



THE BALTIC STATES – BETWEEN NATO’S PROTECTION AND RUSSIA’S THREAT –

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The three Baltic countries carry with them the heavy burden of the Soviet past, alongside their positioning in an area of interest to both the North Atlantic Alliance and Russia. The main research directions and the hypothesis of the present paper are grounded on the premise of the realistic approach in the study of international relations, according to which states are rational actors and lead a permanent competition to increase their power towards hegemony, as well as on the theoretical grounds of the balance of power. This article analyses the situation of the three Baltic states in the context of the tense relationship between NATO and Russia, but also in terms of the ability of each actor to project its power in the Baltic Sea. The main research hypothesis is that although the Baltic states are part of NATO and the EU, they are the most exposed members to the threat of Russian aggression, and hence, the more Russia strengthens its presence in the region, the more NATO will try to rebalance the balance of power to ensure the security of its members. The first direction of research consists in analysing the increasing level of risk to the security of the Baltic countries following the annexation of Crimea and, at the same time, the strengthening of military presence and scale of exercises carried out in the region, by both Russia and NATO. Moreover, the Baltic states need to identify potential vulnerabilities while facing the alternative fighting methods Russia may draw upon, such as hybrid actions, and therefore strengthen their defence capacity. Another direction hereby analysed is NATO’s vulnerability to Russia in the context of the Suwalki Corridor, which must be addressed during the forthcoming period. Following these directions, the article mostly relies on the qualitative research method, whilst also including the analysis of quantitative data.

Keywords: Baltic countries; NATO; Russia; Suwalki Corridor; military exercises;

INTRODUCTION

Events on the international political scene in recent years have brought changes to regional security in Eastern Europe. Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, followed by the outbreak of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, determined both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) to make major decisions to ensure the stability of the region and the security of their members on the eastern flank. At that time, the Baltic countries appeared as the most vulnerable to a Russian attack – although being members of NATO and the EU, by bordering Russia and being geographically located on the northeastern border of the North Atlantic Alliance, they could have presented a greater interest for Kremlin such as to challenge the Alliance and test its ability to defend its members, in accordance with the provisions of Article 5 (The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949)¹.

This article analyses several factors that influence the security in the Baltic region and that tip the balance of power in favour of one political and military actor or another. Based on the cultural and linguistic peculiarities that some Baltic citizens still share with the Russians, dating back from the period of the common history as part of the Soviet Union, the analysis proceeds to the current security challenges and the Allied response to counter Russia's intimidation efforts and to discourage any of its potential aggressive actions. I believe that a better understanding of the cultural, social and linguistic context, as well as of the existing political and military context in the Baltic Sea, helps us to have a broader perspective on the events therein.

¹ *"The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security."*



The Baltic region remains extremely important for maintaining security and stability throughout Eastern Europe, as well as for safeguarding international peace.

THE SITUATION OF THE BALTIC STATES AND RUSSIA'S LEVERAGE IN THE REGION

The integration of the Baltic countries within the Euro-Atlantic bodies

Between 1999 and 2004, the Baltic states did not clearly outline the direction of their foreign policy. On one hand, out of the three of them, Estonia had the clearest perspective of joining the European Union and Lithuania the North Atlantic Alliance, but, on the other hand, such a configuration, according to Zbigniew Brzezinski, would have placed Latvia in an extremely vulnerable position, especially as it has a large Russian population (Dahl, Järvenpää, 2014, p. 75). Since the late 1990s, there had been discussions about Russia's possible intentions in the region, with the EU Commissioner Leon Brittan drawing attention towards the need of bringing the Baltic states closer to Western Europe and acknowledging their prospects for joining NATO. Thus, according to Brittan, even in the absence of a guarantee regarding national security, they would send the message that they were making every effort to be part of NATO's peacekeeping efforts and that they are negotiating with the West for further integration (Mole, 2012, p. 155). The message was meant to make Russia understand that it could not prevent the former Soviet states from setting their own domestic and foreign policy priorities. In the end, the three states chose the path to the West all together, joining both NATO and the EU in 2004.

After the integration of the Baltic countries into the European and North Atlantic bodies, it was clear that Russia had lost influence over an important strategic and geopolitical area. The desire to maintain total control over the entire ex-Soviet territory was no longer valid for the Baltic region. The three Baltic states eventually became some of the strongest and most active supporters of NATO and the EU among the new states that joined in 2004, experiencing a successful post-communist transition, from the USSR to their integration within the Western structures (Jakniūnaitė, Berg, Ehin, 2009, pp. 125). Together with their accession, the new members also brought relevant

experience and information regarding the situation of the former Soviet states, information which could thus contribute to the creation of appropriate policies and the adoption of proper financial support measures for the countries in the Eastern neighbourhood (Paulauskas, 2006, p. 26).



