

## North European security after the Ukraine conflict

Kristian Åtland, Senior Research Fellow, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI)

*Russia's illegal occupation and annexation of the Crimean peninsula in February-March 2014, and the country's well-documented involvement in the separatist conflict in Eastern Ukraine, have led to a significant worsening of Russia's relations with the West. Vladimir Putin's move to redraw Russia's southern borders through the use of military force and subversive measures has given rise to an uncertainty that goes well beyond the post-Soviet space. Since 2014, NATO has had to reassess many aspects of its relationship with Russia. The alliance has also initiated various measures to strengthen the military security of its eastern member states, particularly the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania. Further to the north, NATO's northernmost member – Norway – is following developments in Russia with a heightened sense of awareness. The same goes for non-aligned Sweden and Finland, which are trying to adapt to the emerging, and increasingly complex, security environment in Northern Europe.*

*Keywords: Russia; Ukraine; NATO; hybrid warfare; border regions; Scandinavia; the Baltic*

### Introduction

Throughout most of the Cold War period, and particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, defense planners and security policy analysts in Western Europe and North America spent much time and energy analyzing the security situation on what was often referred to as “NATO's northern flank”.<sup>1</sup> Strategies were developed to deal with the increasingly powerful Soviet Northern Fleet and limit the Soviet Union's strategic options in the European Arctic and the Baltic Sea region. Since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it has not been *comme il faut* to use terms such as “northern flank” or “northern front” in Western policy and strategy documents. Russia was no longer to be seen as an adversary for NATO and the West, and throughout the 1990s, NATO's strategic focus shifted from deterrence and collective defense to crisis management and cooperative security.

In 2008, Russia embarked on an ambitious military modernization. The country's foreign, defense, and security policies developed in an increasingly assertive and anti-Western direction. The Russian-Georgian war of 2008 and Russia's intervention in Ukraine six years later sparked growing concerns about Russia's intentions vis-à-vis its neighbors, in the south as well as in the west and northwest. Again, Western experts started to write about emerging security challenges and capability gaps on the northern flank,<sup>2</sup> much like their Russian colleagues had done a few years earlier.<sup>3</sup> But the underlying geopolitical realities were now radically different from those of the Cold War.

The purpose of this article is to discuss how, and how much, the security situation in Northern Europe has changed, and how it may change in the coming years, as a result of the conflict in Ukraine and the observed worsening of Russia's relationship with the West and NATO. The article starts with a brief historical overview of the security situation of Russia's northwestern neighbors. The second section discusses five potentially important "lessons" that may be learned from Russia's intervention in Ukraine. The article then goes on to explore similarities and differences between the security situation of Ukraine and the security situation of Norway and other Nordic and Baltic states. This section is followed, in the fourth section, by some reflections about the how changes in the nature of East-West relations may lead to changes in the security situation in Northern Europe. The fifth and final section discusses possible measures that can be taken by NATO and its member and partner nations in Northern Europe to preserve regional stability in the emerging new security environment.

### **Russia's northwestern neighbors**

Russia has traditionally been – and is likely to remain – a key factor in Norwegian security policy and defense planning. On the northern tip of the European mainland, as well as in the Barents Sea, and on the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard, Norway and Russia are destined by geographical, historical, and other circumstances to be neighbors, and to interact with each other on a daily basis. This has not always been easy. During the Cold War, only two of NATO's member states were in the position of having a land border with the Soviet Union – Norway (since 1949) and Turkey (since 1952).

The Kola Peninsula, located not far from the Norwegian-Soviet border, was in this period the primary basing area for Soviet naval forces, including nuclear-powered ballistic missile and attack submarines. The presence of these forces added to the region's perceived strategic significance, in the East as well as in the West. Thus, the superpower confrontation brought Norway and the Soviet Union into a local "tension field", which in reality was little more than a reflection of the global tension field. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, when Turkey's eastern border became the border with three independent Caucasian republics, Norway was again the only NATO country to share a land border with its big neighbor to the east. But Norway got company in 1999, when Poland, which shares a 232-kilometer land border with Kaliningrad, joined the alliance, together with Hungary and the Czech Republic. In 2004, Norway and Poland were joined by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which all have borders with the Russian Federation.<sup>4</sup> Each of these borders is comparable in length to Norway's border with Russia, even though Estonia's is somewhat longer (294 kilometers).



Figure 1: Northern Europe (map prepared by the author).

Finland, which is not a member of NATO, has a significantly longer border with Russia – 1,340 kilometers. This is longer than the combined length of Russia’s borders with Norway, the Baltic states, and Poland, but still significantly shorter than Ukraine’s Russian border of slightly less than 2,000 kilometers. The Finnish-Russian border starts in the Pasvik valley, west of the Kola Peninsula, where the borders of Norway, Russia, and Finland meet. This point is known as “the three-country cairn”. The Finnish-Russian border then continues southwards through mostly uninhabited taiga forests and sparsely populated rural areas, all the way to the Gulf of Finland (see Figure 1).

