

LATVIA'S SECURITY AND DEFENCE POST-2014

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ABSTRACT. This article takes a comprehensive look at developments in Latvia's security and defence policies since 2014. The annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the military conflict in Ukraine provided a major impetus for Latvian decision-makers to counter external and domestic threats to national security. The article discusses three key aspects of Latvia's post-2014 security and defence developments. First, it looks at the transformation of security perceptions on the policy-making level. Second, the article discusses Latvia's efforts to strengthen its military capabilities. Domestic security developments are also discussed. Third, differences between attitudes of Latvians and Russian-speakers towards a number of security and defence-related issues are presented. The article concludes that much has been done since 2014, but progress has been uneven. It will take more than just a few years to close the existing gaps in domestic and external security of Latvia.

Introduction

It has become a cliché to argue that the Baltic states' security and defence policies have been heavily affected by Russia's annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Yet, that cliché is correct. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were increasingly seen as NATO frontline allies subject to potential military and other probes by Russia (Grygiel & Mitchel 2016). The Baltic states' security perceptions have also undergone a sea change. The threat emanating from Russia was regarded primarily as political and

economic before the conflict in Ukraine. That is no longer the case. The Baltic states had to adjust their estimations of the threat posed by Russia to include a more prominent military element.

That the Baltic states had to readjust their threat assessments is a trivial statement. To state, however, that their responses to the rapidly changing security situation in Europe have been somewhat different depending on domestic and external constraints and opportunities is not trivial. This article looks at the changing security perceptions in Latvia post-2014. The changing security perceptions in Latvia are analysed across three dimensions, which largely correspond to the structure of the article. The first section looks at the policymaking level, that is, how policymakers' perceptions of security have transformed and how that has affected Latvia's security and defence policy. The second section looks at the implementation of policy decisions, that is, whether Latvia has managed to reduce some of the vulnerabilities that it arguably had even a few years ago and whether Latvia's military capabilities have increased. The third section addresses public perceptions related to Latvia's security. The article concludes that Latvia has a number of achievements in the twin realms of security and defence policy, but progress has been uneven. Military capabilities have been strengthened, and greater NATO presence has marked the shift from assurance to deterrence, but there are still gaps in terms of domestic aspects of security such as overly benign views of Russian-speakers towards Russia and a weak civil security system.

Political Decision-Makers' Security Perceptions and Policies

The annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine were definitely the two landmark events contributing to the perception of political leaders and general public in Latvia that Russia might harbour malign intentions also against its small Baltic neighbours. However, notable changes in terms of shifting security

perceptions were already well under way before the crisis in Ukraine broke out in the spring of 2014. Although most measures aimed at strengthening Latvia's defence capabilities took place in the aftermath of the fateful events in Ukraine, the origins of these decisions and their subsequent implementation are to be found well-before 2014. The single most important decision that the Latvian government has made over the past few years was the decision to increase defence spending up to 2 percent of GDP in 2018. The government made the decision in 2015, and the plan is that defence spending would increase rapidly from the low point of 1 per cent of GDP in 2015 to 1.4 percent of GDP in 2016. A further increase to 1.7 percent of GDP would take place in 2017, and the aim of 2 percent of GDP would then be reached in 2018 when the approximate value of Latvia's defence expenditures would be close to 590 million euros. This decision, however, was preceded by the State Defence Concept of May 2012 (shortly before the NATO Chicago Summit) which stipulated that Latvia would increase defence expenditures up to 2 percent of GDP by 2020 (The State Defence Concept 2012, p. 15).

The adoption of the State Defence Concept in 2012 was the result of quiet, but persuasive criticisms on the part of other NATO allies, most notably, the United States. Also, the Long-Term Development Plan of the Armed Forces of Latvia 2012-2024 was adopted in June 2012. Plan was elaborated in order to justify higher defence expenditures and also stipulate development of specific military capabilities. The main reason why Latvia did not spend more on defence at the time was the obvious necessity to recover from the economic crisis that reduced Latvia's GDP by almost a quarter. It also affected armed forces harshly in 2009 when the budget dropped by 44 per cent, damaging the military personnel system (480 military persons retired), and putting on hold various modernization projects such as mechanization of land forces (Romanovs 2016, p. 122). However, on a conceptual level,

the idea that Latvia would have to spend more on defence had already taken hold before 2014.

Considering the fact that other sectors (e.g. education, health care) had also seen considerable budgetary cuts during the economic downturn, the decision to increase defence spending was at risk because there would be two parliamentary elections between 2012 and 2020. The Ukraine crisis in 2014 spring was a game changer in this respect, forcing political parties to start implementing defence-related documents which were adopted in earlier years. As of October 2016, there are no indications that the current government would not be ready to live up to its commitments regarding defence expenditures, although there is a possibility that future defence budgets might be smaller because of slower economic growth. Thus, Latvia would meet its NATO obligation to spend at least 2 percent of GDP on defence, but its gross domestic product would be smaller than envisaged in real terms.

There have also been other, more subtle, changes. Three perceptual shifts have taken place since the outbreak of the military conflict in Ukraine. First, much of the thinking about security of Latvia rested upon the assumption that stability in the Baltic region was largely a function of the following factors. NATO military superiority was such that Russia would not dare to openly challenge sovereignty and territorial integrity of any NATO member state. Furthermore, Russia would be deterred from military aggression because it would not be willing to break international norms. Also, Russia was seen as being unwilling to create instability on its western flank which would have detrimental effects on its security and economic interests. Thus, the specific balance of forces in the Baltic region did not matter, and the military capabilities of Latvia and both of its Baltic neighbours were also of secondary importance. An increase in military expenditures of the Baltic states or NATO presence in the Baltic region would likely have a destabilizing effect because the

prevalent view was that stability in the Baltic region would be best preserved through absence, rather than presence, of NATO. Although the basic elements of this view could still be correct, the thinking within Latvia and NATO more broadly has changed. The current assumption is that stability in the Baltic region (and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe) rests on the twin pillars of presence of NATO troops and boosting of military capabilities of the frontline NATO member states. This rationale does not ask for parity in terms of military balance between NATO and Russia, as that is still regarded as too provocative and politically unrealistic, but the notion of ‘more NATO’ and ‘more capabilities’ is increasingly seen as a precondition for stability in the Baltic region, Latvia included. In short, Latvia and other NATO member states have largely embraced the notion of deterrence as the basis for stability in the Baltic region.

