

WAR IN UKRAINE

SOCIOCULTURAL RUNNING ESTIMATE

Peripheral Impacts: The Baltics



In This Running Estimate...

- Partial Russian domestic polling shows that Putin maintains high public support at 87 percent in December, while Kremlin support remains relatively steady at 72 percent. Other tracked polling measures have not been released for December at this time.
- The Baltics know a long history of domination and occupation by Russia, which continues to engender suspicion, if not fear, of Russian encroachment on their sovereignty.
- Russia's recent interventions due to alleged oppression of, or risk to, Russian 'Compatriots' fuels potential for increasing Russian aggression in the Baltic States, especially for Estonia and Latvia, which have large Russian speaking populations concentrated on their borders with Russia.
- The Kremlin's original plans to limit NATO presence and influence in the Baltics in favor of "constructive relations" were upended by the Ukraine invasion and resulted in increased Baltic resistance and defensive measures, including NATO troop deployments.
- The Baltic states increased their whole-of-nation defenses and resilience against Russian 'Active Measures' and hybrid warfare since the Ukraine invasion—individually and as part of NATO's collective defense—demonstrating potentially strong will to fight.



Demonstration in support of Ukraine at the Tartu Town Hall Square. 26 February 2022, Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stand_for_Ukraine_Demonstrators_at_the_Tartu_Town_Hall_Square.jpg

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

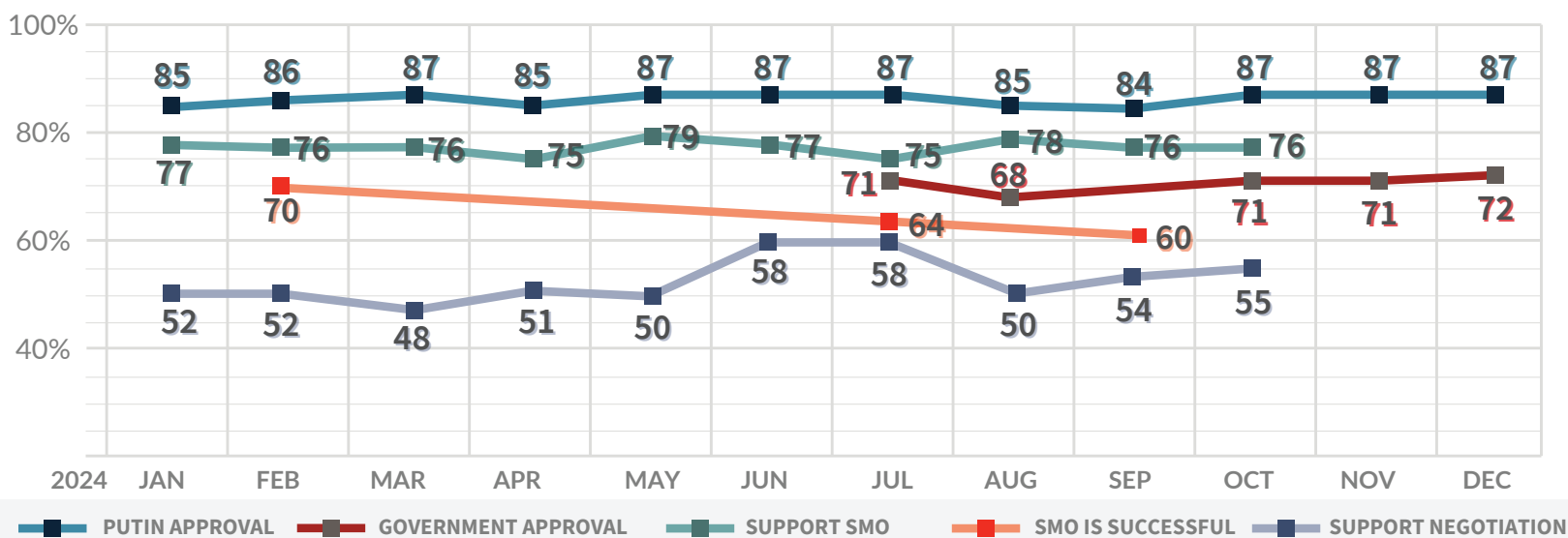


Figure 1: Domestic Russian Perceptions, GCKN.¹

NOTE: Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

PUTIN APPROVAL

Russian President Vladimir Putin's approval rating remained at 87 percent for November and December 2024 after rebounding in October from slight declines in August (85 percent) and September (84 percent) following Ukraine's incursion into Russia's Kursk region. The recovery indicates the public has moved past the initial shock and continues to embrace Putin's strongman image.²

When surveyed about the year's most significant events, Russians highlighted the August Kursk incursion (35 percent), the March presidential election (31 percent), and the March terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall (31 percent).³ These responses underscore widespread concerns about national security, political stability, and public safety, reflecting the nation's focus on sovereignty and governance.

