian population to exploitation by Russian propaganda and the attitude of the Russian minority, including the threat perception of Latvians and ethnic Russians. The author's intent is also to find out how deeply Russian-based organized crime (RBOC) has penetrated the Russian minority and what the relations between RBOC and other malign actors are.

Finally, the author will speculate if and when Russia can violate Latvian living space by employing cross-domain coercion and will summarize the course of the research. The data for this study will be sought from interviews with Latvian (PASS 18-16, SHAPE NMR personnel, think-tank members) and Polish (think-tank member) personnel, supported by an extensive literature search. The approach to solving this problem will be Root Causes Analysis (RCA) for a chosen factor to determine its impact on Latvia's living space.

## Survey of Latvian Population

The Latvian population is one of the smallest in Europe. Currently, it is estimated at approximately 1,950,000, of which slightly more than one million are economically active.<sup>8</sup> Of the ethnic groups within the country, 62% are Latvian and the largest minority within Latvia is Russian (25.4%), most of whom live in the Latgale district in the eastern part of the country. Many sources mention that Latvia has had long-term problems related to the presence of the Russian diaspora, which is the result of the previous Soviet occupation. It is necessary to note that native Latvians perceive there to be two major groups in the country – Latvian speakers and non-Latvian speakers. It is in the second group where Russian speakers can be found (including ethnic Russians, Belarussians, and others).<sup>9</sup>

Inside the Russian minority, there are non-citizens (approximately 242,000) who have a relatively low status in society due to their inability to obtain good jobs, their poor command of the Latvian language, and the troubled economy in the Latgale district. Most of the jobs available to them are in the transportation sector or on construction sites. Latvia has been suffering from a serious demographic decline; the forecast for 2060 projects a population of about 1,200,000 compared to 1,950,000 at current. Furthermore, it is forecast that by 2030, half of Latvians will have turned 50. Another driver of the decline, as well as aging, is emigration. Many migrants are under 30 years of age,<sup>10</sup> and it is estimated that

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<sup>8</sup> *Latvia: Executive Summary* (Englewood, CO: IHS Markit, 2018), 40.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a Latvian service member, October 8, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> BMI reports that the number of emigrants planning to return to Latvia in the short-run drops from 10% to just 3%. In longer perspective, Latvia's demographic problems will hit the economy hard. More in *Latvia Country Risk Report – Q3 2018* (London, United Kingdom: Business Monitor International, 2018).

the intensive emigration will continue until at least 2030.<sup>11</sup>

This is a grave demographic problem<sup>12</sup> and has a very negative effect on the security system. If these factors are put together with the small population density (4 people/sq. km) it is very likely that some areas of the country will end up being depopulated – which will provide unrestricted conditions in which possible adversary elements could operate, should they appear. The webpage *www.globalfirepowerindex* identifies this as a paramount problem for defense – “Going beyond military equipment totals and perceived fighting strength is the actual manpower that makes up a given military force. Wars, particularly those with high attrition, traditionally favor those with more manpower.”<sup>13</sup> In the case of Latvia, the uniformed formations reflect the internal pattern of ethnic diversity: the Latvian National Guard is mostly Latvian speaking, the Army is generally Russian speaking, the Police – half Latvian, half Russian, and the Border Guard in Latgale is mostly Russian speaking.<sup>14</sup>

These findings concerning the cohesion of Latvia's population differ, especially when comparing the literature study with the private interviews. The picture of the population presented during one private interview in September was that the nation is strong and cohesive and that this does not concur with the derogatory messages from its big neighbor.<sup>15</sup> Another Latvian official<sup>16</sup> stated that the nation is rather cohesive and tired of the government scandals and corruption; cohesion is present in the rural areas where Latvians and Russians co-exist in compact communities, but society is polarized in the big cities, especially in Riga and Davgāpilis.

However, there is a report in which society is described as being divided, and that people in Latvian society are neither socially nor politically active,<sup>17</sup> and that the population seriously distrusts the government.<sup>18</sup> The same document claims that the participation of society in public issues is low.<sup>19</sup> Another brief summary about Latvian cohesion comes from the EU Social Justice Index, 2017, in which it is said that Latvia has reached 19<sup>th</sup> position among the 28 other EU members (the last among the Baltic States) with a score of 5.46 on the Social Justice In-

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<sup>11</sup> *Latvia Country Risk Report*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> *Latvia: Executive Summary*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> “Latvia Military Strength,” *GlobalFirepower.com*, [https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country\\_id=latvia](https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=latvia).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a Latvian government official, October 8, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a Latvian servicemember, September 12, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with a Latvian government official, October 8, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Ieva Bērziņa, Janis Berzins, Martins Hirss, Toms Rostoks, and Nora Vanaga, *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia: Potential National Security Threats* (Riga: National Defence Academy, Center for Security and Strategic Research, 2018), 14, <http://www.naa.mil.lv/~media/NAA/AZPC/Publikacijas/WP%2004-2016-eng.ashx>.