Second, the idea that a more substantial military presence of other NATO member states is needed and that Latvia would have to develop sizable military capabilities for deterrence to work, has necessitated the discussion about the particular military capabilities that Latvia would need to develop. This issue is closely related to that of specific military contingencies that Latvia would need to prepare in the coming years. These contingencies range from relatively unproblematic potential attempts by Russia to cultivate separatism in parts of Latvia that have sizable Russian speaking minority communities to more dangerous contingencies that include a full-scale military invasion. Although Latvia’s political decision-makers have time and again emphasized that the risk of a military aggression against Latvia is low, it is something that the Latvian military has to prepare for. The choices related to development of specific military capabilities are addressed in the following section. Here, it would suffice to say that some of these choices are clearly discomfoting because Latvia is facing a potential adversary that has multiple military and other options

that it can use against its smaller neighbours. Also, taking into account that the baseline for Latvia in developing certain military capabilities has been rather low, the issue of costs and timing of acquisitions have been a particularly sensitive subject. Although the Latvian government has tried to project the image that it knows which capabilities it needs to develop and what specific military equipment it needs to procure, doubts have been expressed whether particular types of military equipment are suited for Latvia's needs, as evidenced by the heated exchange between the opposition member of parliament Mr. Andrejs Elksniņš and Defence Minister Mr. Raimonds Bergmanis regarding the purchase of armoured combat vehicles from the United Kingdom (Elksniņš 05 August 2016; Bergmanis 07 September 2016).

Third, much of the debate about security and defence post-2014 has been about domestic security. The discussion which largely began as an attempt to assess the extent of Russia's influence in Latvia in terms of soft power, has added over the past years some notable hard power elements. On the positive side, the understanding of the Russian speaking part of the population has improved considerably within both policy-making and academic communities as a number of public opinion polls have been carried out in recent years. Although this subject is explored in greater detail in the third part of this article, it would suffice to say at this point that the attitudes of Latvia's Russian speakers towards various issues related to foreign and security policy and societal integration are markedly different from those of ethnic Latvians. However, even those Russian speakers who support narratives that are dominant in Russian media are unlikely to express their discontent with government's policies in a violent manner (Berzina 2016). Also, there is evidence that the Russian speaking community in Latvia is internally diverse which opens up possibilities for the government to engage in dialogue with

different parts of this community each on its own terms (Ozolins 2016).

On the negative side, it seems that Russia has become more proactive in seeking influence in Latvia through numerous NGOs which it supports financially. These efforts have been noted and discussed on all levels, that is, Russia's 'soft power', as it is usually referred to, has become the centrepiece of discussions on Russia's attempts to influence Latvia's politics and society. So far, these efforts have been only partially successful. According to the recent assessment of the Constitution Protection Bureau of the Republic of Latvia¹, Russia's compatriot policy is one of the most visible instruments of influence in Latvia, but the usefulness of this instrument has been limited, as it 'allows Russia to manipulate a few individuals and organizations, not all Russian speakers residing in Latvia' (Constitution Protection Bureau 2016, p. 6). The report also takes note of Russia's concerted activities in the information space. The key aim in this respect is to undermine public confidence in NATO security guarantees (Constitution Protection Bureau 2016, p. 5). Notable studies on Russia's soft power in Latvia and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe have been published by the Centre for East European Policy Studies (Kudors (ed.) 2016; Kudors (ed.) 2014a; Kudors 2014b; Pelnens 2010) and the Latvian Institute of International Affairs (Rostoks & Sprūds 2015). There has also been an interest in the extent to which Russia has economic leverage in Latvia (Sprūds 2012). The debate about the extent of Russia's influence in Latvia is far from over, but the key conclusion thus far has been that Russia's attempts to influence the domestic politics and foreign policy of Latvia have backfired, that is, they have for the most part alienated the ethnic

¹ The Constitution Protection Bureau (SAB) was founded in 1995. It is one of the three state security and intelligence services in Latvia, the other two being the Latvian Security Police (DP) and the Defence Intelligence and Security Service (MIDD).

Latvian part of the population while having little effect on government's policies. It should be mentioned though that Russian speakers in Latvia have largely sympathetic views of Russia. Thus, Russia's soft power works with regard to the Russian speakers, but it has limited appeal to ethnic Latvians.

One issue, however, has been conspicuously absent from the domestic debate. Latvia abolished conscription in 2006 shortly after joining NATO, but a broader discussion in Latvia on whether conscription should be reintroduced has been missing. In contrast, Estonia did not abolish conscription, and it has been recently reintroduced by Lithuania. Although the security environment in Europe has changed since 2014, Latvia's defence officials have stated on numerous occasions that Latvia does not need to reinstate conscription and cannot afford to do so even if it wanted to. Latvia's Defence Chief Raimonds Graube has pointed out that there is not feasible to renew conscription because "it would require huge budget allocation and re-investments in infrastructure" (The Baltic Times, 6 April 2016). Public opinion is split on this issue with 47 percent of respondents in favour of reintroducing conscription and 43 percent against. It is important to note though that the younger generation who are most likely to be affected if conscription is reintroduced are not enthusiastic about it (SKDS 2016c). Also, one third of the respondents note that military knowledge and skills should be acquired through the National Guard where participation is voluntary (SKDS 2014). All in all, the thinking on security and defence in Latvia has changed drastically over the past years. There is much more emphasis now on stronger self-defence capabilities, greater presence of troops from other NATO member states in Latvia, and domestic security. However, Latvia's decision-makers have not gone as far as to reintroduce conscription.

Developments in Latvia's defence system

Developments in Latvia's defence system have largely been a function of perceptions of Russia's capabilities and intentions. Participation in international operations was the main pillar of Latvia's defence strategy during the first decade of membership of NATO and the EU because Russia was perceived as a concern but not a real threat. Latvia regarded participation in international operations as a convenient way to demonstrate its commitment to collective defence and to gain experience from international operations for its armed forces (Vanaga 2013). Latvian armed forces participated in international operations and mission in the Balkans (Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Macedonia), Iraq, and Afghanistan. The most important benefits from participation were political ones that Latvia could gain within NATO. For instance, participation in international operations provided the necessary weight for political bargaining when there was a necessity to extend NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission. Continuing Latvia's contribution in mission in Afghanistan (approximately 10-14 million euros per year) even throughout the years of severe cuts in the defence sector (2009-2011) was a very important argument when the Air Policing mission was questioned or when after the Georgian-Russian war (2008) Latvia together with the other Baltic States urged NATO to come up with Baltic Contingency plans (2010). Nationally as well, participation in international operations was perceived by Latvian members of parliament as the best way to contribute to collective defence and, in case of crisis, to would receive assistance from Latvia's allies according to Article 5. This was the dominant discourse over the years encouraging policy makers in the defence sector to put under the umbrella of participation in international operations many initiatives as then there was an assurance that the funding for participation in international operations would be approved by the Parliament (Vanaga 2015).

