RADIANT SPOTLIGHT

Russian Influence in the Baltic States
Radiant Spotlight is Radiant Solutions' new Geospatial Intelligence periodical. It demonstrates how Radiant Solutions addresses diverse global issues through multisource data collection and enrichment, innovative geospatial intelligence tools and techniques, and advanced analytical acumen.

Data + Tools + Expertise

Delivering insight... where and when it matters.
Executive Summary

Following the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the continued presence of Russian forces in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the threat of conflict between the west and Russia is greater than it has been since the fall of the Soviet Union. The area likely to be ground zero for such a conflict is the Baltic Sea region, which includes Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. All three of these states joined the European Union (EU) in 2003 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004.

This article examines Russia’s view of Baltic membership in the EU and NATO, and explores Russia’s new generation of warfare and tactics for preparing the battlefield. In doing so, it demonstrates how Radiant Solutions’ diverse subject matter expertise and unique foundational geospatial datasets can be used to highlight specific geographic locations with growing risks of conflict. This type of information is critical for knowing where and how to evaluate the effectiveness of new generation warfare, and is vital for the planning and scoping of counter-influence operations.

Summary of Unique Tool and Application

**Human Landscape** is Radiant Solutions’ foundational Human Geography dataset, which provides rich attribution and metadata at the country-scale. Radiant Solutions leverages DigitalGlobe’s high-resolution satellite imagery to significantly enrich 1000s of publicly available and conflated data sources. Each dataset comprises 60+ individual data layers across thirteen standard human geography themes.

Human Landscape datasets reduce operating costs and accelerate time-to-mission for complex geospatial analysis or geospatial taskings by providing up-to-date and analysis-ready foundational data. For this study, Human Landscape was used to map and analyze key population demographics and social vulnerability, as well as Russian media and political influence in the Baltics.

### 13 core themes of human geography

- Religion
- Education
- Land
- Ethnicity
- Transportation
- Water
- Medical
- Communication
- Language
- Groups
- Demographics
- Economy
- Significant events

### 60+ Data Layers

### 1,000 Unique Sources
Russia's View of Baltic Membership in NATO

In the aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014, NATO began to focus on the increased possibility of a Russian attack on the Baltic states. These states joined NATO in 2004. As members of NATO, these states are guaranteed protection under Article 5 (the collective defense provision) of the NATO charter. If Russia were to retake the Baltics, NATO’s security guarantee compel the alliance to intervene.

The Baltic states’ only land route to the rest of the EU and NATO is via the Suwalki Gap, a narrow passage along the Polish-Lithuanian border adjacent to the Polish town of Suwalki. The Suwalki gap is bookended by Belarus and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. If Russia were to block the gap, it would be extremely difficult for NATO to dislodge Russian forces without a significant military operation. A Suwalki Gap escalation and response would greatly increase the likelihood of devastating conflict.

Russia sees the enlargement of NATO (to include countries on its periphery) as an immediate threat to its security. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1989-91 and Russia’s retreat from central and eastern Europe to its current borders, proximity plays a major role—the Russian-Estonian border is only 120 kilometers from St. Petersburg. Additionally, the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, and the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014 are seen by Russia as attempts to further erase its buffer with the West. Russia may calculate it worth the risk to retake the Baltic states in order to send a strong message to NATO about its further regional expansion.

As a legacy of the Soviet period, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania each have significant Russian populations that are focal points of both Western and Russian attention. If Russia plans to retake the Baltic states, it is very likely that they will cite mistreatment of Baltic Russians as a pretext for intervention. Russia works diligently to exacerbate tensions between the Baltic governments and their Russian populations through political intervention and media manipulation.

