

BELARUS'S KEY ROLE IN RUSSIA-BALTIC STATES CONFRONTATION

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THE ISSUE

Many indicators suggest that distrust and tensions between Russian Federation and Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) will increase in the near future. The rising tensions, against the backdrop of an increasingly likely success of Russia in the Ukrainian conflict, are clear-cut but, whereas Estonia confronts directly with Russia, the situation in Latvia and Lithuania is affected by the proximity with Belarus. Belarus could become not only a tool of Russian foreign policy but also the target of hybrid actions conducted by Latvia and Lithuania with the likely support of Poland. From the Russian point of view, one of the most relevant lesson

learned from the Ukrainian conflict is that being Russophone does not necessarily mean being Russophile. The main Russian effort in Pribaltika in the months to come will be the attempt of put together Russian minorities against a common ideological enemy, the so-called "Collective West". Latvia and Lithuania, on their part, can oppose this strategy in many ways. Belarus could likely be targeted by hybrid actions by Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, aimed to underpin Belarusian opposition abroad and recruiting Belarusian citizens and State officers who are critics towards the complete submission of Belarus to Russia and its interests. ■



Executive Summary

Many indicators suggest that distrust and tensions between Russian Federation and Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) will increase in the near future. This intelligence report, based upon open-source data in different languages and from different political leanings, aims to analyse how Republic of Belarus could tip the balance, both as active player and target of external influence, in escalating or lessening the risk of crisis and direct confrontation particularly with Latvia and Lithuania.

Obtained Information (OSINT)

1. On December 20, 2023, the Belarusian visa-free travel for Lithuanian and Latvian (as well as Polish) citizens has been extended for 2024, allowing people of these countries to free travel in Belarus without a visa. Vilnius and Riga openly criticized such a move, fearing the risk of false accusations of espionage and illegal detentions of citizens.

2. On January 17, 2024 after the expulsion from Latvia of Boris Kaktov, a retired Russian veteran and chair of the Latvia-Russia Cooperation Association Board, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the events that are taking place in Latvia and other Baltic countries affect Russian national security, indirectly threatening a possible intervention in the

region under the pretext of defending Russian minorities. During his interview with Tucker Carlson on Feb. 6, however, Putin declared “there is no plan of invasion of Poland or Latvia”.

3. On January 19, 2024, Defence ministers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania approved the concept of building anti-mobility defensive installations on the borders with Russia and Belarus: the “Baltic Line of Defence”. No details have been officially provided, but the Defence ministers of Baltic States signed a Letter of Intent for HIMARS multiple rocket launchers as well.

4. On January 19, 2024, the Belarusian Minister of Defence Viktor Khrenin, during the presentation of the New Military Doctrine of Belarus, sent contradictory messages. On the one hand, he stressed the importance of deploying tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of the Republic of Belarus as a measure of preventive deterrence against potential adversaries. On the other hand, he said his country is open to dialogue and military cooperation with everyone, including NATO countries.

5. On January 24, 2024, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka declared his country has to pay attention to what is happening in Poland, as well as in Latvia and Baltic States, where some squads and paramilitary groups are training to fight against Belarus, and stressed the importance of protecting national borders.

6. On January 28, 2024, during a meeting of the Union State Supreme Council in St. Petersburg, Russia, Lukashenka reaffirmed its strong allegiance to Russian Federation and stated that a war involving Minsk is possible only in case of attack by Western countries against Russia and Belarus.

7. On January 30, 2024, the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) published a detailed report by Jan Kallberg: Code Red: How Russia Conquers the Baltics. The author develops a scenario, based upon a leaked German Defense Ministry paper, consisting in a Russia full-scale invasion of the Baltics where the Russian occupation of Suwałki Gap (a 65 km-long gap linking the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad with Belarus), plays a key role.

8. On February 12, 2024, Estonia's Foreign Intelligence Service publicly stated that Russia is preparing a long-term military confrontation with the West. Although in the short term a military attack by Russia is labelled as "highly unlikely", the overall assessment is based upon the Russian plans of doubling its troops along the border with Baltic States and Finland in the near future.

9. On February 20, 2024, five Latvian politicians (Jana Simanovska, Antoņina Ņenaševa, Mairita Lūse, Leila Rasima, Juris Viļums), as part of #WeStandBYyou, a solidarity campaign in support of political prisoners in Belarus, have taken on parenthood Belarusian detainees

Siarhei Pliashkun, Ala Zuyeva, Yauhen Verkhavodkin, Ala Sakalenka und Ruslan Slutski, arrested and sentenced for different reasons over the last years.

10. The Constitution Protection Bureau (SAB), the State Intelligence Agency of Latvia, in its annual report, issued on February, 2024, stressed that Belarus continue to pose a threat to Latvia due to its closeness with the Kremlin, but also that many sectors of Belarusian society maintain a rather reserved attitude towards the rapprochement with Russia.

