

TRACKING THE RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE

– Cases from Nordic-Baltic countries

Minna Ålander & Patrik Oksanen (eds). Main contributor: Karen-Anna Eggen
With contributions by: Ieva Bērziņa, Bjarni Bragi Kjartansson,
Marek Kohv, Adam Rožević and Jeanette Serritzlev



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Summary

- Russia has deployed coordinated hybrid attacks on all Nordic and Baltic countries with a broad variety of tools, from disinformation and cyber attacks to pranksters, vandalism and sabotage, twisting historical narratives, and even utilising the Russian Orthodox Church for malign purposes.
- Russia seeks out and maps weak spots and dividing lines in target countries. These are used to serve Russia's interests, be it with a view to election manipulation, sowing discord in the societies and doubt in the democratic institutions. The wider goal is to challenge and weaken the Western-dominated, rules-based international order that the Kremlin sees as a threat to its great power ambitions.
- Urgency is of essence. Hybrid attacks have been ongoing for a long time but are intensifying due to Russia's increasingly reckless strategic goals and disregard for consequences. These attacks must be met with more coordination and activity in order to create a better deterrence against hybrid threats. A special mechanism for the Nordic and Baltic countries, within the NB8-framework, is suggested.

Introduction

By Karen-Anna Eggen, Patrik Oksanen, Minna Ålander

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 created much debate about Russian hybrid activity as part of Russian thinking about and approach to modern warfare. A key notion was the idea echoing ancient military thinkers like Sun Tzu, that the ultimate art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.¹ Although Russia has actively engaged in kinetic war in Ukraine since 2014, escalating its efforts into a full-scale war of aggression in 2022, its various activities towards the West resemble the strategic thinking of Sun Tzu. In this policy brief, we collect a variety of examples of such Russian hybrid interference in the Nordic-Baltic region. These include, but are not limited to, examples of disinformation campaigns, cyber attacks, property purchases in strategic locations, prankster calls, disappearing and damaged undersea data cables and pipelines, and vandalism against monuments and politicians. Nothing is off limits to Russia, as even the Russian Orthodox Church has been utilised in malign schemes.

The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats defines hybrid threats as *“harmful activities that are planned and carried out with malign intent. They aim to undermine a target, such as a state or an institution, through a variety of means, often combined.”*² These activities are conducted with the aim to serve strategic objectives and are usually deliberately kept below the threshold of armed conflict in order to, in Russia's case, avoid activating (but pref-

erably undermining) NATO's Article 5.³ As is evident in the examples provided, the activities are part of a comprehensive approach to malign influence, meaning that economic, legal, diplomatic, information, religious, military, intelligence and other tools are used if deemed effective.

The aim of this brief is to demonstrate the variety of tools at Russia's disposal and pave the way to set up a tracker for Russian activity in the Nordic-Baltic region. A tracker will serve two purposes. The first is to provide a comprehensive overview of the sub-threshold, or hybrid, activity in the Nordic-Baltic region. The second aim is to use the examples to create a categorization of the Russian activity to help academics and practitioners alike better understand the scope and scale of Russian approaches. Examining the region as a whole is of importance as Russian military exercises indicate that Russia views the High North and the Baltic Sea region as one continuous area.⁴ Scholarly and news articles from the region also point to increased Russian activity, especially after 2014.⁵

In May 2024, NATO stated that the organisation was deeply concerned about recent Russian hybrid attacks affecting half a dozen member states, among them Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania: *“These incidents are part of an intensifying campaign of activities which Russia continues to carry out across the Euro-Atlantic area, including on Alliance territory and through proxies. This includes sabotage, acts of violence,*

1 Sun Tzu was an ancient Chinese military strategist and philosopher who wrote “The Art of War,” a seminal text on military tactics and strategy. He lived in the 5th century BC in China, a time of significant military conflict and political turmoil. His teachings stress the importance of intelligence, strategic planning, and adaptability in warfare.

2 The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, “Frequently Asked Questions on Hybrid Threats” (Helsinki, 2024), <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/FAQ-on-Hybrid-Threats.pdf>.

3 NATO, “The North Atlantic Treaty,” NATO Newsroom: Official Texts, April 4, 1949, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm.

4 Etterretningstjenesten, “Focus 2024: Russia's Permanent Break with the West” (Oslo, 2024), https://www.etterretningstjenesten.no/publikasjoner/focus/Focus24_contents/Focus24_chapter_2.

5 Karen-Anna Eggen, “Russia's Strategy towards the Nordic Region: Tracing Continuity and Change,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45, no. 3 (2021): 1–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2021.1873781>; Ivo Juurvee et al., “Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment 2019/2020” (Riga: StratCom | NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020), <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-footprint-in-the-nordic-baltic-information-environment-20192020/24>.

*cyber and electronic interference, disinformation campaigns, and other hybrid operations.*⁶

A couple of days later, Financial Times cited several European intelligence services who collectively warned of Russian preparation and planning for sabotage and other attacks on European soil.⁷ The Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson confirmed that Swedish intelligence shared this threat assessment, as did the head of Finland's secret and intelligence service (SUPO).⁸

The nature of Russian activity, utilising the realms below the threshold of armed conflict, has created ambiguity and uncertainty related to how to respond to such attacks. A key difficulty relates to attributing attacks and activity to Russia or affiliated actors. Part of that stems from our lack of willingness to actually attribute, because we either do not want Russia to know what we know or we fear an attribution may "provoke" the aggressor or force a response that escalates tensions and worsen relations. A combination of all above-mentioned reasons is often also possible.

But even if such attributions can be made with confidence, the next question is how to calibrate a response, as democratic countries that value rule of law cannot resort to illegal or grey area methods. This creates a discrepancy in what tools are available to the target country and the adversary, with the latter enjoying freedom of manoeuvre with impunity or few consequences, and the former being left with ineffective responses.

Nordic-Baltic region in a strategic context

The Northern flank of NATO is now more in the hotspot than during the Cold War. The reasons are many, and with the inclusion of Finland and Sweden in NATO we see a major security political turning point for the region.

Russian imperialism views many of its neighbouring countries as part of the Russian world or at least as its sphere of interest, especially the Baltic States. In order to succeed in its endeavour to re-establish the empire, Russia needs NATO and EU to fail to defend the countries in the region. To achieve this, and to avoid a direct confrontation with NATO, hybrid tools are of great value for Russia to weaken its target societies, for example by delaying decision-making processes and achieving reflexive control over Western decision-makers by fuelling fears of escalation.⁹ Putin's regime promotes the narrative of the West as an enemy seeking to keep Russia weak and aiming to topple the regime. This perception has created a hyperfocus on securing information control at home, emphasising and constructing the role of an evil U.S.-led West as an enemy to ensure patriotic, domestic cohesion as losses mount in Ukraine. On the flip side, it has created an active, all-encompassing Kremlin-led system set on imposing its will on Russia's self-proclaimed sphere of influence in particular, but also conducting intimidation and influence operations abroad in general. In Russian zero-sum thinking, Russian loss of influence is someone else's (often Western) gain.

The Arctic region is economically and militarily valuable to Russia. Climate change opens up previously year-round frozen sea lanes and brings with it new opportunities for exploitation of natural resources. Russia claims control over the Northern Sea Route (NSR) to use it exclusively for its

6 NATO, "Statement by the North Atlantic Council on Recent Russian Hybrid Activities," NATO Newsroom: Official Texts, May 2, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_225230.htm#:~:text=These%20incidents%20are%20part%20of,campaigns%2C%20and%20other%20hybrid%20operations.

7 Sam Jones, John Paul Rathbone, and Richard Milne, "Russia Plotting Sabotage across Europe, Intelligence Agencies Warn," *Financial Times*, May 5, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/c88509f9-c9bd-46f4-8a5c-9b2bdd3c3dd3>.

8 Patrik Dahlin, "Kristersson: Uppgifter Om Ryska Angrepp Är Korrekta," *Omni*, May 5, 2024, <https://omni.se/kristersson-uppgifterna-om-ryska-angrepp-ar-korrekt/a/jQP5KA.>; Samuli Niinivuo, "Suojelupoliisi: Sabotaasin Uhka on Tiedossa, Eikä Venäjä Vältä Tekojensa Seurauksista," *Helsingin Sanomat*, May 5, 2024, <https://www.hs.fi/maailma/art-2000010405744.html>. Among earlier confirmed Russian sabotage are the blowing up of two munitions depots in the Czech republic in 2014.

9 A simple definition of reflexive control is manipulating an opponent to one's advantage. For a more detailed introduction to the Russian concept, see: Timothy L. Thomas, "Russian Military Thought: Concepts and Elements" (The MITRE Corporation, August 2019), Chapter 4, p. 1–11, <https://www.mitre.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/prs-19-1004-russian-military-thought-concepts-elements.pdf>.

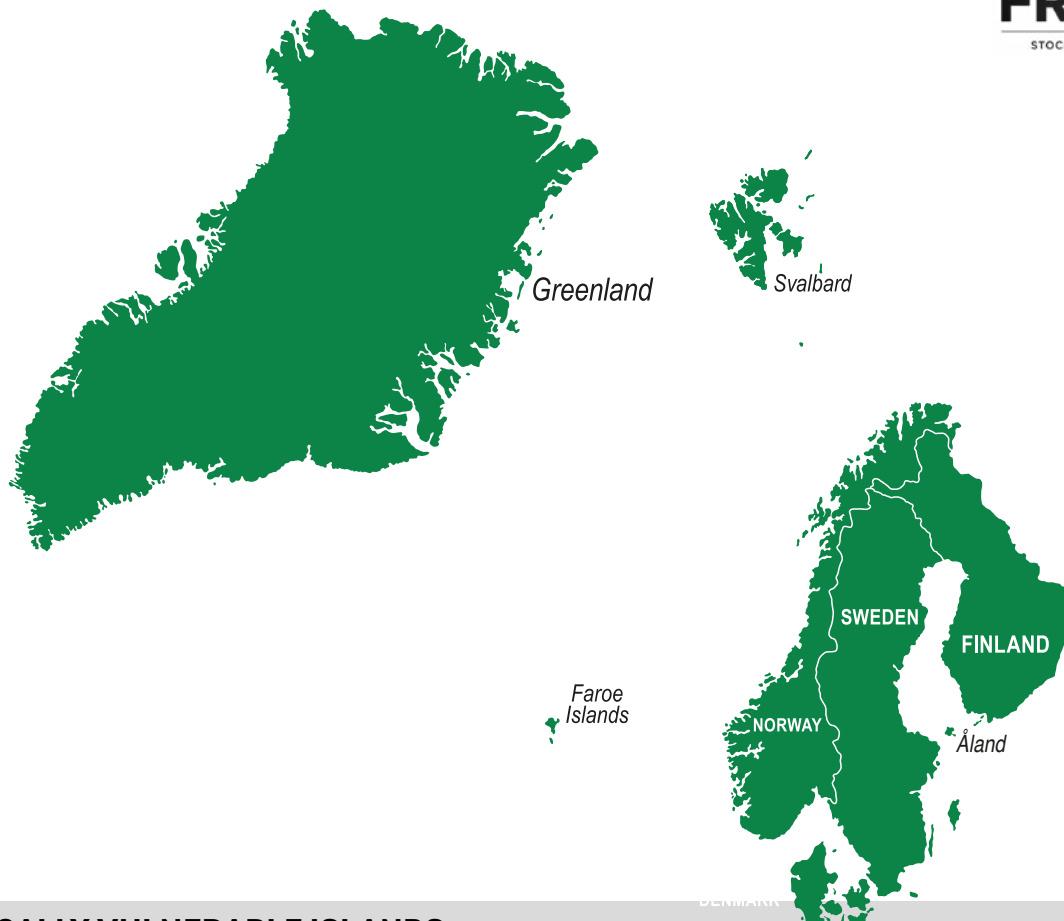
energy exports to Asia, as Western markets are now largely closed due to sanctions (apart from LNG¹⁰).¹¹ China has ambitions in the region, too, and shows an increasing interest in the NSR.¹² A recent display of Russian-Chinese cooperation was the route of the ship NewNew Polar Bear, sailing under a Hong Kong flag, that is suspected to have damaged the Balticconnector undersea gas pipeline between Finland and Estonia in October 2023: after leaving the Baltic Sea, NewNew Polar Bear sailed along Norwegian Arctic coast off to the NSR, accompanied by the Russian icebreaker Sevmorput.¹³ To assert its interests in the Arctic, Russia has heavily militarised its parts of the region, and harbours its strategic submarines key to its nuclear second-strike capability in the Northern Fleet Military District on the Kola Peninsula. What happens in the Arctic has consequences in the Baltic Sea, and vice versa. Therefore, the whole Nordic-Baltic region, including the European parts of the Arctic, must be viewed from a strategically holistic perspective.