<sup>18</sup> Bērziņa, et al., *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Bērziņa, et al., *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia*, 14.

dex.<sup>20</sup> The education system was especially well evaluated, but it was remarked that there is an urban-rural gap, while education chances for those with special needs are limited.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite positive trends, the economy has significant vulnerabilities, which include being a small and open system dependent on global trends. Business and development is usually associated with Riga, while the rest of the country is underdeveloped. This is the reason why about 30% of native Latvians have declared their readiness to leave the country. There is a significant disparity in the rate of unemployment, with the best situation in Riga and the worst in the Latgale region. The structure of the governmental organizations is outdated and does not provide proper services for the rapidly declining population. Pensions are so low that people are being driven into poverty. As a result, the percentage of the older generation facing the risk of social exclusion has risen from 33% in 2011 to 43.1% in 2018.<sup>22</sup> These factors affect the cohesion of the Latvian community. But it also has an extra internal problem – the attitude of the Russian minority.

### Attitude of Russian Minority towards Latvia

First impressions from the literature study lead to the conclusion that the threat from the Russian minority is low<sup>23</sup> since about 80% of Russian speakers declare their loyalty to the nation.<sup>24</sup> The diaspora is reasonably integrated within society, although there is some resentment towards any active participation in the defense system.<sup>25</sup> There is also the general opinion that the forthcoming language reform will bring many problems, and that may result in feelings of discrimination.<sup>26</sup> Probably this is the reason why these people are not willing to engage in public protests. Half of these non-citizens do not support Russian accounts,<sup>27</sup> and the older generation expresses the greatest level of loyalty<sup>28</sup> to Latvia; they profess to enjoying life in Latvia and prefer it to Russia. However, a majority of them claim that they do not plan to obtain Latvian citizenship, and the reasons are:

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Schraad-Tischler, Christof Schiller, Sascha Matthias Heller, and Nina Siemer, *Social Justice in the EU – Index Report 2017* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2017), 49, [https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/NW\\_EU\\_Social\\_Justice\\_Index\\_2017.pdf](https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/NW_EU_Social_Justice_Index_2017.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Schraad-Tischler, et al., *Social Justice in the EU*, 115.

<sup>22</sup> Schraad-Tischler, et al., *Social Justice in the EU*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Bērziņa, et al., *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, “Non-Citizens in Latvia: Is it a Real Problem?” *Sprawy Narodowościowe Seria nowa (Nationalities Affairs New series)* 49 (2017), Article 1438, <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.1438>.

<sup>25</sup> James K. Wither, “‘Modern Guerrillas’ and the Defense of the Baltic States,” *Small Wars Journal*, January 13, 2018, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/modern-guerrillas-and-defense-baltic-states>.

<sup>26</sup> *Latvia: Executive Summary*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Bērziņa, et al., *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Kuczyńska-Zonik, “Non-Citizens in Latvia: Is it a Real Problem?” 8.

the problems with communicating in the Latvian language, ease of traveling to Russia (no visas are necessary) and, partially, plans to obtain Russian citizenship.

The other interviews with Latvian representatives produced more details. One of them expressed some rather negative feelings towards the non-citizens claiming that their existence is a real problem for his country. According to his statement, these people love Russia but live in Latvia; some of them have problems with alcohol and drugs, especially the younger generation (of non-citizens); the older generation accuses the Latvian population of Nazism. But there were also positive points during this conversation – it was said that much depends on the parents of the younger non-citizens. There are some who try to learn the Latvian language and to integrate within the society. Another Latvian representative<sup>29</sup> stated that those non-citizens who wanted to emigrate to Russia had already emigrated, and now the majority of them do not plan to emigrate. The older people feel some sentiment towards Russia, but only because of their ethnicity. They definitely do not want to emigrate, especially to Russia, as they get information from the younger generation about real living conditions in Russia and Latvia. They are partially influenced by Russian propaganda, especially in the Eastern part of the country and, having a free visa, like to travel to Russia.

But there are also non-citizens who act against Latvia, and that creates problems for national security, given that they can be used by the Kremlin as a tool. A first warning signal comes from the NATO Centre of Excellence, which reveals that Russia is seen as a trusted source of information for minorities in the Baltic States.<sup>30</sup> Versions of a document developed by Latvia Security Police paints a clearer picture. This 2017 Report<sup>31</sup> claims that there are Russian compatriots who were involved in Russia's misinformation campaign, in which Latvia was targeted, and its internal problems were exaggerated.<sup>32</sup> Probably this section of the Russian minority may be used again if Russia wants to influence Latvia's internal situation.<sup>33</sup> So far, there have been several cases in which some activists were so advanced in their derogatory activity fomenting hatred and intolerance, that Latvian Security Police have had to intervene and warn them about the consequences of any further behavior of this kind.<sup>34</sup> One of the tools of incitement may be Russian-based organized crime (RBOC), which has penetrated the Russian diaspora. It is directly connected to the Kremlin, from where it receives sup-

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with a Latvian government official, October 8, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Ieva Bērziņa, Māris Cepurītis, Diana Kaljula, and Ivo Jurvee, *Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment*, Report 2016/2017 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2018), 102, [www.stratcomcoe.org/russias-footprint-nordic-baltic-information-environment-0](http://www.stratcomcoe.org/russias-footprint-nordic-baltic-information-environment-0).