Demographics of Support for Putin

- **Strongest Approval:** Women (89 percent), those under 24 (90 percent), Moscow residents (92 percent), television viewers (95 percent), and those who believe the country is on the right track (97 percent).⁴
- **Highest Disapproval:** Men (13 percent), people aged 25-54 (12 percent), residents of large cities (15 percent), YouTube users (23 percent), and those dissatisfied with the country's direction (44 percent).⁵

Putin's resilience in maintaining public approval highlights his skill in managing public opinion and preserving his base despite significant political and military challenges. Ending the war without the credible ability for Putin to claim a "win" as the defender of Russian society to the Russian population may threaten his popularity and weaken his authoritarian grip on power.

GOVERNMENT APPROVAL

Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Putin's approval has consistently been in the mid to high 80th percentile, well above pre-conflict levels of around 70 percent, demonstrating a clear "rally-around-the-flag" effect. Notably, his personal popularity far exceeds that of the government and the prime minister. In the final quarter of 2024, the Kremlin's approval stood at 71 percent in October and November and rose slightly to 72 percent in December. Meanwhile, the prime minister's approval was slightly higher, at 74 percent in October, 75 percent in November, and 73 percent in December.⁶

SUPPORT FOR THE SMO

Levada has not yet released polling information of support for the Special Military Operation (SMO) in November or December 2024. Domestic support for the SMO remained steady at 76 percent in October, unchanged from September. While support peaked at 79 percent in May, it has slightly declined amid challenges such as Ukraine's August offensive in Kursk, the assassination of Russian General Igor Kirillov in Moscow in December, and increasing Ukrainian drone strikes on the capital.⁷

Demographics of Support for the SMO

- **Highest Support:** Men (82 percent), older respondents (81 percent), Muscovites (84 percent), those who believe the country is on the right track (87 percent), Putin supporters (82 percent), and television viewers (86 percent).⁸
- **Lowest Support:** Women (72 percent), youth under 24 (67 percent), residents of larger cities (72 percent), those dissatisfied with the country's direction (46 percent), Putin critics (35 percent), and YouTube users (57 percent).⁹

The demographic divide shows younger, urban, and lower-income groups—those influenced by independent media and affected by the war's economic toll—are more skeptical of the SMO, while older, rural populations relying on state media largely support the war. Despite strong overall backing, public opinion remains polarized: If given a choice before the 2022 invasion, 44 percent of Russians polled would approve the SMO's launch while 40 percent would cancel it, reflecting consistent division over the past 18 months.¹⁰

SMO IS SUCCESSFUL

Levada's October-December polling did not address perceptions of the SMO's success, leaving September data as the latest measure. In September, 60 percent of Russians believed the war in Ukraine was going well, down from 64 percent in July and 70 percent in February. This steady decline reflects growing concerns over intensified Ukrainian military actions, including the Kursk incursion, which forced a Russian retreat, and left conscripts as prisoners of war—a significant blow to Russia's military reputation.¹¹

Despite rising doubts, state-driven narratives framing the war as a defense of sovereignty and resistance to Western aggression continue to sustain support. However, ongoing setbacks risk further eroding confidence and may amplify calls for diplomatic solutions.

SUPPORT FOR NEGOTIATION

Levada has not yet released polling of support for a negotiated end to the SMO in November or December 2024. Support for peace talks rose to 55 percent in October, recovering from a dip following Ukraine's August incursion into the Kursk region, which briefly bolstered resolve to continue hostilities. Meanwhile, the share of those favoring continued conflict fell to 36 percent. The earlier decline in support for negotiations likely resulted from heightened patriotic sentiment and state media's focus on defending Russian territory.¹²

Demographic Breakdown

- **Negotiation Supporters:** Women (61 percent), lower-income groups (57 percent), rural and small-town residents (59 percent), those dissatisfied with the country's direction (48 percent), Putin critics (76 percent), and YouTube users (62 percent) favor negotiations more strongly.¹³
- **War Supporters:** Men (45 percent), older respondents (42 percent), wealthier individuals (39 percent), Muscovites (65 percent), those who believe the country is on the right track (44 percent), Putin supporters (39 percent), and television viewers (41 percent).¹⁴

Public opinion remains deeply divided along demographic lines—a trend that has not shifted since the start of the conflict—shaped by income, education, media consumption, and trust in leadership. While a majority now supports negotiations, a substantial segment remains committed to continuing the current course, driven by nationalist rhetoric and firmly held views.

