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# The Baltic Factor

Why should the Baltic States play a more prominent role in the European Union's engagement with the former Soviet space? David Erkomaishvili thinks they're uniquely qualified to counter Moscow's increasingly negative propaganda about the 'mistreatment' of Russian-speaking minorities.

By David Erkomaishvili for ISN

In 2008, Russia incorporated into its [foreign policy concept](#) a pledge to "protect [the] rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots living abroad." In doing so, Moscow also highlighted its determination to strengthen and expand the appeal of the Orthodox faith and Russian culture by reaching out to the non-ethnic Russian speaking minorities of the former-Soviet space. By comparison, the European Union's (EU) post-Soviet strategies have fallen into a dangerous state of disrepair, a predicament that has been accentuated by the Ukraine crisis. Fortunately, the Baltic States - potentially with Estonia at the helm - are ideally placed to redress the balance.

## **Moscow Calling...**

Russia's efforts to reach out to the Russophone world beyond its borders are hardly a new phenomenon. Moscow's first attempts to reconnect with its former Soviet republics can be traced back to the late 1990s. Back then, Russia was determined to move beyond the old-style narrative of maintaining a 'sphere of influence' towards cultivating a 'sphere of interest', a term that was meant to consign the perceived excesses of Soviet hard power to the dustbin of history. In this respect, Moscow's current foreign policy outlook represents the next stage in its attempts to recoup its influence. Instead of playing up the material gains to be made by fostering closer ties with Russia, the emphasis is now on the cultural, linguistic and religious ties that bind large swathes of the population of the South Caucasus, Central Asia and the Baltic States to the former motherland.

Moscow's attempts to reconnect with the Russians of its near-abroad (and indeed beyond) have grown exponentially under Vladimir Putin. Since the early 2000s, Russia has, for instance, expanded its presence in the region's communications, electricity and hydrocarbon sectors. Further demonstrations of soft power include the financing of regional think tanks, promoting Russian citizenship and issuing passports, as well as media-based efforts to preserve and safeguard Russian culture, identity and language in strategically important states. In the case of the former, Moscow recently hosted a global congress of Russophone media outlets and stood up its 'Sputnik' network of news agencies in November 2014. In this respect, Sputnik International's global outreach and rhetoric more than mirrors its established Western counterparts.

## **While Brussels isn't...**

By comparison, the EU's combined efforts to reach out to the former Soviet Union have been lackluster, to say the least. In keeping with the United States, Brussels' post-Soviet strategies have not changed that much over the past 25 years, particularly when it comes to the gradual accession of Central and Eastern Europe into the European Union. Consequently, initiatives like Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) have quite often played second string to individual activities, like those developed by Poland. Since joining the EU in 2004, Warsaw has embarked upon a series of solo efforts to improve its relations with neighboring Ukraine, repair ties with Russia and reach out to the likes of Georgia and Moldova. Similar efforts have also been launched by other 'near-neighbors' like Romania and Sweden.

Brussels' overall inertia is, perhaps, unsurprising. Until comparatively recently, the EU's western flank did not see the same need to engage with Russia at the multilateral level as its newer members in Central and Eastern Europe. As they saw it, historical ties and geographical proximity more than justified individual approaches to the region. This partly helps to explain the apparent failure of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Formed in 2009, the EaP was supposed to define Brussels' relations with the former-Soviet space for the foreseeable future. However, the organization has been compromised from the start by a notable lack of investment and enthusiasm. For example, Russia remains firmly outside the partnership while Belarus has proved to be a fair weather member of the Partnership. To compound matters, the EaP's Western partners have done little to help the wider region break free of its Soviet-era infrastructure and economic/political ties.

There are some bright spots - of sorts. Brussels is currently putting together a ['communication team'](#) under its External Action Service (EAS) to counter Russian "disinformation campaigns" regarding Ukraine. A recent [job advertisement](#) confirms that the team will monitor a selection of Russian language media outlets, fact-check for misinformation, and communicate the benefits of the EU and, indeed, the EaP. Yet, the objectives of this new communication team fall short of Russia's more robust media outreach to its former sphere of influence. It certainly lacks an equivalent to Russia Today and, indeed, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (REF/RL). If anything, the initiative serves to reinforce that the EU still lacks a common position on Russia, with only its eastern partners demonstrating a firm interest in reaching out to its near abroad.