The mixture of information operations and kinetic action that Russia uses in Ukraine and Georgia is referred to as “hybrid warfare” (or “new generation warfare” in Russian parlance). It is the greatest threat to the integrity of NATO since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Russia has a distinct military advantage in the Baltic region. Kaliningrad and the areas bordering Estonia and Latvia are part of Russia’s Western Military District. Since 2014, Russia has undertaken a fortification campaign in Kaliningrad that includes the garrisoning of hundreds of thousands of troops and positioning of nuclear weapons that can reach many western European capitals. Additionally, Belarus participates in joint military training and takes part in large maneuvers every 4 years. Known as ZAPAD (West), these exercises have in recent years included simulated attacks on the Suwalki Gap and the Baltic states. Russia also used maneuvers as cover for action in 2008 against Georgia and in 2014 against Ukraine.
Modern Russian Warfare

New generation warfare combines conventional warfare methods with covert and deniable tactics intended to influence local populations—including information operations, cyber operations and the use of proxies, economic influence, clandestine operations, and political influence.

Russia’s actions in the Baltics include a combination of nonviolent covert action to influence or undermine target governments, violent but deniable covert action and traditional overt aggression. Russia’s intended goals include influencing domestic policy and politics in other countries to be more Russia-friendly, subverting NATO and Western or pro-Western governments, and furthering its military aims. This allows Russia to avoid conventional war, which would likely result in defeat by Western powers.

By taking advantage of modern technologies and media outlets, Russia has further expanded its propaganda and information operations. It generates large volumes of partial-truth or fiction propaganda across widespread channels (including the internet, social media, television and radio) to disseminate its messages quickly and continuously in multiple languages. Propaganda producers also often pay “trolls” to undermine information that does not support its propagated views.

Individuals are susceptible to this propaganda for numerous reasons. The affiliation of Russian proxy outlets is often obfuscated. The internet has led to information overload and humans often struggle to correctly identify false information, and information that appeals to group identities or narratives frequently makes individuals particularly vulnerable to false information.

New Generation Warfare Tactics

Information operations are strategic communications (like propaganda) used to influence politics in other countries. Channels for influence include media outlets, think tanks and internet “trolls.”

Cyber operations involve hackers collecting valuable information that can be used to influence political outcomes.

Proxies are groups that Russia leverages to exert influence, including compatriot organizations and other non-governmental organizations (NGO) that typically exhibit anti-Western values or Russian sympathies.

Russia maintains a mix of traditional clandestine tactics (including bribes and extortion) that primarily target already vulnerable populations. It also applies economic influence, through its exports of energy resources or potential investment opportunities, as well as political influence.
Primary Target Populations

Throughout the Baltics, certain segments of the population are particularly vulnerable to the aforementioned Russian tactics. Ethnic minority Russian populations and other Russian speakers (such as older Poles and Belarussians) are the most susceptible because they tend to already hold a pro-Russian sentiment. Many are integrated into the government and military, making them a greater risk due to their influence. Other vulnerable populations include those lacking basic services, education or employment. The following four pages highlight the primary target populations within each Baltic state, as well as known Russian propaganda efforts and proxy influence. The data used to highlight the target populations was acquired from Radiant Solutions Human Landscape, which offers a wealth of country-level foundational geospatial information to enable more advanced analytics. By providing an understanding of key population demographics and social vulnerability, Human Landscape helps analysts evaluate the effectiveness of Russia’s new generation warfare and guides counter-influence operations.

Key Minority Populations
High Unemployment

- Baltic Sea
- Estonia
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Russia
- Belarus
- Poland
- Kaliningrad

Legend:
- 17-24% Unemployment
- 12-17% Unemployment

Political Influence

- Baltic Sea
- Estonia
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Russia
- Belarus
- Poland
- Kaliningrad

Legend:
- Locations where minority political parties with ties to Russia hold seats

17-24% Unemployment
- 12-17% Unemployment

Locations where minority political parties with ties to Russia hold seats

- Estonia
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Russia
- Belarus
- Poland
- Kaliningrad

Legend:
- Locations where minority political parties with ties to Russia hold seats
Russian Propaganda and Proxy Influence

Estonia
Estonia has made considerable efforts to integrate its Russian population, which is located primarily in Narva and Tallinn. Comprised of 90 percent Russian speakers, the Narva region voted for independence in 1993—a movement that was only stopped when ruled illegal by an Estonian court. Based on this history, there is some risk (currently thought to be low) that Russia could engineer a separatist movement in Narva. Although Estonian security in Narva is relatively strong, its location on the border makes it susceptible to Russian influence.