10 Arthur Sullivan, "War in Ukraine: Why Is the EU Still Buying Russian Gas?," *Deutsche Welle*, April 29, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/war-in-ukraine-why-is-the-eu-still-buying-russian-gas/a-68925869>.

11 Trym Eiterjord, "Amid Ukraine War, Russia's Northern Sea Route Turns East," *The Diplomat*, December 13, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/amid-ukraine-war-russias-northern-sea-route-turns-east/>.

12 Malte Humpert, "China Pushes Northern Sea Route Transit Cargo to New Record," *High North News*, December 18, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-pushes-northern-sea-route-transit-cargo-new-record>.

13 Thomas Nilsen, "Russian, Chinese Ships Spotlighted by Finnish Police after Pipeline Damage, Are Now Pairing up Outside Northern Norway," *The Barents Observer*, October 18, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2023/10/russian-chinese-ships-spotlighted-finnish-police-after-gas-pipeline-damage>.



FOUR LEGALLY VULNERABLE ISLANDS

The Nordic-Baltic region has a unique geographical situation with strategically important islands that have different legal status in relation to their mainland; Faroe Islands and Greenland (Denmark), Svalbard (Norway) and Åland Islands (Finland). This creates vulnerabilities that could be exploited by malign actors. In its annual report in 2023, the Danish security police (PET) drew attention to the threat against the self-governed islands of Greenland and Faroe Islands from Russia (and China) and the "interest in information that could be used for influence activities such as potential internal disagreements within the Danish Realm."¹⁴

Svalbard is Norwegian, but regulated under the Svalbard treaty with rights to pursue economic activities in the archipelago for all signatory states. Of the 46 parties of the treaty only Russia (apart from Norway) is currently present in Svalbard. Russians have been operating a coal mine in Barentsburg since 1932.

The Åland Islands are an autonomous part of Finland and under treaty obligations (Åland convention from 1856 and 1921) demilitarised in peacetime, but also neutral in wartime – with a Finnish responsibility to defend the neutrality of the islands. According to the Finnish government, "Finland is obliged to take necessary measures to ensure the neutrality of the Åland Islands. The Defence Force is prepared to defend Åland. As a civilian authority, the Border Guard has continuous presence in Åland and is prepared for different contingencies. The Border Guard is able to increase its presence in the area quickly, if necessary."¹⁵

Two additional strategic islands in the region; Bornholm (Denmark) and Gotland (Sweden), differ from the other four examples in that they have no special legal status separate from the respective mainlands. This leaves less wiggle room for Russian hybrid (often lawfare) approaches.¹⁶

14 Politiets Efterretningstjeneste, "Assessment of the Espionage Threat to Denmark, the Faroe Islands and Greenland," May 2023, https://pet.dk/en/-/media/mediefiler/pet/dokumenter/analyser-og-vurderinger/vurdering-af-spionagetruslen-mod-danmark/vurdering-af-spionagetruslen-mod-danmark-2023_uk_web.pdf.

15 Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, "Government Report on Changes in the Security Environment" (Helsinki: Finnish Government, 2022), https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/164002/VN_2022_20.pdf.

16 Mark Voyger, "Russia's Weaponization of International and Domestic Law" (George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2019), https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-09/pC_V10N1_en_Voyger.pdf.

Hybrid tools: A preliminary overview

In this report we have identified two main categories; non-military and military tools. These two categories are further divided into two subcategories respectively. Non-military is divided into non-physical and physical and

military into conventional and nuclear (or other weapons of mass-destruction, WMDs). The typology aims to develop a pedagogical way of illustrating and describing different hybrid cases, and the variety of tools used in hybrid activities.

Graphics: Hybrid tools and targets below the threshold of war

Non-military		Military	
Non-physical	Physical	Conventional	Nuclear (or other WMDs)
Hostile information*	Real estate	GPS-jamming/EW	Indirect threat of nuclear weapons
Diplomacy	Strategic location	NOTAMS	Direct threat
Official statement	Coercive migration	Cyber attack (military target)	Exercise
Cyber attack (civilian target)	Critical infrastructure	Blockade	Deployment
Harassment (non physical)	Harassment/ assault (physical)	Violation of sea territory	Space
History / memory	Abduction, detainment and/or disappearance	Violation of land territory	Other
Compatriots	Assassination	Violation of airspace	
Religion	Vandalism / sabotage	Exercise	
Front organisation	Nuclear** or other WMDs	New military structure	
Espionage	Criminals / mercenaries / private contractors***	Mercenaries / private contractors / paramilitary	
Economic fraud / money laundering	Incident in the air /close flying	Incident in the air /close flying	
Infiltration / influence or take over 3rd party	Incident on the sea / close manoeuvring	Incident on the sea / close manoeuvring	
Corruption	Space	Mobilisation	
IP theft	Other	Sabotage	
Sanctions/Economic coercion		Kinetic military violence	
Democratic Institution		Special military operation	
Deception (including deepfake)		Space	
Lawfare		Other	
Other			

* Hostile information covers disinformation and propaganda. These are distinct but related categories. The former can be information that is outright false or true, or partly true, but taken out of context or proportion to do harm. The latter share similar traits but are used to amplify messages, often to the benefit of Russia. This may take place in traditional, digital and social media.

** Nuclear here includes activities that could for example be drones over nuclear power plants, Russian nuclear producer and atomic energy company Rosatom or other non military means that could be associated with nuclear activities.

*** Could also be MC-clubs, fight clubs, cyber criminals.

Cases from all Nordic-Baltic countries

Denmark: 'Anonymous Sudan', not very anonymous, and definitely not Sudanese

By Jeanette Serritzlev

Cyber attack (civilian target)

Democratic institution

Critical infrastructure

Religion

In February 2023, a hacker group claiming to be 'Anonymous Sudan' wrote on Telegram: "*The unfortunate country we want to attack tomorrow is: Denmark,*" The Telegram group was new, only created in January the same year.¹⁷ The next day, Copenhagen Airport's webpages were down due to a DDoS attack. One of several attacks this group claimed responsibility for in Denmark as well as Sweden. The week after, several Danish airport's webpages were inoperative due to a new wave of DDoS attacks. A few days later, Danish hospitals and universities were targets of the same kind of attacks. After that followed attacks on the Danish State Railways and a Danish media outlet.¹⁸

A DDoS attack stands for 'Distributed Denial of Service' and describes an overload attack directed at an internet service, meaning it will be out of order for a period of time. DDoS attacks are the preferred weapon for cyber activist hackers, as they have the dual advantage of not requiring advanced technical skills while at the same time attracting media attention, according to the Danish Centre for Cyber Security.¹⁹ DDoS attacks are often considered to have one of two purposes: deception or influence.

As a means of deception, DDoS attacks can attract attention in one area, while the actual attack takes place elsewhere. As a means of influence, the same kind of attacks can be carried out in order to achieve a cognitive effect due to the attention they get. To the general public, the media coverage of these relatively simple attacks create a perception of a country frequently under attack within cyber space and through that potentially increase insecurity.

This is by far not the first time Denmark has been targeted by DDoS attacks. In the yearly threat assessment from the Danish Centre for Cyber Security, it is stated that pro-Russian hackers have been particularly active since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022.²⁰ This case, however, is a bit more spectacular than most, as the alleged hacker group claimed to be affiliated to the hacktivist network Anonymous, and from Sudan, attacking targets simultaneously in Denmark as well as Sweden, allegedly due to a right wing individual with Danish-Swedish citizenship burning of the Quran in public places in both countries.

Burnings of the Quran have reached international attention, including a lot of criticism from Muslim countries, demanding that the Danish and Swedish governments take initiatives to punish such actions. In that context, a religious motivated hacker group could seem plausible. Rather than a religious motive among African Muslims, however, the group seemed to have nothing to do with Sudan or Anonymous.

17 TV2, "Mystisk Hackergruppe Påstår at Stå Bag Angreb På Danmark – TV 2 Har Spurgt Dem, Hvem de Er," *Nyheder TV2*, February 27, 2023, <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/samfund/2023-02-27-mystisk-hackergruppe-paastaar-at-staa-bag-angreb-paa-danmark-tv-2-har-spurgt-dem-hvem-de-er>.

18 TV2, "Berygtet Hackergruppe Varsler Nye Angreb Mod Danmark," *Nyheder TV2*, April 2, 2023, <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/samfund/2023-04-02-berygnet-hacker-gruppe-varsler-nye-angreb-mod-danmark>.

19 Center for Cybersikkerhed, "Cybertruslen Mod Danmark 2023," *Center for Cybersikkerhed*, May, 2023, <https://www.cfcs.dk/da/cybertruslen/trusselsvurderinger/cybertruslen-mod-danmark/>.

20 Center for Cybersikkerhed, "Cybertruslen Mod Danmark 2023," 2023.

In fact, according to cyber experts, it seemed more likely that the group was connected to Russia.²¹ IT and cyber security experts supported that idea very early, among others Truesec, a Swedish cyber security company. In a report of the operation against Swedish targets, Truesec is calling it a Russian information operation.²² Regarding Sweden specifically, it was a way of sowing discord between Sweden and Turkey during Sweden's application for NATO membership.²³ Both for Denmark and Sweden, it kept the Quran burnings in the media spotlight, as it raised a political and public discussion and caused international pressure from Muslim countries. To the Danish newspaper Børsen, Torben Clemmensen, an expert from the French IT security company TEHTRIS explained that the group communicated in Russian, and that IP addresses were related to Russia. The company analysed 47 specific attacks against the Nordic countries, looking at internet traffic etc. Of these, 90 %, according to Clemmensen, is likely to be a reaction to support for Ukraine. Truesec as well as TEHTRIS

attribute them to a larger Russian hacker community. The argument of revenge for Quran burnings is more to be seen as a false flag operation, as TEHTRIS has only identified two cases of DDoS attacks related to that.²⁴ Furthermore, it is worth remembering that the hacker network Anonymous clearly took a stand being pro Ukraine and against Russia just after the Russian invasion in 2024.²⁵

To summarise this, by putting on a false flag in its existing DDoS activities, Russia can heaten up national as well as international tensions in the targeted countries, and at the same time 'mock' a declared adversary as the real hacktivist community known as Anonymous. Meaning that we were not only targets of Russian DDoS attacks, but also got caught in Russia's discursive trap by accepting the labelling: In the general public's perception, we are still talking about Anonymous (and) Sudan – even though we are talking of neither.