## **Enter the Baltics**

Which is why the Baltic States' contribution to an updated EU strategy for the former Soviet Union is not only desirable, but absolutely essential. Estonia is a case in point. Not only was it the first Soviet republic to break away from Moscow, it was also the first to experience the Kremlin's recent attempts to undermine aspects of its governance and sovereignty. Beyond the well-publicized computer hacks, Estonia has since 2007 been on the receiving end of a propaganda campaign that has invariably depicted the country as a Nazi state that discriminates against its Russian minorities. Nothing could be further from the truth. Today, Estonia is a vibrant multicultural state that enjoys higher standards of living than the rest of the former Soviet Union. Indeed, its Russian-speaking minority enjoys same quality of life as the rest of the population, particularly when it comes to practicing the Orthodox faith.

Accordingly, Brussels immediately has at its disposal a member-state that could easily be factored into a communication strategy that counters the 'anti-Russia' rhetoric propagated by Moscow's outreach to the Russophone world. Instead, Estonia is proof that the lives of Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic States are not nearly as unbearable as it might appear - a 'positive' that should be conveyed to the [64% in Ukraine](#), [60% in Georgia](#) and [44% in Moldova](#) that still favor closer ties with the EU. Indeed, given Tallinn's historical ties with Kiev, Tbilisi and ChiÈinÄu, it's possible that the Baltic States could also act as a bridge between those former Soviet states that are serious about aligning more closely with Europe and the West. If so, then Brussels' also has an opportunity to allay concerns among its north-easternmost members that their contribution to EU forums is

underappreciated and/or unheard.

A more prominent position within the EU might also strengthen the Baltic States' individual ties with Russia. Beyond their shared past, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are united by their determination to remain firmly outside of Moscow's sphere of influence/interest. However, that's still an objective that depends upon accommodating their former master. That's why a new and tightly-crafted EU strategy should not only highlight the Baltics' successful transformation but also reaffirm their commitment to remaining cognizant of their post-Soviet past. This might entail revisiting some of Brussels' previous attempts to reach out to the former Soviet Union, reaffirming the status of Russian language and minority rights or further enhancing trade and economic ties with Moscow. Finally, by not giving an increasingly bellicose Russia even greater cause for concern, the Baltics will go a long way to establishing their credentials as savvy operators on the diplomatic stage.

## **Looking Ahead**

Until then, Brussels will have to guide the Baltic States' efforts to craft a new EU-wide strategy for Russia and its surrounding neighborhood. Despite their more intimate knowledge of the region's political landscape, none of these states have - for the time being - anything like the diplomatic skills and nous associated with the likes of Germany and Poland - the two states that have traditionally lead the EU's outreach to Moscow and beyond. This is particularly true of Estonia. Despite its status as the most prosperous of the Baltic States, the country's foreign policy remains prone to bouts of inertia and passivity. Indeed, if Tallinn is to lead this shake-up, then it might want to look at the more confident role that Lithuania has played in recent months on the international stage.

Irrespective of which Baltic state assumes leadership, the EU as a whole must agree upon a strategy that offers more than just 'more of the same'. While countering misinformation is important, it counts for little if it is not backed up by renewed political and economic engagement with those states that officially 'look East' while retaining more than just a passing interest in the West. As things currently stand, full membership of the Western 'family' of international organizations is not only unrealistic, but also dangerous. However, this option should not be taken off the table altogether. The Baltic States will tell you why.

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David Erkomaishvili Ph.D. is Executive Editor at Central European Journal of International and Security Studies ([CEJISS](http://cejiss.org)). His area of expertise is security and alignments analysis. He can be reached at [erkomaishvili@cejiss.org](mailto:erkomaishvili@cejiss.org).

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ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland