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## Bridge of Spies: Soft Power & Espionage in Eastern Europe

BY ARCHIT OSWAL on NOVEMBER 15, 2018 • ( 0 )

After her brush with death in a Salisbury park earlier this year, twenty-four-year-old Yuliya Skripal [released a statement through the BBC](#) rejecting the Russian embassy's offer of consular assistance. She and her father, Sergei Skripal, had been exposed to a powerful, military-grade nerve agent and spent several weeks in comas. After immigrating to the United Kingdom, her father, a retired Russian military intelligence officer recruited by MI6 who spent 13 years in a Russian prison for espionage, had kept a low profile in the medieval English town of Salisbury.

Soon after the poisoning, British authorities began building a case to formally implicate Russia in the incident. During her address to the House of Commons, British Prime Minister Theresa May [accused the Russian government](#) of directing the attack and promised an appropriate response. Within days of the attempted assassination, the UK had [expelled 23 Russian diplomats](#). In a show of solidarity, several British allies including the United States followed suit. The diplomatic fallout in response to the poisonings continued into the summer when America, in accordance with the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act of 1991, [imposed sanctions](#) on Russian banks and restrictions on the sale of technologies to Russia.

[PM May argued](#) that Russia has a "record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations." History corroborates her assertion; the Russian Secret Service has a robust record of eliminating exiled compatriots who fell out of favor with the Kremlin. The attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal is the latest in a pattern of destabilizing behavior that includes Russia's assassination of Kremlin critic Alexander Litvinenko twelve years ago in London, its annexation of Crimea in 2013, and the arrest of its top Estonian spy in 2015.

These events share a striking commonality — they involve elements of Russia's [30 million strong diaspora](#). Russia recognizes this and explicitly links its expansive diaspora to national security. Published in the wake of the Ukraine Crisis, its military strategy designates the discrimination and suppression of Russians living in foreign states as a critical threat to Russian national security. To make matters confusing, the military broadly defines discrimination and suppression. Russia's conflation of national security interests with "compatriot protection" shrouds its intentions abroad and threatens the stability and sovereignty of countries with significant Russian populations. Recent events in the Baltics, Ukraine, and Georgia attest to the tangible threat that Russian soft power poses.

[Estonia is Russia's gateway to NATO](#) and an invaluable source of knowledge about the alliance's defense planning, armaments, organization, and military infrastructure, given the large number of NATO personnel that are stationed throughout the country's Eastern flank.

Because of Estonia's proximity to Russia and its relatively weak security infrastructure, Russian agents work round the clock to hack NATO offices in Estonia for data that GRU, Russia's military intelligence



Academic – ish.

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agency, can analyze and catalog.

Russia deploys a set of interconnected strategies to promote its intelligence operations in the Baltics that combine Cold War-era propaganda with 21st-century media to influence the opinions of the region's Russian speakers. [Nearly two-thirds](#) of all ethnic Russians in Estonia do not consume Estonian media at all and [roughly 40 percent do not speak Estonian](#). A critical agent of Moscow's wider information war against Western news sources, Kremlin-backed news media now dominates news feeds in Estonia's Russian households.

The impact of Russian journalists operating within Estonia is twofold. First, they enable misinformation that skews opinion against opponents of the Kremlin such as Ukraine, America, or pro-EU political parties. [An Estonian counterintelligence report](#) detailed the character of Russian reporting:

*"They all paint the image of Estonia as an economically, socially and culturally degenerated country on the periphery of Europe, where neo-Nazism flourishes, and the Russian-speaking population is discriminated against."*

Second, [many possess explicit intelligence-gathering mandates](#) that empower them to extensively catalog Estonia's critical infrastructure in the country's southwestern quadrant, which is the closest to the frontier with Russia. Russian [diplomats are also known](#) to detail structures such as expressways and railways that connect the country's interior to the Baltic Sea.