- 21 Christina Toustrup Eriksen, "Først Gik Det Ud over Sverige. Nu Danmark. Det Ved vi Om Striben Af Hackerangreb – Flere Ting Peger Mod Rusland," *Berlingske*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.berlingske.dk/samfund/foerst-gik-det-ud-over-sverige-nu-danmark-det-ved-vi-om-striben-af>.
- 22 Mathias Wåhlén, "Anonymous Sudan – Threat Intelligence Report" (Truesec, February, 2023), <https://files.truesec.com/hubfs/Reports/Anonymous%20Sudan%20-%20Publish%201.2%20-%20a%20Truesec%20Report.pdf>.
- 23 The burning of the Quran outside the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm in January 2023 happened after an idea of two Swedish alternative media personalities. They represented outlets with pro-Russian narratives and Russian connections, such as election observer trips. One of those taking the initiative has stated he is a vocal opponent of Nato-membership. But that is another story.
- 24 Mathias Sommer and Godtfred Perera, "Ekspert Er Ikke I Tvivl: Russiske Hackere Står Bag Falsk Flag-Angreb Mod Danmark," *Børsen*, April 26, 2023, <https://borsen.dk/nyheder/virksomheder/falsk-flag-hackerangreb-kan-spores-til-rusland>.
- 25 Dan Milmo, "Anonymous: The Hacker Collective That Has Declared Cyberwar on Russia," *The Guardian*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/27/anonymous-the-hacker-collective-that-has-declared-cyberwar-on-russia>.

Estonia: Smashing cars and sowing fear

By Marek Kohv

Vandalism / sabotage

Democratic Institution

Harassment / assault
(physical)

History / memory

Criminals / mercenaries /
private contractors***

On the night of 8 December 2023, windows of the Interior Minister’s personal vehicle were smashed.²⁶ The same happened to the car of the news portal Delfi editor-in-chief (Russian edition).²⁷ The evidence collected in the criminal proceedings suggests that the Russian special services have coordinated this hybrid operation.²⁸ People of different backgrounds were detained, including individuals over 30 years of age with Russian citizenship, Estonian citizenship, and dual Estonian-Russian citizenship. Most of them have a criminal background, with some recruited in Russia and others on social media.

One method of hybrid warfare is to instil a sense of fear in the adversary’s society. The purpose is to create anxiety and thereby sow doubt in the correctness or sustainability of various social processes.

Russian influence operations towards Estonia (and the Baltic states) have never stopped since they regained their independence. As the latest example, late last year and early

this year, the Estonian Internal Security Service (ISS) detained 10 suspects accused of acting on behalf of the Russian special services.

On the one hand, the expulsion of Russian diplomats from Europe has reduced the ability of Russian special services to operate physically in the target countries.²⁹ On the other hand, a transition to social media unties their hands as online recruitment is also, in some ways, more difficult to monitor and also more cost effective, as the recruiters can do their work comfortably from behind a computer.

It is important to highlight that travelling to Russia is a direct security threat because Russian special services adhere to no restrictions when recruiting a person. Russians also use an individual’s relatives, friends, and loved ones residing in Russia to influence one to work for them.

The use of people with a criminal record is a common practice, especially for the FSB which has better contacts in the underworld due to its activities.³⁰ While Western special services generally do not cooperate with criminals, the Russian attitude puts an emphasis on the result — not so much on how it has been achieved. In Russia, Western countries are seen as adversaries, and any means and methods against them are, therefore, justifiable.

Vandalism against specific persons and their property, as well as socially and historically important objects, is a familiar trend in all three Baltic countries. On 1 February 2024, the ISS arrested two men on suspicion of desecrating the Blue Hills (Sinimäed) monuments in Ida-Viru County

26 Grete Wolmer, “FOTOD | Siseminister Lauri Läänemetsa Isikliku Auto Aknad Löödi Öösel Puruks. Politsei Alustas Kriminaalmenetlust,” *Delfi*, December 8, 2023, <https://www.delfi.ee/artikkel/120253842/fotod-siseminister-lauri-laanemetsa-isikliku-auto-aknad-loodi-oo-sel-puruks-politsei-alustas-kriminaalmenetlust>.

27 Delfi, “FOTO | Asi Ei Piirdunud Läänemetsaga. Auto Aknad Löödi Sisse Ka RusDelfi Peatoimetaja Autol,” *Delfi*, December 8, 2023, <https://www.delfi.ee/artikkel/120253891/foto-asi-ei-piirdunud-laanemetsaga-auto-aknad-loodi-sisse-ka-rusdelfi-peatoimetaja-autol>.

28 Helen Wright et al., “ISS: Russian Special Services behind Attack on Estonian Minister’s Car,” *ERR News*, February 20, 2024, <https://news.err.ee/1609258853/iss-russian-special-services-behind-attack-on-estonian-minister-s-car>.

29 Roksana Gabidullina and Pierre Morcos, “Curtailing Russia: Diplomatic Expulsions and the War in Ukraine” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, May, 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/curtailing-russia-diplomatic-expulsions-and-war-ukraine>.

30 Mark Galeotti, “‘We Have Conversations’: The Gangster as Actor and Agent in Russian Foreign Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 6 (2023): 907–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2154316>.

on 23 and 31 January this year.³¹ The order to commit the crime was reportedly given by Russia. The Estonian State Prosecutor says that there is reason to believe that the damage to the cars and the defacing of the monuments that took place in May³² last year and in January this year are connected.³³

The head of the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service claims with high confidence that such activity has not only been employed against Estonia but has also taken place in other countries.³⁴ On 8 February 2024, the Latvian Security Service (VDD) arrested a dual citizen of Estonia and Russia for vandalism.³⁵ This person was caught defacing memorial sites in Latvia and Lithuania and suspected of acting on the orders of Russian special services. The Chief of the VDD said that Russian and Belarusian special services were recruiting people to not only acquire intelligence about Latvia but also to wreak havoc across the country.³⁶

Leonid Volkov, a Russian opposition figure, was violently assaulted in a car near his home in Vilnius, Lithuania, on the evening of 12 March 2024.³⁷ The attacker broke the car window, sprayed tear gas, and started beating Volkov with a meat hammer. He suffered severe injuries to his head,

arm, and leg. In early April, Polish authorities detained two Polish citizens suspected of acting on behalf of the Russian special services. The preliminary investigation suggests that these persons also were previously known to Polish security and law enforcement agencies.³⁸

The head of the Lithuanian National Crisis Management Centre said that this attack was a professional and well-planned operation that can be considered the first case of political terrorism in Lithuania. The director of the State Security Department said that it was likely organised by Russian special services and executed by a recruited person.³⁹

Although the ability of Russian special services to operate in the Baltic states has been significantly curtailed since the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine, their intent to cause mischief here remains. Assaults on individuals at such a level are a notable escalation. Acts of vandalism to desecrate memorials in the Baltic states — followed by influence and intimidation operations where the national memory is the target — show Russia's inability to tolerate the fact that no one wants to embrace the Russian world.

31 Joonatan Pärn, "Sinimägedes Rüvetati Mälestusmärke! Kapo Kahtlustab, et Kuritegu Telliti Venemaal," *TV3*, February 5, 2024, <https://www.tv3.ee/3-portaal/paevakaja/sinimagedes-ruvetati-malestusmarke-kapo-kahtlustab-et-kuritegu-telliti-venemaal/>.

32 Marcus Turovski, "Vandals Deface Three Memorials in Ida-Viru County," *ERR News*, May 9, 2023, <https://news.err.ee/1608972200/vandals-deface-three-memorials-in-ida-viru-county>.

33 Aleksander Krjukov et al., "Kapo: Siseministri Auto Lõhkumist Koordineeris Vene Eriteenistus," *ERR News*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.err.ee/1609258833/kapo-siseministri-auto-lohkumist-koordineeris-vene-eriteenistus>.

34 Riigikogu, "Vene Külmutatud Varade Kasutuselevõtust, 20.02.2024," *YouTube*, April 20, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbXJkrVikj4>.

35 BNN, "VDD: Russian Special Services Recruit People to Perform Sabotage in Latvia," *Baltic News Network*, March 14, 2024, <https://bnn-news.com/vdd-russian-special-services-recruit-people-to-perform-sabotage-in-latvia-255202>.

36 BNN, "VDD: Russian Special Services Recruit People to Perform Sabotage in Latvia," *Baltic News Network*, 2024.

37 LRT, "Navalny's Former Chief of Staff Volkov Attacked in Lithuania," *Lithuanian National Radio and Television*, March 12, 2024, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2220647/navalny-s-former-chief-of-staff-volkov-attacked-in-lithuania>.

38 Šarūnas Nekrošius, "Volkovo Užpuolimu Įtariamai Asmenys – Lenkai, Juos Gegužę Tikimasi Perduoti Lietuvai," *Lithuanian National Radio and Television*, April 19, 2024, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2254702/volkovo-uzpuolimu-itariamai-asmens-lenkai-juos-geguze-tikimasi-perduoti-lietuvai>.

39 Šarūnas Nekrošius, "Volkovo Užpuolimu Įtariamai Asmenys – Lenkai, Juos Gegužę Tikimasi Perduoti Lietuvai," 2024.

Finland: Holiday homes with a view (over strategic infrastructure)

By Minna Ålander

Real estate
Strategic location
Critical infrastructure
Front organisation
Espionage
Economic fraud / money laundering
Infiltration / influence or take over 3rd party

In 2018, Finnish security authorities conducted a spectacular raid of a Russian-owned company, the Airiston Helmi. Officially, the operation was purely related to financial crimes committed by the company, and the case later went on trial only on those grounds.⁴⁰ However, there was a clear link to national security. The company had been systematically purchasing island and coastal property in the Turku archipelago between mainland southwestern Finland and the autonomous Åland Islands, establishing a monitoring – and potentially blocking – capacity along the major sealines

leading to Turku and Naantali ports, which are crucial for Finland’s military and civilian security of supply.

Installations, such as a landing platform for a helicopter built with special permit on the island of Säckiluoto⁴¹ and the purchase of decommissioned ships from the Finnish Navy that Airiston Helmi failed to repaint and rename⁴², arouse the Finnish authorities suspicions already in early 2010s regarding the possibility that the purpose was hosting “little green men”,⁴³ i.e. Russian troops without identifying insignia, as seen in the annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁴⁴

One year earlier, in 2017, the Finnish government created a task force to prepare for a legislative change regarding regulation of third-country nationals’ (outside of EU and ETA) property purchases in Finland.⁴⁵ The task force had been preceded by two memos, one on the comprehensive security perspective of landowning by foreign nationals from 2014 and another on legislation regarding hybrid threats from 2014, by the Security Committee responsible for Finland’s comprehensive security approach⁴⁶, as well as a lengthy report on the same topic by the Ministry of Defence.⁴⁷ The legislation in question had been already dis-

40 Yle News, “Airiston Helmi Financial Crimes Case Heads to Court in December 2023,” *Yle News*, October 18, 2022, <https://yle.fi/a/3-12662132>.

41 Tuomas Hyytinen, “Keskustelu Katkesi Siihen” – Venäjä-Asiantuntijat Paljastavat, Kuinka Venäläiset Yrittivät Udella Heiltä Varuskunnista Ja Ukrainasta,” *Yle Uutiset*, October 21, 2023, <https://yle.fi/a/74-20056140>.

42 Robin Häggblom, “A Dawn Raid in the Archipelago,” *Corporal Frisk*, September 23, 2018, <https://corporalfrisk.com/2018/09/23/a-dawn-raid-in-the-archipelago/>.

43 MTV, “AL: Hallitus Ja Presidentti Ovat Epäilleet Jo Vuodesta 2014 Airiston Helmen Kiinteistöjen Käyttöä – Suojelupoliisin Päällikkö Ilmaisi Huolensa Kaksi Vuotta Sitten,” *MTV Uutiset*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.mtvuutiset.fi/artikkeli/al-hallitus-ja-presidentti-ovat-epailliet-jo-vuodesta-2014-airiston-helmen-kiinteistojen-kayttoa-suojelupoliisin-paallikko-ilmaisi-huolensa-kaksi-vuotta-sitten/7086662#gs.9ehzav>.

