**Why a Tour of Eastern Europe?**

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I hope to increase Americans’ knowledge about Eastern Europe and its strategic location with regard to Russia, with the hopes that the U.S. foreign policy will be more supportive of these countries that currently few Americans know anything about.

In September 2017, I joined a 12 person bicycle tour of the Baltic States, riding through Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. We learned from our tour guide that the Baltic States are strategic in containing Russian aggression, despite my and most other Americans’ ignorance about them. Russia is meddling in the countries, well beyond what Russia has attempted in the United States.

Through disinformation and interference, Russia works to sow distrust in elections and institutions, pit social groups against one another, and undermine the notion of truth on which democratic discourse depends. In dozens of countries including the Baltics, Russia has employed cyberattacks, fake news, propaganda, and social-media manipulation to undermine open societies, while providing material support to illiberal social and political groups, including radical populists on both sides of the ideological spectrum, attempting to disrupt the political discourse there.

The people of the Baltic States are particularly proud of how their independence from the Soviet Union was won. The Baltic Countries were some of the earliest in their resistance to Russia (Soviet) occupation of their countries. Significant events include:

* The Baltic Way or Baltic Chain of Freedom was a peaceful political demonstration that occurred on August 23, 1989. About 2 million people of the Baltic States joined hands forming a 419.7 mile human chain from Tallinn, Estonia through Riga, Latvia to Vilnius. Lithuania. The campaign reportedly gathered 700,000 people in Estonia, 500,000 in Latvia and 1,000,000 in Lithuania.
* On March 11, 1990, the Lithuanian Supreme Council announced the restoration of Lithuania's independence. Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to announce its secession from the USSR. On April 20, 1990, the USSR imposed an economic blockade by stopping to deliver supplies of raw materials (primarily oil) to Lithuania.
* On January 13, 1991, known as “Bloody Sunday” in Lithuania, following lethal attacks on demonstrators at the Vilnius TV tower and the Radio and Television Committee building by Soviets troops, large crowds (20,000 during the night, more than 50,000 in the morning) of independence supporters gathered around the Lithuanian Supreme Council building in Vilnius. People started building anti-tank barricades and setting up defenses inside surrounding buildings. Despite columns of military trucks, BMPs and tanks moving into the vicinity of the Supreme Council, Soviet military forces retreated instead of attacking.
* Also on January 13, 1991 in Riga, Latvia, around 700,000 people had gathered as a demonstration. As night came, following requests from the Lithuanian government, agricultural and construction machines and trucks full of logs arrived in Riga to build barricades in the city to block streets to protect objects deemed of strategic interest: the [Supreme Council buildings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_the_Livonian_Noble_Corporation), the Council of Ministers, [Latvian Television](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvijas_Telev%C4%ABzija), [Latvian Radio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvijas_Radio), the International [Telephone exchange](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telephone_exchange) offices, [Ulbroka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulbroka%22%20%5Co%20%22Ulbroka) radio and bridges. 20 people were killed by Soviet troops as the troops tried to quell the uprising.
* Independence in Estonia came more peacefully, but with extensive political and diplomatic efforts by the Estonian people. The first signs of radical changes in society emerged in Estonia in spring 1987, when the Soviet plans to establish phosphorite mines in northern Estonia were revealed. Numerous protests broke out and petitions were signed against the new mines, in what became known as the ‘[phosphorite war](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phosphorite_War)’.
* In August 1991, the hard-line members of the Soviet government [attempted to take control](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1991_Soviet_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat_attempt) of the Soviet Union. On August 21, 1991, the Estonians and the Latvian parliament proclaimed independence. The coup in Russia failed but the [collapse of the Soviet Union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collapse_of_the_Soviet_Union_%281985%E2%80%931991%29) became unavoidable. On August 28, 1991, the [European Community](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Communities) welcomed the restoration of the sovereignty and independence of the Baltic States. The Soviet Union recognized the Baltic independence on September 6, 1991.

Some fear that Putin’s grand strategy is to rebuild Russia’s empire of buffer states in an attempt to assuage his nation’s cultural paranoia regarding outside invaders, driven by the historic invasions by Napoleon in 1812 in which he captured Moscow and by the Nazis in World War II in which at least 25 million “Soviet” (mostly Russians, but Putin also counts people living in areas later within or controlled by the USSR) citizens died. At the core of the problem is that while the Russians can deter a military attack, the Kremlin sees NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and Washington as attempting to subvert Moscow domestically, threatening the security of the Putin’s current regime in Moscow.