<sup>31</sup> *Public Report on the Activities of Latvian Security Police in 2017* (Riga: Latvian State Security Service, 2018), 19, URL: <https://vdd.gov.lv/en/useful/annual-reports>.

<sup>32</sup> "Public report on the activities of Latvian Security Police," 19.

<sup>33</sup> "Public report on the activities of Latvian Security Police," 20.

<sup>34</sup> "Public report on the activities of Latvian Security Police," 15.

port and directions as to how to wield political influence and to be an instrument of statecraft abroad.<sup>35</sup>

Further research concerning the perception of threats to Latvia's security has brought surprising findings. For Latgalians, Russia is one of their least problems, which is thought-provoking given the location of the district. 78% of people who speak the Latgalian dialect claim to support Latvia when faced with Russian aggression. They claim to be ready to fight for the freedom of Latvia if that is necessary.<sup>36</sup> But, for the Latvian population, the biggest threat is not Russia, but the troubled domestic situation (low wages, the bad demographic situation, an inefficient health care system, corruption, and crime).

As for the interviewees, all of them considered Russia to be a threat.<sup>37</sup> They also expressed the feeling that Russia could attack their country without any warning. This is confirmed by entries in the Latvian "National Security Concept," where Russia is recognized as the main threat to Latvia's national security. Other statements in the document point out that Russia implements its foreign policy by using complex measures, so-called hybrid threats, which aim to gradually weaken the countries at which they are aimed.

Based on these insights, it is possible to speculate that the Russian diaspora in Latvia is not homogenous, it differs in opinion towards the government and it has different perspectives about the threat from Russia. That is why this subject definitely requires further studies and interviews, as the current postures of the non-citizens and their Russian compatriots are not well reflected in the literature. This also refers to the presence of Russian-based organized crime, which has penetrated the Russian minority in Latvia.

## The Impact of Russian-based Organized Crime on Latvia

The origin of Russian-based organized crime (RBOC) structures in Latvia stretches back to the Soviet times, when many criminals, who were released from prisons, decided to go to Latvia and start a new life there.<sup>38</sup> In this context, the term "new" means criminal, as these people kept their underworld inclinations and connections in order to use them in their new homeland. As cooperation grew, so did crime in Latvia in areas of drug trafficking, car theft, money laundering, and fuel smuggling. For example, in 2012, it was calculated that 30% of fuel consumption in Latvia came from contraband supplies.

<sup>35</sup> Riga is considered one of the criminal hubs specialized in money laundering. See Mark Galeotti, "Crimintern: How the Kremlin Uses Russia's Criminal Networks in Europe," European Council on Foreign Relations, April 18, 2017), [www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/crimintern\\_how\\_the\\_kremlin\\_uses\\_russias\\_criminal\\_networks\\_in\\_europe](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/crimintern_how_the_kremlin_uses_russias_criminal_networks_in_europe).

<sup>36</sup> Interview with a Latvian government official, October 8, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Following these statements, Russia and Belarus should be perceived together as threat, where Belarus can be the proxy.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Kegö, et al., *Russian Organized Crime: Recent Trends in the Baltic Sea Region* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2012), 69, <http://isdsp.eu/publication/russian-organized-crime-recent-trends-baltic-sea-region>.

John Ruehl argues that Russia, despite being weaker, is still able to coerce many countries, including the USA. The Russian toolkit includes the use of minorities, cyber and info operations, natural resources, and the RBOC. This development was possible because, as the author points out, there was an agreement between the Kremlin and RBOC about mutual support, which resulted in the building of mafia-like structures and networks of corruption in Europe, enabling Russia to create zones of influence.<sup>39</sup> This makes the RBOC a proxy agent of Russian interests, which can promote the Russian agenda wherever it is feasible.<sup>40</sup> A further study of RBOC activity in Latvia has revealed that when the Russian economic footprint in a country exceeds 12% of GDP, it creates conditions that allow for the RBOC to use the economic channels.<sup>41</sup> Since there is close economic cooperation between Latvia and Russia, many links have been created between Latvian and Russian businesspersons with Russian-backed crime elements in the background.<sup>42</sup>

RBOC also has a second face, which is connected to and directed by the Russian special services. It has been used by the Kremlin as a channel for intelligence and political influence,<sup>43</sup> and it is becoming a real problem while Russian attempts to undermine Western cohesion continue. Russian criminal groups, which are located on Latvian territory, are employed by the Russian security services to gather information about the border area (Latgale), security installations, and the personal data of prominent persons.<sup>44</sup>