Sweden’s and Finland’s traditional role as a “buffer” of non-aligned territory between NATO and Russia in Northern Europe seems to have come under pressure in the post-Cold War period, particularly after Russia’s intervention in Ukraine in 2014. In Finland as well as in Sweden, voices have been raised in favor of NATO membership.<sup>5</sup> Still, there are few indications that this is likely to happen in the near to medium-term future. Should Sweden and/or Finland decide to join the Atlantic alliance, this would not be well received in Moscow, and probably lead to a strengthening of Russia’s military presence in the Republic of Karelia. On the other hand, a Scandinavian NATO enlargement would probably contribute to a widening and deepening of defense and security cooperation in the

Nordic-Baltic area and a formalization of the Nordic and Baltic states' commitment to collective defense.

### **Five lessons from Ukraine**

Russia's use of military force against Ukraine in 2014, and the country's apparent lack of respect for its southern neighbors' sovereignty and territorial integrity, has raised concern not only in countries like Moldova, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, but also among Russia's neighbors in Northern Europe.

Russia's political engineering and military operations in Crimea prior to, during, and after the annexation of the peninsula in March 2014, as well as Russia's involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine since April the same year, have taught us a number of lessons. The same goes for Russia's behavior in the five-day war with Georgia in August 2008.

The first lesson which can be drawn from these conflicts is that *Putin's Russia is willing to use military force and other means of influence in situations where this may serve the country's national interests, such as its interest in creating or upholding a privileged "sphere of influence" outside its own borders.*

The increasingly authoritarian nature of the country's political system, and the fact that decisions concerning war and peace are made by an increasingly narrow circle of political decision makers, implies that there are few domestic impediments to the kind of behavior we have seen in Georgia and Ukraine. The Russian Duma has largely become a rubber-stamping institution which does not hesitate to provide the president with whatever powers he needs to execute his policy. The absence of a free and critical press, the fragmented nature of the Russian opposition, and the lack of public involvement in the country's domestic political processes, seem to reinforce this situation.

The second lesson is that *Russia's military capability has increased significantly since the modernization of the country's Armed Forces started in 2008.* The forces which were deployed to Crimea in February-March 2014 were, of course, the tip of the spear of the Russian military (spetsnaz, naval infantry, and airborne forces). Their equipment, skill level, and degree of professionalism may not necessarily be representative of the Russian Armed Forces as a whole. But there is little doubt that Russia's military capability is on the increase, and that it has been on the increase for quite some time. The forces are more mobile, better trained, better equipped, better paid, and more highly motivated than they were when the country's military modernization program started seven-eight years ago. This goes for the conventional forces as well as for the nuclear forces.

The third lesson for Russia's neighbors is that *Russia's concept of operations has changed.* Russia's former focus on the ability to conduct old-school, kinetic operations seems to have been replaced by a new and more comprehensive concept in which unconventional and non-military means of

influence play a much more important role. As observed in Crimea, the military operations on the ground were accompanied by large-scale (dis)information operations, cyber operations, various forms of economic pressure, international diplomacy, and so on, in order to maximize the effect of the campaign as a whole. Russia tried, and largely succeeded, in using the element of surprise to its advantage, and managed to use the various means of influence – military as well as non-military – in a relatively coherent and coordinated fashion. Russia’s use of “hybrid” warfare tactics, as seen in Crimea and Donbas, may potentially be repeated in other regions, provided that the local circumstances allow for such an approach. As pointed out by General Staff Chief Valeriy Gerasimov in his 2013 article in the military-industrial weekly newspaper *VPK*, “the role of non-military means in achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases they far exceed the power of weapons in their effectiveness”.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Russia’s top military brass and political leaders have recognized this fact and are willing to change their concept of operations accordingly, may have far-reaching implications for Russia’s behavior in future interstate conflicts. But this does not necessarily mean that the concept used in Ukraine will be a blueprint for operations in the Nordic-Baltic area or in other parts of NATO’s eastern flank. In the event of a Russian military intervention in the northern part of NATO’s eastern frontier regions, the operations are unlikely to be carried out as a “Crimea 2.0 or Donbas 2.0”, but rather as operations tailored to the specifics of the region(s) in question.<sup>7</sup>

The fourth lesson, which can be of particular relevance to countries which have significant, poorly integrated, or dissatisfied Russian minorities within their borders, is that *Russia is willing to go to great lengths to “defend” ethnic Russians and Russian speakers who live outside the Russian Federation, or to use them as a pretext for military intervention and territorial expansion.* Seen from a perspective of International Law, the notion that Russia has the right to intervene militarily whenever and wherever Russians are deemed by Moscow to be in trouble is highly problematic. The repeated Russian claims that Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians living in Crimea or Eastern Ukraine were subjected to systematic discrimination or persecution after the dismissal of president Yanukovich in February 2014 are also, to put it mildly, difficult to substantiate. But Putin’s “standing up for the Russians” rhetoric was widely accepted by the general public in Russia, and he was able to use it as a pretext for sending in troops and seizing control of Crimea and eastern Donbas, much like he had done in South Ossetia and Abkhazia six years earlier. Thus, interventions in the name of Russian speakers in other regions may not be excluded.