THE BALTICS AND RUSSIA



Figure 2: The Baltics Region. (Source: TRADOC G2 OEI)

The Russia-Ukraine war has escalated suspicion, if not fear, of Russian encroachment in the Baltic states, who know a long history of Russian domination and occupation.

The Baltics gained independence from the Russian Empire in 1918 amid the turbulence of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. They maintained independence until June 1940 when the Soviet Union invaded and occupied the Baltic States after accusing their governments of collusion with Western powers against it. By August of 1940, all three countries were absorbed into the Soviet Union. In 1941, Nazi Germany invaded and occupied the Baltics until 1944, when the Red Army pushed it out of the region. Following World War II, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin bolstered the Baltics as a buffer between the West and the rest of the Soviet Union through ‘Russification’ and the presence of the Soviet military. Stalin’s ‘Russification’ involved settling ethnic Russians across the Soviet Union and enforcing Russian as the official language of government and business. Russian transplants were installed in positions of authority and formed the ruling class in the Soviet Socialist Republics. The effects of ‘Russification’ can

be seen today in the ethnic Russian and Russian speaking populations across all the former Soviet Socialist Republics, including the Baltics.¹⁵

As the Soviet Union crumbled, the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were some of the first Soviet Socialist Republics to break away. Lithuania was the first state to declare independence on 11 March 1990, followed by Latvia on 4 May 1990. Estonia declared independence on 20 August 1991. In early December 1991, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus formed the Commonwealth of Independent States, and on 25 December 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as president of the Soviet Union. These acts signaled the end of the Soviet Union to the world and the beginning of an independent Russia.¹⁶ However, despite independence, the Red Army remained in the Baltics until finally withdrawing in 1994.¹⁷

The end of the Soviet Union ushered in a decade of turmoil and transition for Russia and the former Soviet Socialist Republics as they transitioned to alternate forms of government, economies, and sovereignty. Since Vladimir Putin became president of the Russian Federation in 2000, Russia has increased its efforts to regain influence in the

Baltic States and other areas of the Near Abroad to create a bulwark against the West. Putin exploited longstanding Russian cultural fears of invasion and foreign interference in his attempts to build Russian power while establishing a buffer around the Russian Federation from outside threats. The 2004 acceptance into NATO of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia reinforced Putin's theme of Western threats on the borders of Russia.¹⁸

Russian influence in the Baltic states to weaken NATO continues through soft power 'Active Measures,'^a including disinformation, energy pressures, and political influence and resistance to assimilation within the Russian and Russian speaking population. These efforts have grown since its invasion of Ukraine, and Russia has increasingly engaged in hybrid warfare activities in the Baltics and the surrounding region in efforts to weaken the NATO alliance and disrupt NATO member support for Ukraine.^{b,19}

RUSSIAN “COMPATRIOTS”: A KREMLIN TOOL FOR LEVERAGING ITS INTERESTS IN THE BALTICS AND BEYOND

“Compatriots’ are defined by the Kremlin as transmitters of Russian culture, values, language, and intermediaries of relations between Russia and foreign countries.” Part of the ideological concept known as *Russkii Mir* (Russian World), compatriots extend throughout the boundaries of the former Russian Empire. Under Russian President Vladimir Putin’s ethnocentric nationalist policies, membership of the *Russkii Mir* is defined not as a choice, but rather “as a predestined ancestry” in “a common civilizational space of Russia, for all Russians around the world.” *Russkii Mir* “signified an identity construction process which sought to extend the boundaries of the imagined Russian nation beyond the territorial sovereignty of the Russian state.” The Kremlin uses Compatriots to promulgate *Russkii Mir* through three pillars: Russian language, historical Soviet memory, and the Russian Orthodox Church.²⁰ Russian Compatriots are an “ideologically constructed and politically utilized” group used to further Russian interests, especially in the Near Abroad.