The Estonian Centre Party (Eesti Keskerakond), the country’s most pro-Russian party, won 25 percent of the vote in 2015, and the party’s current leader, Jüri Ratas, is the current prime minister of Estonia. The Centre Party particularly caters to the Russian population, though most of its members are ethnic Estonians. The party was criticized for its pro-Russian stance after it signed a cooperation agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s United Russia Party in 2004. Former leader Edgar Savisaar defended the agreement at the time, claiming that it would protect Estonia’s interests vis-à-vis Russia. The agreement certainly helped the Centre Party appeal to Estonia’s Russian population, and it became the primary voice for Russian Estonians afterwards.

Savisaar was accused by Estonian security services of accepting bribes from Russia in 2010. Before the 2011 parliamentary elections, the Russian Tsentr TV channel broadcast a pro-Savisaar film that was widely viewed in Russian areas of Estonia. Savisaar remains very popular amongst Russian Estonians, and many observers believe that the Centre Party has close links with pro-Russian media, Russian activist groups and NGOs in Estonia. The party constantly cooperates with Russian language media like First Baltic Channel (PBK).

The Centre Party used the controversy over the transition to Estonian language curriculum in Russian schools in 2012 to its electoral advantage. It worked with media outlets and Russian NGOs in Estonia to appeal to the angry Russian minority. The party has controlled the mayorship of Tallinn since 2005, which has provided it a privileged position from which to aid pro-Russian NGOs and disburse funds to the pro-Russian media. Though the party has consistently been elected to a high number of parliamentary seats, it was excluded from governing coalitions until 2016, when Edgar Savisaar was removed from leadership.

Latvia
Latvia has the highest percentage of Russian citizens and residents of the three Baltic nations—and the most favorable disposition towards Russia of the three. Russian speakers in Latvia are not inherently supportive of Russia (especially since the invasion of Crimea), but are rather divided into several camps: support for Russia, loyalty to Latvia, and a neutral position.

70 percent of ethnic Russians live in Riga or the eastern Latvian region of Latgale. A number of Russian activists and Russian-backed NGOs are linked to propaganda calling for Latgale to secede. The Latvian military has trained in Latgale for potential “little green men” attacks, such as those that Russia launched to take over Crimea. Russian media in Latvia speaks negatively of Latvia’s treatment of Russian speakers and Latvia’s accession to NATO. Russian-backed NGOs also issue textbooks and films, host conferences and promulgate a pro-Russian version of Latvian history that paints the Latvian government as fascist and the Russian minority as oppressed.

Primary Locations of Ethnic Russians in Latvia
Pro-Russian media recently published articles claiming that Latvia’s NATO membership and focus on defense has come at the expense of the Latvian healthcare system. Propaganda also refers to NATO’s deployment in Latvia as “the Bundeswehr,” a depiction designed to evoke memories of the Nazi occupation amongst Russian speakers in Latvia.

In Latvia, the Harmony Party (formerly Harmony Center) has the closest links to the Russian government of any major party. The party controls Riga and performs well in nationwide elections, but has been excluded from governing coalitions due to its pro-Russian platform. Harmony has a close relationship with PBK, similar to that of the Centre Party in Estonia. Nils Usakovs, the leader of the party and Mayor of Riga, is a former employee of the channel. Latvian sources allege that Harmony Center was directly set up by the Kremlin in 2005; the party’s creation was announced after a meeting between Latvian Russian politicians and Kremlin officials in Russia. Harmony had a cooperation agreement (2009-17) with Putin’s United Russia party, similar to that of Estonia’s Centre Party, the agreement was ended as a result of political pressure.