Information about Russian-based organized crime (RBOC) in Latvia is limited. However, a few aspects need to be considered here. A short outline of its activity in Latvia leads to the conclusion that RBOC has penetrated the Russian diaspora and has good knowledge of local criminal structures. There is close cooperation between elements of RBOC and Russian special services, including cybercrime. And, RBOC follows the economic involvement of Russia. It means that this low-profile element has a significant potential to operate inside Latvia, probably following instructions from the Kremlin. In the face of low social activity in Latvian society, this creates permissive conditions for the easy weaponization of Latvian

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<sup>39</sup> John Ruehl, "How Is Russia so Dangerous with an Economy Smaller than Italy's?" *PoliticsMeansPolitics.com*, April 21, 2018, 6, <https://vip.politicsmeanspolitics.com/2018/04/21/how-is-russia-so-dangerous-with-an-economy-smaller-than-italys>.

<sup>40</sup> Ruehl, "How Is Russia so Dangerous with an Economy," 6.

<sup>41</sup> Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 13, 2016), 18, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook>.

<sup>42</sup> Conley, et al., *The Kremlin Playbook*, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Galeotti, *Putin's Hydra: Inside Russia's Intelligence Services* (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016), 4, [https://ecfr.eu/publication/putins\\_hydra\\_inside\\_russias\\_intelligence\\_services/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/putins_hydra_inside_russias_intelligence_services/).

<sup>44</sup> "Public Report on the Activities of Latvian Security Police," 9.

society, for example, by the employment of Latvian criminal groups (cooperating with RBOC).

## How Russia “Weaponizes” Latvian Society

The weaponization of identity, which is understood here as inciting the Russian minority against the Latvian government and the state, has been reflected in many publications. At this point, it is a good idea to start with the statement in “The National Security Concept”<sup>45</sup> (likely regarding Russia), which talks about “attempts of separate countries to influence the unity of Latvian society.” In addition, Janis Berzins argues that Russia can employ the language reform to create discord between the Latvian population and national institutions.<sup>46</sup>

In the course of weaponization, Russia is using the strategy of raiding, which is a cheap means of warfare.<sup>47</sup> When there is a situation in which the traditional (conventional) methods are too expensive, raiding is easy and effective; in the information sphere, it shapes the perspective to reach the desired effect, which is coercion of the enemy.<sup>48</sup> As in every aggression, the intruder targets the center of gravity of the opponent, and, in the Latvian case, it is probably the public perception.

Myriads of derogatory messages penetrating the Latvian information space have been sent to try to create a positive picture of Russia in the eyes of the Russian minority in Latvia and to undermine trust in the Latvian government. Whilst there are broadcasts of music and culture, in between, there is also fake news and lies (like the one that Latvia was never occupied by Russia). Russian media enjoys an easy ride in the Latvian information sphere, which hosts media in both Russian and Latvian. TV, radio, troll farms, and also robot-trolling transmit Russia’s soft power in the social media and also counters the messages of other competitive actors. Russia plays on the national sentiment of the Russian minority in order to influence the domestic policies of neighboring countries, even using these people as a means of implementing foreign policy. Probably the most accurate description of this comes from the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (COE), which states that “the violation of the human rights of Russia’s compatriots abroad may be used as justification for the violation of sovereignty, as was the case during the war with Georgia and crisis in Eastern Ukraine.”<sup>49</sup> It is possible to speculate that if Russia decided to project instability, the minority would be a tool.

The danger related to this activity is pinpointed by the Constitution Protection Bureau, which in 2016 reported that “Russia’s influence in Latvia’s infor-

<sup>45</sup> *The National Security Concept (informative Section)* (Riga: Ministry of Defense, 2018), 1, [https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/NDK\\_ENG\\_final.pdf](https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/NDK_ENG_final.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Berzins, “Russia’s New Generation Warfare in Ukraine,” 12.

<sup>47</sup> Kofman, “Raiding and International Brigandry,” 1.

<sup>48</sup> Kofman, “Raiding and International Brigandry,” 4.

<sup>49</sup> Bērziņa, et al., *Russia’s Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment*, 32.

mation environment still constitutes one of the most important long-term threats to the security of the Latvian state.” This broadcasting is used to target the many vulnerabilities that exist within society, such as economic diversity, the nation’s vertical division, and income disparity. Russia will exploit them all and use any pretext that suits its purpose. In this stream of messaging, Russia presents itself as the defender of old sentiments criticizing NATO and the Latvian language policy and repeating its offers of citizenship and pensions for compatriots. It is aimed especially towards the part of the population that only consumes Russian-language media and, in 2015, a media survey confirmed that “46% of Russian speakers don’t obtain any information from the Latvian language media, approximately one fifth of Latvian society cannot be reached through media in the state language.”<sup>50</sup>