The fifth and final lesson is that *Putin has been able to capitalize politically on his use of military force against Ukraine in 2014, as he did in the aftermath of the Georgia war in 2008, and that this may have an impact on his willingness to apply similar measures in other regions.* Putin’s popularity in Russia soared after his intervention in Crimea. His approval ratings shot to 88 percent and remained

high throughout 2014 and 2015,<sup>8</sup> peaking at 89 percent in late June 2015.<sup>9</sup> The deterioration of Russia's relations with the West and the imposition of Western sanctions do not seem to have negatively affected his domestic popularity ratings. It was and is a widely held view in Russia that Putin "did the right thing" when he seized and annexed Crimea, and that the Russian president had showed decisiveness and determination when he "stood up to" the western world and the post-Maidan regime in Kyiv. In Crimea, Putin achieved his objectives quickly and without experiencing military losses, and this may have been part of the reason why Russia chose to intervene in Donbas shortly after. Should similar conflicts arise elsewhere, there may be an expectation in Moscow, based on the Crimean experience, that a military victory may be achieved at a relatively low cost and within a relatively short period of time, and that such a move may lead to high approval ratings at home.

### **Similarities and differences**

This brings us to the question of how vulnerable the Nordic and Baltic states are to the kind of military pressure and hybrid warfare tactics that Ukraine was exposed to in 2014. Are there similarities or parallels between the security situation of Ukraine and the security situation in the High North or the Baltic Sea region? And what are the main differences?

The short answer to these questions seems to be that there are issues of concern also on NATO's northern flank, and that the security situation in the Nordic-Baltic area has been negatively affected by Russia's use of military force against Ukraine. This is particularly the case in the Baltic Sea region, which since 2014 has seen a significant increase in Russian naval activity<sup>10</sup> as well as incidents where Russian aircraft have violated the air borders of Estonia, Finland, and Sweden.<sup>11</sup> In the Barents Sea region, the situation appears to be more stable, and the Russian Armed Forces' behavior at sea and in the air seems to be more predictable and less provocative than in the Baltic.

Norway's security situation in the High North may have certain features in common with the security situation of the country's neighbors to the east and south, that is, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, or for that matter Ukraine, but there are also a number of significant differences. In order to get a better understanding of the potential for Russian-Western conflicts in Northern Europe, we need to take a look at some of the factors and circumstances that shape the security situation of the Nordic and Baltic Sea countries. Among the potentially relevant factors are (i) the countries' historical experiences with Russia and the former Soviet Union; (ii) the ethnic composition of their populations, particularly in areas bordering Russian territory; (iii) their military alignment status; and (iv) whether their security concerns are primarily related to their land territories, or to maritime areas under their jurisdiction. Each of these factors is briefly discussed below.

Starting with the *historical dimension*, it can be noted that Norway's historical experience with Russia and the former Soviet Union has been different from that of Finland, the Baltic countries, and Poland. Norway's 196-kilometer border with Russia has historically been a peaceful border. The two countries have never been at war with each other. The fact that the eastern part of Norway's northernmost county, Finnmark, was liberated by Soviet forces in October 1944, and the fact that these forces withdrew from Norwegian territory after the liberation, created a foundation for good and tranquil neighborly relations between the two countries after World War II, particularly at the local level. Still, during the Cold War, the amount of cross-border interaction at the level of individuals, organizations, and business enterprises remained fairly limited, mostly due to the geopolitical context. But the traffic and interaction between the region of Finnmark and the neighboring regions of Murmansk and Arkhangelsk across the Norwegian-Russian border at Storskog grew rapidly in the 1990s and 2000s, particularly after the establishment of the Barents Region cooperation in 1993. Since the early 1970s, the main unresolved issue in the bilateral relationship between the two countries has been the maritime delimitation dispute in the Barents Sea, which was resolved in the form of a negotiated compromise solution in 2010.<sup>12</sup>

The *ethnic composition* of the population in the Schengen area's eastern border regions varies greatly. As of today, it is difficult to envision a "Crimean" scenario materializing in, for example, Kirkenes or other parts of Norway's northeastern land territory. The Russian population in Kirkenes constitutes less than 10 percent of the border town's total population.<sup>13</sup> Most of the Russians living in this and other parts of Norway are well integrated, many of them are married to or live with Norwegians, and very few of them claim to be discriminated against. This is also the case in most of Finland's eastern border regions. This leaves very little room for the exploitation of local ethnic or linguistic tensions as a prelude for military intervention. Such scenarios are probably more likely to occur in Estonia or Latvia, which both have large Russian minorities within their borders, and in many cases located in areas close to the Russian Federation. For instance, the largely Russian-speaking cities of Narva and Daugavpils – respectively, Estonia's third largest city and Latvia's second largest city – have been cited as examples of places which could be vulnerable to tactics similar to those used in Crimea.<sup>14</sup> The Baltic states have in recent years faced an increasingly harsh rhetoric from the Russian side, numerous accusations about language-based discrimination,<sup>15</sup> as well as FSB provocations such as the September 2014 abduction and unlawful detainment of Estonian police officer Eston Kohver.<sup>16</sup> Similar incidents have not occurred, and are unlikely to occur, on the Norwegian-Russian or the Finnish-Russian border.