Context

- Belarus and Russia. Belarus is part of the State Union with Russia (Soyuznoe Gosudarstvo) and the majority of analysts characterizes the country as a military outpost of the Kremlin. Belarus uselessly tried to position itself as a mediator hosting peace talks (the "Minsk agreements") after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. After the protests erupted in 2021 and the subsequent crackdown of opposition with the aid of Russian forces, Belarus dependence from Moscow significantly increased. The war in Ukraine, because of the logistic support offered by Minsk to Russian Armed Forces, strengthened such trend.

- Estonia. The amount of Russian speakers in Estonia is estimated at 374.038 residents, which is 27.4% of the population as a whole. Estonia shares a border of 294 km with Russia.

- Latvia: The country hosts approximately 558.216 Russian-speaking residents, which is 29.7% of the population as a whole. Russia-Latvia border consists of 270 km, whereas 172,912 km is the length border between Latvia and Belarus, partially separated by a fence monitored by border officer.

- Lithuania: The country hosts approximately 141.122 Russian native speakers, which corresponds to 6-7% of the overall population. There is no direct border between Russia and Lithuania, but Russian exclave of Kaliningrad shares a border of 275 km with Lithuania. Lithuanian-Belarus border (678,8 km) was at the core of migration crisis between Belarus and UE in 2021. In 2023, almost 3.9 million people crossed the border at the official checkpoints and 66% of them were Belarusian citizens. On 1st March, 2024, Lithuania closed Lavoriškės and Raigardas checkpoints, whereas Šumskas and Tverečius were closed in summer 2023.

BRELL Agreement: One of the most important and often neglected economic link between all three Baltic States and Belarus-Russia is the electricity network system: the so-called BRELL (Belarus Russia Estonia Lithuania Latvia) agreement. This Soviet-era integrated power grid system, controlled by Moscow, represents in fact the highest form of dependence from Russia. The difficulty to disconnect from this network and to synchronize with the

European grid system poses a potential risk for the Baltics to be blackmailed by Russia in case of escalation.

Assessment

The rising tensions between Russia and Baltic States, against the backdrop of an increasingly likely success of Russia in the Ukrainian conflict, are clear-cut but need to be clarified in detail. Although Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are often viewed as a geopolitically integrated region that represents a possible strategic goal for the Kremlin (Pribaltika, in Russian geographic terminology), they remain three different countries with a different weight of Russian-speaking communities and a quite different geographic location. Whereas Estonia confronts directly with Russia, the situation in Latvia and Lithuania is affected by the proximity with Belarus.

Even the role of Belarus, sharing borders both with Lithuania and Latvia, results to be pivotal in order to understand where a future Russian military intervention could take place and where Russia could try to destabilize a single country via hybrid actions. Moreover, Belarus constitutes at the same time Russia's bridgehead westward and a potential "buffer zone" as far as it keeps neutrality or unwillingness to follow passively Russian geopolitical expansionism. That is the reason why, particularly in the field of information warfare, Belarus could become not only a tool of Russian foreign

policy but also the target of hybrid actions conducted by Latvia and Lithuania with the likely support of Poland.

The Belarusian State, especially the Armed Forces and the security apparatus, is deeply influenced by the Russian one. Nevertheless, even though Belarusian authorities and the majority of Belarusian population feel undoubtedly close to Russian identity and support Kremlin's foreign policy, the direct involvement of Minsk and its Armed Forces in any conflict alongside with Russia would not be welcomed inside the country. This is proved above all by the prevailing attitude towards the war in Ukraine. The ambiguity of New Military Doctrine of Belarus, apart from its obvious constraints, witnesses to the unspoken desire to avoid a complete absorption of Belarus by Russia. The Belarusian word "pamiarkoŭnašč" (meaning "reasonableness," "good sense"), often used by Sociologists to describe the pragmatic - but sometimes passive and lazy - national character of Belarusians, is quite fitting to express this reluctance to staunch engagement, which could become a double-edged sword in managing the relations with Latvian and Lithuanian neighbours, and particularly with their Russian-speaking communities.

From the Russian point of view, one of the most relevant lesson learned from the Ukrainian conflict is that being Russophone does not necessarily mean being Russophile. Moreover, in Baltic countries, the Russian native speakers are in part of

Ukrainian or Belarusian origin, and they are sometimes integrated in Baltic societies, that makes even more nuanced their self-identification as "ethnic Russians". Beyond the propaganda about the so-called "Russkyi Mir" (the allegedly monolithic Russian-speaking world of Russian diaspora abroad), Moscow is aware that the political support does not stem simply from using the Russian language.

The main Russian effort in Pribaltika in the months to come will be the attempt of put together Russian minorities against a common ideological enemy, the so-called "Collective West" (in Russian Kollektivnyj Zapad). The polarisation between an allegedly united Russian-speaking world abroad, including all people of East Slavic origin and erasing different degrees of identity, will be at the core of Russian hybrid strategy in which Belarus could serve as platform to disseminate a most convincingly version of Russian narrative. For instance, Belarusian Channel ANT is regularly spreading stories about Latvian Russophones people who choose to quit Latvia to live in Belarus due to better life conditions and "ideological" reasons as well (traditional family values against LGBT policy, sense of community against individualism, welfare State against liberalism etc). This kind of information measures adopted by Belarus will increase in the near future in connection with its Russian ally.

