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Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania: Background and U.S.-Baltic Relations

Updated January 7, 2025

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R46139



R46139

January 7, 2025

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Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania: Background and U.S.-Baltic Relations

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, often referred to as the *Baltic states*, are democracies and close U.S. allies. Strong U.S. relations with these three states are rooted in history. The United States never recognized the Soviet Union's forcible incorporation of the Baltic states in 1940, and U.S. officials welcomed the restoration of their independence in 1991. The United States supported the Baltic states' accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) in 2004. Congress backed their NATO and EU integration on a bipartisan basis.

Regional Security and Foreign Policy Concerns

Since Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014, potential threats posed to the Baltic states by Russia have driven increased U.S. and congressional interest in the region. Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has intensified U.S. and NATO concerns about the potential threat of Russian military action against the Baltic states. The Baltic states have strongly supported Ukraine, including by providing military assistance and imposing sanctions against Russia that go beyond those adopted by the EU. The Baltic states have been increasing their defense spending and seeking to build up their military capabilities, although their defense planning continues to rely heavily on their NATO membership. The Baltic states exceed NATO's target for member states to spend at least 2% of gross domestic product on defense.

The Baltic states have experienced various hybrid warfare attacks, attributed predominantly to Russia but also to China. Hybrid threats to the Baltic states include disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, sabotage, and weaponized migration. The Baltic states have sought to strengthen their societal resilience to hybrid threats, and NATO leaders have sought to increase member countries' cooperation on countering hybrid warfare tactics.

Due to concerns about Russia using energy dependence as political and economic leverage, the Baltic states have taken steps to end their past energy reliance on Russia, including through a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in Lithuania and pipeline interconnections with European neighbors. The Baltic states ended Russian gas imports in 2022.

Various factors, including China's support for Russia, have contributed to the development of a more skeptical view of China in the Baltic states. In 2021-2022, the Baltic states quit the 17+1, a forum China launched to deepen cooperation with countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

U.S. Relations, Defense Cooperation, and Issues for Congress

The United States and the Baltic states cooperate closely on defense and security issues for the purposes of building capacity to deter and resist potential Russian aggression. In FY2023 and FY2024 combined, Congress appropriated more than \$450 million in U.S. Department of Defense security assistance funding to the Baltic states through the *Baltic Security Initiative*. Congress also appropriates security assistance funding through the Foreign Military Financing program.

The United States has enhanced its military presence in Central and Eastern Europe since 2014, with rotational U.S. forces conducting training and exercises in the Baltic states and a persistent rotational presence of U.S. forces in Lithuania since 2019. Bilateral defense cooperation roadmaps signed in 2023 conveyed the U.S. intention to maintain a persistent rotational presence of military personnel in each of the three countries. NATO also has helped bolster the Baltic states' security. In 2017, NATO deployed multinational *Enhanced Forward Presence* battlegroups to the Baltic states. NATO countries have developed plans to expand the battlegroups over the next two to three years. Baltic leaders have advocated for further enhancements to the U.S. and NATO deployments.

Some Members of Congress may have an interest in assessing U.S. security assistance to the Baltic states; regional security threats and related U.S. defense policies and commitments; regional energy security and related U.S. policies; and regional relations with China in the context of concerns about China's influence and activities in Europe.

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Introduction and Issues for Congress

For decades, U.S. policymakers, including some Members of Congress, have considered Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (often referred to collectively as the *Baltic states*) to be valued U.S. allies and among the most pro-U.S. countries in Europe. Strong ties between the United States and the Baltic states have historical roots dating back to the early 20th century. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania gained independence in 1918, after the collapse of the Russian Empire. In 1940, they were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union, but the United States never recognized their annexation.¹ The United States strongly supported the restoration of the countries' independence in 1991 and was a leading advocate of their accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) in 2004.

Figure 1. Map of the Baltic Region



Source: Created by CRS using data from the Department of State and ESRI.

The United States and the Baltic states work closely together in their respective bilateral relationships, within NATO, and in the context of U.S.-EU relations. The U.S.-Baltic partnership encompasses diplomatic cooperation in pursuit of shared foreign policy objectives and extensive cooperation on security and defense issues, as well as trade and investment ties. The United States provides security assistance to the Baltic states intended to strengthen their military capabilities.

Although the Baltic states are relatively small in terms of area and population (the three countries have a combined population of approximately 6.1 million), some policymakers view their territories as a strategically important but potentially vulnerable position along NATO's eastern flank; all three countries border Russia, and two of the three border Russia's ally Belarus (see **Figure 1**). Since 2014, following Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine, U.S. focus on the Baltic

¹ See U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Press Release Issued by the Department of State on July 23, 1940*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1940v01/d412>.

region has increased, driven by concerns about potential threats posed by Russia. Such concerns have intensified since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, leading the United States and NATO to enhance their defense posture on NATO's eastern flank and adopt new plans for deterrence and defense in the region.

Developments in the Baltic region related to security concerns about Russia and the implications for U.S. policy and NATO may be of interest to the 119th Congress. The Baltic states are among the principal U.S. partners in assessing and responding to these challenges. As indicated by annual security assistance appropriations and the Baltic Security Initiative that Congress launched in 2020 (see "Security Partnership and Assistance," below), as well as frequent congressional delegations to the region, some Members of Congress have broadly supported the maintenance of close relations and security cooperation with the Baltic states. The House Baltic Caucus, a bipartisan group of Members of the House of Representatives, and the Senate Baltic Freedom Caucus, a bipartisan group of Senators, seek to maintain and strengthen the U.S.-Baltic relationship and engage in issues of mutual interest.²

Domestic Politics

Given the three Baltic countries' many similarities, observers typically view Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as a group. The countries cooperate extensively with one another and hold comparable views on foreign and security policy (particularly with regard to the threat posed by Russia). Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania stand out as democratic leaders among post-Soviet states and are the only states formerly part of the Soviet Union that have joined NATO and the EU. Since the restoration of their independence, the three countries' governments have tended to consist of multiparty coalitions, which have maintained pro-U.S., pro-NATO, and pro-EU orientations.

At the same time, alongside the similarities of the Baltic states are notable differences in national history, language, and culture. Each country has its own unique domestic political dynamics, and the viewpoints and priorities of the three countries are not always perfectly aligned.³ Additionally, ethnic Russians make up approximately 25% of the populations of Estonia and Latvia, respectively; Lithuania has a smaller percentage of ethnic Russians, approximately 5%.⁴

Estonia

The center-right Reform Party came in first place in Estonia's 2023 parliamentary election, winning 37 seats in Estonia's 101-seat unicameral parliament, the *Riigikogu*.⁵ Under then-Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, the Reform Party subsequently formed a coalition government with the liberal Estonia 200 party, which won 14 seats, and the center-left Social Democratic Party, which won 9 seats. Kallas had led the government of Estonia since 2021, when the Reform Party took over leadership following the collapse of a previous governing coalition. In July 2024, former Climate Minister Kristen Michal succeeded Kallas as prime minister after Kallas resigned to become the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.⁶

² Joint Baltic American National Committee, *Baltic Caucus*, November 20, 2024.

³ See, for example, Rein Taagepera, *Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia: 100 Years of Similarities and Disparities*, International Center for Defence and Security (Estonia), February 16, 2018.

⁴ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *World Factbook*.

⁵ Valimised, *Riigikogu Elections 2023, Total Republic of Estonia*, April 20, 2023.

⁶ Bartosz Chmielewski, *Estonia: Michal Forms an Anti-Crisis Cabinet*, Centre for Eastern Studies, July 24, 2024.

The other parties that won seats in the *Riigikogu* in the 2023 election were the far-right Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE, which came in second place with 17 seats), the populist center-left Center Party (16 seats), and the conservative *Isamaa* (Fatherland) party (8 seats). The next parliamentary election in Estonia is due to be held by March 2027.

The main priorities of Estonia's government include strongly supporting Ukraine, countering security threats from Russia, maintaining defense spending, and continuing to develop defense capabilities. The Michal government also has focused on promoting economic growth and reducing the country's budget deficit through tax increases and spending cuts.⁷

The president of Estonia is Alar Keris, who was elected by Estonia's parliament in 2021 after having served as director of the Estonian National Museum. The president is elected indirectly by the *Riigikogu* for a five-year term. In Estonia's parliamentary system, executive power is vested in the government. The president is head of state, is supreme commander of the armed forces, and represents Estonia in international relations.