When it comes to the issue of *military alignment status*, there is little doubt that NATO's role as a security provider for the countries in Northern Europe has grown, particularly after the Baltic states'

accession to NATO in 2004. Sweden and Finland, which are important partner nations for NATO, have in recent years strengthened their ties and interaction with the Atlantic alliance<sup>17</sup> as well as their mutual cooperation in the military field.<sup>18</sup> At the Wales summit in September 2014, NATO signed “host nation support” agreements with both countries.<sup>19</sup> Sweden and Finland are also important contributors to the NORDEFCO cooperation.<sup>20</sup> But as non-members of NATO, they are not covered by the collective security clause of the North Atlantic Treaty. In that sense, they are in a different, and perhaps more disadvantaged, position than Norway and the Baltic states. On the other hand, Sweden and Finland are presumably viewed by Russia as less of a threat than the northern NATO members. In addition to Sweden, Finland, and Russia, the Baltic Sea is surrounded by six NATO countries – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, and Denmark. Further north, by the Barents Sea, Norway is the only coastal state in addition to Russia, and NATO’s only regional representative. Should crises arise in this region, or should Norway be exposed to Russian military provocations, either on land, at sea, or in the air, Norway will have to handle these by itself and with the forces that are already available in the region, at least until allied reinforcements can be brought in by air or sea. Thus, crisis management and the transfer of reinforcements from the south are important elements in the military contingency planning and training activity that takes place on NATO’s northern flank.

In Norway’s case, incidents and episodes involving Russian state or non-state actors are *more likely to happen at sea than on land*. The two countries’ land border is relatively short, undisputed, and has essentially been unchanged since 1826.<sup>21</sup> But it continues northwards for another 1,700 kilometers, across the Barents Sea and into the Arctic Ocean. The maritime area between the northern coast of the European mainland and the archipelagos of Svalbard, Franz Josef Land, and Novaya Zemlya (see Figure 1) is a treasure chest of living marine resources, and the continental shelf underneath it is believed to contain significant resources of oil, gas, and minerals. The offshore petroleum activity in this area is still fairly limited, mostly due to low oil prices, but the Barents Sea fisheries is a billion-dollar industry which provides jobs and revenues to Northern Norway and Norwest Russia. Many of the fish stocks in these waters are managed jointly by Norway and Russia. The fisheries take place not only in the two countries’ exclusive economic zones, but also in the Svalbard Fisheries Protection Zone, which was established by Norway in 1977. Russia has on a number of occasions questioned the legal basis for the establishment of this zone, and the Norwegian Coast Guard’s enforcement measures vis-à-vis Russian trawlers operating in the Svalbard zone have on occasions lead to fierce reactions from the Russian side. In the current geopolitical climate, fishery disputes in this and other parts of the Barents Sea may be more prone to escalation than they have been in the past. The same goes for disagreements regarding the legal status of the continental shelf around the archipelago.



Thus, if we compare the post-2014 security situation of Norway to the post-2014 security situation of the other nations on NATO's northern flank, there are similarities as well as significant differences. The Nordic and Baltic Sea countries' historical experience with Russia varies greatly, and there are also significant differences when it comes to their alignment status, ethnic composition, and geopolitical position. Norway's most likely scenario for a conflict with Russia may not necessarily be the most likely conflict scenario of Estonia or Latvia, and vice versa. One of the things they have in common, though, is that they are relatively small countries located on the periphery of Europe, and that their armed forces are limited in size, at least compared to those of Russia.

### **Norway and Russia – consequences of the changes in East-West relations**

The security situation in Northern Europe and the nature of Norway's bilateral relationship with Russia are to a significant degree shaped, or at least influenced, by developments in other parts of the world and the dynamics of the NATO-Russia relationship. Thus, after the Cold War, it was possible for Norway and Russia to "normalize" their bilateral relations and establish state-to-state, region-to-region, and people-to-people cooperation within a number of fields. Security-related restrictions on commercial and industrial activities in the Barents Sea and on the northern coast of the Kola Peninsula were also lifted, and new patterns of civil-military relations started to emerge. By the early 2000s, the Barents Sea and other parts of the Arctic, which in previous times had been seen primarily as a theater of military operations, were increasingly seen as an arena for interstate cooperation and economic activities such as fisheries, marine transportation, and offshore petroleum exploration.