The vulnerabilities of the Baltic states facing the Russian threat

Russia not only was disgruntled with the integration of the three Baltic states within the Euro-Atlantic structures, thus neighbouring NATO and the EU, but did not even fully accept their independence. Following the annexation of Crimea, Russia's General Prosecutor's Office issued a statement presenting the intention to review the legality of the 1991 decision by the Baltic countries to gain independence from the Soviet Union, following the request made by two members of the Parliament on behalf of the United Russia party (RFE/RL, 2015). This turned out to be a statement that caused concern among Baltic officials, given the existing tensions and the security context at that time.

Relations between Russia and the Baltic states are very asymmetrical, being marked by some peculiarities. They are based on the geostrategic position and history of the three Baltic states rather than on the existence of a friendship or real collaboration (Sleivyte, 2008, p. 32). To these are added the cultural influence exerted by Russia and the large number of Russian speakers settled on the Baltic territory, who are more likely to be the target of disinformation actions coming from Russia through various media channels and social networks. This results in a combination of factors that produce sufficient reasons for the Baltic states to fear a possible aggression from the largest eastern neighbour.

In my opinion, as far as the Baltic countries are concerned, Russia is not pursuing a new territorial gain, but rather a strategic one. With an invasion of the Baltic states, Russia would significantly undermine NATO's position in the region and question the Alliance's ability to ensure the collective security of its members, as enshrined in Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. Russia's actions in the Baltic area are provocative rather than aggressive, examples of which may be the violation of the air border and the abduction of an Estonian agent in 2014 (Braw,

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2015). The main encouraging factor and, at the same time, Russia's main pretext for intervening in some way in that region could be the Russian-speaking population, as well as the high percentage of Russian minorities, especially on the eastern border of the Baltic states. According to the Estonian *Population and Housing Census*, in 2012, Russian was declared as mother tongue by 383,062 citizens, representing a share of 29.6% of the total population, while ranking second among spoken languages². Russian ethnic minorities in Estonia are about 24% of the total population, with Latvia accounting for a higher share, 27% of the population, and 34% being Russian speaking, also including other minorities, such as Poles, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Lithuania, on the other hand, stands much better in this respect, with minorities of Russian origin being below 6%, and Russian speakers representing around 8% of the total population (Grigas, 2015). Another important thing to note is that, in all three Baltic countries, the largest concentration of the Russian minority population is in the capital cities, Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius, respectively, followed by the other large cities in each country.

In addition to Russia invoking the defence of minorities as reasoning for its actions, a possible Russian occupation of the Baltic states could also be motivated by historical pretexts. The imperialist and Russification tendencies of the Baltic territory originate in the 18th century, under the rule of the Russian Tsar Peter the Great and, later, of Catherine the Great. Moreover, seaports play an important and strategic role for Russia. If at the Black Sea, before being annexed, Crimea was a long-term host of the Russian navy, in the Baltic Sea as well, the seaports of the Baltic states were used to transport Russian oil to Western Europe until 2000-2001. It is a strategic position that Russia has managed to consolidate in Crimea, but lost in the Baltic region, with the accession of the three states to NATO. However, the Baltic ports continue to play a rather important role from an economic point of view, whilst still having a major transit role for the routes of Western goods imported in Russia. If we were to compare, again, with the antecedent in Ukraine, Russia's intervention in eastern Ukraine, where the most important coal mines are, could be repeated by a similar scenario in the Baltic

² "1,294,455 permanent residents enumerated in the census", https://vana.stat.ee/63780?parent_id=39113, retrieved on 13 June 2021.

countries, even if they do not have very rich natural resources. An exception is the Ida-Viru County in northeastern Estonia, located at the border with Russia, which has rich energy resources, providing about 80% of Estonia's electricity consumption (Ib.). This region could be a rather tempting strategic target for Moscow.

Russia has understood very well that, first and foremost, a non-military strategy is required to target the Baltic countries. As early as 1992, the Russian Foreign Ministry's magazine, *Diplomaticheskii Vestnik*, presented the Karaganov doctrine, which "encouraged the use of Russian compatriots in the so-called 'close neighbourhood' for foreign policy purposes" (Maliukevičius, 2015, p. 118). This doctrine argued the need to maintain Russia's interest in the region and to increase its influence on the territory of the Baltic states. It was to be put into practice by facilitating the establishment of Russian speakers in the close neighbourhoods, especially in the former Soviet republics, and then, by preventing the integration of ethnic minorities in those countries, they could be used as a foreign policy tool for safeguarding Russia's interests. Concepts such as "compatriot policy" and "close neighbourhood" have been intensely promoted and used in Russia's foreign policy actions, especially in the Baltic countries (Ib.).