Latvia

The center-right New Unity party came in first place in Latvia's 2022 parliamentary election, winning 26 seats in Latvia's 100-seat unicameral parliament, the *Saeima*.⁸ Under then-Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš, who had led a coalition government since 2019, New Unity subsequently formed a coalition government with the centrist United List, which won 15 seats, and the conservative National Alliance, which won 13 seats. Following disagreements among the coalition partners, Evika Siliņa took over as prime minister in September 2023 at the head of a new coalition comprising New Unity, the centrist Union of Greens and Farmers (16 seats), and the left-wing Progressives party (10 seats).⁹

The other parties in the *Saeima* are the For Stability! party (11 seats), which seeks to appeal to Latvia's Russian-speaking community, and the populist Latvia First party (9 seats). The center-

Estonia: Basic Facts

Population: 1.365 million

Ethnicity: 69.1% Estonian, 23.7% Russian

Languages: Estonian is the official language and first language of 67.2% of the population; Russian is the first language of 28.5% of the population

Religion: 71.3% none or unspecified; 16.5% Orthodox; 9.2% Lutheran

Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 2023: approximately \$41.3 billion; per capita GDP approximately \$30,138

Sources: International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, October 2024; Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*.

Latvia: Basic Facts

Population: 1.879 million

Ethnicity: 62.7% Latvian, 24.5% Russian

Languages: Latvian is the official language and first language of 56.3% of the population; Russian is the first language of 33.8% of the population

Religion: 36.2% Lutheran; 19.5% Roman Catholic; 19.1% Orthodox; 23.5% none or unspecified

Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 2023: approximately \$43.6 billion; per capita GDP approximately \$23,176

Sources: International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, October 2024; Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*.

⁷ Republic of Estonia Government, *Prime Minister Michal Approved the Areas of Responsibility of Ministers*, August 13, 2024; Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, *Estonia: Priorities of the Kristen Michal's Government*, Institute of Central Europe, July 29, 2024.

⁸ Central Election Commission of Latvia, *14th Saeima Elections*, October 17, 2022.

⁹ Bartosz Chmielewski, *Latvia: A New Government Led by Evika Siliņa*, Centre for Eastern Studies, September 18, 2023.

left Harmony Social Democratic Party, which draws its support largely from the country's ethnic Russian population, did not win any seats in the 2022 election. Harmony, which previously had ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, had been the largest party in the *Saeima* and Latvia's leading opposition party since 2011. The party reportedly lost support due to voters' fatigue over its inability to implement its agenda, because supporters of Russia's war in Ukraine viewed it as too critical of the war, and because opponents of the war viewed it as not critical enough.¹⁰ The next parliamentary election is due to be held by October 2026.

Supporting Ukraine and strengthening national security in the context of threats posed by Russia are main priorities of Latvia's government. The Siliņa government also has focused on improving the country's education and health care systems.¹¹

The president of Latvia is Edgars Rinkēvičs, who was elected by Latvia's parliament in 2023 after having served as foreign minister from 2011 to 2023. The president is elected indirectly by the *Saeima* for a four-year term. The president is head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, represents Latvia in international relations, and can initiate legislation, but executive power is vested in the prime minister and cabinet.

Lithuania

The center-left Social Democratic Party came in first place in Lithuania's October 2024 parliamentary election, winning 52 seats in Lithuania's 141-seat unicameral parliament, the *Seimas*.¹² The Social Democrats subsequently formed a coalition government with the populist Nemunas Dawn party, which won 20 seats, and the center-left Union of Democrats "For Lithuania," which won 14 seats. Prime Minister Gintautas Paluckas of the Social Democrats leads the government. The other main parties in the *Seimas* are the center-right Homeland Union-Christian Democrats (28 seats), which led the government from 2020 to 2024, the Liberals Movement (12 seats), and the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (8 seats). The next parliamentary election is due to be held by October 2028.

Lithuania: Basic Facts

Population: 2.883 million

Ethnicity: 84.6% Lithuanian, 6.5% Polish, 5.0% Russian

Languages: Lithuanian is the official language and first language of 85.3% of the population; Russian 6.8%; Polish 5.1%

Religion: 74.2% Roman Catholic; 3.7% Russian Orthodox; 19.8% none or unspecified

Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 2023: approximately \$77.8 billion; per capita GDP approximately \$26,998

Sources: International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, October 2024; Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*.

Similar to the other two Baltic states, supporting Ukraine, countering security threats from Russia (and neighboring Belarus), and bolstering national defense capabilities are top priorities for Lithuania's government. The Paluckas government also seeks to expand the country's social welfare system and undertake reforms to the education system.¹³

¹⁰ Bartosz Chmielewski, *Latvian Parliamentary Elections: Victory for the Centre-Right*, Centre for Eastern Studies, October 3, 2022.

¹¹ Cabinet of Ministers, Republic of Latvia, *Government Headed by E. Siliņa Has Accomplished the Promised Urgent Tasks During its First 100 Days of Office and Confirms its Priorities*, December 21, 2023.

¹² Seimas, *About the Seimas 2024-2028*.

¹³ "Lithuania's Govt Programme: New China Direction, Social Economy Policy – Key Points," *Lithuanian National* (continued...)

Lithuania's president is Gitanas Nausėda, a politically independent centrist and former banker who won a second consecutive five-year term in the country's 2024 presidential election. The president of Lithuania performs more significant policy functions compared to their Baltic counterparts, but executive power is exercised by the government. The Lithuanian president plays an important role in shaping foreign and national security policy, is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and has the power to initiate and veto legislation.

Economies

As with many other countries in Europe and elsewhere, external shocks connected to the war in Ukraine, including high inflation and rising energy and commodity prices, have posed challenges to the Baltic states' economies.

- Estonia's gross domestic product (GDP) contracted by 3.0% in 2023 and an estimated 0.9% in 2024. The economy is forecast to grow by 1.6% in 2025, and unemployment is forecast to be 7.1%.¹⁴
- Latvia's GDP contracted by 0.3% in 2023 before growing an estimated 1.2% in 2024. Growth is forecast to be 2.3% in 2025, and unemployment is forecast to be 6.5%.
- Lithuania's GDP contracted by 0.3% in 2023 before growing by an estimated 2.4% in 2024. Growth is forecast to be 2.6% in 2025, and unemployment is forecast to be 7.1%.

The Baltic states each use the euro, the common currency used by 20 EU member states (Estonia adopted the euro in 2011, Latvia in 2014, and Lithuania in 2015).

In November 2022, year-on-year inflation was 21.4% in Estonia; 21.7% in Latvia; and 21.4% in Lithuania, compared with the euro area average of 10.0%.¹⁵ In November 2024, annual inflation had decreased to 3.8% in Estonia; 2.3% in Latvia; and 1.1% in Lithuania, compared with the euro area average of 2.3%.¹⁶

Sweden, Finland, Germany, and Denmark are the largest foreign investors in the region.¹⁷ Major regional trading partners include Finland, Germany, Poland, Russia, and Sweden.¹⁸

Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

The Baltic states are among the international community's biggest supporters of Ukraine and strongest critics of Russia. Baltic officials have expressed the view that their security is directly tied to the outcome of the war in Ukraine, because they are concerned that a victorious Russia could focus its territorial ambitions on the Baltic states next. In a February 2024 interview, for

Radio and Television, December 4, 2024; "Incoming Lithuanian PM Prioritises Defence," *Central European Times*, November 25, 2024.

¹⁴ Economic statistics from International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook Database*, October 2024. Figures rounded to the nearest tenth of a percent.

¹⁵ Eurostat, *Euro Area Annual Inflation Down to 10.0%*, November 30, 2022.

¹⁶ Eurostat, *Euro Area Annual Inflation Up to 2.3%*, November 29, 2024.

¹⁷ Teona Gelashvili, "Charting Scandinavian FDI in the Baltics," *CEE Legal Matters*, January 16, 2024.