44 John R. Haines, “How, Why, and When Russia Will Deploy Little Green Men – and Why the US Cannot,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 9, 2016, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/03/how-why-and-when-russia-will-deploy-little-green-men-and-why-the-us-cannot/>.

45 Valtioneuvosto, “Työryhmä Valmistelemaan Lakimuutoksia Kokonaisturvallisuudelle Tärkeistä Kiinteistökaupoista” (Valtioneuvoston viestintäosasto, April 20, 2017), https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/tyoryhma-valmistelemaan-lakimuutoksia-kokonaisturvallisuudelle-tarkeista-kiinteistokaupoista?languageId=en_US.

46 The Security Committee, “Operation and Responsibilities” (Turvallisuuskomitea, n.d.), <https://turvallisuuskomitea.fi/en/security-committee/operation/>.

47 Puolustusministeriö, “Valtion Kokonaisturvallisuudesta Kiinteän Omaisuuden Siirroissa,” April 20, 2017, https://www.defmin.fi/files/3749/Selvitys_20-4-2017_VKTKOS_final.pdf.

cussed extensively at the Finnish Parliament in 2014 due to national security concerns.⁴⁸

The reason for the increasing concerns over potential threats to national security was the numerous and well-documented cases of Russian nationals buying property in strategic locations in different parts of Finland, often close to military bases or installations. In 2014, *Iltalehti* reported that the Russian property purchases often followed the same pattern: acquiring a piece of land with lofty development plans, often for tourism purposes, which however never materialised.⁴⁹ A typical example was the case of a person from Moscow purchasing land right next to a military-class telecommunications mast, merely building an empty hall in the area that remained devoid of any business activity. Often, the individuals, groups or companies behind the purchases have had family or business ties to the Kremlin or previous KGB functionaries, Putin's personal network.

Russian buyers started purchasing property in strategic locations already in the early 2000s, right after Finland slackened the respective legislation. Twenty years later, stricter legislation was brought back: since 2020, foreign nationals must seek a permit for property purchases and Finnish authorities can deny it on grounds of national security.⁵⁰ Although Finland is by far not the only country in the Nordic-Baltic region subjected to this particular Russian strategy, other countries have yet to take similar steps. In a recent case, exposed by Norwegian TV2, in Northern Norway, both the Swedish and Norwegian Defence Forces had rented cabins owned by Russians with ties to the Kremlin during military exercises.⁵¹ The properties, known by locals as "Russian cabins", overlook the Bardufoss military airbase.⁵² The Norwegian Prime Minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, admitted that such potential abuse of Norway's open real estate market that can undermine national security poses a challenge that Norwegian authorities still lack a proper response to.⁵³

48 Eduskunta, "Täysistunnon Pöytäkirja 16/2014 vp – Laki ETA-Maiden Ulkopuolelta Tulevien Henkilöiden Ja Yhteisöjen Kiinteistönhankinnasta Ja -Vuokrauksesta," 2014, <https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/vaski/sivut/trip.aspx?triptype=ValtiopaivaAsiakirjat&docid=PTK+16/2014+ke+p+5>.

49 Tuula Malin, "Katso Kartta: Venäläisten Maakauppoja Strategisissa Kohteissa," *Iltalehti*, March 12, 2015, <https://www.iltalehti.fi/uutiset/a/2015031119338528>.

50 Puolustusministeriö, "Authorisation to Non-EU and Non-EEA Buyers to Buy Real Estate," n.d., https://www.defmin.fi/en/licences_and_services/authorisation_to_non-eu_and_non-eea_buyers_to_buy_real_estate#e45ccd65.

51 TV 2, "Forsvaret Leide 'Russerhyttene' under Nato-Øvelse," *TV 2 Nyheter*, April 6, 2024, <https://www.tv2.no/nyheter/innenriks/forsvaret-leide-russerhyttene-under-nato-ovelse/16431337/>.

52 TV 2, "Midt I Det Norske Militærområdet Finner vi 'Russerhyttene,'" *TV 2 Nyheter*, April 6, 2024, <https://www.tv2.no/spesialer/nyheter/bardufoss-hytte-russere#:~:text=TV%20%20har%20derfor%20kartlagt>.

53 TV 2, "Støre Om 'Russerhyttene': – vi Må Følge Veldig Nøye Med," *TV 2 Nyheter*, April 6, 2024, <https://www.tv2.no/nyheter/innenriks/store-om-russerhyttene-vi-ma-folge-veldig-noye-med/16589399/>.

Iceland: Shutting down the parliament when visitors are in town

By Bjarni Bragi Kjartansson

Cyber attacks (civilian target)

Democratic institution

In May 2023, during the convening of the Council of Europe in Reykjavik, Russian cyber actors executed targeted DDOS attacks, compromising critical Icelandic institutions' digital infrastructure⁵⁴. One such attack targeted The Parliament (Alþingi), resulting in the rendering of both its website and internal network inaccessible. This marked a significant escalation in cyber conflict, evidenced by the activation of Civil Defence's uncertainty protocols.⁵⁵

Iceland's strong support for Ukraine has soured relations with Russia. Designating Iceland as hostile, Russia and its supporters have launched actions, from public criticism to cyber attacks, targeting public institutions and major businesses. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Iceland has experienced a surge in cyber attacks, a trend observed across NATO countries.

Once serving as a crucial outpost for US defence during the Cold War era, Iceland finds itself pitched back into a similar strategic role. This time the threat extends far beyond mere airspace violations or increased submarine traffic.

Since NATO's founding, Icelandic sentiment towards the alliance has been conflicted. Recent events however

have led to increased pragmatism in attitudes regarding security and defence. Amidst this, Russian agents' intangible actions in Iceland take on a heightened significance, revealing deeper geopolitical machinations at play in the region.

Number of cyber attacks has been steadily rising.⁵⁶ In 2020, CERT-IS recorded 266 attacks, surpassing 700 by 2022. Russia is actively engaged in disseminating propaganda, false information, and veiled threats, leveraging⁵⁷ its embassy in Iceland and various media platforms.

In August 2022, the now-defunct Icelandic news outlet, Fréttablaðið, faced a cyber attack following a demand from the Russian Embassy in Iceland to its editorial board for an apology. This request was prompted by the publication of a photograph highlighting the resilience of Ukrainian forces.⁵⁸

The attribution of these attacks⁵⁹ to the hacker group NoName057, known for its alignment with Russian interests, introduced a dimension of state-sponsored cyber aggression, prompting an immediate reassessment of cyber deterrence strategies and diplomatic responses.⁶⁰ It most certainly played a role in the decision to close the Icelandic embassy in Moscow, leading to an inevitable reduction in the operation of the Russian embassy in Reykjavik.

In Iceland, a backdrop of distrust and grievances exists regarding support for the Western alliance, NATO, and the US. While not prominently aired, there are undercurrents

54 Iceland Monitor, "Russian Group NoName057 behind Cyber Attacks on Various Sites This Morning," *Iceland Monitor*, May 16, 2023, https://icelandmonitor.mbl.is/news/news/2023/05/16/russian_group_noname057_behind_cyber_attacks_on_var/.

55 Iceland monitor, "Raise the Alert Level due to Cyber Attacks," *Iceland Monitor*, May 16, 2023, https://icelandmonitor.mbl.is/news/news/2023/05/16/raise_the_alert_level_due_to_cyber_attacks/.

56 Darren Adam, "Cyber Attacks on the Rise," RÚV, January 5, 2024, <https://www.ruv.is/english/2024-01-05-cyber-attacks-on-the-rise-401229>.

57 DV, "Fordæma Skrif Rússneska Sendiherrans – „Uppfull Af Rakalausum Þvættingi Og Lygum“,” *Dagblaðið Vísir*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.dv.is/ejjan/2023/02/23/fordæma-skrif-russneska-sendiherrans-uppfull-af-rakalausum-thvaettingi-og-lygum/>.

58 Alexander Elliott, "Newspaper Threatened over Russian Flag Photo," RÚV, August 12, 2022, <https://www.ruv.is/english/2022-08-12-newspaper-threatened-over-russian-flag-photo>.

59 Iceland Monitor, "Russian Group NoName057 behind Cyber Attacks on Various Sites This Morning," 2023, https://icelandmonitor.mbl.is/news/news/2023/05/16/russian_group_noname057_behind_cyber_attacks_on_var/.

60 Wiktoria Gajos, "How Russia's NoName057(16) Could Be a New Model for Hacking Groups," *CSO Online*, January 3, 2024, <https://www.csoonline.com/article/1270051/how-russias-noname05716-could-be-a-new-model-for-hacking-groups.html>.

within political discourse tentatively suggesting that the Russian invasion of Ukraine may be viewed as an inevitable consequence of perceived Western threats towards Russia.

Iceland may not be Russia's top priority. But its strategic importance in the North Atlantic and Arctic, coupled with its NATO membership – and heightened regional tensions

stemming from the conflict in Ukraine, render it a valuable target. Any weakening of resolve among NATO allies benefits Russia, due to NATO's consensus-based approach. This underscores the role of elusive manoeuvres, in setting the stage for potentially increased military presence, let alone operations or attacks, in the region.⁶¹

61 Russian-attributed cyber attacks are a common occurrence throughout the region: For example in August 2022, Estonia faced its “most extensive” cyber attacks since 2007's Bronze Night, following the removal of several Soviet monuments, including a tank, from the eastern border city of Narva. While in previous years denial-of-service attacks were often conducted with financial motivation, since 2022 most of the blocking attacks have been pro-Kremlin hacktivists who expressed their dissatisfaction in this way, e.g. on the suspension of Russian TV channels in Estonia or Estonia's support for Ukraine. The attackers' favourite targets were, as expected, Government, Parliament, President websites, but also Estonian e-state – e-services for citizens, id-card webpage. Additionally some companies from the transport and media sector were targeted. See: Riigi Infosüsteemi Ameti, “KÜBERTURVALISUSE AASTARAAMAT 2023,” 2023, https://ria.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2023-02/RIA_kyberturvalisuse_aastaraamat_2023.pdf.

Latvia: A Kremlin prank is not just an ordinary prank – when Vovan and Lexus contacted Latvian officials

By Ieva Bērziņa

Harassment (non physical)

Democratic institution

Deception (including deepfake)

Russian pranksters Vovan (Vladimir Kuznetsov) and Lexus (Alexei Stolyarov) have fooled high-ranking officials and celebrities from many Western countries, and Latvia is no exception. In March 2021, Rihards Kols, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Latvian Parliament (Saeima), received a fake letter from the Russian pranksters with a request to meet members of the Committee pretending to be Leonid Volkov, the associate of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny⁶². The fake Leonid Volkov's meeting with the Foreign Affairs Committee took place, and Latvian Television broadcasted the conversation between him and correspondent Ina Strazdiņa, who obtained his e-mail address from the Saeima press service as a reliable source of information⁶³.

In February 2022, Alexei Stolyarov, published a video of a prank with leaders of the European People's Party, including Latvian member of the European Parliament Sandra Kalniete⁶⁴. In September 2023, pranksters managed to hold a conversation with Krišjānis Kariņš, Latvian Prime Minister, pretending to be Moussa Faki, the Chairperson of the

African Union Commission⁶⁵. The Constitution Protection Bureau in 2022 prevented an attempt by Russian pranksters to contact the Prime Minister and the State President shortly after the missile landed on Polish territory, when the pranksters tried to impersonate Polish President Andrzej Duda⁶⁶.

The same pranksters targeted the Danish minister of foreign affairs, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, in October 2023. This time, Vovan & Lexus, pretending to be Moussa Faki, commission chairman for the African Union. The meeting took place at the online platform Teams with an artificial impersonation of Moussa Faki. During the conversation, the Danish minister of foreign affairs was asked about the perspectives of ending the war. "It is not easy for me to predict, but at some point I guess the Ukrainian president will adjust the situation and declare that the time has now come to start negotiations," he answers. This remark made it into a TASS telegram under the headline 'Zelensky to agree to peace talks, top Danish diplomat says in call with Russian pranksters'.