Russian intelligence exploits Russia's domination of news media among Estonia's Russian diaspora by recruiting spies from Estonia's ethnic Russians. On several occasions, Estonian authorities have arrested Russian spies who were members of Russia's diaspora in Estonia. Notably, in 2015, [Alexander Rudnev](#), an Estonian possessing both European and Russian citizenship, was arrested for espionage. He had been collecting information about NATO troop movements in Estonia and passing it on to his FSB handlers, who are Russia's equivalent of FBI agents, in exchange for money. Critical to this case are two variables that repeatedly appear in similar cases: connections to the Russian diaspora and possession of dual citizenship.

In 2007, President Vladimir Putin authorized the creation of [Russkiy Mir](#), an initiative that seeks to integrate Russian communities abroad by promoting the Russian language and culture. However, critics have accused it of being an instrument of soft power. In 2009, Russia Foreign Minister Andrei Denisov [outlined his vision](#) of a more Russian world as "an intellectual, spiritual, cultural, demographical resource of Russia; one of the components of the development of Russia's civil society." Perpetuating the Russian language through media and making Russian citizenship easily available to anyone with Russian heritage have been critical to this vision.

On the surface, Russia's plans to encourage repatriation have failed miserably. Of the millions of Russians living abroad, [only a minuscule fraction have returned to their motherland](#). The current trend runs strongly in the opposite direction — more Russians want to leave Russia rather than return.

However unsuccessful this policy may seem, it achieves two purposes. First, it implies support for Russians living abroad, a popular cause among the Russian nationalists who have been the driving force in Russian politics since Vladimir Putin became president. Second, it expands the scope for Russian intelligence-gathering operations in countries with large Russian minorities.

Because of Russia's repatriation laws, Estonian citizens who possess dual citizenship can shuttle back and forth between Estonia and Russia, potentially carrying sensitive information.

Nearly all the Russian spies arrested in Estonia have dual Estonian-Russian citizenship and speak Russian fluently. Russia's preference for recruiting Estonians poses the question of how to deal with homegrown spies that have yielded to the trifecta of Russia soft power: language, citizenship, and pan-Russian ideology. While their numbers are vanishingly few, these individuals have a negative impact on NATO and Estonia disproportionate to their size. In 2012, Estonia [detained Aleksey Vasilyev for suspected espionage](#). Mr. Vasilyev, a Russian student studying computer programming in Estonia, had likely undergone FSB training while in Russia shortly before his detention by Estonian authorities. He had been instructed by his

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handlers to use his IT skills to identify weaknesses in Estonia's information systems and attempt to penetrate them. Despite having lived in Estonia since his middle school years, his Russian citizenship, knowledge of Russian, and high IT skills proficiency made him an attractive recruit for Russian Intelligence.

How should Estonia and other countries respond to Russian soft power? In 2017, [Moldova introduced a law](#) that outright banned television channels from broadcasting news from Russian news stations. In Ukraine, the government has coalesced around the creation of a Ukrainian nation-state that limits the use of Russian in public spaces.

These policies are misguided and have already backfired. Russia eagerly points out the hypocrisy of governments with supposedly Western values limiting the freedom of the press by restricting access to Russian news. Taking aggressive steps to remove the presence of the Russian language from public life antagonizes Russian communities that continue to identify culturally with Russia, leading to poorer inter-ethnic relations that destabilize countries in the long run. Eastern Ukraine's fragmentation into two unrecognized Russian-backed republics in response to Kiev's "[De-russification](#)" policies attests to the inevitable failure of solutions that proffer a nationalistic approach.

Estonia, in true European spirit, should exercise tolerance. It should support the creation of Russian language news based in Estonia to compete from a position of moral fortitude with news from networks that receive support from the Russian government. Instead of trying to erase the diaspora's identity, Estonia should address its cultural needs and ensure that Russians are properly represented within the national government. Doing so would provide the diaspora with a stake in their new homeland and empower them with a sense of agency.

Hostile operations carried out against NATO and its partners by Russia typically exploit Western conventions that protect openness and civil society. The use of social media bots to [influence the 2016 American elections](#) is a perfect example of this behavior. However, openness does not beget weakness. A liberal democratic and market-oriented Estonia benefitted early on from Europe's economic assistance and protection. As populism sweeps across Europe and time-honored liberal values are threatened, Estonia should respond by embracing the quintessential values of an organization originally designed to promote integration: tolerance and openness.

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