At the same time, the over emphasis on participation in international operations has resulted in a disregard of territorial defence. Only minimal self-defence capabilities have been developed (State Defence Concepts 2008, 2012). But even this commitment stayed as a formal priority never to be materialized as there was a constant lack of financial resources (Vanaga 2013). Hence critical military capabilities for self-defence such as air defence, indirect fire support, and medical support were not developed (Romanovs, 2016). The Long-term Development Plan of the Armed Forces of Latvia 2012-2024 was an attempt to boost development of necessary military capabilities in order of priority. The plan embraced a list of 28 military capabilities: SOF, explosive ordnance disposal, combat engineering, mechanization of one infantry battalion, elements of air defence, helicopters for search and rescue, command and control of “Skrunda” class patrol ships, indirect fire support, brigade level reconnaissance and others (Ministry of Defence 19 June 2012). The implementation of the plan never entirely took place due the crisis in Ukraine in the spring of 2014 when it was clear that it should be reviewed, putting self-defence capabilities on the top of the list.

Events in Ukraine significantly shifted Latvia’s defence strategy from collective to territorial defence. The threat of Russia became so obvious that it made members of parliament review the mantra of participation in international operations as the best way to provide national security. It was concluded that Latvia, in comparison with the other two Baltic States, had the biggest shortfalls in self-defence capabilities. Besides the lack of self-defence capabilities, other areas of vulnerabilities towards Russia’s so-called hybrid warfare were identified: lack of NATO military presence in the Baltic region, inability to protect Latvia’s information space, underfunded interior security structures (Security Police, Boarder Guard etc.), weak cooperation and coordination between defence and interior sectors, and potentially

harmful effects of the presence of a large Russian-speaking minority in Latvia. In order to address these challenges in 2016 a new State Defence Concept was passed, that emphasizes the necessity to develop self-defence capabilities and work on the state's resilience (The State Defence Concept 2016).

Self-defence capabilities

The measures adopted shortly after the Ukraine crisis aimed at increasing the manpower of the Latvian armed forces by 2018. Strengthening of the National Guard, which was severely underfunded before, was an integral part of these measures. The new guidelines stipulated allocation of more than 70 million euros for development of 18 increased readiness National Guard units from all over Latvia that have obtained air defence, anti-tank, sniper, engineering, weapons of mass destruction, mortar and engineering capabilities (Ministry of Defence 29 July 2014). In order to increase the patriotism and interest of youth in defence matters, a Youth Guard Development Programme 2015-2024 was initiated with the aim to increase its membership from 6000 up to 16000 and allocating more than 2 million euros per year until 2018 to achieve this purpose (Cabinet of Ministers 10 March 2015). Also, decisions to review and reorganize the recruitment system of armed forces and to increase personnel of professional armed forces from 5000 soldiers up to 7000 were made (Vējonis 22 January 2015).

With regard to the development of military capabilities, the Long-term Development Plan of Armed Forces of Latvia 2012-2024 was reviewed and the sequence of priorities was changed. Priority was given to such critical self-defence capabilities as electronic warfare at tactical level, medium and long indirect fire support, ground based short and medium range air defence, command and control with other NATO units, anti-tank, SOF, information operations in a very broad sense and others. Development of these capabilities

has gone hand in hand with procurements. In this respect, the mechanization project was by far the most important priority. The decision to procure 123 Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance (Tracked) (CVR(T)) completely overhauled platforms from the United Kingdom was adopted in the autumn of 2014. In order to integrate CVR(T) into the armed forces structure, an appropriate battalion structure had to be established, including additional personnel and training. Latvia also procured the fourth generation man-portable fire-and-forget anti-tank guided missile systems “Spike” and a couple of hundred man-portable reusable anti-tank recoilless rifles “Carl Gustav” for strengthening anti-tank capabilities (Sargs.lv 15 October 2014). In 2015, procurement of an air defence radar system was launched. Considering the fact that air defence systems are extremely expensive, Latvia signed an agreement with Lithuania in 2016 on synchronising their efforts in defence procurement, especially with regard to medium range air defence systems (LSM 14 September 2016).

Greater NATO presence

In order to improve NATO’s ability to respond quickly in the time of crisis, development of host nation support (HNS) capabilities is regarded as one of the top priorities. The HNS package includes investments in infrastructure – developing “Lielvārde” airbase, expanding Ādaži base, building barracks, depots, training areas, ammunition storages etc.) – and command and control. In order to improve HNS capabilities, support defence planning and assist in coordinating training and exercises, it was decided at the NATO Wales Summit to establish NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU) in the three Baltic States, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. Plausibly one of the most important contributions of NFIU to the Baltic defence is to have all three NFIU of Baltic States plugged in one chain of command and control, being subordinated to the Multinational Corps Northeast (MCN) based in Szczecin, Poland. That gives NATO a better overview of the Baltic operational

theatre, exchange of information and coordination of activities and functions as another platform that enhances the Baltics States' ability to work together (Interview with representative of NFIU 13 April 2016). Another established cooperation platform for the Baltics, after years of talks led by Latvia, is that the Baltic Combined Joint Staff element in Riga will become a platform for military planners from the three Baltic States to meet 2 or 3 times a year to coordinate operational plans, share intelligence, synchronize HNS activities and to discuss strategic communication issues (Interview with representative of J5 5 April 2016).

The most visible result of the Baltic States' cooperation has been the elaboration of the joint position with Poland for the NATO Warsaw Summit asking for deployment of multinational battalions on a rotational basis in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Considering the challenges that NATO faces regarding its ability to act rapidly in the case of a crisis in the Baltic Sea region and Russia's anti-access and access denial (A2/AD) military capabilities, it was crucial to have at least a battalion-size multinational force present on the ground. Although from a military point of view this kind of force is not even close enough to counter Russia's military superiority, from a political perspective it is a significant contribution to NATO's deterrence posture. It not only demonstrates NATO's efforts to strengthen its conventional presence in the Baltic region, but also is a part of nuclear strategy as from 16 NATO member states that provide their troops for participation in multinational battalions three are nuclear powers (Lute 29 September 2016).