At the beginning of Vladimir Putin's first term, the main foreign policy resources aimed for the Baltic states were considering the so-called "humanitarian dimension", specifically aiming to assist and support the Russian minorities on the territory of neighbouring states and to protect their rights and interests. The strategy was meant to assure the control of the post-Soviet region, mainly through soft-power, non-military instruments, such as: "dodgy investments, energy blackmail and manipulation through the media" (Ib.). In 2008, and then in 2013, such a doctrine, which was based on the "humanitarian dimension", was included in the provisions of the concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. The following aspects were declared as objectives for the country: "protecting the rights and legitimate interests of Russians living abroad; (...) Supporting the strengthening of compatriots' organisations in order to enable them to effectively uphold their rights in the countries of residence, while maintaining the cultural and ethnic identity of the Russian Diaspora and its links with the historical homeland; (...) Facilitating the widespread learning and



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According to Lithuania's National Security Strategy, the main risks and threats are: the economic and energy dependence on other states; the development of nuclear energy by other states in the region, without taking into account international safety standards; cyber attacks as well as information threats aiming to manipulate the public opinion or to exert external influence on Lithuania's domestic policy, military capabilities, economy, society and cultural identity.

use of the Russian language; (...) countering extremist manifestations, neo-Nazism, any form of racial discrimination, aggressive nationalism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia, as well as the attempts to rewrite history while using it to build a confrontation which can provoke revenge in world politics and review the results after the Second World War (...)" (apud Maliukevičius, lb., 1). Through this approach in foreign policy, Russia practically legitimizes its possible future interventions on the territories of neighbouring states.

This type of foreign policy, such as Russia's, directly influences the political and security strategies of the countries concerned. For instance, according to Lithuania's National Security Strategy, the main risks and threats are: the economic and energy dependence on other states; the development of nuclear energy by other states in the region, without taking into account international safety standards; cyber attacks as well as information threats aiming to manipulate the public opinion or to exert external influence on Lithuania's domestic policy, military capabilities, economy, society and cultural identity (apud Maliukevičius, lb., p. 119, 2). If Russia's strategy is to legitimise possible interventions, by building various pretexts, then the strategies of the states targeted by these actions rather seek to find solutions to avoid conflicts and to develop alternative ways of defence. Moreover, such states also aim to minimise the risk of foreign interference in domestic policy, making efforts to reduce their dependence on other states.

Among the major national security risks mentioned by the State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania are the following: *"control of economic and energy resources, the creation and support of Lithuanian influence groups, (...) informational activities, ideological policy and <rewriting history>"* (Maliukevičius, lb.). According to the cited document, they have the potential to encourage ethnic and political dissensions, thus leading to a decrease in the capacity to integrate ethnic minorities into society and to promoting distrust in the country's democratic political system. The introduction of these provisions is rather a precautionary measure taken by Lithuania so that it does not give reasons to an aggressor state to intervene in its domestic policy. If Karaganov's doctrine was to facilitate the placement of Russian speakers in neighbouring states, such that afterwards to

make it as difficult for them as possible to integrate into that society and therefore, later use them as a foreign policy instrument, then, among the provisions of the Lithuanian Security Department, the actions that undermine the process of integration of ethnic minorities in the society are clearly mentioned as a danger to national security.

In my opinion, the historical and ethnic reasons, as well as the economic, energy and strategic interests, would be sufficient for Russia to seek to intervene, or at least to destabilise the situation in the Baltic region. The Baltic countries are in a different situation from Ukraine, with all three being members of NATO and the EU. Unlike in the case of the eastern Ukraine conflict, where NATO only condemned Russia's aggressive actions, in the event of an aggression against one of its members, the Alliance's inability to honour its responsibilities and guarantees under Article 5 would lead not only to the destabilisation of the region, but even to a serious shaking of international security.

The continuous pressure targeting the Baltic states suggests they are in a non-traditional and non-military war with Russia. For example, in recent years, several research and consultancy centres on security affairs have been established in the Baltic States: the NATO Centre of Excellence for Cyber Defense Cooperation (Tallinn, Estonia, 2008); NATO Centre of Excellence on Energy Security (Vilnius, Lithuania, 2013) and NATO Centre of Excellence on Communication (Riga, Latvia, 2014) (Ib. P. 120). By mentioning the Alliance within the name of each centre, the Baltic states demonstrate not only that they are dedicated to the concept of common security, but also that they need NATO's protective umbrella against Russia's threats.