The call to the Danish minister of foreign affairs happened only a few years after Vovan & Lexus made a similar call to the Danish foreign policy committee in the Danish parliament pretending to be Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in 2020.⁶⁷ The pranksters had

62 Kols Rihards, "Par Viltus Leonīdu Volkovu: Kā Trīs Baltijas Valstis Satika Viltvārdi Un Kā Vēlāk Tāpat "Uzkērās," April 22, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/KolsRihards/posts/4129537150399849>.

63 Ina Strazdiņa, "Navalņija Lidzgaitnieks Volkovs: Manā Vārdā Uzdarbojas Kremļa Aģenti," *Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/navalnija-lidzgaitnieks-volkovs-mana-varda-uzdarbojas-kremla-agenti.a401696>.

64 Алексей Столяров, "Пранк с лидерами Европейской народной партии в Европарламенте," *Octagon*, February 8, 2022, https://octagon.media/blogi/aleksej_stolyarov/prank_s_liderami_evropejskoj_narodnoj_partii_v_evroparlamente.html.

65 Ģirts Kasparāns, Jolanta Plauka, and Krišs Kairis, "Krievijas Viltvārdiem Izdevies Sarīkot Videosarunu Ar Kariņu," *Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji*, November 14, 2023, <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/14.11.2023-krievijas-viltvarziem-izdevies-sarikot-videosarunu-ar-karinu.a531610/>.

66 Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji, "SAB Aptur Viltvārzu Plānus Sarunām Ar Amatpersonām," *Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji*, November 23, 2022, https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/sab-aptur-viltvarzu-planus-sarunam-ar-amatpersonam.a483856/?utm_source=lsm&utm_medium=article-body&utm_campaign=admin.

67 A common denominator for the two calls to the Danish politicians was the focus on issues concerning animals, as a recurrent theme in Russian disinformation about Denmark. Storylines within this theme include fake news stories from 2017 about state sanctioned animal brothels and exploitation of true events such as the killing of a giraffe in Copenhagen Zoo back in 2014. The giraffe was killed based on a rationale of reducing the population of giraffes in the zoo. In the prank-call to the foreign minister in 2023, the story of the giraffe once again was brought up.

also success in Sweden and Norway. The former Swedish foreign minister Ann Linde and two MP:s of the foreign affairs committee were fooled in 2021 to talk with the pranksters who pretended to be Navalnyj's associate Leonid Volkov⁶⁸ and in 2023 the Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre was pranked.⁶⁹

Deepfake technologies allow pranksters to use the visual image of the person they are pretending to be, making pranking effective in video conferencing formats, which became widely used by high-level officials during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Pranking officials allow Russia to pursue its interests covertly since pranksters act as independent humorists.

The purpose of the prank is to fool someone without causing harm; nevertheless, the results of these actions support the Kremlin's interests. The way pranksters operate, and the consequences of their activities give grounds to treat the pranking of officials as a form of hybrid attack.

The described Latvian and other cases are part of a broader attack on Western countries, where pranksters achieve several political goals of Russia under the guise of humour.

First, they discredit the image of Western politicians, trying to portray them as people who can be easily fooled. Second, by pretending to be someone with whom targeted officials sympathise or want to maintain a relationship, the pranksters also obtain opinions and information not for wide publicity. In this way, pranksters create content for the Russian media, which uses it to discredit Western countries and their political leaders. Third, pranksters waste targeted officials' time by arranging fake meetings, which decreases their work efficiency and creates an additional psychological burden and workload by explaining the situation afterward. Finally, pranksters can also attempt to influence the behaviour of their targets in the interests of malign foreign actors.

68 Arne Lapidus, "Ryska Bluffmakare Lurade Svenska Politiker: "Komiskt", " *Expressen*, October 3, 2021, <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/ryska-bluffmakare-lurade-svenska-politiker-komiskt/>.

69 Meme-art-alchemy, "Vovan and Lexus Prank the Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre.", *YouTube*, December 6, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVGJmWCBuCk>.

Lithuania: Painting statues and rewriting history

By Adam Roževič

Hostile information*

History / memory

Vandalism / sabotage

Criminals / mercenaries /
private contractors***

Just before 9th of May 2023, when the Kremlin celebrated victory over Nazi Germany, the monument of the Lithuanian resistance leader Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas was covered in white paint.⁷⁰ This attack was only one of several attacks on monuments commemorating freedom fighters who fought Soviet occupation in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.⁷¹

The historical memory of partisans who fought against Soviet occupation after the Second World War is a target for the Kremlin and its attempt to rewrite history. The Russian state, without historical evidence, has been aggressively promoting the narrative that Lithuanian freedom fighters were Nazi collaborators and portraying them as terrorists. The purpose is to blur the fact of an occupation. This narrative is not new. It was an official state position of the USSR, where it was prominent in the school curriculum and often mentioned in cultural and public life.

Unfortunately, this disinformation campaign has been quite successful. The apogee of this campaign was last year. On three different occasions, various statues and memorials of Lithuanian freedom fighters were defiled and desecrated⁷².

With the fall of the USSR, Lithuania underwent extreme socio-economic and political changes. During the first years after regaining independence, many people found themselves at a disadvantage, without a stable job or social guarantees. This naturally left a mark in parts of society — even today, some view Soviet times more positively. As per research by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre, despite the fact that the threat perception from Russia remains high among Lithuanians, the more individuals view Soviet times positively, the more susceptible they are to propaganda from Russia, especially when it comes to familiar narratives.⁷³

With the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian state propaganda apparatus found itself on the back foot. It became difficult to conduct effective disinformation campaigns in Lithuanian society as the “right” and “wrong”, “victim” and “aggressor” had become ever clearer. However, Russian state propaganda evolved and started to employ more targeted and bespoke narratives that, at first glance, are not easily recognizable. Such campaigns aimed at specific parts of Lithuanian society and also included kinetic actions such as desecrating monuments.

The combination of disinformation and propaganda, together with physical actions where it is hard to know who is behind it, creates an image that the narrative causes so much emotion for individuals so they act on the information and translate the emotions into kinetic action with real consequences. However, there remains a high degree of uncertainty; is all, some or none of the events created by Rus-

70 LRT, “Monument to Anti-Soviet Resistance Leader Defaced in Lithuania,” *Lithuanian Radio and Television*, May 8, 2023, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1983200/monument-to-anti-soviet-resistance-leader-defaced-in-lithuania>.

71 State Security Department of Lithuania, “National Threat Assessment 2024” (Vilnius, 2024), <https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/GR-2024-02-15-EN-1.pdf>.

72 15 min, “Išpuoliai Prieš Partizanų Vado A. Ramanausko-Vanago Paminklus: Merkinėje Aplietas Dažais, Lazdijų Rajone Įsmeigtas Kirvis,” *15 Min*, May 8, 2023, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktuali/lietuva/merkinėje-isniekintas-partizanų-vado-a-ramanausko-vanago-paminklas-56-2049494>; Delfi, “Vandalai Išniekino Dar Vieną Ramanausko-Vanago Paminklą: Į Memorialą Įkirstas Kirvis,” *Delfi*, May 8, 2023, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/vandalai-isniekino-dar-viena-ramanausko-vanago-paminkla-i-memoriala-ikirstas-kirvis-93288529>.

73 Mažvydas Jastramskis, “Demokratijos Tvarumo Barometras 2023” (East European Studies Center (RESC), 2023), https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/v03_Jastramskis_Demokratijos-tvarumo-barometras_2023_LT_A4.pdf.

sia? The fact that Latvian Security Police arrested a person with dual citizenship in Estonia and Russia for attacks in Lithuania and Latvia⁷⁴ points clearly in the direction that we can exclude that all incidents are spontaneously conducted by local citizens.

Another example of creating a false narrative to create interference is related to the Russian war in Ukraine, specifically, the “de-escalation” and “war-mongering” narratives that are becoming more prevalent in Lithuanian society. In 2024, Lithuania will have three different political campaigns (European parliament, Presidential election and National parliament) during which some candidates from “Party of Regions”, “Dawn of Nemunas” or “The Way of Courage” political parties publicly say that Western support for Ukraine or its tough stance towards Russia is es-

calatory and possibly leading to a broader war. The principle of peace through ceasefire functions as a Trojan horse, which basically repeats Moscow’s narratives and serves its strategic interests.

Although these candidates have a very low chance of entering public office, they do attract quite significant audiences online, where some of their interviews or talks get tens of thousands of views. This, in turn, greatly contributes to the spread of such narratives with a possible long term effect.

To sum up, even after the full-scale invasion, Russian disinformation campaigns still pose a challenge. As the Lithuanian case showed, narratives could be combined with, or create, physical actions as well as be hidden behind not-so-innocent calls for peace and de-escalation.

74 BNN, “VDD: Russian Special Services Recruit People to Perform Sabotage in Latvia,” *Baltic News Network*, March 14, 2024, <https://bnn-news.com/vdd-russian-special-services-recruit-people-to-perform-sabotage-in-latvia-255202>.

Norway: Svalbard, the arctic forewarning of the next front line

By Karen-Anna Eggen

Criminals / mercenaries / private contractors***

History / memory

Hostile information*

Religion

Incident on the sea / close manoeuvring

Vandalism / sabotage

Critical infrastructure

Cyber attack (civilian target)

Lawfare

After 2022, Russia's behaviour in the Arctic has become more confrontational. This mini-case presents various sub-threshold Russian tools of influence related to the Arctic Svalbard Archipelago and Northern Norway: The first is a combination of cyber attack, intimidation and lawfare. The remainder examines examples of (para-)military signalling, disinformation, religion, and intimidation in the form of incidents on the sea.

Between May-June 2022, Russia instigated an information operation towards Norway and Svalbard in connection with the EU sanctions restricting Russian transport into Schengen. Consequently, Russia could no longer transport goods to the Russian settlement in Barentsburg from

Murmansk via Tromsø to Svalbard. Although the Norwegian government quickly proposed two solutions, either that Russia found another means of transportation from the Russian border to Tromsø or simply shipped the goods themselves from Murmansk, Russia portrayed the decision as a discriminatory act towards Russians on Svalbard and warned of a looming humanitarian crisis. The pro-Russian hacker group Killnet instigated a large DDoS-attack on several official and media websites, using a manipulated picture of then-foreign minister Anniken Huitfeldt and citing the discriminatory act towards Russians as a reason.⁷⁵ On top of this, Russian Duma politicians threatened to dissolve a much-praised and hard-won delimitation agreement from 2008⁷⁶, and several other Russian officials questioned Norway's right to sovereignty as they alleged it was breaching the Svalbard Treaty.⁷⁷

Between January and July 2023, Northern Norway experienced three (para-)military incidents. The first was two Russian 'seamen' walking in the streets of the Norwegian border town Kirkenes in military-looking uniforms.⁷⁸ On May 9th, Russian military-style parades were organized for the first time in Barentsburg and Pyramiden⁷⁹. In Barentsburg, the parade included several Russian flags, military-looking uniforms, a motorcade, and even a helicopter. In Pyramiden, the so-called Donetsk People's Republic flag was also used. In July 2023, the Russian Consul General to Svalbard led a small military-inspired flotilla with several

75 Hallvard Norum, "Russisk Hackergruppe Skal Ha Startet Angrep Mot Norge," *NRK*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.nrk.no/norge/russisk-hackergruppe-skal-ha-startet-angrep-mot-norge-1.16020947>.

76 Aftenposten, "Avtalen Var Jonas Gahr Støres Store Seier. Nå Åpner Russerne for å Vrake Den.," *Aftenposten*, July 5, 2022, <https://www.aftenposten.no/verden/i/MLORVR/russlands-nasjonalforsamling-skal-utrede-skroting-av-delelinjeavtalen-med-norge>.