The Norwegian-Russian cooperation in the High North was not only limited to non-military fields such as fisheries management, environmental conservation, and cultural exchanges. Contacts were also established between the two countries' military forces. In 1994, Norwegian and Russian naval forces conducted their first joint exercise in the Barents Sea, called "Pomor". Similar exercises were held intermittently until the spring of 2013, and with an increasingly prominent "hard security" profile. Along with other cooperative endeavors in the military field, such as dialogue at the level of regional military commanders, this gave valuable insights into the other side's military capabilities and provided, at least temporarily, for a heightened level of trust at the regional level. Some of the joint activities, such as the 2012 "Northern Eagle" exercise, also involved American naval forces.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the post-Cold War period, that is, the 25-year period between 1989 and 2014, Russia's relationship with the West has gone through a number of "ups and downs". Some of the "downs" have negatively affected the climate for military-to-military cooperation at the bilateral level. For instance, in 1999, in the aftermath of NATO's air campaign against Serbian forces in Kosovo, Russia

decided to temporarily suspend its military cooperation with Norway and other NATO members. A few years later, however, the cooperation was back on track. The military-to-military cooperation between Norway and Russia in the High North was also temporarily suspended in 2008, this time on Norway's initiative. The reason on the latter occasion was, of course, Russia's use of military force against Georgia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Again, the political obstacles to military cooperation were gradually overcome and joint activities in the military field resumed, as indicated by the successful Norwegian-Russian "Pomor" exercises in 2011, 2012, and 2013.<sup>23</sup>

Shortly after Russia's intervention in Crimea, the Norwegian Government decided in March 2014 to put its military cooperation with Russia on hold, including all planned visits, exchanges, and joint exercises.<sup>24</sup> The Norwegian-Russian-American "Northern Eagle" exercise, planned for the spring of 2014, was also called off.<sup>25</sup> In April the same year, NATO's foreign ministers agreed to suspend all of NATO's practical cooperation with Russia, military and as well as civilian.<sup>26</sup> The EU and Norway have also imposed individual travel restrictions, in the form of a Schengen visa ban, on a number of high-ranking military officers who are believed to have played a role in the planning and execution of the Russian intervention in Ukraine. The list of sanctioned individuals includes, among others, the Chief of the General Staff, General Valeriy Gerasimov, and the former commander of the Western military district, Colonel General Anatoliy Sidorov, who paid an official visit to Norway in October 2013.<sup>27</sup>

Norway's temporary suspension of its military cooperation with Russia was in December 2014 prolonged until the end of 2015, as was NATO's. Further prolongations of the ban on military cooperation with Russia, as well as other restrictive measures in this and other fields, are likely to follow. Unless Russia decides to take on a more constructive role in Ukraine, the current situation, characterized by a comprehensive freeze in military-to-military interaction, could become "the new normal" in NATO's and the EU's eastern frontier regions. If the current lack of dialogue, interaction, and cooperation between military commanders and military forces in Northern Norway and Northwest Russia becomes a long-lasting or semi-permanent situation, this may contribute a climate of reduced military transparency and increased suspicion.

As in the Cold War period, routine military activities on the Norwegian side – on land, at sea and in the air – are likely to be interpreted in Russia as an expression of NATO's "aggressive" intentions in the High North. Despite being of a small scale, exercises which take place in the far northeast, that is, in the County of Finnmark, are likely to be seen as a threat to Russia's strategic interests in the region. Thus, for instance the "Joint Viking" exercise in Finnmark in March 2014, which was a national joint exercise involving some 5,000 personnel, was portrayed by RIA Novosti as a "NATO provocation".<sup>28</sup> The short-term presence of a Norwegian frigate in Kirkenes, 8 kilometers from the

Norwegian-Russian land border and 150 kilometers from the Russian Northern Fleet's headquarters in Severomorsk, was seen as particularly problematic, according to Russian media reports.<sup>29</sup>

The involvement of troops, vessels, and aircraft from other NATO countries in military training activities in Northern Norway, such as the "Cold Response" exercises, which have been held on a more or less regular basis since 2006, has also been a source of Russian security concerns. These exercises, which are usually held further south, mainly in the County of Troms, are increasingly interpreted in the context of the NATO's deteriorated relationship with Russia. For instance, the 2016 edition of the Cold Response exercise, which involved some 15,000 troops from 14 NATO member and partner countries, including Sweden and Finland, was not well received by the Russian political and military establishment.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, Russia's military activity in the region, which has grown considerably in the past seven-eight years, may cause new security concerns on the western side. This is particularly the case with the so-called "snap exercises", which are unannounced and often large-scale. Despite good intelligence, Russia's western neighbors have no way of knowing whether such exercises are for military training purposes only, or a cover for the preparation of armed aggression. The lessons from Ukraine and Russia's behavior prior to the intervention in February 2014 will have to be taken into account in this regard.

### **Meeting the new security challenges**

As noted in the introduction, Russia's use of military force against Ukraine in 2014, and against Georgia in 2008, and the country's apparent lack of respect for its southern neighbors' sovereignty and territorial integrity, has raised concern also in Northern Europe. The security situation in Europe as a whole has deteriorated, as have Russia's relations with the West and NATO. Thus, the direct and indirect consequences of the conflict in Ukraine may be severe as well as long-lasting, for Russia as well as for Russia's western neighbors. The fact that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict takes place in a period of great economic hardship in Europe, and in a period of rapidly mounting security challenges on other fronts, most notably the southern and southeastern, makes it difficult for Europe to cope with the Russian challenge in an effective and coordinated fashion.

NATO's renewed focus on the need to strengthen the credibility of the alliance's collective security guarantee, which was highlighted at the September 2014 summit in Wales,<sup>31</sup> is an important step in the right direction. The same goes for the on-going efforts to enhance NATO's level of preparedness and the size and capability of the alliance's rapid-deployment forces.<sup>32</sup> While NATO as an alliance still enjoys a clear conventional advantage over Russia at the aggregate level, its limited forward

presence on the periphery of Europe implies that Russia still retains a conventional superiority over its smaller neighbors at the local level.<sup>33</sup> For instance, in the Barents Sea region, Norway is not, and will never be, able to “match” the Russian naval, air, and ground forces that are located on the Kola Peninsula. But it is important for Norway to continue to develop national defense capabilities that are suited to the emerging new security environment, and to demonstrate, through routine military presence and regular national and allied exercises in priority areas, that the country is committed to defending its territory, rights, and interests in region, if necessary with the help of its 27 allies. Similarly, it is important for Norway to show solidarity with the Baltic states, the other Nordic countries, and other nations that may face challenges in their relations with Russia.

Russia’s use of “non-linear” or “hybrid” methods of warfare, most clearly demonstrated in Crimea, is a particular source of concern, at least for some of NATO’s eastern member states. It is important for Russia’s western neighbors to study how these methods were applied in Ukraine and what we can learn from it. As observed by a staff officer in the NATO’s International Defence Policy and Planning Division, “Russia’s approach to conflict undeniably includes political, diplomatic, economic, non-linear and hybrid means below the level of armed conflict”.<sup>34</sup> These means can be used not only to “achieve strategic objectives without military violence”, but also “lead unexpectedly to rapid escalation into a military phase”.<sup>35</sup>

As shown in this article, the applicability of “hybrid warfare” methods to the countries on NATO’s northern flank may vary, but it is important that NATO as an alliance and the individual member states that are vulnerable to such tactics develop the means necessary to counter scenarios such as those described above. This may include not only cyber defense strategies and methods to defuse Russian (dis)information operations, but also strategies for how to deal with what Mark Galeotti calls “guerilla geopolitics”,<sup>36</sup> that is, the use of Special Forces, paramilitaries, and agent provocateurs.

Interesting in this regard are the European Union’s efforts to boost support for independent media in the “Eastern Neighborhood” countries, raise awareness about the potential for “disinformation activities by external actors”, and improve the EU’s capacity to anticipate and adequately respond to such activities.<sup>37</sup> For this purpose, the EU has recently established a unit known as the East StratCom Team, which will assist the Eastern Neighborhood countries in their efforts to promote media freedom and provide access to alternative sources of information, also for Russian speakers. The East StratCom initiative may turn out to be an important supplement to NATO’s and other actors’ efforts to reduce the playing field for Russian use “non-linear” or “hybrid” warfare methods.

That being said, it is important to point out that Russia’s increasingly sophisticated non-military, asymmetrical, and unconventional means of influence, which were displayed in Ukraine in 2014,

come in addition to the country's military, symmetrical, and conventional means. They should be seen as a *supplement* to other and more traditional means of influence, and not as a *replacement*. Russia will continue to modernize its Armed Forces, including their conventional capabilities, as it has done since 2008, and the conventional use of military force against smaller and potentially weaker states in the country's neighborhood will continue to be an option available in Moscow's toolbox.

This means that Russia's neighbors – and NATO as an alliance – will have to prepare for not only "Crimea-style" scenarios, but also the kind of scenarios that were discussed prior to the intervention in Ukraine. And since "full-spectrum" military capabilities are beyond the reach of NATO's smaller members, increased emphasis should be placed on multinational cooperation. NATO's ambition for 2020 is to have "a coherent set of deployable, interoperable and sustainable forces [that are] equipped, trained, exercised, commanded and able to operate together and with partners in any environment".<sup>38</sup> This is a high ambition which will place heavy demands on NATO's commitment to force modernization and military training in the coming five years. Starting in 2015, NATO will carry out large "high visibility" exercises every third year. The 2018 "high visibility" exercise, involving an estimated 25,000 troops, will take place in the High North and be hosted by Norway.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the security and stability of the European Arctic, the Baltic Sea region, and other regions bordering Russia in the west, south, and east will depend not only on our efforts to deter and defend against Russian aggression, but also on whether we succeed in finding some common ground with Russia in areas of mutual interest. As of today, we do not know how long the current government in Russia will endure or how long the current impasse in Russian-Western relations will last. There are few indications that things will improve in the near to medium-term future, and we have to be prepared for a potentially long-lasting "winter" in our relations with Russia. But, while keeping up the pressure on Russia, in the form of sanctions and other punitive measures, we also have to try and find some kind of *modus vivendi* while we wait for a spring to arrive.