Another vulnerability, or even internal threat, encountered mainly among the population of the former Soviet states, is the nostalgia for the Soviet past. The popularity of the Russian culture and language among Baltic citizens, as well as the widespread presence of the Russian media, along with the coordinated actions of disinformation and propaganda coming from Moscow, both create a favourable environment for informational aggression against the citizens of these states. Kęstutis Petrauskis, a media expert, conducted a survey in 2013 that showed the audience shares of television channels in the Baltic States. The results showed that, in Lithuania, more than 23% of the population preferred alternative television channels and almost 16%



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A survey conducted in 2020 showed that 1/3 of adult media consumers in Latvia consider the Russian press and radio to be somewhat trustworthy, and about 50% watch Russian-language news. In Lithuania, also in 2020, 3% of survey respondents affirmed that they believe Russian TV channels and radio stations are very reliable, and another 16% considered that they are somewhat reliable. In addition, 64% of all respondents stated that they access Russian-language news.

the Russian television channels; more alarming is the situation in Latvia and Estonia, where shares of 29% and 19% respectively were identified for Russian TV channels (Ib., pp. 120-121). The situation has not changed much after Russia's aggressive actions undertaken in Eastern Europe during the following years. A survey conducted in 2020 showed that 1/3 of adult media consumers in Latvia consider the Russian press and radio to be somewhat trustworthy, and about 50% watch Russian-language news (Cesare, 2020). In Lithuania, also in 2020, 3% of survey respondents affirmed that they believe Russian TV channels and radio stations are very reliable, and another 16% considered that they are somewhat reliable. In addition, 64% of all respondents stated that they access Russian-language news (Public Opinion Poll, 2020). These figures show the extremely high exposure of the population to Russia's propaganda and manipulation tools, which have proved their effectiveness both through mass media and online. Latvia and Lithuania have taken some steps in this regard, aiming to reduce the share of the Russian press in the national listing and hence banning the Russian RT channel in 2020. Despite a fairly large influence from Russia, in the Baltic region there are cities with a majority Russian ethnic population or a share of Russian speakers of over 80%, as it is the case of the Lithuanian city of Daugavpils, but in which the new generations declare themselves as being "Russian speakers" rather than "Russians" (Cesare, Ib.), aspect which shows that the strategy for the integration of minorities implemented by the Baltic countries is effective and offers real results.

The situation in the Baltic region describes a favourable context for hybrid attacks on the territory of the three countries. Hybrid activities can be carried out by both state and non-state actors. These types of threats are multidimensional, combining subversive, informational, economic and diplomatic means with coercive measures. They are designed in such a way that it is difficult to identify the source where they come from (European Commission, 2018). Hybrid campaigns use conventional and unconventional means and tactics in order to intervene in the internal affairs of another state, but whilst trying to avoid a direct military confrontation. In addition to the use of conventional forces, Russian hybrid threats also use the method of creating conflicts. The Russian military has defined this type of war as

one at strategic level, seeking to shape the governance of a targeted state and its geostrategic orientation, in which all actions taking place are subject to an information campaign. The use of conventional military forces in regional conflicts is also part of the hybrid warfare tactic (ISW Report, 2020). If in the ex-Soviet space, we have created more regional conflicts, then the European space is increasingly facing hybrid threats related to the field of misinformation, counterintelligence or cyberattacks. The EU, together with NATO, is working to address these challenges and to respond appropriately (European Commission, lb.).



THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE BALTIC SEA

Russia's military forces

Ultimately, the hottest spot in the Baltic region remains Kaliningrad. Located between two NATO member states, this Russian territory is home to a significant amount of military equipment. Even if it is not directly linked to Russia from a territorial point of view (separated by Poland and Belarus), it still gives Russia an important strategic advantage in the Baltic Sea. Since 2014, Russia has increased the number of military exercises both in Kaliningrad and in its western territorial area. Lithuania has been forced to respond to Russia's intimidation by preparing, at a high level, its own military capabilities and rapid reaction forces. The pretext for Russian intervention in Ukraine to protect minorities in the region can always also be invoked in the case of the Baltic countries.