¹⁸ World Bank, *World Integrated Trade Solution Database*.

example, Latvian President Rinkēvičs stated, “And we know that Ukraine is fighting not only for us but, to some extent, I would say Ukraine is fighting instead of us.”¹⁹

The Baltic states have committed substantial military and financial support to Ukraine. According to the nongovernmental Kiel Institute, which tracks international aid to Ukraine, the Baltic states provided \$2.2 billion in bilateral military assistance and \$350 million in financial and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine from January 2022 through October 2024.²⁰ Over the same time period, in terms of total bilateral assistance to Ukraine as a percentage of GDP, Estonia ranked as the top country in the world (2.2%), Lithuania ranked third (1.7%), and Latvia ranked fourth (1.5%), according to the Kiel Institute.²¹ Military assistance to Ukraine from the Baltic states has included Javelin anti-tank missiles, Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, other air defense and anti-tank weapons, howitzers, armored vehicles, small arms, grenades, communications equipment, night vision equipment, ammunition, helmets, medical equipment, fuel, and food. As of November 2024, the Baltic states hosted more than 131,000 Ukrainian refugees, equivalent to approximately 2% of the three countries’ combined population.²²

The Baltic states have strongly supported the 15 rounds of sanctions that the EU adopted against Russia between February 2022 and December 2024 and have been leading advocates for using Russian sovereign assets immobilized due to sanctions to support Ukraine. The Baltic states also have implemented some measures beyond those adopted by the EU:

- In 2022, all three countries banned natural gas imports from Russia.²³
- In 2022, the three countries stopped issuing tourist visas to Russian citizens and (along with Poland) barred entry to Russian tourists seeking to travel to other destinations in Europe.²⁴ In 2023, the three countries banned entry of vehicles with Russian license plates.²⁵
- Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has prompted the three countries to remove Soviet monuments and World War II memorials as a “risk to public order” and an unwanted reminder of Russia’s former occupation of their territories.²⁶
- The Baltic states’ parliaments have adopted resolutions describing Russia’s actions in Ukraine as genocide and declaring Russia a “terrorist state” and a “state sponsor of terrorism.”²⁷
- EU sanctions suspend the broadcasting of nearly 20 Russian media outlets, including state-owned Sputnik and Russia Today, in all member countries, due to concerns about spreading disinformation and propaganda.²⁸ The Baltic states

¹⁹ Vazha Tavberidze, “Interview: Latvia’s President Says Ukraine Is Not Only Fighting For Us But ‘Fighting Instead Of Us’,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 20, 2024.

²⁰ Kiel Institute for the World Economy, *Ukraine Support Tracker*, December 5, 2024. Hereinafter, Kiel Institute.

²¹ Kiel Institute. Denmark ranked second.

²² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Operational Data Portal, Ukraine Refugees Situation*.

²³ “Baltic States Become First in Europe to Stop Russian Gas Imports,” *Euractiv*, April 4, 2022.

²⁴ Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Republic of Poland, *Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia Want to Limit the Possibility of Travel in Europe for Russian Citizens - a Joint Statement by the Prime Ministers*, September 8, 2022.

²⁵ Richard Connor, “Baltic States Shut Borders to Russia-Registered Cars,” *Deutsche Welle*, September 13, 2023.

²⁶ Julian Gomez, “Controversy as Latvia Tears Down Soviet-Era Monuments,” *Euronews*, November 10, 2022; “Estonia to Remove Soviet-Era Monuments to ‘Ensure Public Order,’” *Euronews*, August 16, 2022.

²⁷ Riigikogu, *Riigikogu Declared Russia a Terrorist Regime*, October 18, 2022; “Latvian Parliament Designates Russia a State Sponsor of Terrorism,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 11, 2022; “Lithuania Adopts Resolution Calling Russia ‘Terrorist State,’ Accuses Moscow of ‘Genocide,’” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 10, 2022.

²⁸ European Council/Council of the European Union, *EU Sanctions Against Russia Explained*, December 16, 2024.

have banned numerous additional Russia-based outlets and websites beyond those sanctioned by the EU; Lithuania has banned the retransmission or online distribution of all radio and television programs from Russia and Belarus.²⁹

- In February 2024, Latvia became the first EU country to adopt a ban on the import of Russian agricultural products.³⁰

Since the 2022 invasion, the Baltic states have increased their defense spending and military capabilities. They also have advocated for increasing the U.S. and NATO forces stationed on their territory (see “Regional Security Concerns and Responses” below).

Baltic Relations with the United States

The U.S. State Department describes Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as strong allies and valued partners that have helped to promote security, democracy, and prosperity in Europe and beyond.³¹ Many citizens of the Baltic states express continuing gratitude to the United States for consistently supporting their independence throughout the Cold War, and playing a key role in promoting the restoration of their independence in 1991. Many policymakers in the Baltic states tend to express the view that their countries’ relationship with the United States serves as the ultimate guarantor of their security against threats from Russia. All three Baltic states joined NATO and the EU in 2004 with the full backing of the United States. Successive U.S. presidential administrations have maintained strong bilateral partnerships with the Baltic states and have expressed a continued U.S. commitment to ensuring the security of the Baltic region.³²

While most of the Baltic states’ security cooperation with the United States focuses on the Baltic region, the three countries also have sought to support U.S. foreign policy and security goals outside of Europe. For example, the Baltic states worked closely with the United States in Afghanistan, where they contributed military personnel to NATO-led missions for nearly two decades. The three countries also are partner countries contributing personnel and resources in the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State.³³

Security Partnership and Assistance

The United States provides security assistance to the Baltic states. Recent highlights include the following:

- The Baltic Security Initiative (BSI), established by Congress in 2020, directs U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) security cooperation funding to the Baltic states. FY2024 appropriations for the BSI was approximately \$228 million.³⁴

²⁹ “Lithuania Extends Ban on Russian, Belarusian Media,” *Lithuanian National Radio and Television*, June 13, 2024; “LTV: Blocking Russian Propaganda is Difficult in the Digital Age,” *Public Broadcasting of Latvia*, September 17, 2024; Joakim Klementi, “Russian Info Channels in Estonia Viewed, Trusted Far Less Than Year Ago,” *Estonian Public Broadcasting*, March 9, 2023.

³⁰ Cabinet of Ministers, Republic of Latvia, *Latvia Bans Imports of Certain Agricultural and Feed Products From Russia and Belarus*, March 6, 2024.

³¹ See U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Relations with Estonia*, December 3, 2020; *U.S. Relations with Latvia*, December 3, 2020; and *U.S. Relations with Lithuania*, August 5, 2020.

³² See, for example, The White House, *Statement from President Biden Commemorating 100 Years of U.S. Diplomatic Relations with our Baltic Allies*, July 28, 2022.

³³ See Global Coalition Against Daesh, <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/>.

³⁴ See S.Rept. 118-81, incorporated into the explanatory statement to the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, (continued...)

Congress appropriated \$225 million for the BSI in FY2023, \$180 million in FY2022, and about \$169 million in FY2021. Under the BSI, DOD has prioritized developing the Baltic states' air defense systems, maritime domain awareness, and land forces.

- The United States provided the Baltic states with more than \$426 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance in FY2022 (much of it from Ukraine-related supplemental appropriations) and nearly \$59 million in FY2023.³⁵ For FY2024 and FY2025, the Biden Administration requested \$29.25 million in FMF annually for the Baltic states (\$9.75 million annually for each).³⁶
- In December 2023, the United States signed bilateral defense cooperation roadmaps with the Baltic states for 2024-2028 (following on previous five-year defense cooperation roadmaps signed in 2019.) These roadmaps seek to promote “defense cooperation in integrated air and missile defense, maritime domain awareness, cyber, irregular warfare, participation in international military operations and exercises, infrastructure development, and training.”³⁷
- Since 1993, the Baltic states have participated in the U.S. National Guard State Partnership Program. Under the program, Estonia's armed forces partner with units from the Maryland National Guard, Latvia's armed forces with the Michigan National Guard, and Lithuania's armed forces with the Pennsylvania National Guard.

Economic Relations

Given the relatively small size of the Baltic states' economies and populations, U.S. trade and investment ties with the three countries are modest:

- In 2023, U.S. exports of goods and services to Estonia were valued at \$549 million and imports of goods and services from Estonia were valued at \$931 million. U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) stock in Estonia was \$99 million in 2023. The U.S. Department of Commerce lists energy, agriculture, information technology services and equipment, electronics and electronic components, transportation, and defense as leading sectors in Estonia for U.S. exports and investment.³⁸
- In 2023, U.S. exports of goods and services to Latvia were valued at \$1.2 billion and imports of goods and services from Latvia were valued at \$727 million. U.S. FDI stock in Latvia was \$58 million in 2023. The U.S. Department of Commerce lists information and communications technologies, including computer services,

2024 (P.L. 118-47, Division A). The Baltic Security Initiative was first established in the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2021, passed in December 2020 (P.L. 116-260, Division C).