This is particularly important for those who live in the – still peaceful – border regions of Northern Europe. For this reason, Norway has, together with Sweden and Finland, decided to continue its "people-to-people" cooperation with Russia in the Barents Region. In the absence of interaction and joint activities with Russia in the military field, Norway has also chosen to uphold its cooperation with Russia in other non-military fields. This includes, among other things, the Norwegian and Russian Coast Guards' generally successful joint efforts to combat illegal fishing in the northern waters, the cooperation between the two countries' search and rescue services in the High North, and the long-standing cooperation between the two countries' local police authorities and border commissioners.

This shows that it is possible, at least for Norway and Russia, to maintain cordial relations and a healthy degree of people-to-people dialogue and interaction at the local level, simultaneously with the enforcement of the sanctions regime and the freeze in military-to-military contacts. In a political climate marked by growing fear, suspicion, and mistrust between East and West, these and other confidence-building measures at the local level may be important contributions to regional stability.

\*) An earlier draft version of this article was presented in the form of a working paper at a conference held at the Diplomatic Academy of Ukraine on September 25, 2015.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Jeffrey G. Barlow, *NATO's Northern Flank: The Growing Soviet Threat* (Washington, D.C: The Heritage Foundation, 1979); Barry Posen, "Inadvertent Nuclear War? Escalation and NATO's Northern Flank", *International Security* 7, no. 2 (1982): 28–54; Dov S. Zakheim, "NATO's Northern Front: Developments and Prospects", *Cooperation and Conflict* 17, no. 3 (1982): 193–205; Johan Jørgen Holst, *The "Nordic Balance" and the Northern Flank: A Norwegian Perspective* (Oslo: NUPI, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Duncan Depledge, "Testing the Northern Flank: The UK, Norway and Exercise *Cold Response*", *The RUSI Journal* 157, no. 4 (2012): 72–78.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Aleksandr Bartosh, "Arktika v pritsle NATO" ["The Arctic in NATO's sights"], *Voyenno-Promyshlennyyi Kur'er (VPK)*, no. 6 (2009): 2.

<sup>4</sup> Estonia and Latvia borders on Russia in the east, whereas Lithuania borders on Kaliningrad in the southwest.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Joel Andersson, "Nordic NATO: Why It's Time for Finland and Sweden to Join the Alliance", *Foreign Affairs*, April 30, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/finland/2014-04-30/nordic-nato> (accessed October 21, 2015, as subsequent websites); Anders Fridén, "Why It's Time: The Case for Swedish Membership in NATO", *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, April 1, 2014, [http://yalejournal.org/article\\_post/why-its-time-the-case-for-swedish-membership-in-nato/](http://yalejournal.org/article_post/why-its-time-the-case-for-swedish-membership-in-nato/); Mark Seip, "Fearful of Putin, Finland Explores NATO Membership", *Newsweek*, June 4, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/fearful-putin-finland-explores-nato-membership-339428>.

<sup>6</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, "Tsennost' nauki i predvideniya" ["The value of science and foresight"], *Voyenno-Promyshlennyyi Kur'er (VPK)*, no. 8 (2013): 1–3.

<sup>7</sup> Octavian Manea, "Hybrid War as a War on Governance" (Interview with Dr. Mark Galeotti), *Small Wars Journal*, August 19, 2015, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/hybrid-war-as-a-war-on-governance>.

<sup>8</sup> See the "Approval of Putin" index at the website of the Levada Center, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/indexes-0>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Birnbaum, "Putin's approval ratings hit 89 percent, the highest they've ever been", *The Washington Post*, June 24, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew M. Aid, "Intensified Russian Naval Activity in the Baltic Sea", *The Baltic Times*, August 6, 2014, <http://www.matthewaid.com/post/94053933211/intensified-russian-naval-activity-in-the-baltic>.

<sup>11</sup> Sam Jones & Richard Milne, "Fighters scrambled as Russian spy plane violates Estonian air space", *Financial Times*, October 22, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/8e28123e-5a09-11e4-8771-00144feab7de.html#axzz3m52ZVIsY>; Richard Milne, "Scandinavians warn Russia after air near-miss", *Financial Times*, December 15, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/95751ff2-837e-11e4-8a84-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3m52ZVIsY>.

<sup>12</sup> The Norwegian-Russian Delimitation Treaty, which marked the end of a 40-year maritime delimitation dispute, was signed in Murmansk on 15 September 2010 and entered into force on 7 July 2011. The text of the treaty is available at [https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/SMK/Vedlegg/2010/avtale\\_engelsk.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/SMK/Vedlegg/2010/avtale_engelsk.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> The Russians make up 300-400 of the town's population of approximately 3500.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Lucas, *The Coming Storm – Baltic Sea Security Report* (Washington, D.C.: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2015): 11, <http://www.cepa.org/content/new-cepa-report-baltic-sea-security-coming-storm>.