The easy access to Latvian media space does not guarantee victory for Russia in this information war. A report from the NATO Centre of Excellence survey clearly shows that Russian efforts are not as effective as planned since “national media in the surveyed countries is perceived as a more trustworthy source of information than the Russian media outlets.”<sup>51</sup> For example, 54% of respondents to a 2017 public survey fully disagree with the statement: “Russian speaking people in Latvia are being discriminated.”<sup>52</sup> In another example, 45% fully disagreed with the statement that “NATO is a threat to Russia.”<sup>53</sup> This tends to suggest that the audience makes their judgment of the Russian broadcasting by comparing it with other sources.<sup>54</sup>

The weaponization of Latvian society is not limited only to the information sphere. Russia has been searching for countries or regions with poor governance to gain influence over them by means of corruption.<sup>55</sup> This process is at the forefront of what is known as the New Generation Warfare, which aims to influence a system by penetrating it and weakening from the inside.<sup>56</sup> Once inside, Russia pumps its influence into the country along established economic connections and tries to capture the state and amend national decisions.<sup>57</sup> In May 2018, Reuters placed an article on its website about money, suspected to be Russian, that was kept in the Latvian banking system and was being used to interfere in the internal affairs of European countries.<sup>58</sup> The agency stated that these financial

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<sup>50</sup> Bērziņa, et al., *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia*, 17.

<sup>51</sup> Bērziņa, et al., *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia*, 90.

<sup>52</sup> Bērziņa, et al., *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia*, 98.

<sup>53</sup> Bērziņa, et al., *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia*, 100.

<sup>54</sup> Bērziņa, et al., *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia*, 100.

<sup>55</sup> Conley, et al., *The Kremlin Playbook*, X.

<sup>56</sup> Conley, et al., *The Kremlin Playbook*, X.

<sup>57</sup> Conley, et al., *The Kremlin Playbook*, X.

<sup>58</sup> These issues are currently under investigation. For more details go to: John O’Donnell and Gederts Gelzis, “Exclusive: Latvia Probes Whether Russian Money Flows Used to Meddle in Europe,” *Reuters*, May 29, 2018, <https://fr.reuters.com/article/us-latvia-banks-politics-exclusive-idUSKCN1IU2BM>.

assets were delivered from Russia and used to finance hybrid activities and to undermine political systems in other countries. One more indicator of these Russian attempts was given in July 2018 by Bloomberg,<sup>59</sup> which reported about suspected financial transactions from Russia between 2010 and 2014, and also a significant inflow of Russian deposits into Latvia beginning in 2012. These deposits are suspected to have been used for organized crime and corruption.

An example from Finland shows a path of financial coercion that leads to an alarming conclusion. In September 2018, there was a massive operation in south-western Finland, when the security services discovered the existence of a Russian plot. Ethnic Russians (some with double nationality) were buying or constructing expensive houses in the proximity of vital communication routes and security installations. They were also buying ex-military speed boats and storing huge amounts of cash.<sup>60</sup> According to some sources, there were frequent helicopter flights between Finland and Latvia. Discussions are now taking place in Finland about introducing strong financial countermeasures, which will reduce the possibility of foreigners buying land or property in Finland. Similar measures could also be introduced in Latvia, where it is possible now to gain 5-year permanent residence by fulfilling one of the three conditions: buying a property, investing, or opening a bank account.<sup>61</sup>

It is also necessary to pay special attention to Russian indoctrination of the young, which is taking place outside of Latvia in the form of paramilitary camps.<sup>62</sup> In these places, young brains are said to be infected with fake history, for example, about the Soviet victory during World War II. This Russian investment in the young generation may result in a batch of pro-Russian leaders who may, one day, try to shape the internal policy of Latvia. President Putin's decision announced on July 26, 2018 about limiting support for the compatriots in Latvia, may seem a bit controversial and signal a Russian step backwards. But it may be only a temporary and rational move, perhaps because of its other areas of interest (Ukraine, Syria). Putin can reactivate pro-Russian sentiments at any moment. Attacks on taboo areas such as language, history, and integration can create a horizontal division that internally weakens the country.

In response, Latvia strives to unite the nation into one cohesive society, which will be able to repel any adversarial action. There has been an official call for the

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<sup>59</sup> Aaron Eglitis and Alessandro Speciale, "Latvia's Corruption Scandal Is Getting Even Weirder," *Bloomberg*, July 13, 2018 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-13/latvia-s-corruption-scandal-is-getting-even-weirder-quicktake>.

<sup>60</sup> Antoni Rybczyński, "Zielone ludziki' na Bałtyku? Spektakularna Akcja Fińskich Służb," *TVP Info*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.tvp.info/39269003/swiat/zielone-ludziki-na-baltyku-spektakularna-akcja-finskih-sluzb/>.

<sup>61</sup> More details can be found at: "Latvian (EU) Residency Program," *Elma Global*, [www.second-citizenship.org/permanent-residence/latvian-eu-residency-program](http://www.second-citizenship.org/permanent-residence/latvian-eu-residency-program).