³⁵ U.S. Government, *U.S. Foreign Assistance by Country* (*ForeignAssistance.gov*), September 26, 2024. FY2023 figures partially reported as of September 26, 2024.

³⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification, Department of State Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Supplementary Tables, Fiscal Year 2024 and Fiscal Year 2025*.

³⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *U.S., Baltic States Sign Bilateral 5-Year Roadmaps for Defense Cooperation*, December 15, 2023.

³⁸ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Estonia – International Trade and Investment Country Facts*; U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, *Estonia - Country Commercial Guide*, March 15, 2024. Hereinafter, U.S. Department of Commerce.

- software, hardware, and telecommunications services, as leading sectors in Latvia for U.S. exports and investment.³⁹
- In 2023, U.S. exports of goods and services to Lithuania were valued at \$3.3 billion and imports of goods and services from Lithuania were valued at \$2.3 billion. U.S. FDI stock in Lithuania was \$256 million in 2023. The U.S. Department of Commerce lists agriculture, building materials, energy, environmental services, computer software and hardware, medical equipment and pharmaceuticals, and financial technology as leading sectors in Lithuania for U.S. exports and investment.⁴⁰

Regional Security Concerns and Responses

Over the past two decades, officials in the Baltic region increasingly have viewed Russia as a threat to their countries' security. Baltic officials have expressed concern over past buildups of Russian forces in the region, large-scale Russian military exercises simulating conflicts with the Baltic states, and frequent approaches of Russian military aircraft to Baltic states' airspace.⁴¹

Russia's 2022 war against Ukraine has intensified concerns among Baltic officials that the Baltic states could be targets for Russian ambitions beyond Ukraine. The presence of a large ethnic Russian population in the Baltic states, particularly in Latvia and Estonia, is a factor in these concerns; Russia's claims of persecution against Russian-speaking communities were a large part of its pretext for its invasion of Ukraine. One principle of Russian foreign policy is to act as the defender and guarantor of the "rights" of Russian-speaking people wherever they live.⁴²

Since 2022, Baltic officials also have warned that Russia is preparing for a military confrontation with NATO; Baltic authorities assess that following the end of the war in Ukraine, it would take three to five years for Russia to rebuild its forces and pose a direct threat to NATO.⁴³ Scenarios for Russian action against the Baltic states include a full invasion after a military buildup, with the aim of capturing the region and closing it off from NATO reinforcements (also see textbox on "Kaliningrad: Russia's Strategic Territory on the Baltic Sea," below); an attempted land grab following a quick mobilization; and a limited incursion or "ambiguous invasion" similar to the tactics employed in Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014.⁴⁴ Russia also has sought to exert pressure on NATO's eastern flank with the deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons to Belarus, a move that Russia first announced in 2023.⁴⁵ With many of the Russian military personnel formerly stationed in the Baltic region having been withdrawn and redeployed to Ukraine,

³⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce.

⁴¹ Sabine Siebold, "Scrambles of NATO Jets Against Russian Aircraft Up More Than 20%, Source Says," Reuters, May 16, 2024; Mason Clark and George Barros, *Russia's Zapad-2021 Exercise*, Institute for the Study of War, September 17, 2021.

⁴² "Putin Approves New Foreign Policy Doctrine Based on 'Russian World,'" Reuters, September 5, 2022. See also President of Russia, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, March 18, 2014, at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

⁴³ Vanessa Gera, "Estonia's Foreign Minister Says the Baltics Have 3 or 4 Years to Prepare for Russian 'Test' of NATO," Associated Press, February 14, 2024.

⁴⁴ Sean Monaghan, et al., *Is NATO Ready for War?*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2024; Franz-Stefan Gady, "NATO's Confusion Over the Russia Threat," *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2024. Also see Lukas Milevski, "Scenarios for Baltic Defence: What to Prepare Against," *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review*, vol. 17 (2019) and Ben S. Wermeling, "Fighting Russia? Modeling the Baltic Scenarios," *US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, vol. 48, no. 2 (Summer 2018).

⁴⁵ Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, "Russia's Nuclear Weapons Are Now in Belarus," *Foreign Policy*, March 13, 2024.

analysts assert that the immediate threat of direct Russian military action against the Baltic states appears to be low.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, regional intelligence services assess that Russia has developed longer-term plans to reconstitute its forces and redeploy a large military presence in the region.⁴⁷

NATO member state leaders repeatedly have vowed, included at the 2024 NATO Summit in Washington, DC, to defend “every inch” of alliance members’ territory.⁴⁸ At the 2023 NATO Summit in Lithuania, the Allies agreed to a set of three new regional defense plans to “significantly improve the coherence of NATO’s collective defence planning with Allies’ national planning” and “set out specifically what will be expected of Allies in a crisis.”⁴⁹ The plans “detail the steps and resources needed to protect specific regions of Alliance territory from attack ... including by assigning specific forces and capabilities and stipulating levels of readiness.”⁵⁰ NATO’s Joint Force Command Brunssum (located in the Netherlands) leads the plan for defending Central Europe and the Baltic region.⁵¹ Some observers note that the accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO (in 2023 and 2024, respectively) has substantially enhanced the alliance’s ability to defend the Baltic states and prevent a scenario in which Russia might effectively close off the region.⁵²

Kaliningrad: Russia’s Strategic Territory on the Baltic Sea

Kaliningrad, a 5,800-square-mile Russian exclave on the Baltic Sea located between Poland and Lithuania (see **Figure 1**), is a key strategic territory for Russia, allowing it to project military power into NATO’s northern flank. Although ground units and air defense systems based in Kaliningrad reportedly have been redeployed for use in the Ukraine war, the territory retains a heavy Russian military presence, including Russia’s Baltic Fleet, two airbases, Iskander ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons, S-400 surface-to-air missile systems, and coastal defense missile systems.⁵³ The Lithuanian government’s National Threat Assessment 2023 called Kaliningrad “the biggest threat in Lithuania’s neighborhood.”⁵⁴

Some analysts assert that Russia has used Kaliningrad to pursue an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy that involves layering surface-to-air missiles to potentially block NATO allies’ access to the Baltic states and much of Poland.⁵⁵ Some analysts also warn that Kaliningrad’s geographic isolation creates a scenario in which Russia could try to seize the Suwałki Gap, the 65-mile border between Poland and Lithuania separating Kaliningrad from Russia’s ally Belarus and the Baltic states’ sole land connection to the rest of NATO territory.⁵⁶

⁴⁶ Lukas Milewski, *How Long Do the Baltic States Have? Planning Horizons for Baltic Defense*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 11, 2023; Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsch, “Russia’s Stripped Its Western Borders to Feed the Fight in Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, September 28, 2022.

⁴⁷ “Russia May Double Troops Along Border With Baltics, Finland – Estonian Intelligence,” *Lithuanian National Television and Radio*, February 13, 2024.

⁴⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Washington Summit Declaration*, July 10, 2024.

⁴⁹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Deterrence and Defence*, July 1, 2024.

⁵⁰ Nele Loorents, *NATO’s Regional Defence Plans*, International Centre for Defence and Security, July 2024.

⁵¹ The other two regional defense plans pertain to the Atlantic and the Arctic, and the Mediterranean and Black Sea, respectively.

⁵² Anna Wieslander, Eric Adamson, and Jesper Lehto, *How Allied Sweden and Finland Can Secure Northern Europe*, Atlantic Council, January 6, 2023.

⁵³ Steve Wills, *Kaliningrad: Impregnable Fortress or “Russian Alamo”?*, CNA, May 15, 2023.

⁵⁴ State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania and Defence Intelligence and Security Service Under the Ministry of National Defence, *National Threat Assessment 2023*.

⁵⁵ See Robin Häggblom, *Myth 5: ‘Russia Creates Impenetrable “A2/AD Bubbles,”’* Chatham House, July 14, 2022; Stefan Hedlund, *Scenarios for Russia’s Strategic Kaliningrad Exclave*, Geopolitical Intelligence Services AG, June 21, 2022; and Vaidas Saldžiūnas, *Kaliningrad: A Useless Sliver of Russia or the Cause of a New Fulda Gap?*, International Centre for Defence and Security, February 12, 2016.