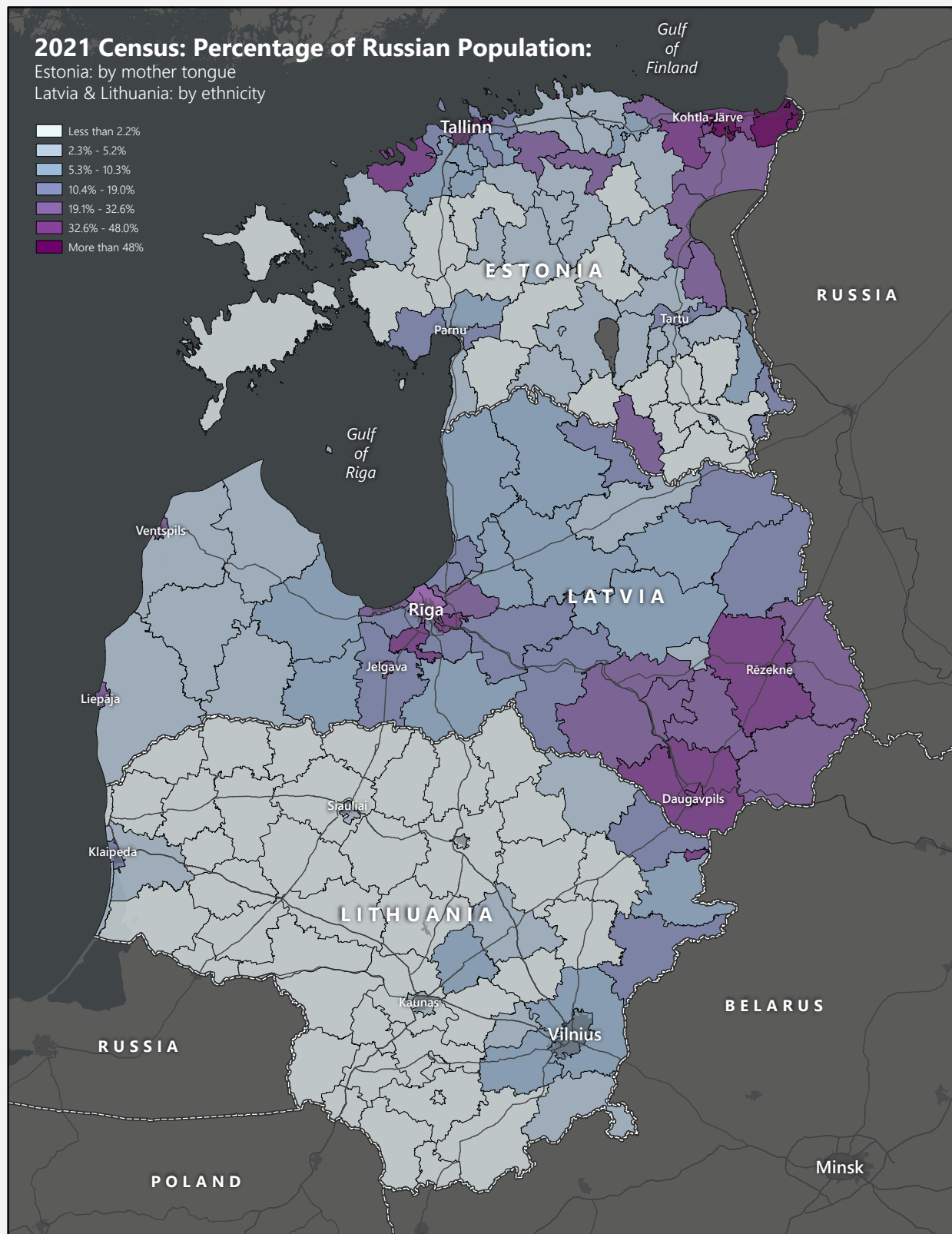
- In 1993, the Kremlin codified Russian speaking populations outside of Russia as an ethnic diaspora in its Russian Federation Foreign Policy Concept.²¹
- The 1999 Compatriot Law and a 2010 Amendment expanded this ethnic diaspora to allow Russian citizenship to “Russian Compatriots” with “ancestral connections to one of 185 national groups within the Russian Empire, and a ‘spiritual link’” to the Russian homeland.²²
- The Kremlin alleged oppression or risk to Compatriots to justify the 2008 Georgia War, the 2014 incursion into Eastern Ukraine, and the 2014 takeover of Crimea.

Due to historical settlement in the region and forced ‘Russification’ of the Baltics after World War II, there are sizable populations of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Estonia and Latvia, clustered mainly in larger

urban areas and along their shared borders with Russia. Lithuania has a significantly smaller Russian population, which makes sense in geographic context (see figure 3), largely clustered in the capital and larger cities.

a For more on Russian ‘Active Measures,’ see GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 9, *Russian Global Influence Efforts*, December 2022, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/> and GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 19, *Peripheral Impacts: Russian Active Measures in Moldova*, November 2024, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/>

b For more on these Russian efforts in the Baltics (and elsewhere), see GCKN Sociocultural Fault Lines: *The Baltics*, May 2017 (FOUO), available on request to USG personnel and contractors; GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 2, *Russian Diaspora*, April 2022, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/>; GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 9, *Russian Global Influence Efforts*, December 2022, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/>; GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 10, *Winter is Coming – Energy Warfare*, February 2023, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/>; and GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 18, *Peripheral Impacts: Immigration as a Weapon of Instability*, September 2024, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/>



- Roughly 33 percent of the 1.36M Estonian population are ethnic Russian.²³
- Twenty-three percent of the 1.8M Latvian population are ethnic Russian.²⁴
- Five percent of the 2.84M Lithuanian population are ethnic Russian.²⁵

Figure 3: Distribution of ethnic Russians in the Baltics. (Source: TRADOC G2 OEI)

INTERNAL TENSIONS WITH RUSSIAN SPEAKERS IN THE BALTIC STATES

Russia's recent interventions due to alleged oppression of, or risk to, Russian 'Compatriots' fuels potential for increasing Russian aggression in the Baltic States, especially for Estonia and Latvia, which have large Russian speaking populations concentrated on their borders with Russia.

Originating with policies of the Russian Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries and intensifying during Stalin's 'Russification' after World War II, there continues to be segregation and "separateness" of Russian speakers and ethnic nationals in Baltic societies, regardless of the birthplace of individuals. Russians and ethnic nationals were isolated and kept distinctly separate, with Russians in positions of authority prior to Baltic independence in the 1990s. The chief overlap was in language, where Russian was taught in all schools as the official language of government and business. This resulted in stable unassimilated bilingualism throughout the Baltic States.²⁶

The integration of non-Baltic ethnicities is an ongoing effort by each Baltic government through laws, education, and incentives. Anecdotal reports and polling suggest most of those populations at least partially identify with the Baltic country they reside in, especially those that are citizens. Still, tensions remain and have intensified since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While some non-Baltic ethnicities understand the need for policies and laws to protect the sovereignty of the Baltic states, they feel cut off from society as a result. Putin called Latvia's language-based integration efforts "de-Russification."²⁷

- The ethnic divide is especially present in Estonian and Latvia, with their large ethnic Russian and Russian speaking populations. Estonia struggles with a generational divide between the older and younger Russian speaking populations. In part, this could be the result of integration policies favoring the young, and the fact that language acquisition is easier earlier in life. Younger Russian speakers are automatically qualified for citizenship, Estonian-language instruction, and economic benefits not available to older Russian speakers. In national polling, older Russian speakers tend to be more favorably disposed toward Russia and Putin, which likely results from their personal

histories under the Soviet Union, continued ties to Russia, and subsequent lack of integration into Estonian culture, all of which is fueled by Russian propaganda.²⁸

WHO IS TO BLAME FOR THE WAR IN UKRAINE?

- In Latvia, 82 percent of Latvian speakers blame Russia, compared to 38 percent of Russian speakers.²⁹
- In Estonia, 89 percent of Estonian speakers, 52 percent of bilingual speakers (Estonian and Russian), and 30 percent of Russian speakers blame Russia.³⁰
- In an April 2023 Latvian survey, 37 percent of Russian speakers reported that attitudes towards Russian speakers have worsened in the country.³¹ In a May 2023 Estonian national survey, 47 percent of Russian speakers, 57 percent of Estonian speakers, 59 percent of bilingual Estonian/Russian speakers believed that attitudes of Estonians towards the Russian speaking population of Estonia have worsened since February 2022. Additionally, a majority of respondents from all three groups believe that ethnic conflict between Russian speakers and Estonian speakers is possible, even if it is unlikely.³²

POSSIBILITY OF SERIOUS ETHNIC CONFLICT BETWEEN ESTONIANS AND RUSSIAN SPEAKERS LIVING IN ESTONIA

	RUSSIAN SPEAKERS	BILINGUAL SPEAKERS (RUSSIAN/ESTONIAN)	ESTONIAN SPEAKERS
Possible	14%	23%	23%
Unlikely	52%	57%	62%
Not Possible	30%	18%	11%