In the year of the annexation of Crimea and the eastern Ukraine conflict, there were multiple incidents in the Baltic region as well as various actions were taken by Russia, events which caused concerns, among which: the abduction of an Estonian secret agent on the border with Russia; frequent violations (about 50 times) of Latvia's maritime borders during military exercises; conducting multiple military exercises with short-range ballistic missiles in Kaliningrad, where the base point for the Baltic Sea Fleet is also located (Rosen, 2014). All of this is a real cause of concern for the Baltic countries, and Russia's habit of interfering in its neighbours' internal affairs and territorial annexations is one of the reasons for the state of distrust and the precautionary measures taken in the region, thus explaining the numerous military exercises that were conducted in the years to come.



In Kaliningrad, Russia built one of the A2/AD systems. The range of such systems covers a wide region, including even the territory of some NATO member states. Russia's air defence and anti-missile system in Kaliningrad puts NATO in a very difficult position, making it much more difficult for it to access the Baltic Sea if naval or air interventions are needed.

Following the annexation of Crimea, Russia continued to strengthen its military presence and capabilities in Eastern Europe. A significant increase in Russian military resources also took place in the Baltic region, with Kaliningrad being heavily militarised using ground, naval and air combat capabilities. Although facing economic problems, Russia still continues to allocate large sums for its defence budget. Its military spending in 2020 was estimated at \$ 61.7 billion, up 2.5% from the previous year. At the same time, the US had approximately \$ 778 billion in military spending in 2020, the largest military spending in the world and accounting for 39% of total defence spending in 2020 internationally (SIPRI, 2021).

Russia has divided its military forces into five districts so as to cover its defences throughout its entire territory, from Eastern Europe to Asia. Out of the four older districts, two have a strategic position on the western border: the Western Military District and the Southern Military District. The Western Military District also includes Kaliningrad, where the Russian Baltic Fleet is stationed (RAND Corporation, 2015, p. 6). A novelty regarding the reorganisation of Russia's military bases came in January 2021, when Russia's Northern Fleet was elevated to the status of a military district, which means that Russia's military capabilities stationed there will be strengthened in order to consolidate its position in the Arctic region (McDermott, 2021).

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³ "Those actions and capabilities, usually long-range, designed to prevent an opposing force from entering an operational area."



In recent years, Russia has been repeatedly accused of approaching or even violating NATO's airspace. In 2020 alone, NATO air forces intercepted Russian aircrafts about 350 times near its airspace (NATO, 2020). Most such interceptions took place near the borders of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, being flights carried out between Russia and Kaliningrad.

exercises, a war simulation took place, one that would include if required the use of nuclear resources owned against Western countries. The figures conveyed by some Western analysts show that about 100,000 soldiers were mobilised to take part in these demonstrations in the Baltic region (CEPA Report, 2019, p. 24). Nevertheless, other experts claim that the number of Russian soldiers involved in the Zapad exercises would have been much lower, approximating the mobilised troops as around 48,000, among which 23,000 already active in the region where the exercises took place (Giles, 2018).

Russia also conducted other military exercises in the Baltic region in the following years. The missile test conducted in 2018 near Latvia raised concerns for the states in the region. It was the first time that Russia tested real ammunition in a military exercise so close to NATO, which even led to the partial suspension of civilian flights in the Latvian airspace and their redirection towards the Swedish airspace, as precautionary decisions taken by the two states. In 2019 too, military exercises took place in the Western Military District – *Union Shield*, conducted together with Belarus (CEPA Report, lb.). Following the international resonance of Zapad-2017, in autumn this year will take place another round of military exercises for Russia, Zapad-2021. Once again, a strong display of forces is expected from Kremlin, where it will most likely mobilise its capabilities in other military districts, including Russia's Northern Fleet. Regarding the mobilization of military troops, this time too, it is very likely that tens of thousands of soldiers will be conveyed, if not more than 100,000 (Hurt, 2021).

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when two Russian fighter jets entered the Estonian airspace over an island in the Baltic Sea, belonging to Estonia. This time as well, Moscow denied the incident, stating it was a routine flight over the international waters of the Baltic Sea (Tanner, 2021).

Russia's way of acting ambiguously and unpredictably, as well as the irregular combat tactics previously used, persuade NATO to adequately improve its ability to defend its members, but also to deter the aggressive actions of its opponents. The Alliance is also constantly modernizing its military capabilities, techniques and tactics as well as developing new strategies to counter Russia's A2/AD capabilities and to discourage other aggressive actions, thus balancing the military power in the region. Throughout his actions, Putin has shown that he is willing to take great risks and use military force in exchange for political and territorial advantages. Russia's military doctrine, as well as its military capabilities strategically located along the eastern flank, under the umbrella of the A2/AD systems, pose challenges to the security of both NATO members and their Eastern European partners (Hicks, Conley, 2016, p. 2).