⁵⁶ Matthew Karnitschnig, “The Most Dangerous Place on Earth,” *Politico Europe*, June 20, 2022.

Defense Spending and Capabilities

The Baltic states' national militaries are relatively small (see **Table 1**) and have limited capabilities (no combat aircraft or main battle tanks, for example); defense planning consequently relies heavily on NATO membership. The Baltic states have emphasized active participation in the alliance through measures such as contributing to NATO's former mission in Afghanistan. Prompted by Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014, the Baltic states have increased their defense budgets and undertaken efforts to modernize their armed forces and acquire new military capabilities.⁵⁷ All three countries exceed NATO's target for member states to allocate at least 2% of GDP for defense spending.

Lithuania's defense spending was an estimated 2.78% of GDP (approximately \$2.2 billion) in 2023 and was expected to be 2.85% of GDP (\$2.3 billion) in 2024.⁵⁸ Lithuania has the largest military of the three Baltic states, with 25,300 total active duty personnel, 7,100 reserves, and 18,400 gendarmerie and paramilitary personnel, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *Military Balance 2024*.⁵⁹ After abolishing conscription in 2008, Lithuania reintroduced compulsory military service in 2015 due to concerns about Russia. The Lithuanian armed forces' modernization program has included the acquisition or planned acquisition of new self-propelled artillery, infantry fighting vehicles, short- to medium-range air defense systems, High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), helicopters, and anti-tank weapons. In October 2024, Lithuanian officials confirmed plans to acquire 54 Leopard 2A8 tanks from Germany, with the goal of establishing a tank battalion by 2030.⁶⁰

Estonia's defense spending was an estimated 3.04% of GDP (approximately \$1.2 billion) in 2023 and was expected to be 3.43% of GDP (approximately \$1.4 billion) in 2024.⁶¹ According to the *Military Balance 2024*, Estonia's armed forces total 7,100 active personnel and 41,200 reserves.⁶² The Estonian armed forces' modernization program has included the acquisition or planned acquisition of new self-propelled artillery, infantry fighting vehicles, HIMARS, coastal defense systems, short- and medium-range air defense systems, and anti-tank weapons.

Latvia's defense spending was an estimated 2.87% of GDP (approximately \$1.3 billion) in 2023 and was expected to be 3.15% of GDP (approximately \$1.4 billion) in 2024.⁶³ According to the *Military Balance 2024*, Latvia's armed forces total 6,600 active personnel and 16,000 reserves.⁶⁴ In 2023, Latvia adopted a law reinstating compulsory military service for males ages 18-27 (conscription previously had been abolished in 2006). The Latvian armed forces' modernization program has included the acquisition or planned acquisition of new medium-range air defense systems, coastal defense systems, HIMARS, and helicopters.

⁵⁷ Justina Budginaite-Froehly, *The Baltic (R)evolution in Military Affairs*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 11, 2024; Bartosz Chmielewski and Jacek Tarociński, *On the Warpath: The Development and Modernisation of the Baltic States' Armed Forces*, Centre for Eastern Studies, May 10, 2024.

⁵⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization Public Diplomacy Division, *Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*, June 17, 2024. Hereinafter, NATO Public Diplomacy Division.

⁵⁹ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2024*, pp. 113-114. Hereinafter, IISS, *Military Balance*.

⁶⁰ "Lithuania Confirms Purchase of Leopard 2A8 Main Battle Tanks from Germany," *Defence Industry Europe*, October 22, 2024.

⁶¹ NATO Public Diplomacy Division.

⁶² IISS, *Military Balance*, pp. 87.

⁶³ NATO Public Diplomacy Division.

⁶⁴ IISS, *Military Balance*, pp. 122-123.

Purchases of U.S. weapons through the Foreign Military Sales program play an important role in the Baltic states' armed forces modernization efforts. In 2023, for example, the United States approved Foreign Military Sales to Lithuania of Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) for use with the National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS), valued at approximately \$100 million.⁶⁵ Other U.S. Foreign Military Sales to Lithuania since 2020 include HIMARS valued at approximately \$495 million, Javelin anti-tank missiles valued at approximately \$125 million, and six Black Hawk helicopters valued at approximately \$380 million.⁶⁶ In 2022, the United States approved a Foreign Military Sale to Estonia of HIMARS valued at approximately \$500 million.⁶⁷ In 2023, the United States approved Foreign Military Sales to Latvia of HIMARS valued at approximately \$220 million and a Naval Strike Missile Coastal Defense System valued at approximately \$110 million.⁶⁸

In 2024, the three countries announced plans to construct a common defense line along their respective borders with Russia and Belarus.⁶⁹ The project is expected to include a network of bunkers and anti-mobility installations such as anti-tank obstacles, fences, trees, and ditches.

Table 1. The Baltic States: Armed Forces and Defense Spending

	Active Armed Forces Personnel	Armed Forces Reserves	2024 Defense Expenditure	2024 Defense Spending % of GDP
Estonia	7,100	41,200	\$1.4 billion	3.43
Latvia	6,600	16,000	\$1.4 billion	3.15
Lithuania	25,300	25,500	\$2.3 billion	2.85

Sources: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2024* and NATO Public Diplomacy Division, *Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*, June 17, 2024.

Note: Reserve numbers may include territorial defense units, gendarmerie, paramilitary units, and voluntary formations. Defense expenditure rounded to the nearest tenth of a percent.

U.S. and NATO Military Presence

Following Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the United States launched *Operation Atlantic Resolve*, a contingency operation to deter potential Russian aggression against NATO by rotating U.S.-based military personnel into the countries of NATO's eastern flank, including the Baltic states. Starting in 2022, *Atlantic Resolve* activities expanded to include the provision of security assistance (training and equipment) for the Ukrainian armed forces. During the second quarter of 2024, approximately 8,100 U.S. military personnel supported *Atlantic Resolve*.⁷⁰ U.S.

⁶⁵ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, *Lithuania – AIM-120C-8 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM)*, October 23, 2023.

⁶⁶ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, *Lithuania – M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS)*, November 9, 2022; *Lithuania – Javelin Missiles*, December 21, 2021; *Lithuania – UH-60M Black Hawk Helicopters*, July 6, 2020.

⁶⁷ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, *Estonia – M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS)*, July 15, 2022.

⁶⁸ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, *Latvia – M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems*, October 24, 2023; *Latvia – Naval Strike Missile Coastal Defense System*, May 2, 2023.

⁶⁹ Ministry of Defence, Republic of Latvia, *Baltic Defence Ministers Agree on the Baltic Defence Line*, January 22, 2024.

⁷⁰ Special Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, *Operation Atlantic Resolve Including U.S. Government Activities Related to Ukraine*, April 1, 2024-June 30, 2024, pp. 12. Hereinafter, Special Inspector General Report.

Army V Corps forward headquarters, located in Poznań, Poland, is responsible for overseeing mission command of rotational units supporting the operation. Rotational units include an Armored Brigade Combat Team and a Combat Aviation Brigade.⁷¹

Congress supported *Atlantic Resolve* by establishing the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI, initially called the European Reassurance Initiative) in FY2015 to provide funding for: 1) increasing the U.S. military presence in Europe; 2) conducting additional bilateral and multilateral exercises and training with regional allies and partners; 3) improving regional infrastructure to allow greater responsiveness; 4) enhancing the prepositioning of U.S. equipment in the region; and 5) intensifying efforts to build partner capacity with regard to NATO members and other partners in the region. From 2015 to 2023, EDI funding totaled more than \$30 billion.⁷² From FY2022 through June 1, 2024, Congress authorized more than \$11.6 billion in appropriations that support EDI objectives, and DOD had obligated more than \$7.4 billion of that amount.⁷³

The 2023 bilateral defense cooperation roadmaps between the United States and the Baltic states “convey the Secretary of Defense’s [Biden Administration Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin] intention to provide heel-to-toe persistent rotational presence of U.S. forces in each Baltic State.”⁷⁴ The exact number of U.S. military personnel in each country varies at any given time in accordance with exercises and other unit movements; publicly available sources indicate a battalion-sized force of more than 1,000 U.S. personnel stationed in Lithuania as of March 2024, approximately 600 in Estonia as of July 2024, and approximately 600 in Latvia as of August 2022.⁷⁵ As part of efforts to convince the United States to make its force presence permanent, Lithuania opened a new military training camp (*Camp Herkus*) in 2021 in the town of Pabradė, near Lithuania’s border with Belarus.⁷⁶

Since 2017, the NATO alliance has deployed multinational battlegroups to the Baltic states and Poland (see **Figure 2**).⁷⁷ These *Enhanced Forward Presence* units are intended to deter Russian aggression by acting as a *tripwire* that ensures a response from the entire alliance in the event of a Russian attack. Germany leads the battlegroup in Lithuania; the unit is based at Rukla, in central Lithuania. Canada leads the battlegroup in Latvia; the unit is based at Camp Ādaži, near Latvia’s capital city Riga. The United Kingdom (UK) leads the battlegroup in Estonia; the unit is based in Tapa, less than 100 miles from the border with Russia.