77 Anastasia Tenisheva, "Russia Hits out at Norway over Blocked Arctic Archipelago Access," *The Moscow Times*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/06/29/russia-hits-out-at-norway-over-blocked-arctic-archipelago-access-a78138>.

78 Thomas Nilsen, "Russian Seamen Walk Streets of Kirkenes in Military-Looking Uniforms," *The Independent Barents Observer*, January 12, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/kirkenes/2023/01/russian-seamen-walk-streets-kirkenes-military-looking-uniforms>.

79 Atle Staalesen, "Russia Stages Military-Style Propaganda Parade on Norway's Svalbard Archipelago," *The Independent Barents Observer*, May 9, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2023/05/russia-stages-military-style-propaganda-parade-norways-svalbard-archipelago>.

Russian flags in the waters outside Barentsburg in connection with Russia's Navy Day.⁸⁰

On June 16th, 2023, a pro-Kremlin Telegram channel Mash⁸¹ published a disinformation story about a secret U.S.-led military-biological laboratory⁸² on the Norwegian Bear Island (located between Svalbard and mainland Norway).⁸³ The story was picked up by regional and national Russian media and further dispersed in a speech by the Russian Head of Medicine and Biological Problem of Human adaptation in the Arctic at a pro-Kremlin conference in Murmansk in late October.

In August 2023, the Russian orthodox church had a seven-meter-high cross illegally erected on Pyramiden (Svalbard) to sanctify the ghost village and pay tribute to the Russians who discovered Svalbard.⁸⁴ According to Barents Observer, bishop Iyakov of Naran-Mars and Mezen is well-known for 'pushing Russia's geopolitical ambitions in the Arctic by blessing polar outposts together with leaders of military and security structures.' The bishop was also heard calling the village 'Russian'.

In October 2023, in an apparent act of signalling and harassing, the Russian research vessel, or spy ship, "Yantar", pursued the Norwegian research vessel "Kronprins Haakon" for 18 hours outside Svalbard.⁸⁵ Yantar documented Norwegian activity, taking pictures and filming. The Russian

vessel is under the direct command and control of the Russian Ministry of Defence and is considered the flagship of Russia's secret military program GUGI (Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research).⁸⁶

Russian complaints about Norwegian regulations on Svalbard⁸⁷ and also testing Norway's responses to various attacks, from cyber to migration, are not new.⁸⁸ However, Svalbard's rising security and strategic significance, paired with a more aggressive Russia, is concerning. Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Review highlighted Russia's ambition to prevent 'the negative impact of illegal restrictive measures imposed by unfriendly states on Russia's presence on the Spitsbergen archipelago.' This suggests that Svalbard is a key area of contention in Russian thinking.⁸⁹ Especially when its activity is paired with official rhetoric as voiced in February 2024 by Deputy Prime Minister Yury Trutnev, who claims that Russian rights on Svalbard are under pressure, comparing the fight to preserve these with the same battle for 'Russian sovereignty' in Ukraine.⁹⁰

80 Thomas Nilsen, "Russian Diplomat Staged Navy Parade at Norway's Svalbard Archipelago," *The Independent Barents Observer*, July 31, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2023/07/russian-consul-staged-navy-parade-norways-svalbard-archipelago>.

81 Mash, "Биологическая лаборатория США появится в нескольких часах по воде от Мурманска," *Telegram*, June 16, 2023, <https://t.me/breakingmash/45026>.

82 Thomas Nilsen, "Isolated Russia Invites Faraway Countries to Upcoming Svalbard Science Center in Pyramiden," *The Independent Barents Observer*, October 30, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2023/10/ghost-town-pyramiden-will-be-home-russias-planned-international-svalbard-science>.

83 Ramsar Sites Information Services, "Bear Island," Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, June 23, 2023, <https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/1966>.

84 Thomas Nilsen, "Svalbard Governor Orders War-Glorifying Cross Demolished. Russian Official Protests on Behalf of the Entire Orthodox World," *The Independent Barents Observer*, October 17, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2023/10/svalbard-governor-orders-war-glorifying-cross-demolished-russian-official-protests>.

85 Inghild Eriksen, Håvard Gulldahl, and Lisa Rypeng, "Norsk Forskningskip 'Forfulgt' Av Russisk Spionskip I 18 Timer," *NRK*, October 30, 2023, <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/det-norske-forskningskipet-kronprins-haakon-ble-forfulgt-av-russlands-spionskip-yantar-1.16610177>.

86 Wikipedia, "Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research," Wikipedia, February 19, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Directorate_of_Deep-Sea_Research#cite_note-1.

87 Atle Staalesen, "Amid Jubilant Celebration at Svalbard, Norway Sends Strong Signal It Will Not Accept Encroachment on Sovereignty," *The Independent Barents Observer*, February 9, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2020/02/amid-jubilant-celebration-svalbard-norway-sends-strong-signal-it-will-not-accept>.

88 The sanctioned former Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin's illegal pit stop on Svalbard in 2015 springs to mind. Indicators also point to Russia being behind two sub-sea sabotages outside Svalbard and the coast of Northern Norway in 2021, although this is not officially attributed.

89 Karen-Anna Eggen, "Designing around NATO's Deterrence: Russia's Nordic Information Confrontation Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2024, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2024.2332328>.

90 Atle Staalesen, "Deputy Prime Minister Sends Warning to Oslo: Russian Rights at Svalbard Must Not Be Challenged," *The Independent Barents Observer*, February 13, 2024, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2024/02/deputy-prime-minister-sends-warning-oslo-russian-rights-svalbard-must-not-be-challenged>.

Sweden: The atomic church with the crooked priest

By Patrik Oksanen

Nuclear** or other WMDs

Economic fraud / money laundering

Criminals / mercenaries / private contractors***

Real Estate

Religion

Strategic location

Infiltration / influence or take over 3rd party

Espionage

Democratic institution

Lawfare

Just five minutes walk from Västerås Airport, with the third longest runway in Sweden, lies a newly built Russian Orthodox Church (Heliga Gudsmoorden till Kazan/Holy Godmother of Kazan). The building of the Church is a story about money laundering, infiltration of the political body, funding from Rosatom, decisions from the highest level in Moscow, connections with organised crime and a

strategic position from which to quarter resources and operatives in the annexes.

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), also known as the Moscow Patriarchate, was revived by Stalin in 1943 and was put under the control of the NKVD, precursor to KGB which today is SVR and FSB.⁹¹ A bond that remains.

In Västerås ROC has through funding from Rosatom built the SEK 35 million (appr EUR 3.1 million)⁹² wooden church. Rosatom is the state owned nuclear energy company that also produces nuclear weapons.⁹³

The plan to build a church in Västerås at the location dates back to 2012, but it was not until 2017 that the permission to build the church was granted. Despite warnings from Swedish Security Police.⁹⁴ Two substitutes of the local permit board acted in practical support for the Church without reporting conflict of interest, and the decision to grant permit was taken, which is highly unusual, of the chair alone.⁹⁵

During the process the priest⁹⁶ was CEO for a Russian company⁹⁷ and later convicted for accounting violations.⁹⁸ In addition, the Estonian developer had a jail sentence for seven years for drug smuggling and reportedly has connections to Russian organised crime who is linked to FSB.⁹⁹

91 Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West* (London: Penguin Books, 2000). p. 634.

92 Approximation due to fluctuation in SEK vs EUR.

93 Mikaela Lundblad, "VLT AVSLÖJAR: Ryskt Kärnkraftsbolag Finansierade Kyrkobygget," *Vestmanlands Läns Tidning*, November 28, 2023, <https://www.vlt.se/2023-11-28/vlt-avslojar-ryskt-karnkraftsbolag-finansierade-kyrkobygget>.

94 Mikaela Lundblad, "Efter VLT:s Avslöjande – Teljebäck (S) Saknade Tydliga Besked Från Säpo: "Vi Kan Inte Göra Den Bedömningen"," *Vestmanlands Läns Tidning*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.vlt.se/artikel/efter-vlts-avslojande-teljeback-s-saknade-tydliga-besked-fran-sapo-vi-kan-inte-gora-den-bedomningen/>.

95 Mikaela Lundblad, Mats Lagggar, and Daniel Nordström, "Rysk Kyrka Byggs Nära Västerås Flygplats – Pekas Ut Som Säkerhetshot: "Chockerande"," *Vestmanlands Läns Tidning*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.vlt.se/artikel/rysk-kyrka-byggs-nara-vasteras-flygplats-pekast-ut-som-sakerhetshot-chockerande>.

96 The priest was later also responsible for another congregation (in Gävle) who rented a church from Swedish Church in Marma (30 kilometres south of Gävle) situated just beside a military shooting range and camp that is administered by the Royal Life Guards regiment in Stockholm. It is also close to several important road and railroad bridges over the river Dalälven, close to Gävle harbour that has been pointed out as a strategic harbour for Nato by the Russian chief of staff Gerasimov.

97 Mikaela Lundblad, Mats Lagggar, and Daniel Nordström, "Bygget Betalades Med Fuskfaktura – På Uppdrag Av Prästen Makarenko: "Pekar I En Riktning Att Dölja Pengar"," *Vestmanlands Läns Tidning*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.vlt.se/artikel/bygget-betalades-med-fuskfaktura-pa-uppdrag-av-prasten-makarenko-pekar-i-en-riktning-att-dolja-pengar/>.

98 Mikaela Lundblad, Mats Lagggar, and Daniel Nordström, "Bygget Betalades Med Fuskfaktura – På Uppdrag Av Prästen Makarenko: "Pekar I En Riktning Att Dölja Pengar"," 2019.

99 Mikaela Lundblad, Mats Lagggar, and Daniel Nordström, "Rysk Kyrka Byggs Nära Västerås Flygplats – Pekas Ut Som Säkerhetshot: "Chockerande"," 2019.

Now the Church is inaugurated and will continue to be a security challenge for the Swedish authorities. Churches are protected in various ways in the legislation, for example from eavesdropping. The vicinity to the airport but also as nuclear fuel production at Westinghouse in Västerås is noteworthy.

Swedish Security Police (SÄPO) stated in 2019 that Russia is using various tools, among them the religious tool and establishing physical platforms, which could be used now, but also in a possible future. They also reported that Russia has intelligence gathering platforms close to Swedish facilities.¹⁰⁰ In 2024, after SÄPO confirmed ROC's ties to Russian intelligence, Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities decided to stop all Swedish government funding to the Church.¹⁰¹

Also noteworthy; in Sweden ROC has rented a church close to a military shooting range in Marma¹⁰², south of Gävle, which is a strategic location with several important bridges, one harbour and several energy plants.¹⁰³ This rent was terminated by the end of 2023 after intervention from central level of the Swedish Lutheran Church.

A hostile takeover attempt of an independent Russian orthodox parish in Stockholm failed, with the culmination that police were summoned to a disturbed baptise.¹⁰⁴ ROC admitted the attempt to change jurisdiction with the justification: *'because they had stopped to love Russia and lost their Russian identity.'*¹⁰⁵

Instead ROC managed to infiltrate an independent non-profit association 'Sankt Sigfrids kyrkas vänner' (Friends of the church of Saint Sigfrid)¹⁰⁶ and take control over the building which lies close to Stockholm Waterworks and just beside the main road of Essingeleden (E4/E20). Despite the loss in the court where control over the association was re-established by the original board, the ROC is keeping control of the building due to continuous legal challenges against the non-profit association and refuses to hand over the keys.¹⁰⁷

In Norway ROC established a church¹⁰⁸ with a perfect view over Norway's most important naval base¹⁰⁹ and attempted to get a chapel close to an important radar facility¹¹⁰, operated by Norwegian intelligence, in the high north of Norway.¹¹¹ On the island of Svalbard¹¹² a huge orthodox

100Mikaela Lundblad, Mats Laggar, and Daniel Nordström, "Moskvapatriarkatet Ett Av Kremles Verktyg – Pekas Ut Som Påverkansvapen," *Vestmanlands Läns Tidning*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.vlt.se/artikel/moskvapatriarkatet-ett-av-kremles-verktyg-pekas-ut-som-paverkansvapen/>.