As of Spring 2017, Latvia will host a multinational battalion with Canada as the lead nation. Other participating countries are Spain, Italy, Slovenia and Poland. The next step that Latvia is willing to work on is for that battalion to consist of three mechanized, preferably armoured, manoeuvring companies with anti-tank (medium and long range) capabilities, indirect fire support, air

defence, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance, engineering and airlift capabilities. As discussed above, Latvia has pledged to develop some of these capabilities on its own, but it lacks both financial and personnel resources to provide all of them in the short term. Thus, it is still left for a discussion among policy makers which capabilities would be developed by Latvia itself and which could be provided by its NATO allies.

Another issue that Latvia will address are the command and control of the battalion. It is known that the battalions stationed in the Baltic states will be subordinated to MCN (Szczecin, Poland). But MCN is not a part of the NATO command and control structure itself and it is primarily centred on land force. The mandated and deriving tasks and rules of engagement are also unclear. The normative approach would be to have the force not only for the case of crisis, but it would also function as an assistance tool for training critical capabilities of national armed forces. Clear rules of engagement are very important in order to avoid Russia using activities of the battalion in its information warfare against Latvia and NATO, arguing that Russia is being provoked. Although the multinational character of the force demonstrates the solidarity among NATO member states, the effectiveness of the battalion can be a problem because of interoperability issues (especially when it comes to communication) and the strength of force in terms of manpower. Interruptions between rotations may occur. Thus, it is of great importance for Latvia to have a predictable schedule, and rotations should be “heel-to-toe” with no gaps between them.

Military exercises needs to be mentioned as well as they remain an important element when it comes to the demonstration of NATO’s increased presence in the Baltic region right after the beginning of Ukraine crisis. They became a significant part of NATO measures aimed at reassurance, as after exercises some of

the participating NATO member states' forces would remain in Latvia for several months, until they were replaced by other member states' forces. That can be seen also in statistics, as in 2015 more than 90 military exercises were held in Latvia. In 2016, more than 70 military exercises were planned. These would involve participants not only from the Baltic states, but also from countries such as Germany, Norway, Poland, Denmark, US, Canada, Germany, UK, Belgium, Poland, Netherlands and even NATO partnership countries (Finland and Sweden) (Interview with J7 1 April 2016).

Most military exercises are focused on testing and training the elements of HNS. The most important annual military exercise for HNS is the Baltic Host that is aimed at training the Baltic States defence sectors together with other responsible civilian institutions in providing HNS while receiving the Allied troops and humanitarian support. Accordingly, these exercises help to enhance the interoperability among Baltic countries and NATO forces, to coordinate and provide regional support for NATO forces by using military and civilian resources, to improve integration of civilian authorities into the regional decision making, and to test the legal basis and procedures. Considering the amount and scope of exercises one of the greatest challenges for Latvia was to keep up on this pace not only from an organizational point of view but also to write down the lessons learned and to work them into policy recommendations (Interview with Representative of Crisis Management Department 5 October 2015).

Strengthening of the interior structures

Russia's hybrid warfare tactics in Ukraine were an important element that contributed to Ukraine's societal instability and demoralized its interior structures. Thus, Latvian policy makers had to reassess the situation in the interior sector. Latvia's government has increased salaries for personnel in the Security

Police, Border Guard, Prison Administration and Police. In 2016, the budget of the Interior Ministry was increased by 40 million euros, half of which was allocated for salaries. After adopting the new salary system, it is expected that interior structures will have a sustainable personnel system. Analytical and intelligence capabilities of the Security Police have also been improved (Interview with Trofimovs 20 April 2016).

Inter-sectoral cooperation between the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior has considerably improved. Both ministries have come up with many suggestions for amending existing laws in order to provide a more precise definition of war and specifying the responsibilities of respective institutions in crisis situations. One of the amendments stipulates that the Border Guard will act under the command of the Latvian National Armed forces in case of a crisis. In order to provide the interoperability of weapon systems, the Ministry of Defence is procuring weapons for border guards and conducts joint exercises on a regular basis. There have also been attempts to secure the eastern border of Latvia, developing a 12 metres wide zone that will provide mobility along the border and improve the early warning system. The project is financed by the Ministry of Interior and is expected to be completed by 2019.

Lastly, in order to improve the early warning system and functioning of crisis management that could fall under Article 5, the Ministry of Defence is organizing exercises for the Cabinet of Ministers and representatives of government institutions (Interview with Trofimovs 20 April 2016). Although the steps taken to strengthen the interior sector can be seen as successful, nothing has been done so far to improve the civil security system. Latvia had a well-functioning civil security system during Soviet times, but it has largely been dismantled since then. The general public lacks information about what is to be done during a crisis, including war. 55 per cent of respondents admit that they do not

know what to do in case of a crisis and 75 percent are willing to know more (SKDS 2016b). Lithuania produced a manual on what to do in case of war (Reuters 15 January 2015). Latvian policy makers, despite the newly approved State Defence Concept (2016) which states that resilience is one of Latvia's defence pillars, have not yet acknowledged that policies aimed at civil security are needed to increase the resilience of society.

Strengthening the information space

The division of Latvia's information space into two spaces – Russian-speaking and Latvian – is a problem that is widely acknowledged by policy makers. However, it was not perceived as a threat to national security until recently. Since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis when the effects of Russia's disinformation campaign on public opinion became clearly visible (72 percent of Latvian speaking respondents thought that the cause of the Ukraine crisis is Russia's interference and 64 percent of Russian speakers perceived it as the result of Western interference (Factum 2015)) placed the problem in the spotlight. Latvian policy makers tried to deal with this challenge in three ways. First, they discussed a necessity to establish a joint TV channel in Russian language with the other two Baltic States. Such a TV channel would provide an opportunity to influence the attitudes of the Russian-speaking communities in all three countries. As this idea did not materialize due to political reasons, Latvia (like the other two Baltic States) had a domestic discussion about establishing a national TV channel in Russian language. Unfortunately, there was lack of political support for that in Latvia because the nationalist party National Alliance argued that it would send the wrong signal to Russian-speaking minorities, namely, that a state sponsored channel in Russian language would encourage them not to learn Latvian language (Interview with Dimants 2 May 2016). Estonia was the only country that established a new channel in Russian language “ETV+”. This TV channel is funded by the government

and provides Russian speakers with local news and daily events with an emphasis on the positive aspects of life in Estonia (Re:Baltica 23 November 2015). Latvia chose a different strategy by allocating more funding for the existing bilingual TV channel LTV7. These efforts have not delivered the expected results because this TV channel is too 'Russian' for the Latvians and too 'Latvian' for the Russian-speaking community.

There have also been efforts to ban certain Russian media from Latvia's information space. In April 2014, the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLM) prohibited for three months the TV channel "Rossija RTF" and shut down an internet home page "Sputnik" in March of 2016. It is likely that more such cases will follow because Lithuania banned three TV channels – Ren TV Baltic, NTV Mir Lithuania and RTR Planeta – due to disinformation about the events in Ukraine and misinterpretation of Lithuanian history. But in Latvia's case as the former head of the NEPLM notes, the main obstacle has been the divided political position about NEPLM decisions, which politicized the process and spread speculations in public about the legitimacy of the decision. Also, public support for such measures is relatively low with only 34 percent of respondents being in favour of banning Russian TV channels (Factum 2015). Thus, Latvia has done relatively little in comparison with the neighbouring countries.

Risks of Social Destabilisation

Initially, there were concerns among policy makers that a scenario broadly similar to the one that was played out in Ukraine could also take place in Latvia because of its geographical proximity to Russia, large Russian-speaking minority, and the large proportion of Russian speakers in Latgale (the Eastern region of Latvia) The concern was that this situation would provide enough ground for Russia-backed separatist movements. A thorough analysis of public opinion nationally and, more specifically, in the Latgale

region demonstrated that even though there are large groups of Russian-speakers in Latvia which support Russia's narratives about Latvia, the probability of mass protests and support for Russia's provocations was unlikely. The behavioural analysis of Latvia's society revealed that political and social participation was low. The majority of people do not want to stand out from the crowd, and they do not believe that their actions (also in the form of protests) can change anything. Thus, it would be challenging for Russia to cause widespread societal unrest. Specifically, the survey of the Latgale region demonstrated that there was indeed considerable support for Russia's narratives, but there was little support for separatism. One of the findings of the public opinion survey was that those speaking the Latgalian dialect held the most patriotic views and supported Latvia's Western geopolitical orientation (Berzina 2016). The Latgalian dialect, which is linguistically close to Latvian language, is spoken by a substantial part of the population of Latgale. Although it was very unlikely that those who live in this region would develop separatist tendencies, it was nevertheless a relief that Latgalians turned out to be even more patriotic than Latvians themselves.

All in all, Latvia's efforts to strengthen its information space reveal a mixed picture. On the one hand, Latvia has done less in terms of offering its Russian-speaking community a more balanced view about Russia's foreign policy, its relations with the West, and life in Latvia more generally than Lithuania and Estonia. On the other hand, multiple public opinion surveys since 2014 reveal that there is little ground for mass unrest and separatism. Russian-speakers hold benevolent views on Russia, but they are unlikely to support Russia-backed efforts to destabilize Latvia.

Public Perceptions of Security

Latvia is a multi-ethnic society, and this factor has major implications for security and defence policy. According to the

Central Statistical Bureau, the share of ethnic Latvians was 62.1 per cent in 2011, an increase from just 52 per cent in 1989. Meanwhile, the share of ethnic Russians was 26.9 per cent in 2011, a decrease from 34 per cent in 1989. Russians are unevenly distributed across Latvia, as they for the most part reside in the biggest cities. For example, Russians comprise 40.6 percent of the population in Riga. The uneven geographical distribution of ethnic minorities is largely to blame for the fact that Latvians are a minority in Riga (46.3 per cent) and the Latgale region (46 per cent) (Central Statistical Bureau 2012). Moreover, a category of Russian speakers, which includes Ukrainians and Byelorussians, alongside ethnic Russians, has gained increasing salience in terms of predicting political attitudes and behaviour. The share of Russian speakers is roughly 37 per cent in Latvia. Taking into account their patterns of media consumption (mostly media in Russian language or media originating in Russia) and unwillingness to criticize their country of origin, the differences between the views of Russian speakers and ethnic Latvians are substantial (Berzina 2016). The following paragraphs address the following issues related to public perceptions of security in Latvia: perception of various threats to personal security among Latvians and Russian speakers; Russia as an economic opportunity; results from a public opinion survey in Latgale, the easternmost region of Latvia; limits of the Russian speakers' support for Russia's foreign policy; support for government's security-related policies and the presence of NATO troops in Latvia; and the ability of Latvia and its NATO allies to defend Latvia in the case of an armed conflict.

Regarding public perception of Russia as a threat, surveys show that to some extent she is seen as a threat. According to the FACTUM 2015 public opinion survey, 48 percent of respondents regard Russia as a threat while 43 per cent disagree. Predictably, there are considerable differences between Latvians and Russian speakers: 64 per cent of Latvians regarded Russia as a threat, while

just 23 per cent of Russian speakers agreed with such an assessment (Rostoks 2016, p. 9). Russia's policies, however, are not among top concerns, as the general public regards 'low wages and a lack of social and employment guarantees' (94 per cent), 'low birth rate and the general demographic situation' (82 per cent), 'problems in Latvia's health care system' (76 per cent), 'corruption' (76 per cent), 'crime' (58 per cent), and 'problems relating to societal integration' (49 per cent) to be more important than the threat emanating from Russia's policies. Interestingly, the views of Latvians and Russian speakers differ only on foreign policy and societal integration (i.e. the use of Latvian as the official language, and the presence of other nationalities in Latvia).

On all other issues there are hardly any differences between Latvians and Russian speakers. Moreover, longitudinal data from SKDS surveys starting from 2002 reveal that most of the time less than 10 percent of Russian speakers and less than 40 percent of Latvians have regarded Russia as a threat to Latvia, with the years 2008 (the Russia-Georgia War) and 2014-15 (the military conflict in Ukraine) being exceptions rather than the rule. SKDS data also indicate perceptions of Russia as a threat have decreased by 10 per cent when compared to 2014 (a decrease from 64 percent in 2014 to 54 per cent in 2015) (Rostoks 2016, p. 12). In short, ethnic Latvians are more likely than Russian speakers to see Russia as a threat, but Russia's policies are on average regarded as less of a threat when compared to other threats to personal security as evidenced by data presented earlier in this paragraph (Berzina 2016, pp. 20-21). Also, it seems that the general public's perception of Russia as a threat is decreasing when compared to 2014.

Latvians are more likely to see Russia's policies as a threat than Russian speakers, but what are the views of both groups on Russia as an economic partner? Public opinion surveys reveal that there is no willingness among the general public to sever economic relations with Russia as a result of Russia's role in the military

conflict in Ukraine. Figure 1 indicates that about a quarter of general public (26 percent) were willing to strongly condemn Russia in early 2015. The rest were either in favour of manoeuvring between Russia and the West (26 percent) or in favour of being on friendly terms with Russia irrespective of its role in the military conflict in Ukraine (35 percent). Although differences between Latvians and Russian speakers are stark in this respect, even among ethnic Latvians the support for condemning Russia (40 percent) is less than the sum of those who want to be on friendly terms with Russia no matter what (24 percent) and those who favour of manoeuvring between Russia and the West (21 percent). Russian speakers, in turn, are unequivocal in their support of maintaining good relations with Russia or at least manoeuvring between Russia and the West (Berzina 2016, pp. 22-23). Thus, Russia as an economic partner and opportunity looms large for the general public in Latvia, despite its military involvement in Ukraine.

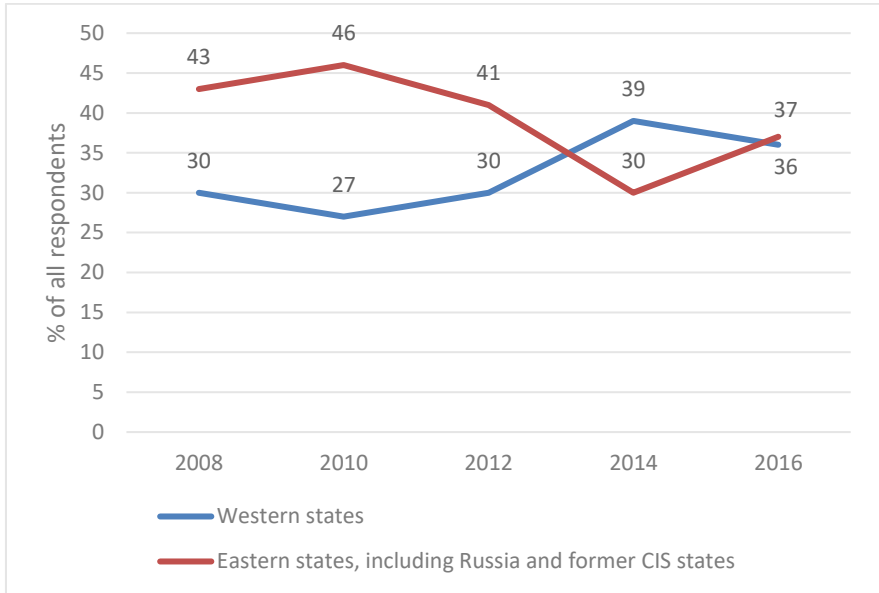
Figure 1. How should Latvia develop its relationship with Russia in the context of the Ukrainian crisis?



Source: FACTUM, 2015. Survey commissioned by the Centre for Security and Strategic Research, Latvian National Defence Academy.

Another aspect of Russia as an economic partner is worth exploring. A large part of the general public are in favour of increasing the Eastern element of Latvia's foreign policy (Eastern states, including Russia and former CIS states). Opinion survey data reveal that Eastern foreign policy orientation has been the preferred choice of a greater share of the general public than the Western orientation. Figure 2 indicates that this changed in 2014, but two years later (in 2016) Western and the Eastern foreign policy orientations were equally attractive, with 36 percent of all respondents preferring the Western orientation and 37 percent preferring the Eastern orientation (Rostoks 2016, p. 19).

Figure 2. Latvia's desirable foreign policy orientation. Which countries should Latvia's foreign policy decision-makers prioritize?

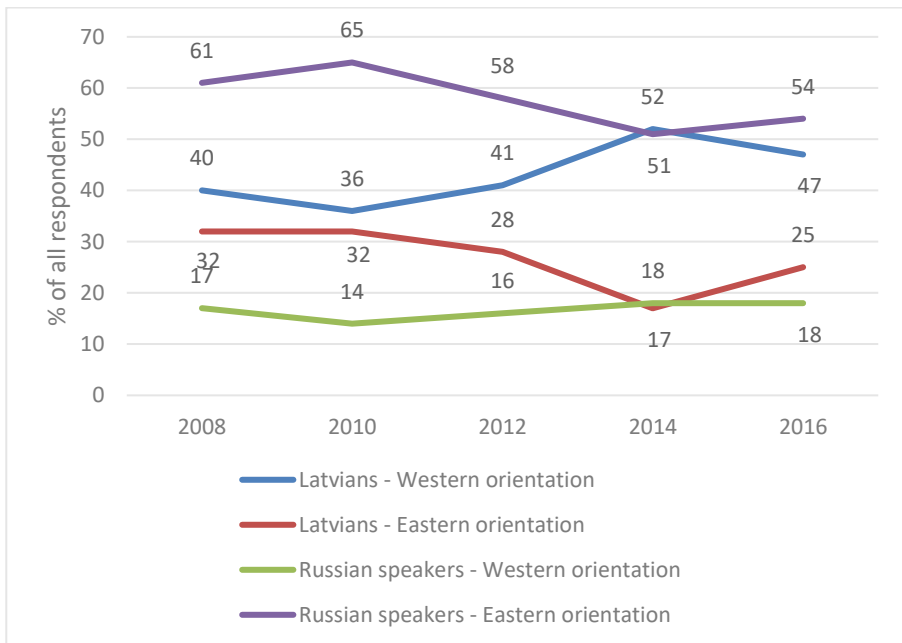


Source: SKDS data, 2008-2016.