Despite increased deployments to the battlegroups since 2022, Baltic officials have expressed the view that NATO’s tripwire forces are too small to deter Russian aggression. Baltic officials have

⁷¹ Overall, as of 2024, there are approximately 80,000 total U.S. military personnel stationed in the United States European Command (USEUCOM) area of responsibility. Special Inspector General Report, pp. 12.

⁷² Special Inspector General Report, pp. 10.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *U.S., Baltic States Sign Bilateral 5-Year Roadmaps for Defense Cooperation*, December 15, 2023.

⁷⁵ C. Todd Lopez, *Austin Discusses NATO, Ukraine, Military Cooperation With Estonian Counterpart*, U.S. Department of Defense, July 23, 2024; U.S. Ambassador to Lithuania Kara C. McDonald, *Three Resounding Truths about Lithuania and NATO*, U.S. Embassy in Lithuania, March 29, 2024; Jim Garamone, *Austin Visits U.S. Troops, Meets With Leaders in Latvia*, U.S. Department of Defense, August 10, 2022.

⁷⁶ “US Battalion to Stay in Lithuania Indefinitely – MoD,” *Lithuanian National Radio and Television*, May 2, 2024; Jacqueline Feldscher, “Is This the Next US Military Base in Europe?,” *Defense One*, October 3, 2021; “Lithuania Opens Training Camp for US troops in Bid to Draw Washington’s Attention,” *Lithuanian National Television and Radio*, August 30, 2021.

⁷⁷ The United States leads the NATO battlegroup in Poland. In 2022, NATO deployed additional battlegroups to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.

called for NATO to shift to a forward defense strategy with forces sufficient to deny Russia territorial gains in the first place. As part of longer-term NATO deterrence efforts, Germany is planning to station a brigade of 4,800 personnel in Lithuania by 2027.⁷⁸ Canada and Latvia have signed a plan for scaling up the NATO battle group in Latvia to brigade size (approximately 3,000-5,000 personnel), including the persistent deployment of 2,200 Canadian personnel to Latvia, by 2026.⁷⁹ The UK has pledged to deploy a mechanized brigade to Estonia in the event of a crisis.⁸⁰

Figure 2. NATO Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States

	Approximate number of personnel	Country contributors ♦ NATO battlegroup lead country
Estonia	1,350	France, ♦ United Kingdom
Latvia	2,450	Albania, ♦ Canada, Czech Republic, Iceland, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain
Lithuania	1,800	Belgium, Czech Republic, ♦ Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway

Source: Created by CRS with data from North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO's Military Presence in the East of the Alliance*, November 29, 2024 and International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2024*.

Lacking their own fighter aircraft, the Baltic countries rely on NATO allies to police and defend their airspace. NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission was launched in 2004 and is based at Šiauliai Airbase in Lithuania and Ämari Airbase in Estonia. The Baltic states contribute to the costs of the mission, including by providing ground services for the aircraft and supplying aviation fuel.

Hybrid Threats

In addition to conventional military threats, analysts have observed that Russia targets the Baltic states with a range of influence operations using *hybrid* warfare tactics such as disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and sabotage, and that Russia has become more aggressive in employing hybrid threats against the Baltic region since 2022.⁸¹ The likely goal of such operations is to weaken, divide, or pressure targeted societies without triggering direct military conflict. Many of Russia's hybrid activities since 2022 appear more specifically intended to pressure, intimidate, or punish countries that have strongly supported Ukraine. Russia routinely denies responsibility for suspected hybrid attacks, and the relatively ambiguous nature of many suspected attacks often makes responsibility difficult to prove. Main categories of operations employed by Russia against the Baltic states include the following:

- **Disinformation and Propaganda.** Russian disinformation efforts against the Baltic states typically attempt to polarize society by portraying the Baltic states as illegitimate and dysfunctional, NATO and the United States as imperial powers, and Baltic governments as Russophobic fascist regimes that fuel the war

⁷⁸ "Germany Sends First Soldiers for Permanent Lithuania Force," *Deutsche Welle*, April 8, 2024.

⁷⁹ Government of Canada, *Roadmap - Scaling the EFP Latvia Battle Group to Brigade*, July 11, 2023.

⁸⁰ Joakim Klementi, "Brigade Assigned to Estonia Likely to Be One of British Army's Strongest," *Estonian Public Broadcasting*, October 23, 2023.

⁸¹ Henrik Praks, *Russia's Hybrid Threat Tactics Against the Baltic Sea Region: From Disinformation to Sabotage*, The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, May 2024. Hereinafter, Henrik Praks.

- in Ukraine while oppressing their ethnic Russian populations.⁸² Russia also has provided funding and other support to organizations in the Baltic states that promote pro-Russia causes and narratives.⁸³
- **Cyberattacks.** The Baltic states regularly experience distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks that EU and Baltic state authorities attribute to pro-Russia hacker groups. Such cyberattacks often target critical infrastructure and the websites of public services, media, and the financial and transportation sectors. Estonia experienced the largest DDoS attack in its history in March 2024.⁸⁴
 - **Vandalism and Acts of Violence.** Since 2023, Baltic state authorities have suspected the involvement of Russian security services in numerous instances of vandalism against monuments, memorials, and national or pro-Ukraine symbols. In March 2024, the chief of staff of the late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was attacked with a hammer outside of his home in Lithuania's capital city Vilnius, an incident that Lithuanian intelligence characterized as probably "Russian-organized and implemented."⁸⁵
 - **Sabotage and Arson.** European officials reportedly suspect Russian security services of planting incendiary devices aboard commercial cargo aircraft in July 2024 after packages originating in Lithuania ignited at handling facilities in Germany and the UK.⁸⁶ In November 2024, a cargo aircraft crashed while approaching the Vilnius airport, further raising suspicions of potential sabotage.⁸⁷ Lithuanian officials also suspect Russia's involvement in a large fire at a warehouse in Vilnius in May 2024.⁸⁸ For information on suspected sabotage against undersea cables and pipelines, see textbox "Vulnerable Infrastructure in the Baltic Sea," below.
 - **Weaponized Migration.** Russia and its ally Belarus have sought to use migration as a tool to destabilize the EU. Since 2021, tens of thousands of migrants, primarily from Middle Eastern countries, have travelled to Russia and Belarus and subsequently attempted to enter the EU illegally through Latvia, Lithuania, or Poland. Many such migrants reportedly hold Russian visas and are assisted by Belarusian security services.⁸⁹

⁸² Indrė Makaraitytė and Mindaugas Aušra, "Moscow's Propaganda in Baltics Achieves Limited Success – LRT Investigation," *Lithuanian National Radio and Television*, August 5, 2024.

⁸³ Henrik Praks, pp. 12-13.

⁸⁴ Republic of Estonia Information System Authority, *Situation in Cyberspace*, March 2024.

⁸⁵ Sarah Rainsford, "Leonid Volkov: Navalny Ally Blames Putin Henchmen for Attack in Lithuania," *BBC News*, March 13, 2024.

⁸⁶ "Parcels That Exploded in Europe Reportedly Part of Russian Plot," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 5, 2024.

⁸⁷ "DHL Cargo Plane Crashes Near Vilnius Airport in Lithuania," *Deutsche Welle*, November 25, 2024.

⁸⁸ Jurga Bakaitė and Evelina Knutovič, "Who is Behind 'Sabotages and Diversions' in Lithuania and Poland?," *Lithuanian National Radio and Television*, May 23, 2024.