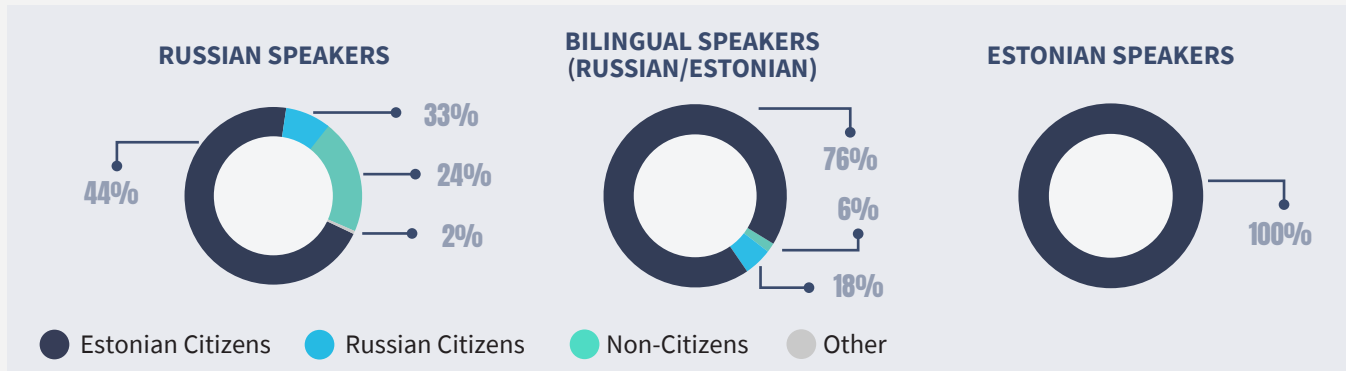


Figure 4: Possibility of serious ethnic conflict between Estonians and Russian speakers living in Estonia. Source: Reinhard Krumm, Tõnis Stamberg, and Irina Strapatsjuk, "Feeling cornered: an analysis of the Russian speaking minority in Estonia," *European Website on Integration*, 4 September 2023 https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/feeling-cornered-analysis-russian-speaking-minority-estonia_en

- Many ethnic Belarusians residing in the Baltics claim they are unfairly associated with Russia, even labeled as "Russian," due to 'Belarus' almost lockstep alignment with Russian interests and policies as part of the 'Union State.'^c However, Lithuanian security services and some politicians claim that Belarusian intelligence has infiltrated the Belarus diaspora, making it a security threat.³³
- After the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Baltic States increased the pace of removing Russian/Soviet monuments, renaming streets, and ending celebrations of Soviet and Russian symbolic dates, which had begun after the fall of the USSR in 1991.³⁴ As a result, Estonia's Prime Minister and Interior Minister as well as Lithuania's Culture Minister were reportedly put on a "wanted list" by the Russian Interior Ministry. Russia considers desecration of war memorials illegal under its laws against "falsification of history" and "rehabilitation of Nazism."³⁵ In February 2023, the Estonian parliament voted to destroy all Soviet monuments. A May 2023 national survey shows that 57 percent of

Estonian-speakers approve of this decision, while only 18 percent of bilingual Russian/Estonian-speakers and 6 percent of Russian speakers approve.³⁶

- A February 2012 Latvian national referendum indicated that 75 percent of Latvians opposed Russian as a second national language. Recent data shows that 62 percent of residents speak Latvian at home, while 35 percent speak Russian. In 2022, Latvia passed the "Bilingual Restriction Law" that bans the use of Russian language in workplaces and businesses, including restricting job postings that require knowledge of Russian or give an advantage to Russian speaking candidates. Latvia also ended bilingual education, phasing out Russian language instruction in favor of Latvian by 1 September 2025.³⁷ In December 2022, the Estonian parliament mandated that Russian-language school curriculums begin transitioning to Estonian language for the 2024-2025 school year, with a completely Estonian language curriculum by the 2032-2033 school year.³⁸

^c See GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 16, *Belarus: New Strategy, New Threats, More Suppression*, February 2024, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/>

BALTIC RESISTANCE TO RUSSIAN SOFT POWER

“In real military scenarios, it’s incomparable. NATO could overwhelm Russia. But the Russians are not counting on that. They are counting on—how they explain it to themselves—democratic weakness, inability to make decisions, differences in opinions.”

-Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis³⁹

“[Russian] propaganda is everywhere, not only in Estonia but all over the world.”

-Estonian President Alar Karis⁴⁰

The Kremlin’s plans to limit NATO presence and influence in the Baltics in favor of “constructive relations” were upended by the Ukraine invasion and resulted in increased Baltic resistance and defensive measures, including NATO troop deployments to the Baltics. The Kremlin’s Directorate for Interregional Relations and Cultural Contacts created an influence strategy for the Baltic States in 2021 similar to its plan for Moldova.^d Plans for each of the Baltic States detailed ways to counter political, military, economic, and social threats to Russian interests in the near, mid, and long terms. The main focus of the strategy was limiting NATO presence on Baltic territory. One of the most utilized Russian tactics to meet its objectives is the exploitation of existing pro-Russian entities in the Baltics, including activists, groups, and Russian speaking residents. Even before the 2022 invasion, the Baltic States spoke out internationally and took defensive measures against perceived and potential Russian influence activities. The invasion caused them to redouble their efforts, especially in regards to mitigating the potential Kremlin use of Russians and Russian speakers within the Baltics. The plan also stated the need to “create new public structures, foundations, NGOs to promote and protect closer cooperation with Russia.”⁴¹