In 2015, an investigation uncovered a massive money laundering scheme centered in Latvia—and as a result, sanctions were enacted by the United States. Despite sanctions against Latvian banks such as ABLV, Trasta Komercbanka and Rietumu, Latvia has moved slowly to stanch the flow of illicit Russian money through its banks. In June 2018, the long-serving central bank governor was charged with corruption for accepting a bribe. It is unclear if he is suspected of corruption related to the money laundering scandal as well. Latvia also has a “golden visa” program under which foreigners who invest in Latvian real estate or invest in Latvian banks may apply for residency permits. This “golden visa” program has been used by Russians to buy real estate in Jurmala and Riga. It is believed that persons under western sanctions have taken advantage of this program to gain Latvian residency.

**Lithuania**

Russia’s primary method for manipulating Lithuanian politics and society is via the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania Party (EAPL). Russia’s Compatriots Policy is used to exacerbate tensions between Poles and Lithuanians in Lithuania (as well as between Lithuania and Poland through its support of the EAPL) in the hopes of destabilizing Lithuanian and European integration. The Compatriots Policy’s on-the-ground implementation in Lithuania is executed mostly through the Polish Cultural House in Vilnius.

Poles and other minorities in Lithuania who are fluent in Russian (a legacy of Soviet upbringing in most cases) are receptive to the same pro-Russian media (Baltmedia, PBK, etc.) that Russians in Latvia and Estonia favor. Lithuania has the smallest Russian population of the Baltic states at 5.9 percent. But with a 15.7 percent market share in 2013, Russian television is disproportionately popular in Lithuania in relation to this small Russian population.

**Perviy Baltiyskiy Kanal (PBK)**

"First Baltic Channel"

PBK is a Russian-language channel (registered in Latvia) that broadcasts in all three Baltic countries. It primarily rebroadcasts Russian government programming and is the most popular channel amongst Russian speakers. It has also been fined and/or temporarily banned in all three Baltic countries because of misrepresentations of history and incitement against the governments.
Kaliningrad: Russia’s Bastion in Western Europe

Military strategists agree that Russia could cut off the Baltic states from Poland at the Suwalki Gap without much effort. When paired with the aforementioned new generation warfare tactics in use by Russia in the Baltic states, this presents a complicated situation for NATO; a seizure of the gap would trigger a conflict.

Russia’s threats of devastating strikes in the Baltics may not be totally sincere, but the focus on conventional war serves the purpose of making new generation warfare seem less threatening. It presents the risk of irreversible escalation as a reason for NATO to fear intervention of any form in the region, even in the form of counter-propaganda or troop increases.

Russia has built up its armed forces in Kaliningrad since 2009, a process that accelerated following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This build-up has including the refurbishment of airfields, an increase of troops and the deployment of anti-aircraft and ballistic missiles. These additions have turned the Oblast into an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/ AD) stronghold.

Rehearsals of a seizure of the Suwalki Gap were conducted from Kaliningrad and Belarus during the last two ZAPAD military exercises in 2013 and 2017. The Russian Baltic Fleet, (anchored at Baltiysk) comprises an additional threat to the region.

Russian Baltic Fleet
In 2012, Russia added S-400 air defense systems to Kaliningrad to supplement the already present S-300 system. The newest air defense system, the S-500, will likely be introduced in Kaliningrad as well. This air defense overlaps with St. Petersburg-area systems and covers the entire Baltic region. These systems also complicate NATO’s maritime approach options.