NATO presence in the Baltic Sea area

Challenges coming from Russia in the Baltic region have been frequent, such that the annexation of Crimea has raised additional concerns for countries in the region, whilst Poland, along with Lithuania, have even called for an emergency NATO meeting, citing Article 4⁴ of the Washington Treaty, alleging that there is a threat of some NATO member states being militarily at risk. Poland's defence adviser, Marek Matraszek, declared at the time that, in the event of a Russian aggression, "Poland will fight on the front lines" (Day, 2015). Poland's concern was largely caused by the border near Kaliningrad, where it neighbours Russia directly. Two major NATO meetings followed in Wales in 2014 and in Warsaw in 2016.

Relevant decisions were taken at the NATO Summit in Warsaw in order to strengthen the Alliance's deterrent and defence capacity. To this end, the military presence on the territory of Eastern European



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⁴ "The Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened".



Poland's geographical position on the border with Ukraine and the Baltic States gives it a key role in managing the crisis in Eastern Europe and hence, an important position within the North Atlantic Alliance. Following the crisis in Ukraine, Poland has increased its involvement in initiatives organised on NATO's eastern flank, such as to ensure the collective security of the region.

members has been strengthened, including that of Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. In the four member countries of the Alliance, the military presence was strengthened by the creation of four multinational battle groups with battalion dimensions. The presence of military forces is ensured through rotation by the allies. These battle groups are being deployed together with the military forces of the host countries, the main purpose being to be prepared to intervene at any time in order to defend the security of the states within the region. The four battle groups are led by the United States, Germany, Canada and the United Kingdom (NATO, 2021-1). The orientation of NATO defence resources towards the Baltic Sea area signalled the Alliance's concern about a possible Russian aggression there or of some hybrid actions potentially coming from Russia.

Poland's geographical position on the border with Ukraine and the Baltic States gives it a key role in managing the crisis in Eastern Europe and hence, an important position within the North Atlantic Alliance. Following the crisis in Ukraine, Poland has increased its involvement in initiatives organised on NATO's eastern flank, such as to ensure the collective security of the region. It is among the founders of the Three Seas Initiative and the Bucharest Format (B9). Former Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski emphasised Poland's role as the European leader in the context of the Ukrainian crisis, stressing that *"the EU will not take any decision on Ukraine without Poland. Many European governments expect Poland to play a leading role in this issue, given Poland's historical and diplomatic experience and the role it plays in the politics of the Eastern Partnership"* (Larsen, 2014, p. 18). Sikorski also argued the need to strengthen the Alliance's military presence in Poland, saying he would be *"content and happy"* if 10,000 troops or two NATO brigades were deployed in his country (Bornio, 2021). In addition to the presence on its territory of one of the four multinational battalion-sized battle groups, in 2018, the Polish government decided to build a national transportation hub – *Central Transportation Hub (CPK)*, which, on one hand, would have the role of consolidating the logistical dimension of the NATO military presence and, on the other hand, would strengthen the defence position in the region and increase the transportation capacity. Additionally, this centre would contribute to the economic development of the countries in Central and Eastern

Europe and would become a key point for the Three Seas Initiative in the process of developing a solid NATO infrastructure, linking central Europe with the entire eastern flank and hence, increasing the mobility of military forces and capabilities (CEPA, 2019, pp. 7-8). Poland's role in the region remains extremely important, being the first country that could intervene directly and quickly to defend NATO members in the event of a Russian aggression in the Baltic Sea.

Following the scale of the Russian military exercises in the Baltic region, especially those in Zapad-2017, NATO members also came up with a response, organising a series of military exercises in the region during 2019, in Poland and the Baltic countries, in which thousands of soldiers and warships took part. Among these are included: *Dragon 19* in Poland, with the participation of 12 countries and 18,000 soldiers; *Kevadtorm 2019* in Estonia, with 12 countries taking part and more than 9,000 soldiers; *Geležinis Vilkas* in Lithuania, together with 10 participating countries; *BALTOPS 19* naval exercises involving 18 countries, 50 warships, two submarines and 36 aircrafts (Mezhevich, 2020).