When it comes to public support for Western and Eastern foreign policy orientations, the differences between Latvians and Russian speakers are significant. In fact, views of Latvians and Russian speakers are mirror images in reverse. In 2014 approximately three times as many Latvians were likely to be in favour of the Western foreign policy orientation than the Eastern one (52 percent against 17 percent). Russian speakers, in turn, despite Russia's complicity in the turmoil in Ukraine were almost three times as likely to be in favour of the Eastern foreign policy orientation over the Western one (51 percent against 18 percent). In the absence of military conflicts involving Russia, support among Latvians for the Eastern foreign policy orientation increases, while Russian speakers are likely to be even more enthusiastic about the Eastern foreign

policy orientation at the expense of the Western one (see Figure 3) (Rostoks 2016, p. 20).

Figure 3. Latvia's desirable foreign policy orientation. Which countries should Latvia's foreign policy decision-makers prioritize? The views of Latvians and Russian speakers.

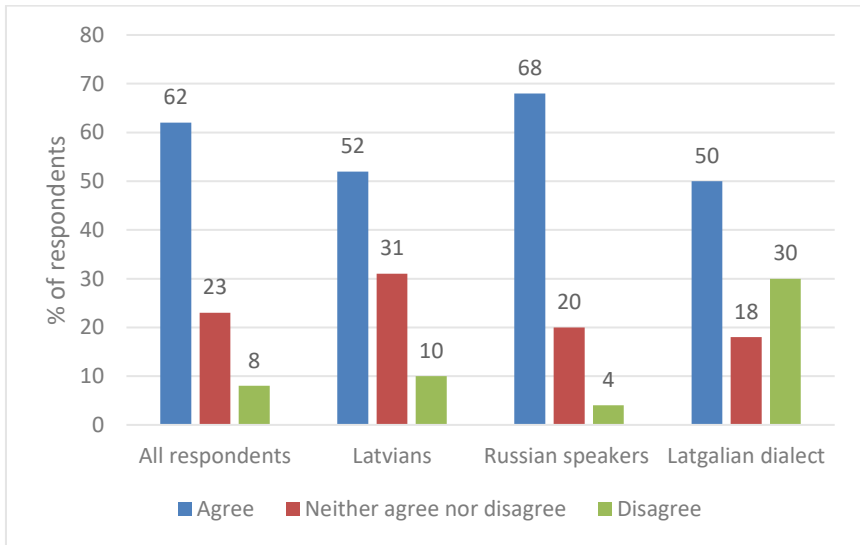


Source: SKDS data, 2008-2016.

Results from a separate survey from the Latgale region conducted in early 2016 reveal mixed results. On the one hand, this survey confirms that a large part of the general public strongly believes that Russia plays an outsized role in Latvia's economy. 80 percent of all respondents agreed with the statement that "Economic relations with Russia are very important for Latvia's economy". 69 percent of Latvians, 85 percent of Russian speakers, and 80 percent of respondents who use the Latgalian dialect on a daily

basis agreed with this statement. Also, the majority of respondents agreed with the statement that “Latvia needs good relations with Russia even though Russia has demonstrated its readiness to defend its interests more aggressively, as it has done in Georgia and Ukraine” (see Figure 4). 62 percent of all respondents agreed with this statement (52 percent of Latvians, 68 percent of Russian speakers, and 50 percent of respondents who use the Latgalian dialect on a daily basis agreed with this statement) (Rostoks 2016, pp. 21-22). Thus, a clear majority across all major groups regards Russia as a very important economic partner and does not want to risk economic relations because of Russia’s policies with regard to Georgia and Ukraine.

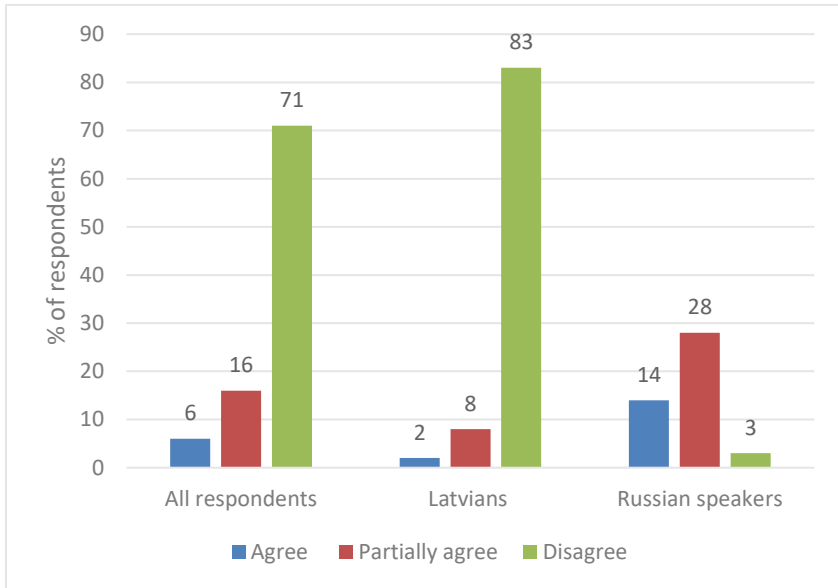
Figure 4. Respondents’ views on Latvia-Russia relations. Question: Do you agree with the statement “Latvia needs good relations with Russia even though Russia has demonstrated its readiness to defend its interests more aggressively, as it has done in Georgia and Ukraine”?



Source: SKDS data, 2016a. Survey commissioned by the Centre for Security and Strategic Research, Latvian National Defence Academy.

On the other hand, however, results from the SKDS public opinion survey in Latgale (2016) as well as the FACTUM survey in Latvia (2015) indicate that support for Russia's foreign policy among the Russian speaking part of the population in Latvia has its limits. When asked to assess whether Russia should become more involved in helping to solve problems of Russian speakers in Latgale, the majority of those who took part in the survey indicated that they do not want Russia's involvement. 52 percent were against Russia's political involvement (22 percent were in favour), 55 percent were against Russia's economic involvement (17 percent were against), and 68 per cent were against Russia's military involvement in the Latgale region (8 percent were in favour) (SKDS survey, 2016). Results of the FACTUM survey from 2015 reveal similar results, that is, there is little support for all sorts of Russian involvement in Latvian politics (see Figure 5). Even the majority of all Russian speakers is against Russia's involvement in defending the rights and interests of Russian speakers (Rostoks 2016, pp. 25-26).

Figure 5. Responses to the question: Do you agree that the rights and interests of Russian speakers in Latvia are violated to such an extent as to justify Russia's involvement?



Source: FACTUM survey, 2015.