101Johan Wicklén, "Inget Statsbidrag till Ryska Ortodoxa Kyrkan I Sverige," *SVT Nyheter*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/inget-statsbidrag-till-ryska-ortodoxa-kyrkan-i-sverige>.

102The rent was terminated in advance and ended the last day of 2023.

103Patrik Oksanen, "Oksanen: Ryske Generalen Som Sätter Oss På Kartan," *Gefle Dagblad*, May 24, 2017, <https://www.gd.se/2017-05-24/oksanen-ryske-generalen-som-satter-oss-pa-kartan>.

104Patrik Oksanen, "Rysk-Ortodoxa Går Putins Ärenden När de Försöker Ta Över Svensk Kyrka," *Dagen*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.dagen.se/debatt/2020/07/09/rysk-ortodoxa-gar-putins-arenden-nar-de-forsoker-ta-over-svensk-kyrka/>.

105Maria Georgieva, "När Rysk Utrikespolitik Tar Sig in I Kyrkorumen," *Sveriges Radio*, July 17, 2020, sec. Godmorgon världen, <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/7517269>.

106The NGO works in the tradition of the Lutheran Swedish Church. This is not a church itself, but the association gathers individuals with a more conservative Lutheran view, and the building of Saint Sigfrid is rented out for baptisms and services. The NGO was split in two because of the issue of renting to ROC. Both sides mobilised, and the association also saw a heavy increase of members of Russian origin who entered the association to support the lease. An extra annual meeting was interrupted by turmoil and police were summoned. This led to the board of Saint Sigfrid being split into two, with the "Russian side" taking control of the building. However they lost the court battle, but despite that still (March 2024) remains in the building. The winning side has now sued ROC for damages of SEK 200,000.

107Jacob Zetterman, "Rysk-Ortodox Församling Vagrar Lämna Kyrkan: "de Har Bytt Ut Låsen"," *Dagen*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2024/04/23/nu-stammer-st-sigfrids-kyrka-rysk-ortodoxa-forsamlingen-som-vagrar-lamna/>.

108Haakonsværn, outside Bergen.

109Kjetil Kjær Andersland and Shad Madian, "Russere Kjøpte Eiendom Ved Marinebase," *Dagbladet Bergen*, October 17, 2022, <https://bergen.dagbladet.no/nyheter/russere-kojpte-eiendom-ved-marinebase/77313186>.

110Located in Vardø, the most eastward corner in Norway.

111Thomas Nilsen, "Bishop Iyakov, Who Backs Putin's War, Raised Giant Cross at Svalbard without Norway's Knowledge," *The Independent Barents Observer*, August 12, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2023/08/russia-worlds-arctic-power-said-war-blessing-bishop-who-week-raised-giant-patriotic>.

112Svalbard is Norwegian territory, but the Svalbard Treaty of 1920 grants other countries equal commercial rights on the island. This is only used by Norway and Russia.

cross was raised in 2023, despite lack of permit from the Norwegian authorities. It was dedicated to a saint that is seen as a protector of warriors (See Norway chapter).¹¹³

In Estonia a donation of EUR 1.24 million to build a new church in Tallinn in 2010 raised alarms. KAPO, Estonian Internal Security Service, pointed out Vladimir Yakunin, the head of Russian Railways, as responsible for the donation.¹¹⁴ In 2024 Estonia did not renew the residence permit for the metropolitan Eugene, a Russian citizen, who led

the Estonian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (ROC).¹¹⁵ KAPO stated in its yearly report that the metropolitan was involved in influence activities and also concluded: *“From Russia’s perspective, it is crucial to maintain the entities associated with the Russian Orthodox Church abroad, along with their influence and assets, because the church is one of the few remaining levers for Russian influence operations that are not yet directly affected by international sanctions.”*¹¹⁶

113 Thomas Nilsen, “Bishop Iyakov, Who Backs Putin’s War, Raised Giant Cross at Svalbard without Norway’s Knowledge,” 2023.

114 Mike Winnerstig, “Tools of Destabilization. Russian Soft Power and Non-Military Influence in the Baltic States” (Totalförsvarets Forskningsinstitut, December, 2014), <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI-R--3990--SE>.

115 Aili Vahtla, “Russian Orthodox Church Leader Metropolitan Eugene Leaving Estonia Tuesday,” *ERR News*, February 6, 2024, <https://news.err.ee/1609244574/russian-orthodox-church-leader-metropolitan-eugene-leaving-estonia-tuesday>.

116 Kaitsepolitseiamet, “Annual Review 2023-2024” (Tallinn, 2024), https://kapo.ee/sites/default/files/content_page_attachments/Annual%20review%202023-2024.pdf.

Nordic-Baltic Region: Jamming and ghost fleet, but no music – examples of hybrid threats on cross border transportation

By Patrik Oksanen and Minna Ålander

Incident on the sea / close manoeuvring

Incident in the air / close flying

Violation of airspace

GPS jamming / EW

Lawfare

Some of the Russian hybrid threat activities are taking place in the air or at sea, typically in either international airspace and waters, but can also occur on foreign sovereign territory.

An example of this is GPS jamming that affects sea as well as air communication. In March 2024, Finnair announced a new destination: Tartu, in Estonia. The new route turned out short-lived. Two Finnair flights had to turn back to Helsinki airport, unable to land at Tartu airport due to extensive GPS jamming in the Gulf of Finland.¹¹⁷ As a consequence, Finnair announced on 29 April 2024 that flights to Tartu will be suspended until June 2024

“so that an alternative approach solution that doesn’t require a GPS signal can be put in place at Tartu Airport.”¹¹⁸

The massively increased GPS jamming in the Baltic Sea in the past years, and the particular peak in 2024, has attracted international media attention.¹¹⁹ However, it is far from a new phenomenon, nor is it restricted to the Baltic Sea. In 2018, the Fintraffic Air Navigation Services gave out a warning due to large-scale GPS jamming in Finnish Lapland, reaching all the way to Norway’s Arctic coast.¹²⁰ In 2019, Norway said to have electronic proof that Russia was behind extensive GPS jamming during NATO exercises.¹²¹ The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 saw an uptick in GPS jamming in the whole Nordic-Baltic region. In Northern Norway, close to the Russian border, GPS was jammed for days in the end of 2022, and the frequency has increased to “almost daily” by 2024.¹²²

Another frequently applied Russian tool of interference towards its Nordic and Baltic neighbours are combinations of aggressive flying near borders, airspace violations, and flying without transponders. Also here, the numbers of violations have spiked since Russia launched its war of aggres-

117 Yle News, “GPS Disruptions Force Return of Two Finnair Planes,” *Yle News*, April 27, 2024, <https://yle.fi/a/74-20086068>.

118 Finnair, “Finnair Suspends Flights between Helsinki and Tartu for a Month,” Finnair, April 29, 2024, <https://www.finnair.com/en/flight-information/travel-updates/finnair-suspends-flights-to-tartu-for-a-month-3383244>.

119 Emmanuel Grynszpan and Cédric Pietralunga, “Russia’s GPS Jamming Intensifies over the Baltic Sea,” *Le Monde*, May 2, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/05/02/russia-s-gps-jamming-intensifies-over-the-baltic-sea_6670151_4.html; Vitaly Shevchenko, “Russia Accused of Jamming GPS Navigation,” *BBC*, May 2, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cne900k4wvjo>.

120 Salon Seudun Sanomat, “GPS-Häirintä Ei Voi Aiheuttaa Vaaratilanteita Suomessa – Ilmailussa Kaikki Järjestelmät Varmistettu,” *Salon Seudun Sanomat*, November 9, 2018, <https://www.sss.fi/2018/11/yle-venajan-gps-hairinta-ulottui-lappiin-naton-sotaharjoituksen-aikana/comment-page-1/>.

121 Nerijus Adomaitis, “Norway Says It Proved Russian GPS Interference during NATO Exercises,” *Reuters*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN1QZ1WM/>.

122 Thomas Nilsen, “More Russian GPS Jamming than Ever across Border to Norway,” *The Independent Barents Observer*, July 9, 2022, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2022/07/more-russian-gps-jamming-ever-across-border-norway>;

Thomas Nilsen, “Russian Jamming Is Now Messing up GPS Signals for Norwegian Aviation Practically Every Day,” *The Independent Barents Observer*, February 26, 2024, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2024/02/russian-jamming-now-messing-gps-signals-norwegian-aviation-practically-every-day>.

sion on Ukraine in 2022. In 2023 alone, NATO Air Policing intercepted Russian aircraft more than 300 times.¹²³ But even before the invasion of Ukraine, the incidents were frequent. The Lithuanian Ministry of Defence regularly publishes data on interceptions of aircraft completed near the Baltic States' borders, and an example from a single week in May 2021 counted that NATO Air Policing jets "scrambled three times to identify and escort military aircraft of the Russian Federation in the international airspace over the Baltic Sea."¹²⁴ Russia is known to use deliberate air space violations as a means to express dissatisfaction, as was the case in 2016 when two Russian SU-27 fighter jets, while transporting Iskander missiles to Kaliningrad, violated Finnish air space one day before Finland signed a bilateral statement of intent on defence cooperation with the United States.¹²⁵

Another recent phenomenon is the so-called "shadow fleet" that Russia is operating in the Baltic Sea, through which half of the Russian oil exports pass.¹²⁶ While unprecedented in nature, Western sanctions on Russian energy since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine have not resulted in the desired effect of emptying Russia's war chest. Russia has found an effective way to circumvent them with a "shadow fleet" of some 1,500 tankers to export oil to India and China, and using flaws in international law in order to conduct the operations.

The ownership structures are deliberately obscured and in addition to financing Russia's war in Ukraine, the ships also pose a risk for the environment, as they are often old, rusty, and uninsured. A special feature of this hybrid challenge is that the tankers have a fuel station outside of the strategically important Swedish island of Gotland. For

the past two years, Russia has used a tanker sailing under the Cypriot flag. The public broadcaster SVT followed the tanker for two months in 2024 and found that 52 out of 56 refuelling operations were for ships heading to or from Russia.¹²⁷ The majority were ships belonging to the Russian "shadow fleet". Sweden has called on the EU to close the loopholes of the sanctions by approaching flag- and harbour states and taking EU actions against owners, operators and insurance companies in any third country used by Russia to enable the Shadow fleet.¹²⁸

NEED FOR FURTHER STUDIES

The examples from the Nordic and Baltic-countries underline the importance of collecting and sharing information in order to achieve a greater situational awareness of below-(military)threshold threats. A permanent hybrid threat tracker where activities in the Nordic-Baltic region would be visible over time would be a resource for researchers, journalists and the wider public. Such a tracker would help create wider public awareness and support measures to strengthen resilience. With the development of closer cooperation between China and Russia, a tracker should also follow Chinese hybrid activities in order to examine patterns, synergies and possible joint ventures, overlaps and differences. Greater knowledge is a key tool to build resilience and develop a better understanding of the threats.

123 NATO, "NATO Intercepted Russian Military Aircraft over 300 Times in 2023," NATO Pressroom, December 29, 2023, https://ac.nato.int/archive/2023/NATO_AP_2023.

124 Ministry of National Defence Republic of Lithuania, "Data on Interceptions of Aircraft Completed near the Baltic States' Borders on May 10 – 16, 2021," May 16, 2021, <https://kam.lt/en/data-on-interceptions-of-aircraft-completed-near-the-baltic-states-borders-on-may-10-16-2021/>.