Russia and Belarus lie immediately to the east of the Baltic States. The Russian enclave of Kaliningrad with its vast military arsenal borders the southwest portion of Lithuania on the Baltic Sea. On the military base in Kaliningrad, Putin has installed a complex of what have come to be known as anti-access/area-denial weapons, including the highly advanced S-400 surface-to-air missile and the Iskander surface-to-surface missile. Between them, these missiles can neutralize NATO air and surface units, keeping naval forces from moving beyond Copenhagen in the Baltic Sea, far from Gdansk, Poland and its industrial ship-offloading facilities.

In the event that Russia invades the Baltic States, America could immediately recognize that an “attack upon one is an attack upon all,” invoking Article V of the NATO treaty. It is highly likely that Russia perceives that any aggressive actions sufficient to trigger Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty would result in direct military conflict with at least several key NATO members. Thus, Russia has conducted activities just under the threshold perceived as aggressive enough to trigger a greater NATO response. The Baltic States have frequently strived to communicate to their fellow members in NATO and the European Union the threat that Russia poses to European security order.

With many Russians still living in the Baltic countries and Russian being one of the four languages commonly spoken (the native language of the country, Russian, German and increasingly, English), many within Russia (and particularly Putin) desire to again reacquire these countries into their sphere of influence, or to occupy them as Russia has in the Crimean portion of Ukraine and a part of the country of Georgia. (This relates to Putin’s belief that Russia is actually borderless, that is, Russia is “wherever Russian speaking people live”.) This concerns many of the people of these countries, as well as NATO . Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are the only former Soviet nations that have joined the European Union and NATO.

24.8 percent of Estonia’s 1.3 million people are Russian, while 26.2 per cent of Latvia’s 2.1 million citizens are Russian. Lithuania with just a small border with Kaliningrad has a much smaller Russian population, just 5.8 per cent. The Russian speakers depend for their news on Russian media, largely controlled by the Kremlin, which worries Baltic governments. Lithuania banned a Russian TV channel for broadcasting "lies" about the country's history.

The Baltic States have good reason to be concerned.

* Ethnic Russians in Estonia rioted in 2007 over the relocation of a Soviet-era Bronze Soldier victory statue. Unveiled by the Soviet authorities in 1947, the Bronze Soldier was originally called "Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn". For Russian speakers in Estonia he represents the USSR's victory over Nazism. But for ethnic Estonians, Red Army soldiers were not liberators. They are seen as occupiers, and the Bronze Solider is a painful symbol of half a century of Soviet oppression. In 2007 the Estonian government decided to move the Bronze Soldier from the center of Tallinn to a military cemetery on the outskirts of the city. The decision sparked outrage in Russian-language media and Russian speakers took to the streets. Protests were exacerbated by false Russian news reports claiming that the statue, and nearby Soviet war graves, were being destroyed. On April 26, 2007, Tallinn erupted into two nights of riots and looting. 156 people were injured, one person died and 1,000 people were detained.
* On April 27, 2007, a series of [cyber attacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyber_attack%22%20%5Co%20%22Cyber%20attack) on Estonian computers began that swamped websites of [Estonian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estonia) organizations, including [Estonian parliament](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riigikogu), banks, ministries, newspapers and broadcasters, which the government blamed on Russia.
* In August 2008, while the world was fixated on the Summer Olympics in Beijing, a [Russian invasion force](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/09/world/europe/09georgia.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=A904F588BE0F21FB6B30925D2BC92C07&gwt=pay) entered [South Ossetia](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/556319/South-Ossetia) and [Abkhazia](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1358/Abkhazia), two "breakaway provinces" in Georgia. [South Ossetia](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/556319/South-Ossetia) and [Abkhazia](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1358/Abkhazia) equal 20 percent of Georgia’s internationally recognized territory. Since the 2008 invasion, South Ossetia and Abkhazia essentially have become large Russian military bases with thousands of Russian troops and hundreds of tanks and armored vehicles stationed in both regions.
* More than $13 billion were laundered through banks in Estonia from 2012-2016 with the accounts traced to sources close to Putin.
* In February 2014, [Russia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia) made several military incursions into [Ukrainian territory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukraine). After [Euromaidan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euromaidan) protests and the fall of Ukrainian president [Viktor Yanukovych](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor_Yanukovych), [Russian soldiers without insignias](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_green_men_%28Ukrainian_crisis%29) took control of strategic positions and infrastructure within the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. Russia then [annexed Crimea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annexation_of_Crimea_by_the_Russian_Federation) after a rigged “[referendum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crimean_status_referendum%2C_2014)” in which Crimeans allegedly voted to join the [Russian Federation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Federation), according to official results. Russia has defended its annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea peninsula by arguing it has the right to protect Russian-speakers outside its borders.