⁸⁹ Henry-Laur Allik, "Poland, Baltics Step up Border Controls Amid Migrant Crisis," *Deutsche Welle*, June 16, 2024.

Other methods and activities Russia has used or allegedly has used to exert psychological pressure include the following:

- In February 2024, Russia placed Estonia's then-Prime Minister Kaja Kallas and other Baltic state officials on a "wanted list" due to their role in removing Soviet memorials.⁹⁰
- A wave of bomb threats, many of them in Russian, disrupted schools across the Baltic states in October 2023. Authorities asserted that the threats "likely were ... carried out at the initiative of hostile states."⁹¹
- Since 2022, Baltic officials have accused Russia of interfering with aircraft navigation in the region by jamming global positioning system (GPS) signals.⁹²
- In May 2024, Russian personnel removed a number of river buoys marking the border between Estonia and Russia, a move labeled by Estonian authorities as a "provocative border incident."⁹³

Vulnerable Infrastructure in the Baltic Sea

In 2023 and 2024, U.S. and NATO authorities reportedly alerted allies of increased Russian military activity near undersea cables, warning that Russia was "actively mapping" undersea infrastructure.⁹⁴ Since late 2023, there have been several incidents in which vessels have allegedly damaged undersea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea by dragging their anchors across the seabed.

In December 2024, Finnish authorities seized an oil tanker registered in the Cook Islands suspected of damaging an undersea power cable linking Finland and Estonia and several data cables after sailing from a Russian port.⁹⁵

Investigators have linked two previous incidents of suspected sabotage to vessels registered in the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) and possibly linked to Russia. In November 2024, regional governments reported that undersea communications cables connecting Lithuania to Sweden and Germany to Finland, respectively, had been physically cut within hours of each other. As authorities investigated the incident, German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius stated, "No one believes that these cables were cut accidentally."⁹⁶ Investigations subsequently centered on a PRC-flagged cargo ship sailing from a Russian port; some observers suspect that Russian intelligence services, rather than the PRC government, were behind the incident.⁹⁷

In October 2023, the Balticconnector pipeline that links the gas infrastructure of Estonia and Finland suffered unexplained damage, with the pipeline shutting down due to a major leak. China's government later admitted that a Hong Kong-flagged cargo ship caused the damage with its anchor, claiming that the incident was an accident due to a storm; regional officials have expressed skepticism that the damage was caused accidentally.⁹⁸

⁹⁰ "Russia Puts Estonian PM And Dozens of Baltic Officials On Wanted List For Removing Monuments," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 13, 2024.

⁹¹ Liudas Dapkus, "Barrage of Bomb Threats Emailed to Schools Cancels Classes Across the Baltic Countries," Associated Press, October 13, 2023.

⁹² Konstantin Eggert, "GPS Jamming in the Baltic Region: Is Russia Responsible?" *Deutsche Welle*, May 5, 2024.

⁹³ George Wright, "Russia's Removal of Border Markers 'Unacceptable' - EU," *BBC News*, May 24, 2024.

⁹⁴ Aleksander Cwalina, *Concerns Grow Over Possible Russian Sabotage of Undersea Cables*, Atlantic Council, September 12, 2024; Charlie Cooper, "NATO Warns Russia Could Target Undersea Pipelines and Cables," *Politico Europe*, May 3, 2023.

⁹⁵ Ellen Francis, "Finland Seizes Ship in Probe of Undersea Cable Damage," *Washington Post*, December 26, 2024.

⁹⁶ Oliver Moody, "Fears That Russia Was Behind Baltic Telecoms Cable 'Sabotage'," *The Times (London)*, November 19, 2024.

⁹⁷ Sophia Besch and Erik Brown, *A Chinese-Flagged Ship Cut Baltic Sea Internet Cables. This Time, Europe Was More Prepared*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 3, 2024. Also see Sophia Besch and Erik Brown, *Securing Europe's Subsea Data Cables*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 16, 2024.

⁹⁸ Li Beiping, "'China's 'accidental' Damage to Baltic Pipeline View With Suspicion," *Voice of America*, August 17, 2024.

The Baltic states have sought to counter hybrid threats by developing and implementing a *whole-of-society* approach that promotes preparedness and societal resilience, emphasizes cybersecurity and strategic communication, and utilizes tools to proactively combat disinformation.⁹⁹ The Baltic states have provided lessons and experience as NATO and the EU likewise have sought to develop their respective toolboxes for countering hybrid threats;¹⁰⁰ analysts assert that Russia's activities targeting the Baltic states are part of a wider campaign of hybrid warfare against Europe.¹⁰¹ In May 2024, NATO leaders expressed concerns about "hostile state activity" affecting not only the Baltic states, but also the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, and the UK.¹⁰² In December 2024, the foreign ministers of NATO member countries "agreed [to] a set of measures to counter Russia's hostile and cyber activities, including enhanced intelligence exchange, more exercises, better protection of critical infrastructure, [and] improved cyber defence."¹⁰³

Energy Security

For more than two decades after regaining their independence, the Baltic states remained isolated from European energy networks and dependent on Russia for their oil and natural gas supplies. Over the past decade, due to concerns about Russia using that dependence as political and economic leverage, the Baltic states pursued policies to end their reliance on Russian energy supplies by integrating with European natural gas and electricity networks and diversifying their supply sources.¹⁰⁴ As noted above, following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, all three countries banned gas imports from Russia, a step that goes beyond the energy-related sanctions adopted against Russia by the EU.¹⁰⁵

In 2014, a floating liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal became operational at the Lithuanian port of Klaipėda, and Lithuania began importing LNG from the United States and Norway. The nearly 300-meter-long floating storage and regasification unit, the *Independence*, has the capacity to supply 100% of Lithuania's natural gas needs and 90% of the total natural gas needs of the three Baltic countries combined.¹⁰⁶ A pipeline (Balticconnector) linking the gas infrastructure of Estonia and Finland became operational in 2020 and a pipeline linking Lithuania to Poland

⁹⁹ See, for example, Nerijus Maliukevičius, *Fortifying Democracies: Lithuania's Comprehensive Approach to Counter Disinformation and Propaganda*, Eastern Europe Studies Centre, April 8, 2024.

¹⁰⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Countering Hybrid Threats*, May 7, 2024; European Union External Action Service, *Countering Hybrid Threats*, March 18, 2024.

¹⁰¹ Doug Livermore, *The West Must Respond to Russia's Rapidly Escalating Hybrid Warfare*, Atlantic Council of the United States, November 7, 2024.

¹⁰² North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Statement by the North Atlantic Council on Recent Russian Hybrid Activities*, May 2, 2024.

¹⁰³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO Foreign Ministers Chart Way Forward in Addressing Russian Sabotage*, December 4, 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Justina Budginaite-Froehly, *Transatlantic Energy Security From a Baltic Perspective*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 13, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ "Baltic States Become First in Europe to Stop Russian Gas Imports," *Euractiv*, April 4, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ "Lithuanian LNG Terminal Turns Seven: 'Weapon Against Russia's Aggressive Energy Policy,'" *Lithuanian National Television and Radio*, November 4, 2021.

became operational in 2022.¹⁰⁷ Estonia additionally has been constructing an LNG terminal at the port of Paldiski.¹⁰⁸ Underground gas storage facilities in Latvia serve as a regional reserve.¹⁰⁹

The three Baltic states expect to synchronize their electricity grids with the rest of Europe in February 2025.¹¹⁰ As a remnant of the Soviet era, the Baltic states' power grids had remained connected and synchronized with those of Russia (including Kaliningrad) and Belarus. From 2006 to 2016, a number of projects prepared the Baltic states for integration with the wider European electricity market, including the construction of undersea power cables linking Estonia with Finland and Lithuania with Sweden, respectively, and the construction of an overland link connecting Lithuania with Poland.