- The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe refused to send observers to Lithuania’s May 2024 presidential elections for the first time since its independence after Lithuania rejected Russian and Belarusian monitors over concerns of election meddling.⁴²

- Estonia’s ruling party introduced legislation in late 2024 to strip noncitizens of voting rights ahead of the OCT 2025 local elections. The law targets about 80,000 Russian and Belarusian citizens/passport holders but does not apply to the 80,000 “stateless” residents holding EU-issued “grey” passports (most of whom are ethnic Russian) or residents who are citizens of other EU countries. However, a November 2024 survey indicates 48 percent of Estonians favor revoking voting rights from “grey” passport holders.⁴³
- In April 2024, the Estonian Interior Minister asked parliament (the *Riigikogu*) to “declare the Moscow Patriarchate an organization that supports terrorism” as it “is subordinate to Vladimir Putin, who, in fact, directs terrorist activities in the world.” This came after Estonia refused to extend the residency permit of Metropolitan Evgeny of the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate over allegations of promoting Russian propaganda.⁴⁴ In May, the *Riigikogu* voted 75-8 to “[Declare] the Moscow Patriarchate an Institution Sponsoring the Military Aggression of the Russian Federation.”⁴⁵

^d See GCKN War in Ukraine Sociocultural Running Estimate Update 19, *Peripheral Impacts: Active Measures in Moldova*, 26 November 2024, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/english-edition-archives/gckn/>

Estonian Riigikogu statement “On Declaring the Moscow Patriarchate an Institution Sponsoring the Military Aggression of the Russian Federation,” 5 May 2024:

“Ever since the Russian Federation launched its full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow... has expressed his public support to the act of aggression of the terrorist regime of the Russian Federation... the Moscow Patriarchate and Patriarch Kirill are using the ‘Russian World’ ideology as a tool to promote the war; it is being utilized to destroy the last manifestations of Russian democracy, militarize Russian society and justify the aggression in order to expand the Russian Federation to all of the territories dominated by it in the past, including Ukraine... The calls of the Moscow Patriarchate contain an inherent danger to Estonia’s security and survival, including a direct threat to the public and constitutional order in Estonia... In the world today, the state also needs to protect people from terrorist and other hostile propaganda as well as incitements to violence... Protection from such propaganda also applies to Orthodox residents of Estonia, regardless of their language, ethnicity or canonical association... Orthodox associations and congregations should also carry out their own assessments of the threat to public order and to their members caused by hostile influencing activities, and take the necessary steps to cut ties with the Moscow Patriarchate... The Republic of Estonia must preserve the constitutional right to religious freedom, with full consideration for the rights and freedoms of everyone living here.”⁴⁶

- Latvia stopped issuing visas to Russians following the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and called for an EU-wide ban of visas to Russians and Belarusians. Estonia and Lithuania joined Latvia in restricting Russian transit and, together with Poland, began working with the EU to further restrict Russian travel.⁴⁷ Estonia first banned Russian and Belarusian tourists, and then “denied entry to dual Russian citizens who hold Schengen visas... claiming reasons to question...

the purposes of their trip to Estonia.” Estonia also denied entry to Russians fleeing military service as an insufficient reason to grant asylum.⁴⁸

- In June 2024, the Lithuanian parliament extended a ban on television and radio broadcasts from Russia and Belarus if they are named as threats to national security in Lithuania’s National Security Strategy.⁴⁹

BALTIC RESPONSE TO RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

“We are trying to convince our people to spend more on defense, to build up factories, to cooperate more with Ukraine, and to learn everything that we can because we feel that if Ukraine is unable to stop the Russians, then the Russians will not stop, and then who knows what will happen next.”

-Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis⁵⁰

“We are in a hybrid conflict right now... Unfortunately, this is the neighbor we are facing.”