125 Yle Uutiset, "Ministeri Niinistö Epäiltyjen Ilmatilaloukkausten Yhteydestä USA-Sopimukseen: 'Näen Ajallisen Yhteyden, Mutta En Osaa Sanoa Muusta,'" *Yle Uutiset*, October 7, 2016, <https://yle.fi/a/3-9216452>.

126 Martin Mederyd Hårdh, "Spökskeppen Misstänks Spionera På Sverige," *Svenska Dagbladet*, May 4, 2024, sec. Världen, <https://www.svd.se/a/Xjw1ko/spökskeppen-smorjer-den-ryska-krigsmaskinen>.

127 John Granlund and Oskar Jönsson, "Här Tankas Ryska Skuggflottan – Från Fartyg Utanför Gotland," *SVT Nyheter*, April 9, 2024, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/har-tankas-ryska-skuggflottan-fran-fartyg-utanfor-gotland>.

128 Stuart Lau, "EU Agrees to Tackle Russia's Shadow Oil Fleet, Sweden Says," *Politico*, April 22, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-agrees-to-tackle-russias-shadow-oil-fleet-sweden-says/>.

Discussion & Conclusions

By Karen-Anna Eggen, Patrik Oksanen, Minna Ålander

This policy brief highlights that Russia utilises the full toolbox of an authoritarian state and is not bound by legal or moral scruples. The malign actions support Russia's strategic aims. Russia demonstrates ruthlessness in its decision-making when it comes to disrespect of international law and human lives and a general willingness to take risks. According to the public assessments of Nordic and Baltic intelligence services, this trend will continue for the foreseeable future and includes attacks by other malign actors operating in a similar fashion as Russia.¹²⁹

It is important to underline that Russia's activities serve the Kremlin's long-term objectives:

- **Make Russia great again:** This objective includes a return to Russia's historical realm that includes, at the very least, Belarus and Ukraine. This is a frontal attack on the international order as well as neighbouring countries' sovereignty. According to the Russian worldview, only great powers are fully sovereign. In the Kremlin's thinking, this implies a natural given right to territorial demands (as in the current war in Ukraine), spheres of influence over neighbouring countries, and to dictate the European security order, exemplified by the list of demands for Eastern and Northern Europe that Russia issued to NATO in December 2021.¹³⁰
- **Regime survival:** For Putin and his inner circle of elites, the idea of a threatening West has long prevailed in the Kremlin corridors. Consequently, ideas that we in the West take for granted, such as human rights, democracy, accountability of power and rule of law, are perceived as existential threats to the power structure Putin has built.

In order to secure its power, the Kremlin ruling elite fortifies itself with authoritarian, and increasingly totalitarian, rule, and exports the image of Russia as a conservative and traditional alternative to the 'decadent' Western values. In this worldview, a successful, democratic and European Ukraine, is a direct threat to the regime.

These goals lead Russia to pursue the following strategies:

- Breaking down the respect of a rules-based order and the European Security order based on the Helsinki act of 1975.¹³¹ This would mean a return to a "Congress of Vienna"-Europe and the end of the UN and OSCE as we know them.¹³²
- Not only ending NATO-enlargement, but also reversing it by undermining and finally breaking the credibility of NATO's article 5 and thus the alliance's collective deterrence.
- Breaking the transatlantic link by getting the US to leave Europe, which would render Europe practically undefended in the short term.
- Undermining the European Union as a functioning political bloc.
- Undermining democracy in EU-countries and contributing to its replacement by more authoritarian regimes, like in Hungary and recently increasingly also Slovakia.

For all the Nordic and Baltic countries, their political systems and memberships in NATO and/or the EU, in addition to being neighbouring countries to Russia, mean they likely are perceived as potential or existing threats to Moscow's national interests. The various memberships in key organisations of the European security architecture, how-

129 Supo, "The Threat of Russian Intelligence and Malign Influence Remains Elevated in Finland" (Finnish Security and Intelligence Service, March 26, 2024), <https://supo.fi/en/-/the-threat-of-russian-intelligence-and-malign-influence-remains-elevated-in-finland>; Säkerhetspolisen, "The Swedish Security Service 2023 – 2024" (Säkerhetspolisen, 2024), <https://sakerhetspolisen.se/ovriga-sidor/other-languages/english-engelska/press-room/swedish-security-services-annual-assesments/the-security-service-2023-24/threats-and-vulnerabilities.html>.

130 Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber and Tom Balmforth, "Russia Demands NATO Roll Back from East Europe and Stay out of Ukraine," *Reuters*, December 17, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-unveils-security-guarantees-says-western-response-not-encouraging-2021-12-17/>.

131 OSCE, "Conference on Security and Co-Operation in Europe Final Act Helsinki 1975," August 1, 1975, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/c/39501.pdf>.

132 Randall Lesaffer, "The Congress of Vienna (1814–1815)," *Oxford Public International Law*, n.d., <https://opil.ouplaw.com/page/477>.

ever, adds layers of protection forcing Russia to find ways to circumvent and challenge NATO's deterrence and the EU's political cohesion.¹³³ Due to the loss of Russian economic, diplomatic and political influence, it is likely that we will see increased hybrid activities, potentially in concert with military activities (exercises, posturing, and signalling). The difficulties on European leaders' part to respond effectively to such actions creates a permissive environment for Russia.

It is crucial for the Nordic and Baltic countries to be resilient enough to absorb the attacks and to endure the Russian threat in the long run. At the same time, it is increasingly important also to take action and to build deterrence to counter the Russian attacks proactively. NATO's European deterrence and defence concept should be widened to include also countering and responding to below-threshold hybrid threats. Lessons learned from countries such as Ukraine and Moldova should be integrated into such work and adapted to region-specific vulnerabilities.

Hybrid threats exploit weaknesses within societies and between Western countries. Furthermore, in Russian thinking it is also an activity that can be applied persistently across the peace-war spectrum. It is therefore essential to build structures that are able to track and if possible, preemptively deter Russia in the hybrid area. A first step is to understand the scope and speed inherent in hybrid challenges and provide an overview that enables accurate analyses of the situation. Thus communication and cooperation between domestic departments and intelligence agencies as well as between the Nordic and Baltic countries needs to be enhanced to a deeper extent than today. Especially as we share the same geography and a lot of Russia's activities likely are coordinated to weaken the region as a whole. This will require the introduction of a new security culture that fully understands the complex and comprehensive threat picture in the wider Nordic-Baltic region. This also means accepting that hybrid threats are not theoretical or negligible, but part of a war that has been ongoing for a long time below the threshold of armed conflict. The cases in this

brief illustrate the variety of methods through which this warfare is conducted.

The examples from the Nordic-Baltic region underline the value of collecting and sharing information in order to achieve a greater situational awareness of Russian activity below the threshold of armed conflict encompassing the whole region. It is crucial that the Nordic and Baltic countries increase their capability to uphold deterrence by denial. This requires achieving a sufficient level of resilience to dilute the effect of the attacks (to the point of rendering them counter-effective) and having the capability to meet an attack with a tactical counteroffensive that degrades the aggressor's capability to inflict harm. This can be done by strengthening laws and regulations (e.g. example of strategic property purchases), building societal resilience and media literacy (in schools, at the workplace and among the elderly population), and building monitoring hubs.

Another tool is deterrence by punishment. The aggressor should know that e.g. a successful cyber attack has tangible consequences. The response can be asymmetric but still effective, e.g. in the form of sanctions on the responsible individuals.¹³⁴ In all of the above cases, it is important to have appropriate responses ready: be it holding the aggressor and its cronies accountable politically, diplomatically, and economically; as individuals or legal entities, or, if more advantageous, choosing the option of non-attribution.

Lessons to be learned for the Nordic and Baltic countries

Although the hybrid threats first and foremost must be dealt with on the national level, the nature of the threat means that the best strategy includes a concerted effort with like-minded allies. The EU and NATO levels are crucial in many ways, but the larger organisations are often slowed down by unanimous decision-making and long processes. Sometimes a more swift response is needed. Strategically, after Finland and Sweden's NATO accession, the Arctic and Baltic sub-regions have become one oper-

133 Karen-Anna Eggen, "Designing around NATO's Deterrence: Russia's Nordic Information Confrontation Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2024, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2024.2332328>.

134 An example where the UK used similar methods was the Salisbury novichok poisoning of the Scripals in 2018 when more than 150 Russian intelligence officers with diplomatic passports were expelled from 30 countries.

ational area. The NB8 format, including the eight Nordic and Baltic countries, can offer a suitable framework for facilitating such consultations and coordination if utilised more effectively.

In order for the NB8-countries to meet hybrid threats with an improved situational awareness and in a coordinated way, we propose a permanent NB8-mechanism of alerting each other of incidents and creating awareness of patterns. This mechanism may also be used to build a capacity to inflict costs on the aggressor that are higher than one country could achieve on its own.

This could be done on different levels:

1. Public attribution of the hostile state and its tools in a joint NB8-declaration. A transparency tracker keeping tabs on the activities and tools of the hostile state as part of a joint NB8-declaration on fighting hybrid threats would add value.
2. Deterrence by punishment: Promise of symmetric or asymmetric collective counter-actions to make such activity too costly to execute.
3. Deterrence by denial: Collective resilience and security measures in order to degrade the possibility and/or effect of hybrid attacks and the tools involved.

To begin with, the NB8-mechanism could be coordinated by the country holding the rotating chairmanship. This country is responsible for holding meetings on a regular basis with hybrid-ambassadors from the NB8-countries. In case of an ongoing attack any ambassador could call for a meeting to inform others and coordinate a response. If the attack is deemed more severe this could lead to meetings with concerned ministers (which minister(s) depends on what field the attack occurs in) or even on the prime minister level.

With time, a more permanent coordination mechanism with resources to analyse and prepare responses could be discussed. Because of the varied nature of hybrid threats and the strategic importance, we advise that if the mechanism becomes permanent it is tied directly to the offices of the sitting prime ministers or presidents instead of being delegated to a ministry (e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence or Ministry of Justice).

Furthermore, since many of the communication platforms and strategic sectors vulnerable to hybrid interference are owned and governed by private actors, not the government, the private sector needs to be connected to the mechanism. Incorporating the private sector (e.g., national confederations of business and enterprises) is important from a total defence perspective.

The first step is to establish the mechanism and ensure it is managed by relevant instances in the respective countries, then private sector points of contact should be included. The private sector inclusion can serve as a feeding mechanism, i.e. they provide data on the activity they are victims of or observe, but also as a learning mechanism for how to protect themselves/understand what we are facing. Since hybrid threats present a whole-of-society threat, a whole-of-society approach is needed in response. This is a well-established understanding in the Nordic total defence concept.

A functioning NB8-mechanism would also strengthen EU and NATO in the field of hybrid threats, as it can facilitate other allies acting together with the NB8 countries in an inclusive fashion and more swiftly, while actions on EU and NATO level are being processed. Here the format JEF, Joint Expeditionary Force, which is a UK-led Northern European multi-national military partnership for rapid responses and expeditionary operations, could offer a natural venue for closer cooperation. This development seems to be already underway.

The hybrid threats are real, severe and defence against them can not wait. Urgency must be the watchword.

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ABOUT SFWF

The think tank *Stockholm Free World Forum* (SFWF) was founded in 2011 to stimulate a vibrant discussion on which ideas and perspectives of liberty should determine Swedish foreign and security policy. SFWF champions individual liberty and believes this is a fundamental right that transcends national borders, religious faith, age, gender and ethnicity. We believe in free societies, free individuals, free markets and rule based international order. We also believe this is best defended in cooperation between democracies, through EU, NATO and other formats.

This report is presented in SFWF:s framework Center for Influence and Disinformation Analysis, CIDA, which has the aim of increasing the knowledge of influence operations and subversive actions by authoritarian regimes targeting political decision making as well as civil society, think tanks, business, the defence sector, media etc. The purpose of CIDA is to increase the resilience of free and democratic societies.

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