Latvia and Lithuania, on their part, can oppose this strategy in many ways. The

support of Belarusian opposition abroad, with the collaboration of Poland, is the most feared and monitored by Belarusian authorities. For instance BYPOL, the organisation of former Belarusian security officers founded in October 2020, which openly underpins the opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, is active in neighbouring countries. Another group of Belarusian dissidents well known for his anti-government activism is Cyber-Partisans. Although there is no evidence of direct contacts between authorities of Latvia or Lithuania and these organisations, they appear very likely due to the strong support to Belarusian opposition coming from different State representatives. Nevertheless, an unexpected crisis in Belarus – as for instance the sudden fall of Lukashenka without a managed transition of power – could very likely increase the risk of military escalation between Russia and the Baltics, in a civil war scenario where Russia predictably annexes Belarus.

Another course of action by Baltics could be the implementation of hybrid informative measures, such as bolstering the sentiment of a Belarusian identity separated from Russia and promoting the mixed, Balto-Slavic identity of Russian-speaking minorities on their territory. In fact, the gradual attempt to move away Minsk from Russian influence, including the enhancement of diplomatic and economic ties of Belarus with Baltic countries, appears more fruitful than declaring an open enmity. On the contrary, as far as Latvia and Lithuania treat their

Russian-speaking minorities as a granitic whole, isolating them from the rest of society and contributing to depict the idea of unity of Russians speakers, they will foster their social and ideological Russification.

One can develop different operational scenarios starting from these assertions. On one hand, Latvia and Lithuania are worried for visa free-travel regime in Belarus since they fear that Russian minorities could be exploited as a fifth column especially after their travels to Belarus, providing information or receiving instructions to put in place subversive actions in Baltic countries. This represents a highly likely scenario due to the amount of people who could be potentially targeted by Belarus under the influence of Russia. On the other hand, Latvia and Lithuania have the opportunity to leverage the abovementioned fear of a complete submission to Russia in some sectors of Belarusian society. In this sense, the Baltics will likely try to influence and recruit people inside Belarusian State even exploiting unsuspecting Russian-speaking elements. Because of the difficulty to find potential resources, this kind of operation does not appear feasible in a systematic or massive manner, but it could be likely put in place in single, carefully planned operations.

From a military point of view, the importance of Belarus appears to be crucial as well. In fact, the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad is linked even with Belarus through the Suwałki Gap, the narrow strip of 65 km that forms also the border between Poland

and Lithuania. In military joint drills over the past years (e.g., Zapad in 2017), Russia and Belarus reportedly simulated an attack to Kaliningrad coming from the Baltics, in which the capacity to manoeuvre land forces from Belarus border resulted decisive. Since the Suwałki Gap is the area where a military accident could probably take place, any attempt to establish security guarantees at the borders between Belarus, Latvia and Poland appears a reasonable way to avoid a further raise of tensions. Nevertheless, the mutual distrust makes this perspective unlikely in the short term, as shown by the recent closure of checkpoints by Lithuanian authorities. At this moment only two checkpoints, Medininkai and Šalčininkai, remain opened at the Belarusian-Lithuanian border.

The future of BRELL Agreement should be also monitored as an effective indicator about the level of tensions and distrust between Russia and the Baltics. According to the last declarations, a partial withdrawal of Baltic States from BRELL is scheduled for June 2024, whereas the synchronization of the Baltic energy lines with the European energy system is supposed to be completed by February 2025. It is unclear at present how decoupling from BRELL will costs in terms of installation of new high-voltage lines and the impact on electricity market prices. An information warfare about the benefits of the withdrawal from BRELL, against the pro-Russian narratives stressing its negative effects, will likely gain a significant place in domestic debate of Baltics countries in the next months.

Key takeaways

- a. The fate of Belarus is crucial in Russia's confrontation with Latvia and Lithuania: Belarus's neutrality or unwillingness to get involved in a possible conflict represents a security guarantee for the Baltics, whereas its absorption by Moscow will foster the likelihood of a direct clash.
- b. Russia will step up its support of NGO and Russian-speaking minorities abroad, using Belarus as a platform of influence to spread Russian narrative and to increase the ethno-linguistic polarisation within Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.
- c. Belarus could likely be targeted by hybrid actions by Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, aimed to underpin Belarusian opposition abroad and recruiting Belarusian citizens and State officers who are critics towards the complete submission of Belarus to Russia and its interests.
- e. The geographical location of Belarus along the Suwałki Gap is pivotal in case of military confrontation: a security agreement on borders with Poland and Lithuania would be an important step to prevent a further escalation, but the current mutual distrust makes such perspective difficult in the short term. ■

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