

Russia's Annexation of Crimea and Security Implications for the Baltic States

- Muhammad Javed** PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science & International Relations, Qurtuba University of Science & IT, Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.
- Nazim Rahim** Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science & International Relations, Qurtuba University of Science & IT, Peshawar, KP, Pakistan. Email: mnazimrahim@qurtuba.edu.pk
- Assad Mehmood Khan** PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science & International Relations, Qurtuba University of Science & IT, Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

Abstract

This article discusses Russia's annexation of Crimea and its security implications for the Baltic States. The study exclusively examines two considerable impacts of the Russian annexation of Crimea, in term of its Compatriots and Hybrid warfare strategies on the security of the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) through qualitative and descriptive analysis. It discusses Russia's Compatriot policy which was behind this annexation, and how this policy is an essential tool of the Kremlin against the Baltic States using their large portion of the population comprised of ethnic Russians. The paper finds that Russia annexed Crimea due to its geostrategic importance. Each of the three Baltic States also has strategic significance for the Russian Federation. In this sense, Russia's aggressive policies are becoming a great challenge for the security of the three States. This instant study highlights the security implications of the Russian annexation of Crimea for the Baltic States in a descriptive-analytical way.

Key Words:

Compatriots, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Security, Hybrid Warfare

Introduction

On March 16, 2014, after Russia's military occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, a hurriedly prepared and widely contentious referendum was held, and two days later, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Crimean leaders in Moscow signed the accession treaty (BBC News, 2014). Analysts noted that this was the first annexation of neighbouring countries on the European continent since World War II. The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and further taking part in the war in eastern Ukraine have caused a deep fear in the capitals of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. After acquiring NATO's membership in 2004, Baltic States felt threatened by the Kremlin and alleged Russia for violating their air space and conducting military drills near their borders. Since the Crimean annexation, Russia is conducting an increased number of military exercises on the borders of the Baltic States. It, for instance, began its largest military exercise in 2015, with some 95,000 Russian forces participated in these military drills (Solovjova, 2016).

In 2004, when the Baltic States were granted NATO and EU memberships, it was widely believed that the security concerns of these states have also been resolved forever regarding Moscow's hegemonic and strategic advantages in the Baltics. Contrary to this, as the Crimean Peninsula has been considered vital for Russia for centuries, the Baltic region and especially the three Baltic Republics have also been considered important for the Russian Empire. The reason behind this geostrategic importance of the Baltic countries' is their ice-free ports and windows towards the west. These ports have been the targets of Russian expansionist designs since the time of Peter the Great (Grigas, 2014). When the Russian armed forces surrounded the eastern and southern borders of Ukraine, many observers asserted that the Baltic States have reason to worry. No doubt, on the one hand, as a member of NATO, the Baltic States were enjoying the article V of NATO, which was providing guarantees of security challenges that were not the case for Ukraine. But on the other hand, some factors were becoming dreadful for the Baltic republics as Moscow's ability to launch shadow wars in Ukraine, Russia's increasing military activity in the Baltic region, and Vladimir Putin's insistence on protecting Russian 'compatriots' abroad. These were all major challenges for the security of the Baltic States.

Literature Review

Russia's security threats to the Baltic States have prompted many scholars to conduct extensive research on the aggressive policies adopted by the former towards the latter. Vilson (2015) argues in his article, titled "The Foreign Policy of the Baltic States and the Ukrainian Crisis: A Case of Europeanization? New Perspectives" that the Baltic countries especially feel that the Kremlin's assertiveness after the Crimean annexation has become the greatest challenge for their security since the restoration of independence in 1991. He further elaborates that these states have drafted different strategies to relieve their security headaches. Their policies reflect not only their concerns about Ukraine but their security concerns as well, especially after the Crimean crisis. Vilson (2015) further opines that Lithuania was the only one of the three countries that even agreed to provide military assistance to Ukraine.

Scholars believe that the annexation of Crimea has strengthened and emboldened Russian and that it could annex other peripheries in the region as well. For Tsygankov (2015), since the Crimean seizure, the Russian foreign policy has been changed diametrically in terms of adopting the attitude of revivalism, racism and nationalism. Tsygankov (2015) argues that Moscow's strategy could become more aggressive, and it could seize more territories in the region.