<sup>62</sup> "Saeima Bans Latvian Children's Participation in Paramilitary Camps in Russia," *The Baltic Times*, May 4, 2018, [https://www.baltictimes.com/saeima\\_bans\\_latvian\\_children\\_s\\_participation\\_in\\_paramilitary\\_camps\\_in\\_russia/](https://www.baltictimes.com/saeima_bans_latvian_children_s_participation_in_paramilitary_camps_in_russia/).

“duty of each citizen to defend their country and to resist an aggression in an active or passive manner.”<sup>63</sup> Apart from the Latvian uniformed forces, the core of the deterrence system is the presence of NATO units on Latvia territory, which conduct exercises as a show of force and a show of the NATO flag. On a national level, deterrence capabilities are based on the concept that, besides the existence and training system of uniformed formations, there is the potential to “rapidly increase the extent of these forces for the level required for the deterrence or warfare.”<sup>64</sup> This could mean, though, that one of the factors determining the resilience of Latvia’s defense system is the aging of the population. Latvia will be facing problems here because “the Baltic states face a common demographic challenge as efforts to expand the size and capacity of territorial forces may be thwarted by a shortage of young, skilled recruits, especially, as seems likely, members of the large ethnic Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia are unwilling to take part.”<sup>65</sup>

### Root Cause Analysis: The Case of Vertical Division

Among factors affecting the cohesion of the Latvian population and posing a threat to national security, there is vertical division within society and distrust of the government. At first sight, this may be explained by the presence of the Russian minority, corruption, poor economic conditions, or other factors. Since perception is not enough, the author decided it was necessary to find other reasons for this phenomenon, in other words – root causes, and employed one of the simplest yet most effective research methods – 5WHYs. The idea of this method is iteratively asking questions starting with “Why” to get to the core of the problem. The number of questions does not have to be five; depending on the scale and complexity of the problem, it maybe six, seven, even ten. Based on this, the process<sup>66</sup> began with a statement of the problem:

*There is vertical division in Latvian society.*

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<sup>63</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, “The National Defence Concept,” approved by the Cabinet of Ministers on May 24, 2016, 7, [www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/Valsts\\_aizsardzibas\\_koncepcija\\_EN.pdf](http://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/Valsts_aizsardzibas_koncepcija_EN.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, “The National Defence Concept,” 9.

<sup>65</sup> James K. Wither, “‘Modern Guerrillas’ and the Defense of the Baltic States,” 7.

<sup>66</sup> Based on: Una Bergmane, “The Three Little Oligarchs: Latvia’s Corruption Scandal,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/11/three-little-oligarchs-latvias-corruption-scandal>; Aaron Eglitis, “U.S. Sanctioning Russian Oligarchs Sparks Exodus of Cash From Latvia,” *Bloomberg*, April 23, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-23/u-s-sanctioning-russian-oligarchs-spurs-cash-exodus-from-latvia>; “Krisjanis Karins & Tambovskaya Mafia,” *Lawless Latvia*, March 13, 2019, <http://www.lawlesslatvia.com/2019/03/>; “How Russian Oligarchs Turned the Country of Latvia into Their Own Personal Money Laundering Machine,” *Gangsters Inc.*, August 3, 2016, <http://gangstersinc.ning.com/profiles/blogs/how-russian-oligarchs-turned-the-country-of-latvia-into-their-own>; “The KNAB Targets Latvia’s Oligarchs,” *The Economist*, June 8, 2011, <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=218189406>.

Then, the author started asking “Why” questions, hoping to find the root cause.

1. The first question was: Why is there vertical division in Latvian society? And the answer was relatively easy to find: *People distrust the political system.*
2. So, next “Why” question was asked: Why do people distrust the political system? The proposed answer, after an analysis, was: *The politicians do not take proper care of the people.*
3. Then came the next “Why”: Why do the politicians not take proper care of the people? At that moment, there were several possible answers, which were rejected: *they are not qualified enough, they do not communicate with the society, they have bad advisors*, etc. Finally, it was decided that the best answer was: *The politicians<sup>67</sup> prefer to take care of their own business.*

Next questions and answers, listed below, drove to the result that corruption can be the root cause:

4. Why do politicians prefer to take care of their own business?  
*They have close connections.*
5. Why do they have close connections?  
*They merge business with politics.*
6. Why do they merge business with the politics?  
*They are corrupt.*

But the author decided to continue as corruption also has a root cause, which should be found. The author decided to stop as this may have brought erroneous results, so after question number seven, there is no answer.

7. *Why are they corrupt?*

## Future Implications

In the short-term, the Latvian government will probably decide how the next few years will develop for Latvia. The elections in October 2018 brought an end to the previous coalition of right parties. The Pro-Russian “Harmony” party got almost 20% of the vote, and the other two populist parties got respectively: “KPV” – 14 % and “New Conservative Party” – slightly below 14 %.