-Latvian Defense Minister Andris Sprūds⁵¹

Individually and as part of NATO, each of the Baltic states have increased their whole-of-nation defenses and resilience against Russian ‘Active Measures’ and hybrid warfare since the Ukraine invasion, demonstrating a potentially strong will to fight. The Baltic states have long been a target of Russian ‘Active Measures’ and hybrid warfare, including cyberattacks, disinformation, and economic pressures. Baltic Governments have raised alarms within NATO and the EU about Russian aggression for nearly a decade and consequently were labeled “Russophobic” by Kremlin influence campaigns in Russian and European media. Since the invasion of Ukraine, the Baltics have suffered repeated recent ‘pressures’ on the Belarusian and Russian borders, including increased illegal immigration, Russian adjustments of maritime borders, and military incursions by land and air.^e Additionally, there have been incidences of sabotage of undersea gas lines and communications cables^f and GPS jamming over the Baltic Sea.^g To counter this threat, the Baltic states have increased their defense spending and reinforced their borders with Russia and Belarus over the last decade.⁵²

- In 2024, Estonia allocated 3.43 percent of GDP (second highest in NATO) and Latvia 3.15 percent (fourth-highest in NATO) for their defense budgets. Lithuania currently spends around 3 percent of GDP on defense, but the Lithuanian president announced on 17 January that defense spending will increase to 5-6 percent in 2026.⁵³ Dependent on NATO’s collective defense, as assured under Article V of the NATO Charter, the Baltic States have been actively encouraging members to exceed the standard 2 percent of GDP on defense spending.⁵⁴

- The Baltic States are developing whole-of-nation approaches to the Russian threat, including population readiness and civil defense programs, diversifying energy and economic sectors, increasing psychological defense, hardening strategic communications assets, and bolstering national service.⁵⁵
- In support of Ukraine, in May 2022, Lithuanians crowdsourced 4.5 million Euros in three days to buy a Bayraktar drone for Ukraine. In August 2022, Latvia began a similar fundraising effort to buy a Bayraktar and raised over 300,000 Euros in the first day of fundraising from a working population of less than 800,000.⁵⁶

e Vanessa Gera, “Poland and Lithuania say they fear provocations from Russia and Belarus at NATO’s eastern flank, AP, 3 August 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/poland-belarus-lithuania-wagner-7743d53fd33b43a90d07e777fe4e17f9>; “Finland pushing back ‘weaponised migration’ on Russia border,” France 24, November 23, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231123-finland-pushing-back-weaponised-migration-on-russia-border>; Constantine Atlamazoglu, “Front-line NATO allies are facing an unconventional Russian threat short of the war but still quite dangerous,” Business Insider, June 22, 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/front-line-nato-allies-baltics-face-russian-hybrid-threats-2024-6>; Hartwell, Rakštytė, Ryng, and Selga, “Winter is Coming: The Baltics and the Russia-Ukraine War.”

f Atlamazoglu, “Front-line NATO allies are facing an unconventional Russian threat short of the war but still quite dangerous;” John O’Sullivan, Debadrita Sur, and Will Stewart, “Vladimir Putin Blow as ‘shadow ship’ raided after Russian ‘sabotage’ campaign,” Irish Star, December 30, 2024, <https://www.irishstar.com/news/us-news/finland-russia-spy-ship-nato-34394755>; Karah Rucker, “Chinese Vessel detained and suspected of Baltic Sea cable destruction,” Straight Arrow News, 20, November 2024, <https://san.com/cc/chinese-vessel-detained-and-suspected-of-baltic-sea-cable-destruction/>; Estonian Internal Security Service, “Annual Review 2023-2024.”

g York, “Too dangerous to ignore’ – Russia’s malicious activity in the Baltics set to test NATO resolve;” “Minister: GPS jamming is a deliberate hybrid attack by Russia,” ERR, 29 April 2024. <https://news.err.ee/1609328073/minister-gps-jamming-is-a-deliberate-hybrid-attack-by-russia>; “GPS jamming not affecting ships in Gulf of Finland,” ERR, 30 April 2024. <https://news.err.ee/1609329078/gps-jamming-not-affecting-ships-in-gulf-of-finland>.

IMPLICATIONS

- The Baltics' common borders with Russia and their history of Russian occupation make them especially sensitive to current hybrid and potentially conventional Kremlin aggression against their government and populations. Even with a cease-fire and peace agreement in Ukraine, each Baltic state will continue and likely increase national and regional protection measures against Russia, portending a long-term, fragile and contentious border region along the EU's and NATO's eastern periphery.
- Estonia and Latvia have significant ethnic Russian and Russian speaking populations clustered near the Russian border and in larger cities, which make them a natural target of concern for Baltic security forces. Russia will continue its influence campaign in the Baltics, but it is very unlikely that ethnic Russians or Russian speakers within the Baltics will act *en masse* in support of Russia beyond political mobilization and protest. This is influenced by the apparent greater integration of younger generations of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers due to incentives and benefits offered to them by Baltic governments. While only espionage cases have been reported so far, it is possible that limited single or small-group lethal and/or sabotage actions by ethnic Russians or Russian speakers may take place.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Figure 1: Susan Littleton, Domestic Russian Perceptions, infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.
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