In 2020, the largest NATO military exercises in the last 25 years, *Defender Europe-2020*, were planned. The United States alone announced that they would participate in these exercises with 85 Abrams tanks, 45 armoured personnel carriers and about 20,000 soldiers. Approximately 37,000 soldiers from 18 countries were planned to participate (Ershova, 2020). However, the scale and manner of the exercises have undergone some changes due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In January-March 2020, the United States sent about 6,000 troops, 9,000 vehicles and a lot of military equipment to Europe. Even under these conditions, *Defender Europe-2020* was the third largest military exercise deployed by NATO in Europe ever since the Cold War. Some of the most valuable results and lessons of these exercises relate to testing the mobility of the NATO capabilities, including the transport of military forces and equipment overseas (Thomas, Williams, Dyakova, 2020). Although NATO officials said the exercises did not target any particular country, Moscow reacted negatively to the fact that they took place in the Baltic region. Russian military expert Konstantin Sivkov considered that the scenario on which those exercises were based would be that of an invasion



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THINKING

Defender Europe-2020 was the third largest military exercise deployed by NATO in Europe ever since the Cold War. Some of the most valuable results and lessons of these exercises relate to testing the mobility of the NATO capabilities, including the transport of military forces and equipment overseas.



Once again this year, between March and June, a new round of military exercises took place, Defender-Europe 21. More than 30,000 soldiers from 27 countries took part in this year's edition. This time, most of the exercises focused on the Black Sea region and the Balkan Peninsula. Among the exercises that took place this year there were also included rapid threat response operations, which took place in the air and territorial space of Romania, Bulgaria, and Estonia.

of the Baltic Sea and part of Poland by an enemy state, in its efforts to reach Kaliningrad. NATO would react by sea, land and air to mobilize and deter the enemy, and then, after defeating it, would continue the attack on its territory (Ershova, Ib.).

A few months later, in June 2020, new military exercises were conducted in the Baltic Sea – *BALTOPS 2020*. These exercises have been conducted annually for a long time and are organised in order to train the military forces of NATO members and partners, especially in the field of maritime and air defence. These exercises were attended by over 3,000 soldiers from 19 countries (SHAPE Public Affairs Office, 2020). Earlier this year (2021), NATO conducted military exercises again, this time simultaneously on the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. For this exercises, two US Air Force B-1 bombers, were conveyed, which, together with fighter jets from Poland, Germany, and Italy, flew over the airspace of the Baltic countries, while in parallel, military exercises were conducted in the Black Sea, with the participation of two French fighter jets, two Spanish F-18s and several NATO warships in the Black Sea (NATO, 2021-2). Once again this year, between March and June, a new round of military exercises took place, *Defender-Europe 21*. More than 30,000 soldiers from 27 countries took part in this year's edition. This time, most of the exercises focused on the Black Sea region and the Balkan Peninsula. Among the exercises that took place this year there were also included rapid threat response operations, which took place in the air and territorial space of Romania, Bulgaria, and Estonia. This year's exercises were conducted also with a significant involvement of the US Air Force and Naval Forces (U.S. Army Europe and Africa, 2021).

Some Russian analysts believe that the role of these military exercises, carried out in recent years by NATO, is much greater than the one intending to discourage the opponent. In their view, the exercises are in fact based on offensive scenarios against Russia, and the exercises in the Baltic area implied a battle scenario to neutralize the heavily militarized Russian region, Kaliningrad, and to protect the Suwalki Corridor. As for this corridor, they say, NATO fears a blockade of access to the Baltic area for its military forces, which could be created by Russia and Belarus through a counterattack in this access strip (Mezhevich, Ib.).

The strategic importance of the Suwałki Corridor

The Suwałki Corridor is of strategic importance to both Russia and NATO. For NATO, it is more of a weak link or “Achilles’ heel”, as some analysts call it. This corridor is a narrow strip of 65 km in a straight line, located between the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and Belarus, on the border between Poland and Lithuania, being the only part connecting the three Baltic countries to NATO by land, through two narrow roads and of a railway line. At the same time, a threat to this corridor could create serious problems for the North Atlantic Alliance in defending its members from the Baltic Sea: Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania (CEPA Report, 2018, pp. 15-16).



Figure 2: Suwałki Corridor (LETA / TBT Staff, 2018)

For Russia, the Suwałki Corridor is quite strategically important, because this part of the territory separates Belarus, a reliable partner state that does not pose any problems, from the militarised Kaliningrad region and the Baltic Sea Fleet. Moreover, if Russia would manage to block this corridor, it would block NATO’s ground access to the three Baltic countries and leave them exposed to the threats of a Russian attack. And, last but not least, the occupation of this part would give Russia another military front on the eastern flank of NATO, after the one in Ukraine, would strengthen its power of control over Belarus



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CEPA experts also came up with a set of recommendations to increase NATO's response speed, especially for NATO member states situated on the border with Russia, such as: "early warning of Moscow's covert subversion of a target in the area, which can be defeated or taken over; the presence of forces capable of responding quickly to an attack on the integrity of the national territory; and adequate infrastructure and properly positioned equipment to enable the rapid deployment of NATO troops".