Despite some opinions, the high score of “Harmony” does not mean that Latvia may be turning towards Russia, as this party also has many Latvian members. Public support for this party has been decreasing: in 2011 – 28% of support, in 2014 – 23%, and in 2018 – slightly below 20% of support. So, the better results of the populist parties may mean that people simply got tired of the many scandals, corruption, and the lack of progress. The scale of change is significant, as only 1/3 of the current parliament will remain, while the new parties that will

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<sup>67</sup> The three oligarchs are still active: one of them is a city mayor, the second is a businessman, and the third is a government official. Looks like one, closed circle, separated from ordinary people.

probably form the government will provide young inexperienced politicians.<sup>68</sup> Despite many changes, the defense and current security policy should remain unchanged – when Latvians were voting about the enhanced forward presence of NATO and expenditure of 2% of GDP for defense, all parties voted in favor. And there are plans to spend more if necessary.<sup>69</sup> There has been some speculation that Russia may try to influence “Harmony” or the future coalition of the populist parties against Latvian society. If this happens, it will probably employ reflexive control and try to exploit the gaps like vertical division (distrust of society towards the Latvian government), horizontal division (disparity between the Russian minority, which is facing language reform, and the Latvian population), and economic inequality, where people with low income and pensions strive to exist and survive (for example, Russian non-citizens). On the other hand, a possible conflict or crisis in Latvia or another Baltic country may not start by the incitement of the Russian minority. Creating a hostile attitude in the diaspora and then trying to destabilize the country from inside would take too much time and would give enough indicators for the government and NATO to react; only to mention the Estonian words “they may come, but they will meet fight at every corner” – and probably the same would happen in Latgale, for example. Instead, an invasion might be very fast and covert by the use of trains, for example.<sup>70</sup>

But this is unlikely because in October 2018, NATO’s SACEUR Gen. Curtis Scaparotti, during a Military Committee meeting in Warsaw, discussed the whole-of-government approach as the reaction against any Russian hybrid warfare. He also stressed the fact that Russian coercion must be fought as a part of a unified effort because “nations themselves have different strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities,” and it is necessary to determine which threats will be dealt with by the use of the military, and which will require other countermeasures.<sup>71</sup> This seems to be addressing Latvia. When considering Russian activity, it is possible to speculate that Latvia has, indeed, experienced Russian coercion, for example in the military domain – the ZAPAD 17 exercise when Russian forces were visible literally on the border, in the internal domain – RBOC and the activity of Russian special services, and in the economy – the Russian footprint that exceeds 12% of GDP. So, if the gaps in Latvian society are closed, Russia will have difficulty in covertly entering the country.

In a long-term perspective, the demographic decline will hit Latvia hard. The decrease in the size of the population is of a catastrophic nature. The now scarcely populated areas will be depopulated even further and it may become a country of old people with huge economic disparities. The lack of young people (the brain drain) will also contribute to this gloomy picture, which raises such

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with a Latvian government official, October 8, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with a Latvian government official, October 8, 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with a Latvian government official, October 8, 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Samuel Cranny-Evans, “NATO Announces Plans to Counter Russian Hybrid Warfare,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.janes.com/article/83503/nato-announces-plans-to-counter-russian-hybrid-warfare>.

questions as who will do the work and who will defend the country in the future. These are the questions that the government, no matter of which political persuasion, will have to swallow and digest. The remedy for this trend would be to bring the birth rate back to at least 2.2 to sustain the population and to try to reverse the emigration trend. As for the current Russian minority, it must be integrated into Latvian society because simply there is no alternative. The non-citizens diaspora will diminish, anyway, due to mortality and the naturalization of the youth. This will require a tough but open stance from the Latvian government towards Russia to fight derogatory messaging and fake news. Nevertheless, efforts are being made. In Latgale, for example, where Latvian TV transmitters presently lose their signal to more powerful Russian stations. Latvian TV stations are erecting transmitting stations and broadcasting Latvian-made Russian programs to communicate with the Eastern part of the country.

The Eastern flank of NATO will be continuously and aggressively tested by Russia, which will employ the strategy of raiding to try to weaken the Alliance. Russia has excelled at coercing other countries by indirect warfare. However, since the Baltic States, although directly exposed to Russian coercion, have shown themselves to be resistant, Russia may turn towards other possible targets on the Eastern flank, like North Macedonia, the Western Balkans, or even Hungary and Bulgaria.

But this process will also depend on the future shape and cohesion of NATO. Since Russia enjoys dealing with countries separately, not with a unified body, any crack in the allied relations will bring benefits for the Kremlin. That is why demands from the US towards the European partners about the necessity for bigger contributions to NATO are not only calls for bigger burden-sharing. This strategy will probably result in a more compact and more cohesive structure for NATO in Europe – “a return of European geopolitics.”<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusions

The presence of a Russian minority in Latvia, especially after the elections in October 2018, could be a good basis for Russia to undermine the country’s cohesion. However, this matter should not be overstated, as this group is not homogenous. There are pro-Latvians and pro-Russians amongst this minority. Also, the picture concerning potential weak points in the Russian diaspora—compatriots and non-citizens—is not black and white. There are Latvian Russians who have distinct opinions about living conditions in Latvia and in Russia and do not believe in Russian propaganda and fake news. The Latgalians, in particular, should not be perceived as being a completely pro-Russian group. Amongst them there are both pro-Russian citizens and there are patriots who do not fear Russia and are