This raises tensions in Estonia and Latvia due to Russia’s long-standing complaints over Estonia’s insistence that the large Russian speaking minority in the east of Estonia must be able to speak Estonian in order to obtain citizenship and be able to vote in elections.
* In 2014 a team of hackers called Sandworm, a hacker group traced back to Russia, planted BlackEnergy malware on targets that included Polish energy firms and Ukrainian government agencies. Sandworm knocked out power in portions of Ukraine in late December 2015 and in 2016. Also, in 2016, the country came under an even broader wave of attacks, hitting Ukraine’s pension fund, the country’s treasury, its seaport authority, its ministries of infrastructure, defense, and finance. The hackers again hit Ukraine’s railway company, this time knocking out its online booking system for days, right in the midst of the holiday travel season.

Russia isn’t only testing its cyberwar abilities; it’s also feeling out the edges of what the international community will tolerate. The Kremlin meddled in the Ukrainian election and faced no real repercussions; then it tried similar tactics in Germany, France, and the United States. Russian hackers turned off the power in Ukraine with impunity.

For now, experts say that, while Russia's grid attacks may seem aggressive, they have actually been comparatively restrained, compared with what the experts believe the hackers could have done, in Ukraine or elsewhere in the world, including the U.S. Instead, Moscow seems to be signaling its capabilities, perhaps as a deterrent against actions that the U.S. and its allies might take (such as a NATO response to Russian invasion of the Baltics or other countries bordering Russia?).
* Russia conducted a massive Russian “Zapad 17” military exercise in September, 2017 in Belarus, between Russia and the Baltic States. NATO estimated that [about 40,000 Russian military members and civilians participated in the exercise](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2017-10-04/true-purpose-russias-zapad-military-exercises), including over 13,000 troops and 250 tanks. Russia’s application of such “hybrid” warfare, namely the use of the presence of large-scale conventional forces close to the border of the target states, is seen by the Baltic States as coercion for them to cooperate with Russia.

The Baltic States broadly welcomed the deterrence measures agreed at NATO’s Wales Summit in 2014 to form the Readiness Action Plan (RAP). A core feature of the RAP is the 5000-strong Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) created within the NATO Response Force (NRF). Nevertheless, many in the Baltics see it as a work in progress, as the current arrangement under RAP stresses the “trip-wire” of small Allied rotations, rather than a robust defense of their countries.

While our tour in September 2017 was only in the Baltic States, as can be seen above, the threats to the Baltic States are shared by most of the former Soviet Union republics bordering Russia.

While touring the Baltics in September 2017, I was introduced to LCC International University, a nationally and internationally recognized liberal arts institution in Klaipėda, Lithuania. LCC was established in 1991 by a joint venture of Lithuanian, Canadian and American foundations. The mission of the university founders was to teach students from the former Soviet Union republics free market economics and business with the hope that those now independent countries would not turn back towards Russia. Doing business with Christian ethics is a fundamental value of LCC. Current student enrollment is around 550 (33% from Lithuania, 67% International), who come from more than 38 countries of the world. Each semester more than 30 Study Abroad students come to LCC from North American universities. One-third of LCC faculty are Lithuanian while two-thirds are from Western Europe, Canada, and the United States.

I became one of that 2/3 to teach last January and February as a volunteer instructor, teaching student how to draft business plans for prospective businesses, as well as delivering lectures to multiple classes for other professors. I became aware that the economies of the countries were still struggling to achieve prosperity. With a population of 3,674,802 in 1989, over a million of Lithuanians have emigrated to other countries for better opportunities, with a current population estimated at 2,875,037, based on the latest United Nations estimates. Wages are low, with some teachers with 20 years of experience paid the equivalent of $720 per month.

To address the problems of Russian influence and poor employment opportunities in Lithuania, I led lead an Entrepreneurship class to develop a business plan for a touring company leading tours beginning in 2020 through 8 Eastern European countries that are somewhat similarly situated. By greater U.S. citizen to Eastern European citizen interaction and personal diplomacy, hopefully we can not only develop closer ties with these countries, but also make more Americans aware to the strategic importance of these countries. A touring company based in Lithuania would also create job opportunities for LCC graduates and students, while bringing in foreign money which will help create opportunities for other residents. The International Committee of the Prior Lake Rotary approved a proposal to conduct such a tour in 2019, which if approved, could serve as a “trial run” for the tours to be conducted by the proposed touring company.

Hopefully we can promote the American values of private property, an unhampered market economy, the rule of law, political freedom in a democracy, constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and of the press, human rights, minority protections and international peace based on free trade.