and would increase the degree of threat to Poland (Ib., P.22). For NATO, the Suwalki Corridor is the weak point that can create serious security problems if the right measures are not taken to prevent this and to discourage possible aggressive actions from outside. CEPA experts carried out a detailed analysis of the situation in the region and the danger posed by this corridor. The biggest risk they identify is that, in the event of a conflict with Russia, a competition for controlling Suwalki will begin, and the Kremlin, through ground forces in Kaliningrad and Belarus, will be able to close the Suwalki Corridor and prevent NATO from defending the three Baltic countries, leading to their isolation from the rest of the continent and the impossibility of ground access for NATO forces (Ib., p. 3).

This corridor, through the two connecting roads between Poland and Lithuania, ensures the European Union's civilian traffic in the region, but it does not have the required space for establishing significant military forces and it could not cope with long military convoys. In order to avoid possible bottlenecks that may occur in this region, NATO would consider alternative routes to reach the Baltic countries, such as landing in the Polish river and seaports of Szczecin/Świnoujście (CEPA Report, 2021). In the event of an escalating conflict between NATO and Russia in the region, in a first phase, Russia would be at an advantage, because it already has a large number of soldiers stationed in the Western Military District. CEPA experts even mention estimates of about 330,000 military forces, as well as the capabilities needed for a possible military attack. To prevent and deter such a scenario, NATO has made efforts in recent years to increase the mobility of its forces, both on the ground as well as naval and aerial. CEPA experts also came up with a set of recommendations to increase NATO's response speed, especially for NATO member states situated on the border with Russia, such as: "early warning of Moscow's covert subversion of a target in the area, which can be defeated or taken over; the presence of forces capable of responding quickly to an attack on the integrity of the national territory; and adequate infrastructure and properly positioned equipment to enable the rapid deployment of NATO troops" (CEPA Report, 2018, p. 14). Although this part of the territory raises concerns among NATO members and may pose serious impediments to the need to deploy forces in the Baltic Sea, Russia

also faces some limitations. Kaliningrad can give the Kremlin headaches, because the access to the Baltic Sea can be fully controlled by NATO and Sweden, which would limit the flexibility of Russian military forces in the region (CEPA Report, 2019, p. 25).



CONCLUSIONS

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Baltic states were the only ex-Soviet states that managed to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures. In 2004, they became members of NATO and the European Union, managing to break with Russia's demands for the reunification of the former USSR in another form. Russia was losing at that time an important part of its influence in Eastern Europe. However, the Baltic countries' membership of NATO and the EU has not made the threats to their security and territorial integrity disappear. Russia has continued, in various forms and methods, to maintain its presence in the region, including using hybrid tactics. An important lever which has been used is that of Russian minorities and Russian language speakers, which are instrumented whenever required to justify some of its undertaken actions. Situated between the protection offered by the North Atlantic Alliance and the threat coming from Russia, the Baltic states are forced to face this combination of factors and risks in order to maintain peace and stability in the area. Fortunately, they have successfully integrated Russian minorities into their own territory, reducing the reasons Russia could invoke in the event of an aggression.

In 2014, with the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, there was a major change in the position of forces on NATO's eastern flank and a new demand for urgent action to be taken by the Alliance such as to defend its most exposed members. The tensions between NATO and Russia have reached new, alarming levels. The degree of militarisation in the area and the number of military exercises carried out in recent years have both increased. NATO has taken real steps to improve its military capabilities, the mobility of its forces as well as the speed of response to a possible attack. Russia further militarized the Kaliningrad enclave, whilst also consolidating its Baltic Sea Fleet and turning the Northern Fleet into a military district.

Even though military tensions between the two powers have risen, NATO has shown that it has the capacity to react quickly to protect

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its members from the potential Russian aggressive actions. One of the NATO member states with a major role in security and stability in the Baltic Sea region is Poland. It has allocated relevant resources to the field of defence and continues to be extremely active. A security issue in the Baltic area, which has been increasingly discussed in recent years, is the Suwalki Corridor - a narrow strip on the border between Poland and Lithuania, which could separate the Baltic countries from the rest of the continent if Russia intervened militarily from Kaliningrad and Belarus, in the scenario of an attack. This vulnerability of the Alliance will most likely receive significant attention in the coming period from defence experts, who will come up with various scenarios and solutions to adequately protect the area. The situation in the region is constantly changing, but all the measures taken in recent years and the military exercises carried out by NATO, in response to Russia's actions, seem to have balanced the balance of power and had the deterrent effect NATO members intended.

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