Like Tsygankov, Mearsheimer (2014) also holds the view that the Crimean occupation by Russia was a long-held ambition of the latter, especially for the revivalism of the previously existing Russian Empire in the region. Mearsheimer (2014) furthers this debate and concludes that Moscow could expand its strategy of annexing regional peripheries, especially entire Ukraine and other Eastern European countries. He believes that the ouster of the Ukrainian President V. Yanukovich in February 2014 provided Putin with an excuse to occupy part of Ukraine.

For Sleivyte (2008), the Russian Federation is changing its due to the trend and transformation in global politics, especially with regard to the balance of power in the polycentric world order. The author elaborates that Russia wants to accumulate more power through expanding its zone of influence for acquiring more power and for using this strategy as a tool to balance other global powers like the United States. She further explains that such Russian domination would make the Baltic States a geopolitical shield against the United States and other Western countries.

For McNabb (2016), the Russian expansionist behaviour has forced the Baltic States and other former Soviet Republics to reconsider their relations with Russia and reshuffle their defence strategies. According to McNabb, Russia's neighboring states are changing their strategies, and they are preparing to strengthen their defenses. The author further argues that Russian aggression is not a new phenomenon in the countries of Northern Europe, but Russian provocations have intensified since the end of the cold war.

For some scholars, Russia is supporting its ex-compatriots, especially for consolidating its aggressive policy, in terms of the revivalism of the Russian Empire and its expansionist designs. RAND (2017), the U.S. global policy think tank opines that Moscow is financially supporting pro-Russian groups across the Baltic Sea, especially through its "Compatriot's Policy". RAND explains that Latvia and Estonia home many Russians, some of whom are used by the former as a source for advancing its aggressive policy. An important example, which RAND highlights, is the Latvian Harmony Party. This party was backed by ethnic Russians living in Latvia, has contacts with the Russian government, RAND mentions.

Dovile (2016) in his study *Changes in Security Policy and Perceptions of the Baltic States 2014 – 2016*, provided a detailed critical analysis of the dynamics of the security thinking in the Baltic States. His article addressed the major changes in the security policy of the Baltic republics and argued that these shifts in policies could be felt in security parameters. He said that the security policies' discourse of the Baltic States was accelerated after the Crimean crisis. The author also argued that the Baltic States recently tried to convince their allies to show the real danger coming from Russia and pressurize them to act decisively and take some concrete measures.

Some more scholars have also discussed potential threats posed by Russia. For example, Radin (2017) argued that after Russia took covert operations and eventually annexed Crimea and supported the separatist rebellion in eastern Ukraine, many policymakers and analysts expressed concern about Russia's use of "hybrid warfare". Radin (2017) opines that the Baltic States are too weak and helpless in the face of Russia's aggressive strategy. Highlighting the weakness of the Baltic States, the author argues that although Estonia and Latvia are NATO member countries, these countries share their borders with the Russian Federation, and the large part of the population of these states is the Russian minority. Hence, the Russian government could easily use the populous of these states for acquiring its geostrategic objectives. The author sheds light on the methods that Russia could use against the Baltic States in terms of either using its 'compatriots' or its covert means for achieving its goals of seizing territories. These tactics could also weaken the reaction of NATO and the European Union in the region.

In a broader context, Antczak and Śliwa (2018) provide a deeper understanding of the security environment of the Baltic countries and their study of Security dilemmas of the Baltic region by discussing the security and geostrategy of the Baltic States. The authors point out that Russia could easily attack these states because of its

geostrategic location. Although the NATO membership of these states strengthens their defence to some extent, in the face of cyber-attacks, it would not provide any desirable support to them. The authors further elaborate that Russia will continue its aggressive strategy, putting pressure on the individual states and the NATO alliance to achieve its goals, but the situation in the Baltic States will remain complicated in the years to come.

The article tries to find out answers to the following questions:

What is the strategic importance of the Crimea and Baltic States for Russia?

What are the main security challenges posed by Russia to the Baltic States?

Why the annexation of Crimea has significance for the Baltic States in their security perspective?

Why are Crimea and Baltic States Significant for Russia?

Crimea

The reasons for Russia's annexation of Crimea should be analyzed to better understand the importance of Baltic countries. More precisely, the first reason Putin emphasized the rationality of the merger is that Crimea is a historical land of Russia and occupies a special place in the history and culture of Russia. In his annual address to the Federal Assembly on December 4, 2014, Putin declared that Crimea holds phenomenal importance for the Russian Federation and that the Russian people have a special attachment with this peninsula. For the Russian nation, Crimea is sacrosanct. Just as some places are sacred for the Muslims and Christians, so is Crimea sacred for Russians (President of Russia, 2014).