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<sup>72</sup> Sten Rynning, “A Europeanized NATO? The Alliance Contemplates the Trump Era and Beyond,” *War on the Rocks*, September 25, 2018, 12, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/09/a-europeanized-nato-the-alliance-contemplates-the-trump-era-and-beyond>.

ready to fight a bloody war.<sup>73</sup> However, though the Russian diaspora does not pose a threat *now*, if impelled from outside, for example by Russian coercion, it may react against Latvian society. It is also the conclusion that Russia, if it decides to intervene in Latvia, will not do it to protect the diaspora but will do it because of strategic choices, and the Russian minority will just be used as a tool.

Russian-based organized crime may emerge as one of the most effective and covert means of coercion in Latvia. It has been deep inside Latvian society since Soviet times and will be difficult to erase. Its existence should be analyzed together with its direct connection with the Kremlin, the Russian economic footprint and the problems affecting the Latvian banking system. In the future, if the Kremlin requests it, the RBOC will probably become heavily involved with Russian attempts to incite unrest, to corrupt politicians, and to gather information. The fight against this must be marshaled on both a national and an international level.

Russia has been practicing extensive, hostile, cross-domain coercion in Latvian living space, hoping to weaken the cohesion on NATO's Eastern flank. The most spectacular cases were the ZAPAD 17 exercise, cyber-attacks, the derogatory propaganda from state-owned TV stations, and the radicalization of the youth (radicalization camps).<sup>74</sup> These efforts may evolve into more aggressive measures, and even the use of direct warfare cannot be written off.<sup>75</sup> What is more, Russia is capable of using Belarus as a proxy against the Baltic States. The good news is that the self-esteem of the Latvian population is growing as people compare the information from different sources and question the fake news. This may also lead to another conclusion that Russian propaganda is becoming an obsolete tool, and Russia will then try to engage in other domains, probably cyber, which is both relatively cheap and very effective, and has no borders.

The Eastern flank of NATO has been tested for a long time, and this process will increase. The Russian effort may concentrate, apart from the Baltic States, on other "promising" targets, such as North Macedonia, the Western Balkans or even Bulgaria, where the Russian economic footprint makes state capture quite a realistic proposition. This research has found that the vertical and horizontal divisions in Latvian society are dangerous for national security. Social inequality is also a serious obstacle to Latvian society and national cohesion. The distrust towards the government is, unfortunately, justified in the face of corruption and political associations along with money laundering and social inequality, which is especially rife in rural areas. This pervasive phenomenon is of a very dangerous nature, as its existence, in the face of low social capital and demographic decline, creates permissive conditions that affect Latvian society in many domains. This

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with a Latvian service member, October 8, 2018.

<sup>74</sup> This problem has been also mentioned by Latvian Security Police. See "Public Report on the Activities of Latvian Security Police," 8, 9, 15.

<sup>75</sup> The case of Skripal shows the real intentions of Russia – for the Kremlin there are no borders that can stop its influence.

gap should be eliminated as soon as possible, as it works against the cohesion and resilience of Latvia.

There are areas which this study has found to be lacking in research, and the first would be the nature of Russian based organized crime in Latvia. In fact, there is not much information about it, maybe due to the fact that most data is classified. But its suspected ability to affect the Russian diaspora by physical coercion and intimidation and its direct link to the Kremlin may be disastrous if it is ever to be unleashed. There is evidence that, apart from money laundering, currently it is dealing with intelligence gathering for Russia, as well as cooperating with criminal groups on the border. This means that, despite the surprisingly positive resilience of the Russian diaspora in Latvia, Russia has the window and potential to covertly enter the country and exert cross-domain coercion from inside. Other areas that should be explored further include the current state of the Latvian population, the cooperation between the Baltic States in dealing with their Russian minorities, and the breakdown of the Russian minority in Latvia.

This study has touched on just a few aspects of Russian indirect warfare. There are other promising domains for research, such as cyberwarfare, the economy, or lawfare. Certainly, research into any of them could bring extensive results and some interesting conclusions for the future of NATO. But even at this stage, this work constitutes a very clear message that the cohesion and unity of a nation are of utmost importance when opposing cross-domain coercion.

## Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not represent official views of the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, participating organizations, or the Consortium's editors.

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## About the Author

**Rosław Jeżewski** serves in the Polish National Military Representative Office for NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe operations in Belgium. He has a background in the Polish Navy and the Current Operations and Planning branches of the Polish Operational Command. He has been deployed to Ethiopia as a United Nations military observer and to Afghanistan as an advisor to the Afghan Army. His expertise includes demographic trends, migration, regional security and projecting stability. He is a graduate of the Marshall Center's Program on Applied Security Studies. *E-mail*: r.jezewski@ron.mil.pl.