The Latvian government has adopted key decisions in recent years regarding the increase of the defence budget up to 2 percent of GDP and the presence of troops from other member states on a rotational basis in Latvia. Do these decisions enjoy widespread public support? Data from the SKDS survey which was conducted in the spring of 2016 reveals a mixed picture, and there are substantial differences among Latvians and Russian-speakers on most key aspects of government's security and defence policy and its relationship with NATO. To start with, data on support for the government's decision to increase defence budget up to 2 per cent

of GDP reveals that a significant plurality supports this decision. 39 percent of all respondents support this decision, while 35 percent do not (20 percent neither support nor oppose this decision). The support for increased defence expenditures is higher among Latvians (53 percent) than among Russian speakers (18 percent). In contrast, 60 percent of Russian speakers oppose the decision to increase defence expenditures, while only 19 percent of Latvians seem to think that defence expenditures should not be increased (SKDS 2016b).

NATO as an organization is largely regarded in favourable terms, although support for the Alliance is mixed. 48 percent of all respondents are confident about NATO, while 43 percent are not. Latvians see NATO in more favourable terms than Russian speakers. 65 percent of Latvians are confident about NATO, but 27 percent are not. Russian speakers, in contrast, distrust NATO, with 69 percent of them having unfavourable views about NATO and only 21 percent expressing confidence in the Alliance. Moreover, there are significant differences among Latvians and Russian speakers on the issue of the presence of troops from other NATO member states in Latvia. 41 percent of all respondents have positive views on this issue, while 28 percent hold negative views (another 28 percent are neutral on this issue). 58 percent of Latvians see the presence of troops from other NATO member states in Latvia in positive terms, and only 12 percent disagree, while 54 percent of Russian speakers regard the presence of troops from other NATO member states in Latvia as negative (and only 14 percent see this in positive light). Russian speakers, however, are more likely than Latvians to disagree with the statement that there is enough information about the presence of NATO troops in Latvia. 40 percent of Russian speakers regard the amount of publicly available information as insufficient. Only 19 percent of Russian speakers disagree with such an assessment. Latvians, in turn, seem to be more satisfied with the amount of available

information on the presence of NATO troops in Latvia. 34 percent of Latvians regard the amount of information to be sufficient, but 28 percent think that there is not enough information on the presence of NATO troops in Latvia (SKDS survey, 2016b).

There is broad support for NATO among the general public in Latvia, but the public is hesitant regarding increasing the number of NATO troops in Latvia. Despite the fact that 36 percent of all respondents disagree with the statement that the possibility of an external military attack is so small that it does not make sense to prepare for this contingency (29 percent agree with this statement), the public is hesitant about the need to increase the number of troops from other NATO member states in Latvia. 50 percent of all respondents agree with the statement that the stationing of troops from other NATO member states in Latvia would needlessly provoke Russia (15 percent disagree). Only 23 percent of all respondents are in favour of stationing more U.S. troops and military equipment in Latvia, while 44 percent disagree. Scepticism with regard to NATO troop increases in Latvia is not restricted to negative attitudes towards U.S. troops, as only 23 percent of all respondents are in favour of increasing the number of troops from other NATO member states in Latvia (39 percent disagree) (SKDS survey, 2016b). Thus, the general public seems to be more in favour of the idea that deterrent measures against external military threats are mainly carried out by the Latvian military alone or in tandem with other NATO member states. There is substantially less public support for an outsized NATO presence in Latvia because that would be either unnecessary or too provocative.

All in all, the analysis of public opinion in Latvia reveals that Russia's policies are seen as threatening by a substantial plurality of respondents, although there are considerable differences between Latvians and Russian speakers. In fact, substantial differences between Latvians and Russian speakers exist on all foreign,

security, and defence policy issues involving Russia and NATO. Latvians are likely to be more critical towards Russia's policies in Ukraine. Latvians are less likely to have favourable views on Russia as an economic partner. NATO membership, in turn, is viewed rather favourably by Latvians. Also, Latvians are in favour of increasing defence expenditures. There are, however, two important limits to public (mostly Latvian) support for government policies. First, the general public is not willing to sacrifice the economic relationship with Russia for geopolitical reasons. Russia is seen as an important economic partner. Second, the public is hesitant with regard to the stationing of more troops from other NATO member states in Latvia, as Russia may see this move as too provocative. It is up to the government though to communicate with society and to explain the rationale behind strengthening Latvia's defence capabilities.

Conclusion

A sea change has taken place in Latvia since the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Latvia's key priority in the defence sector before the Ukraine crisis was to contribute to international operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This contribution was seen as sufficient to ensure allied support for Latvia in the unlikely event of a military conflict. Latvia managed to make the best out of these efforts because it succeeded in developing some military niche capabilities and obtaining allied support for NATO initiatives that were important for its national security. Unfortunately, the negative effects outweighed the few gains considerably because another consequence of this strategy was that Latvia had negligible self-defence capabilities.

Over the past few years, however, Latvia has taken major steps to increase its defence capabilities. Also, NATO presence in the Baltic region has increased substantially. Steps have been taken to

reduce vulnerabilities, such as underfunded interior security institutions, vulnerability of Latvia's information space, and concerns about the large Russian-speaking minority in Latvia. So far the most successfully implemented initiatives have been related to increasing NATO visibility through intensive military exercises, establishing NFIU, and the soon-to-happen deployment of a multinational battalion. As for national efforts, Latvian policy makers have made a commitment to increase defence spending up to 2 percent of GDP by 2018. Also, many procurement and training programmes have been launched in order to strengthen self-defence capabilities. In addition, the recruitment system has been reviewed with the aim to increase the number of men and women in the Latvian military. Still, the policies that would address vulnerabilities emanating from a weak civil security system are lacking.

In order to address the asymmetric threats, cooperation between defence and interior sectors has intensified, and laws and administrative procedures for crisis management have been adjusted. Steps have been taken to strengthen early warning and border control. The efforts to engage in dialogue with Russian-speakers can be described as half-hearted at best. Latvia has done little to counter Russia's information warfare because it failed to establish an alternative Russian language platform (a nation-wide TV channel, for example) that could counter Russian propaganda narratives. Nevertheless, social survey results lend proof that Russia's influence on society is limited because a relatively small proportion of Russian-speakers support Russia's narratives. There is little support for Russia-backed separatism in Latvia and Russia's involvement in protecting the rights of Russian-speakers in Latvia. Also, Russia's influence on Latvia's foreign policy has been negligible because, if anything, Latvia integrated even further in the EU and NATO over recent years.

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