Crimea has strategic importance for Russia as a base for the Russian Navy. The Black Sea Fleet has been stationed there since its establishment by Prince Portkinkin in 1783. The fleet's strategic position helped Russia to defeat Georgia in the 2008 South Ossetian War and remains vital to Russia's security interest in the Mediterranean and beyond. More than 60 percent of the population of Crimea are Russian-speakers, with the rest made up of Ukrainian speakers and Tartars (Pleshakv, 2017).

Baltic States

Because of the geopolitical importance of the Baltic States, especially of the Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, these states hold special importance for Russia, the United States and its Western allies. These are the states through which both Russia and the United States could extend their influence in the region. Historically, Russia had taken several steps to reintegrate the Baltic States into the Russian "Empire" or at least to bring them under Russian influence. Russia has consistently pursued a strategy of bringing the Baltic region under its control, and in 1721, The Russian tsar, Peter I (the Great), occupied the territories of Estonia and Latvia (Vakar, 1943). The Baltic region was of great economic and geographical importance to the Soviet Union. The region was valuable for USSR's economy because electric motors, machinery, radio receivers, and other industrial products were manufactured here. Latvia was a major player in the production of radio receivers for the Soviet Union (Vardys, 1966).

Apart from the geopolitical importance of the Baltic States, the region also holds geopolitical importance for the Russian Federation. To mention, the location of Crimea could facilitate Russia for advancing its geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics in both the rimland and heartland areas. Therefore, this region has always attracted the attention of the Russians since the time of Peter the Great (Military, 2011). Retrospectively, Russia has long been used the ports of the Baltic States for the shipments of petroleum and other products to Europe (Grigas, 2014). To conclude, these countries hold cultural, political, strategic, and economic importance for Russia.

Russia's Hybrid Warfare and its Implications for the Baltic States

Hybrid warfare is an emerging but uncertain concept. It refers to the use of unconventional methods as part of a multi-domain combat method. These methods are designed to disrupt and weaken the opponent's actions without conducting open hostilities. Although this concept is quite new, its impact and results usually remained in media headlines during the Russia-Ukraine crisis in 2014. Russia's strategy towards Ukraine is an example of such warfare. It involves various activities, including false information, economic manipulation, use of proxies and rebellion, political pressure, and armed operations (Fridman, 2018).

Russia used information warfare in the 2008 Georgian war and the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, and it has been Russia's successful strategy. The Baltic States have had to deal with Moscow's information warfare. Russia seeks to gain geostrategic benefits by adopting such a strategy and turning the public opinion of these countries in its favor. Because the three states have been part of the USSR, Russia shares borders with them, and they are also members of NATO and the European Union, and also a large part of the population of Estonia and Latvia is Russian, in such a case, Moscow believes that the Baltic region is an area on which the success or failure of NATO and the US depends. This region could disrupt trans-Atlantic and EU reunification, and any weakness in the Baltic countries

will serve the Kremlin's propaganda, and false propaganda activities would be evidence of the failure of the European Union and NATO at the national and international levels.

Cyber-warfare is a new tool in the Hybrid Warfare toolkit, which, an American general says, is used when cyber capabilities are intended to be used in or through cyberspace. According to him, in such operations, computer network activities are used to operate and defend the international information grid (Cartwright, 2013). As far as Russia's strategy in the Baltic region is concerned, it has often used proxies, cyber-attacks, and other such methods to provoke pro-Russian people (Russian compatriots) in these states and to create political and ethnic tensions in the Baltic States (Bugajski, 2004; Commercio, 2009; Schulze, 2010; Nielsen & Paabo, 2015;). According to officials of the Baltic countries, they have been subverted by Russian propaganda, cyber-attacks, and other non-violent means for decades (Radin, 2017).

Many analysts believe that Russia may seek some actions to control the foreign policy of its neighbors and hope to challenge the influence of the European Union and NATO while avoiding the possibility of a military conflict with NATO. To achieve these targets, Kremlin may adopt strategies to influence the internal politics of the Baltic States, to provoke internal dissatisfaction, or could plan to assist Russia's compatriots loyal to Moscow in taking over the legitimately elected governments of the region while denying its role in any such activities (Schulze, 2010; Conley & Gerber, 2011; Kallas, 2016).