Successive U.S. presidential administrations and some Members of Congress have considered European energy security to be a U.S. national interest, regarding it as critical to European allies' economic prosperity and resilience to malign external influence.¹¹¹ Particularly since the 2000s, the United States has worked with European partners to promote the diversification of Europe's energy supplies, including through the import of U.S. LNG.¹¹²

Relations with China

Over the past six years, the Baltic states' governments appear to have developed an increasingly skeptical view of China and a growing wariness of China's influence and intentions in the region. In 2019, the Baltic states' security services openly identified China as a potential security concern, reflecting a shift from the countries' previous interest in China as a potential economic partner.¹¹³ While many in the Baltic states remain open to pragmatic economic cooperation with China, analyses indicate that China continues to engage in information and influence operations, intelligence gathering, cyber operations, and potentially other hybrid operations in the region.¹¹⁴

In 2021, Lithuania announced that it was quitting the *Cooperation Between China and Central and Eastern European Countries* framework, calling the format "divisive" and noting that Lithuanian exporters' access to China's market had not improved.¹¹⁵ The framework (also originally called the 16+1, then the 17+1, and currently the 14+1) is a China-led initiative that

¹⁰⁷ European Commission, *Inauguration of Gas Interconnection Between Poland and Lithuania*, May 5, 2022.

European Commission, *Balticconnector Gas Pipeline Up and Running Since 1 January 2020*, January 8, 2020.

¹⁰⁸ "Paldiski LNG Terminal Could Be Fully Functioning by Spring," *Estonian Public Broadcasting*, December 20, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Conexus Baltic Grid, *Inčukalns Underground Gas Storage Characteristics and History*, accessed December 3, 2024.

¹¹⁰ *Joint Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Baltic States on the Accelerated Synchronisation of the Baltic States' Electricity Networks With the Continental European Network*, August 3, 2023. Also see "Baltic States Give Russia Notice of Electricity Grid Switch-Off Date," *Latvian Public Broadcasting*, July 16, 2024.

¹¹¹ The European Energy Security and Diversification Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-94, Title XX, Div. P), for example, directs relevant U.S. agencies' heads to prioritize energy infrastructure project support in Europe and Eurasia.

¹¹² The United States and the EU launched the U.S.-EU Energy Council in 2009 to facilitate coordination on strategic energy issues; the forum is chaired on the U.S. side by the Secretaries of State and Energy, respectively. In 2022, the two sides established a U.S.-EU Task Force on Energy Security to support the EU in rapidly eliminating its reliance on Russian energy supplies.

¹¹³ See Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova and Kārlis Bukovskis, *People's Republic of China in the Baltic States*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2023, p. 12-60.

¹¹⁴ For additional information about public perceptions of China in the Baltic states, see Eastern Europe Studies Centre, *Classic Cleavages in a New Light: Chinese Informational Influence in the Baltics*, 2024.

¹¹⁵ Kinling Lo, "Lithuania Quit 17+1 Because Access to Chinese Market Did Not Improve, Its Envoy Say," *South China Morning Post*, June 1, 2021; "Lithuania Quits 'Divisive' China 17+1 Group," *Euractiv*, May 23, 2021.

originated in 2012 as a means to facilitate economic and cultural ties between China and Central and Eastern European countries.¹¹⁶ In 2022, Estonia and Latvia followed Lithuania's example in quitting the group, leaving it with 14 European participants. Since 2022, China's close ties and military cooperation with Russia, as well as China's ambiguous stance on the war in Ukraine, have been primary factors contributing to worsening views of China in the Baltic states.¹¹⁷

Under its previous government (2020-2024), Lithuania in particular pursued several policies that triggered a negative reaction from China.¹¹⁸ Tensions between Lithuania and China increased starting in March 2021 when Lithuania announced its intention to set up a trade representative office in Taiwan. Lithuania subsequently announced that it was quitting the 17+1, and that Taiwan would establish a Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania, the first such trade office (widely considered *de facto* embassies) in Europe to use the name "Taiwan" rather than "Chinese Taipei."¹¹⁹ China responded by recalling its ambassador to Lithuania and demanding that Lithuania withdraw its ambassador in Beijing, and then imposed a *de facto* trade embargo on Lithuania and European firms that source from Lithuania. The embargo led the EU to initiate a trade dispute case at the World Trade Organization in January 2022; the EU suspended the case for "technical reasons" in January 2024.¹²⁰

China's response also prompted the EU to adopt new legislation (the "Anti-Coercion Instrument") in December 2023 aimed at deterring third countries from employing economic coercion against EU member states and allowing the EU to take countermeasures.¹²¹ In the United States, the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (P.L. 117-263) created an interagency Countering Economic Coercion Task Force to develop an integrated U.S. strategy to respond to and deter economic coercion, including against U.S. allies and partners. In May 2023, G7 leaders announced the launch of a Coordination Platform on Economic Coercion.¹²²

Other issues besides Taiwan also have contributed to tensions between China and Lithuania. In May 2021, the Lithuanian parliament passed a resolution condemning China's treatment of its Uyghur Muslim minority as an act of genocide, criticizing China's National Security Law for Hong Kong, and calling on China to allow international observers into Tibet.

The government of Lithuania that took office in 2024 under the leadership of the Social Democratic Party has indicated a cautious intent to improve relations with China and restore full diplomatic ties; China reportedly relaxed its economic pressure against Lithuania starting in late 2023.¹²³ Analysts assert, however, that China's support for Russia and events such as the

¹¹⁶ See Secretariat for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/>.

¹¹⁷ Richard Milne, "China's Support For Russia Has Hurt Its Relations With Europe, Say Nordic and Baltic States," *Financial Times*, November 28, 2024. Also see International Republican Institute, *Public Perceptions of China in 13 European Countries*, August 2022, p. 17.

¹¹⁸ See Lukas Andriukaitis and Patrik Szicherle, *Lithuania's Experience in Combating Hybrid Threats*, GLOBSEC, February 20, 2023.

¹¹⁹ "Taiwan to Use Its Own Name at New Lithuania Office," *France24*, July 20, 2021.

¹²⁰ Camille Gijs, "EU suspends WTO dispute against China's trade restrictions on Lithuania," *Politico Europe*, January 27, 2024.

¹²¹ Augustas Stankevičius, "EU adopts legislation to resist economic coercion following China-Lithuania dispute," *Lithuanian National Radio and Television*, December 8, 2023. Also see European Parliament, *Anti-Coercion Instrument: the EU's New Weapon to Protect Trade*, October 3, 2023.

¹²² The White House, *G7 Hiroshima Leaders' Communiqué*, May 20, 2023.

¹²³ Elzé Pinelytė, *Lithuania's Parliamentary Elections: Foreign Policy Outlook on China and Taiwan*, China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), October 22, 2024.

suspected Baltic Sea sabotage incidents may challenge the Lithuanian government's ability to reduce tensions.¹²⁴

Outlook

The Baltic states are likely to remain strong U.S. allies and important U.S. partners in Europe that look to the United States for leadership on foreign policy and security issues. Bilateral security cooperation with the Baltic states and the regional presence and activities of U.S. and NATO forces are topics that may remain of interest to some Members of Congress. Especially since Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in 2022, numerous Members of Congress have travelled to the Baltic states to conduct oversight of U.S. defense activities, discuss ways to support Ukraine, and affirm U.S. commitment to the security of allies along NATO's eastern flank.¹²⁵

In the 119th Congress, some Members of Congress may have an interest in

- assessing U.S. efforts to bolster the capabilities of the Baltic states' armed forces, including through defense sales and the provision of U.S. security assistance. Congressional actions in these areas may include maintaining or adjusting security assistance appropriations and conducting oversight of related executive branch programs and activities.
- assessing security threats to the Baltic states posed by Russia, including conventional military concerns and hybrid threats such as disinformation campaigns, sabotage, and cyberattacks. Related congressional action may involve continuing oversight of regional U.S. defense policy and commitments, and engaging in oversight of U.S. policies toward countering hybrid threats, including in the context of NATO.
- assessing the Baltic states' process of achieving independence from Russian energy supplies. Related congressional action may include legislation and continuing oversight relating to U.S. policies toward European energy security.
- assessing the Baltic states' relations with China in the wider context of congressional concerns about China's influence and activities in Europe, including economic coercion of U.S. allies and partners. Related congressional action may include legislation and continuing oversight relating to U.S. policies toward China.

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¹²⁴ William Yang, "Lithuania Faces Tough Balancing Act Over Ties With China," *Voice of America*, December 20, 2024.

¹²⁵ See, for example, U.S. Embassy in Estonia, *U.S. Congressional Delegation Meets With Foreign Minister Tsahkna, Defense Minister Pevkur*, July 5, 2024.

Acknowledgments

CRS Visual Information Specialist Amber Wilhelm created the graphics for this report.

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