

Why Narva is not next

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Since the annexation of Crimea, analysts have asked, 'Is Narva next?' The international media has descended on Narva to ask whether 'little green men' could suddenly appear there. An Estonian border town 150 km from St. Petersburg with an overwhelmingly Russian-speaking population, Narva is a symbol for the larger Baltic question and the future of NATO. A chorus of prominent analysts and public figures, including former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, have warned of the 'high probability' of future Russian action against the Baltic states.²¹

Indeed, there is abundant evidence of increasing military activity in the Baltic Sea region as a spill-over from the Ukrainian crisis. Russian air force planes have been flying in a dangerous manner with their transponders switched off, and Russian warships have made their presence felt. In response, NATO has beefed up its air policing mission and increased troop deployment for exercises to reassure the Baltic states and deter Russia.

Although there might initially appear to be some superficial similarities to the Ukrainian case, the differences are clearly more significant. First of all, the Baltic states are members of NATO and the EU, and Russian action against them would therefore have immeasurably graver consequences.

The success of the Crimean operation depended on an element of surprise; few expected or planned for Ukraine

to be attacked by Russia. The Russian preparations went undetected (or were at least not correctly understood). It was able to use its military bases already on Ukrainian territory, and top Ukrainian commanders defected to the Russian side. Russian actions exploited a unique post-revolutionary situation with confusion regarding the legitimacy of the interim authorities in Kiev. The border with Russia in eastern Ukraine was lengthy, porous and weakly guarded. The fact that the Ukrainian forces did not open fire in Crimea encouraged Putin to believe that the same could be easily accomplished in eastern Ukraine. When Ukrainian forces resisted, however, they succeeded in winning back territory until Russian forces intervened directly.

In contrast to Ukraine, Estonia has the capacity to respond quickly. Estonia is a well-governed state and one of the least corrupt in Europe. The country capitulated meekly to the USSR in 1940 in the vain hope of not provoking Moscow: the lesson drawn in the contemporary Estonian defence doctrine is always to offer military resistance. The Commander of the Estonian Defence Forces has stated that the first 'little green man' to appear on Estonian soil will be shot immediately.²²

Hybrid war is nothing new for the Baltic states, which have already experienced elements of hybrid war, including cyber-attacks, economic pressure and disinformation campaigns. Even the Soviet-sponsored, failed Communist

insurrection in 1924 had many common features with events in 2014, as did the Soviet annexation in 1940. A key feature of the Russian operations in Ukraine has been the denial of direct military involvement. Thus, the separatists claim to have obtained their Russian arms and equipment from overrun Ukrainian bases – which is impossible, since Estonian forces only use standard NATO equipment. Putin does not consider Ukraine to be a genuine nation, but rather a part of the larger Russian nation – Greater Russia (and many Russians agree with him). However, even Putin understands that Estonia, though small, is completely distinct – there is no historical dispute about Narva belonging to Estonia.

Perhaps the greatest concern has been caused not by the military but rather the ethnic factor. Putin has justified aggression against Ukraine with the need to ‘protect’ Russian-speakers. This is a dangerous fall-back to the pre-1945 world, where dictators claimed the right to change borders by force to bring co-ethnics into their fold. Putin’s reasoning in Ukraine is a dramatic escalation from the spurious excuse, used six years earlier in South Ossetia, of protecting Russian *citizens*.

Russophones in Ukraine were swayed by the demonstration of power and rational calculations to side with the victor. Material considerations also played a role; for instance, pensions are higher in Russia than in Ukraine. Such incentives do not apply in the Baltic case, where the standard of living is higher than in Russia. This is especially evident in the border areas, with the Pskov Oblast bordering Estonia and Latvia one of the poorest in the entire Russian Federation. People in Narva regularly cross the bridge to Ivangorod and are well aware of how life is more miserable on the Russian side of the border. Narva’s supermarkets became a popular destination for consumers from St. Petersburg after Putin slapped counter-sanctions on EU agricultural produce. Wages are lower and unemployment higher than in Tallinn,

but Narva’s economic statistics are similar to those of other peripheral Estonian towns far from the capital.

While most Estonian Russophones support the annexation of Crimea, it would be wrong to jump to the conclusion that they would desire similar Russian intervention at home. Indeed, the images of carnage in eastern Ukraine are a powerful argument in favour of maintaining peace. Rather than asking residents for their opinion about Crimea or Putin, it would be more insightful to ask whether they would prefer roubles to euros or the Russian healthcare system to the Estonian one. Even Estonian Russophones who are non-citizens enjoy the right to freely travel and work within the EU, a privilege that would be sorely missed. Although there is a sharp contrast between Estonian and Russian-speakers in terms of their support for NATO and perceptions of a threat from Moscow, more importantly, there is little difference regarding the will to defend their country.²³

It was previously believed that the integration of the Russian minority would be resolved over time – that Soviet nostalgia would fade with the passing of the older generation. The first warning signal that this assumption was false came with the conflict over the relocation of the Tallinn Soviet war monument (‘the Bronze soldier’) in 2007. Russia has used its ‘compatriots’ instrumentally in order to undermine societal integration and maintain a sense of grievance and marginalization. The conflict in Ukraine has been accompanied by an unprecedented level and sophistication of hostile information warfare. Most Estonians and Russophones live in separate information spaces, with Russian TV being the prime source for the latter. The Baltic states were among those who proposed that the EU take countermeasures to combat Russian media falsifications. The Estonian government has decided to fund a new Russian language TV channel – not to provide counter-propaganda, but to strengthen the identity of the local community.

Some analysts have argued that it is not important what people in Narva actually think, because Russia could ignite trouble simply by inserting a few outsiders. A related question is whether NATO allies would be willing to 'die for Narva'? The logic of this hypothetical argument is that Putin's ultimate aim is not territorial expansion, but rather dividing the West by undermining NATO and the EU. An operation limited to Narva could leave NATO with a dilemma in terms of how to respond, especially since Russian military policy envisages the 'de-escalation' of conflicts by nuclear means, i.e. threatening to carry out a limited tactical strike

to convince NATO to refrain from coming to the assistance of an ally under attack. Andrei Piontkovsky has turned this question around, asking whether Putin is willing to die for Narva.²⁴ Such a gamble would obviously involve high risks for Putin, but the Russian leader has demonstrated that he is much less risk-averse than Western leaders.

Visiting Tallinn in September 2014, U.S. President Obama stated that the 'the defence of Tallinn and Riga and Vilnius is just as important as the defence of Berlin and Paris and London'.²⁵ In order for the validity of this statement not to be tested, deterrent must be credible.

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