Russian Compatriot Policies and Challenges for the Baltic States

In a remark often quoted out of context, Putin (2005) described the collapse of the Soviet Union as a 'major geopolitical disaster of the century' (Pieper, 2018). The collapse suddenly threw millions of ethnic Russians outside the borders of the Russian Federation. Russian-speaking people were displaced. Russia's compatriot policies are formally aimed at protecting the political, economic, and military rights and interests of Russian citizens living in nearby countries but has served Russia's territorial expansionism in the past. Moscow justified its annexation of Crimea because of protecting ethnic Russians there. Many analysts have the opinion that Russia's compatriot policies meant to acquire foreign territories, as has been the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008 (Toal, 2017). These compatriot policies can be regarded as part of Putin's new military doctrine, which seeks to acquire strategic aims in the former Soviet Republic, especially where there is an ethnic Russian population living. These policies were designed in Putin's first presidential term in 2000 (Grigas, 2014).

An effective strategy related to these policies is to grant Russian citizenship to Russian foreign nationals to better protect their interests. Russia's national security strategy stresses that compatriots are an important tool for achieving Russia's foreign policy objectives. Article 61 of the Russian Constitution promises: "The Russian Federation shall guarantee the defense and sponsorship of its citizens beyond its borders." In other words, Russia shall protect any Russian citizen who has been abused outside Russia. Throughout Russia's neighborhood, one can observe that the compatriot policies have helped Russia's foreign policy objectives and territorial expansionist designs. Before the war between Georgia and Russia in 2008, Georgia had been seeking to establish friendly ties with the Western world and wanted to maintain a distance from Kremlin. At the same time, Moscow granted citizenship to residents of the separatist Georgian territory of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Therefore, "Protection of Russian Citizens" becomes one of the main motivations for fighting Georgia in 2008. Putin validates his aggressive actions in Georgia and Ukraine by asserting Article 61's mandate to defend Russian citizens. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, "We are talking here about the protection of our citizens and compatriots, about the protection of the most fundamental of the human rights — the right to live — and nothing more" (Treimam, Bunkis, & Navarrette, 2014).

The Baltic countries have many factors that are conducive to Russia's "compatriot policy" as the large number of Russian speakers living on the Russian border. There are particularly many Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia, accounting for 24% and 27% of the total population, respectively, while Lithuania's Russian population is just below 6% (Larrabee F., et al., 2017). Russian speakers in Latvia account for almost 34% of the total population, of Lithuania Russian speakers account for 15%, while Estonia's Russian speakers may be as high as 30. Over the past few decades, Russia has increased its efforts to maintain political, economic, and social ties with Baltic Russians and Russian speakers. In the Baltic countries, there are many cultures, trade, and other organizations, oriented by Russian locals and Russian speakers (Grigas, 2014).

There is any kind of distrust found in ethnic Russians and Russian speaking people in the Baltic States; Russia could use the dissatisfaction of Russian speakers in the Baltic countries as an excuse for military intervention. Russia could try to use the same irregular strategies as it used in Eastern Ukraine, encouraging separatist movements between Russians and Russian speakers in Estonia and Latvia. Instead of seeking to develop a large-scale uprising, Russia could seek to seize a small amount of Estonian or Latvian territory populated by ethnic Russians and Russian

speaking people. These tactics could be used as an excuse to protect the Russian population from being treated unfairly (Larrabee F. , et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The wide variety of both academic and military studies examining the current security atmosphere in the Baltic region after the annexation of Crimea is a clear clue that everybody is worried about the possibility that the Baltics could be the next region where Russia might intensify the conflict with NATO in the coming years. Ukrainian crisis in 2014 and ultimately annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine undoubtedly produced a sense of insecurity in Central and Eastern European countries. By annexing a part of the territory of a sovereign country, generating a separatist movement in another part of that state, Russia has become the region's most important threat, and security concern resulted in various security measures have been taken against it unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral. Many observers think that no other states have felt and still feel more threatened and vulnerable than the three Baltic States - Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Baltic States Estonia and Latvia are most concerned about Russian long scale conventional attack because of their long common borders with Russia and also with the expansion of Russia's hybrid threat, especially considering the large Russian-speaking population living in Latvia and Estonia. On the other hand, Lithuanian more focused on the threat of Russian attacks from Belarus and Kaliningrad. But all these Russian aggression scenarios revolve around Russia's compatriot and hybrid warfare policies and strategies, which are considered major challenges for the security of the Baltic States.