Additionally, Russia has deployed Iskander ballistic missiles and Kalibr cruise missiles to the enclave that can reach hundreds (Iskander) or thousands (Kalibr) of kilometers into Europe. Bal and Bastion coastal defense missile systems were introduced in 2017, and the hypersonic Zircon missile is rumored to be under consideration for deployment in the Oblast as well. Smerch multiple-rocket-launch systems are present in the Oblast; their 90-120 kilometer range could easily cover the entire range of the 65 kilometer-wide Suwalki Gap from Russian (or Belarusian) territory.

Kaliningrad’s current troop complement is only approximately 10,000 and is predicted to grow to three brigades (15,000 troops) by 2020. In comparison, NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence “tripwire” force within the Baltic states and Poland only totals 4,743 soldiers. Russia and Belarus have hundreds of thousands of soldiers in the vicinity of the Baltics. Though NATO’s full troop complement is 3.2 million, an initial invasion of the Baltic region is certainly within the realm of possibility for Russia and Belarus.
Fissures within Kaliningrad

The societal and economic well-being of Kaliningrad is important for Russia’s long-term strategy in the Baltics. A successful military campaign in the region would likely require stability and support from Kaliningrad. However, several fissures within Kaliningrad in recent years may challenge or complicate Russia’s planning going forward.

Cultural Diversity
Kaliningrad’s culture and identity are distinct from those of central Russia. Approximately 50 percent of the Oblast’s population was actually born in Kaliningrad. The population consists of a variety of ethnicities from the former Soviet Union, many of whom were resettled from across the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As a result, the central Russian government is concerned about the loyalty of parts of the population, which is generally more pro-European than the rest of Russia.

There is a specific fear of a maidan-style revolution amongst the 10 percent (100,000) of the Oblast’s Muslim population, whose efforts to build a mosque have been thwarted repeatedly. Following the Ukrainian revolution in 2014, one of the leaders of Kaliningrad’s Muslim community explicitly threatened such an insurrection due to the refusal of authorities to permit a single mosque (there are more than 150 Orthodox churches and chapels in the Oblast).

Kaliningrad is also home to a variety of historic German sites and buildings, but hard-line elements in Russian society have attempted to erase Kaliningrad’s German history in recent years. In 2012, the head of a Kaliningrad university and employees of the Ministry of Culture were accused of "academic separatism" and treason because the curriculum gave too much attention to Kaliningrad’s German history. Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church claims that German history and culture are a distraction from Russian spiritual values and should be deemphasized. Recently, a 10 meter-tall statue of Alexander Nevsky, the 13th century Russian national hero who defeated the Teutonic (German) knights, was installed in Kaliningrad at the insistence of President Putin as part of this ideological effort.

Economic Issues
Foreign investment in the region is very low after the imposition of sanctions. Most of Kaliningrad’s exports go to Russia, and the enclave relies largely on imports from central Russia. In June 2016, the head of the Russian security council visited Kaliningrad and stated displeasure with the slow rate of increase in quality of life for people there as well as the status of the economy. Additionally, he spoke angrily of other problems like corruption and smuggling, and announced the imposition of an embargo on foreign news that allegedly makes the situation in Kaliningrad worse.

In response, Poland suspended the Small Border Traffic (SBT) program that allowed visa-free movement between Kaliningrad and Poland. Introduced in 2012, Poland’s SBT program was the EU’s only visa-free zone with Russia. This closure has affected the 50 percent of Russians who used SBT cards to travel to Poland; however, regular visas are still available and many Russians travel to Poland for medical and economic reasons. Nevertheless, the SBT suspension caused a vast decrease in Polish travel to Kaliningrad, which adversely affects the economy.

Conclusion
Russia’s rearmament of Kaliningrad and threats of war serve to distract from its less obvious machinations in the region. The Baltic states have made considerable efforts to integrate their Russian (and other) minorities—efforts which will hopefully yield continued and improved success. A focus on human geography and the further integration of Russian minorities into the societies of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (as well as the broader West) is the best way to reduce tension in the region by disrupting Russia’s influence operations.