References

- Antczak, A., & Śliwa, Z. (2018). Security dilemmas of the Baltic region. *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne*(3), 119-134.
- BBC News. (2014). World. BBC News: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26630062>
- Bugajski, J. (2004). Cold Peace: Russia's New Imperialism. *Center for Strategic and International Studies*.
- Cartwright, J. E. (2013). Joint Terminology for Cyberspace Operations. JCS Memorandum with Cyberspace Operations Lexicon. U.S. *Department of Defense*. May 24, 2020, <https://publicintelligence.net/dod-joint-cyber-terms/>
- Commercio, M. (2009). Emotion and Blame in Collective Action: Russian Voice in Kyrgyzstan and Latvia. *Political Science Quarterly*, 124(3), 489-512. doi:10.1002/j.1538-165X.2009.tb00657.x
- Conley, H., & Gerber, T. (2011). Russian Soft Power in the 21st Century. CSIS.
- Fridman, O. (2018). Russia's hybrid Warfare: Resurgence and Politicization. New York: *Oxford University Press*.
- Grigas, A. (2014). May 23, 2020, Euractiv: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/opinion/the-eu-s-unsresolved-issue-of-the-russian-embargo-against-lithuania-s-oil-refinery/>
- Griga, A. (2015). May 23, 2020, foreign Policy Research Institute: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2015/12/russias-motives-in-the-baltic-states/>
- Grigas, A. (2014). CNN: <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/03/02/opinion/grigas-putin-compatriot-policy-crimea/index.html>
- Grigas, A. (2014). Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper No. 14/05. Russia-Baltic Relations After Crimea's Annexation: *Cicero Foundation*.
- Jakniunaite, D. (2016). Changes in Security Policy and perceptions of the Baltic States 2014-2016. *Journal on Baltic Security*, 2(1). doi:10.1515/jobs-2016-0041
- Kallas, K. (2016). Claiming the Diaspora: Russia's Compatriot Policy and its Reception by Estonian-Russian Population. *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 15(3), 1-25.
- Larrabee, F., Pezard, S., Radin, A., Chandler, N., Crane, K., & Szayna, T. (2017). Russia and the west after the Ukrainian Crisis: European Vulnerabilities to Russian pressures. RAND Corporation, *Santa Monica*,
- McNabb, D. (2016). Vladimir Putin and Russia's Imperial Revival. New York: *CRC Press Taylor & Francis Group*.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2014). Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5).
- Military. (2011). May 23, 2020, Globalsecurity.org: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/warm-water-port.htm>
- Nielsen, K., & Paabo, H. (2015). How Russian Soft Power Fails in Estonia: Or, Why the Russophone Minorities Remain Quiescent. *Journal on Baltic Security*, 1(15). doi:10.1515/jobs-2016-002
- Pieper, M. (2018). Russkiy Mir: The Geopolitics of Russian compatriots Abroad. *Geopolitics*. doi:10.1080/14650045.2018.1465047
- Pleshakv, C. (2017). The Crimean Nexus: Putins War and the Clash of Civilizations. London: *Yale University Press*.
- President of Russia. (2014). Events. November 13, 2019, President of Russia: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>
- Radin, A. (2017). Hybrid warfare in the Baltics: Threats and potential responses. RAND Corporation, *Santa Monica, Calif.*
- Schulze, J. (2010). Playing the compatriot card in Estonia and Latvia: School reform and the bronze soldier crisis. *APSA*.
- Sleivyte, J. (2008). Russia's European Agenda and the Baltic States.
- Solovjova, J. (2016). Feature/Europe. Aljazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/07/russia-threat-baltic-states-160707054916449.html>
- The RAND Corporation. (2017). Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare" and What Can be Done About It. *Santa Monica*.
- Toal, G. (2017). Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus . New York: *Oxford University Press*.

- Treiman, J., Bunkis, J., & Navarrette, D. (2014). Vladimir Putin's shopping list: Which country could be next? *Los Angeles Times*, pp. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0424-treiman-ukraine-russia-estonia-latvia-l-20140424-story.html>.
- Tsygankov, A. (2015). Vladimir Putin's last stand: the sources of Russia's Ukraine policy. *Post-Soviet Affairs*. doi:10.1080/1060586X.2015.1005903
- Vakar, N. (1943). Russia and the Baltic States. *Russian Review*, 3(1), 45-54. doi:10.2307/125231
- Vardys, V. (1966). How the Baltic Republics Fare in the Soviet Union. *Foreign Affairs*, 44(3), 512-517. doi:10.2307/20039184
- Vilson, M. (2015). The Foreign Policy of the Baltic States and the Ukrainian Crisis: A Case of Europeanization? *New Perspectives*, 23(2), 4976.