- 
- <sup>15</sup> Having been held at the Lefortovo prison in Moscow for more than a year, Kohver was released and returned to Estonia on September 26, 2015. For details, see “About Eston Kohver”, Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Estonia, updated September 2015, <https://www.siseministeerium.ee/en/eston-kohver>.
- <sup>16</sup> See for instance “MID RF ulichil Estoniyu v diskriminatsii russkogo yazika” [“MFA of Russia expose Estonian discrimination of Russian speakers”], *NTV*, September 18, 2015, <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1528856/>.
- <sup>17</sup> Alistair Scrutton & Sakari Suoninen, “As Russia growls, Swedes, Finns eye defence options, NATO”, *Reuters*, April 1, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/01/us-ukraine-crisis-nordics-idUSBREA301AD20140401>.
- <sup>18</sup> Johan Ahlander, “Sweden and Finland plan more military cooperation amid Russia tensions”, *Reuters*, February 18, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/02/18/uk-sweden-defence-idUKKBN0LM15F20150218>.
- <sup>19</sup> “Finland and Sweden to strengthen ties with Nato”, *The Guardian*, August 27, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/27/finland-sweden-strengthen-ties-nato>.
- <sup>20</sup> NORDEFCO is a Nordic defense cooperation arrangement, established in 2009, which includes Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland.
- <sup>21</sup> The only major exception being that Norway did not have a land border with Russia/the Soviet Union between 1920 and 1944. In 1920, the Petsamo region was ceded to Finland, giving Finland access to the Barents Sea, and the former Norwegian-Russian border became part of the Norwegian-Finnish border. Petsamo was ceded to the Soviet Union in 1944 and the Norway–Soviet Union border was established.
- <sup>22</sup> Gerald O’Dwyer, “Norway Hails Northern Eagle as Bridge-builder”, *Defense News*, August 24, 2012, <http://archive.defensenews.com/article/20120824/DEFREG01/308240002/Norway-Hails-Northern-Eagle-Bridge-builder>; Trude Pettersen, “Norwegian-Russian POMOR-2013 naval exercise starts this week”, *BarentsObserver*, May 7, 2013, <http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/2013/05/norwegian-russian-pomor-2013-naval-exercise-starts-week-07-05>.
- <sup>23</sup> Ilya Kramnik, “Pomor-2013 Russian-Norwegian exercise: looking for common ground”, *The Voice of Russia*, May 12, 2013, [http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/2013\\_05\\_12/Pomor-2013-Russian-Norwegian-exercise-looking-for-common-ground/](http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/2013_05_12/Pomor-2013-Russian-Norwegian-exercise-looking-for-common-ground/).
- <sup>24</sup> Ministry of Defence of Norway, “Norway suspends all planned military activities with Russia”, Press Release, no. 25/2014, March 25, 2014, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/Norway-suspends-all-planned-military-activities-with-Russia/id753887/>.
- <sup>25</sup> Thomas Nilsen, “Crimea crisis puts Barents naval exercise on hold”, *BarentsObserver*, March 14, 2014, <http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/2014/03/crimea-crisis-puts-barents-naval-exercise-hold-14-03>.
- <sup>26</sup> “Statement by NATO Foreign Ministers”, Press Release, no. 062/2014, April 1, 2014, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_108501.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_108501.htm).
- <sup>27</sup> See Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP and Council Decision 2014/308/CFSP, dated, respectively, March 17 and May 28, 2014, both available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/homepage.html>.
- <sup>28</sup> Aleksandr Khrolenko, “Ucheniya NATO v Severnoy Norvegii: razvedka ili provokatsiya” [“NATO’s exercises in Northern Norway: espionage or provocation”], *RIA Novosti*, March 17, 2015, <http://ria.ru/authors/20150317/1053024319.html>.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> See, for instance, interview with Professor Vladimir Kozin of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISI), cited in ‘Mnenie: v peshcherakh Norvegii mozhet khranit’sya ogromnoye kolichestvo oruzhiya [Opinion: Enormous amounts of military equipment may be stored in Norway’s caves]’, *RIA Novosti*, February 19, 2016, [http://ria.ru/radio\\_brief/20160219/1377317332.html](http://ria.ru/radio_brief/20160219/1377317332.html).
- <sup>31</sup> “Wales Summit Declaration”, Press Release, no. 120, September 5, 2014, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm).
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Matthew Kroenig, “Getting NATO Ready for e New Cold War”, *Survival* 57, no. 1 (2015): 54.
- <sup>34</sup> Dave Johnson, *Russia’s Approach to Conflict – Implications for NATO’s Deterrence and Defence* (Rome: NATO Defence College, 2015): 10, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=797>.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Mark Galeotti, “Putin, Ukraine and Asymmetric Politics”, *Johnson’s Russia List*, April 14, 2014, <http://russialist.org/putin-ukraine-and-asymmetric-politics/>.
- <sup>37</sup> Rikard Jozwiak, “EU Plans To Step Up Fight Against Russian Propaganda”, *Radio Free Europe*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/european-union-russia-propoganda-georgia-moldova-/27091155.html>.
- <sup>38</sup> NATO, “Connected Forces Initiative”, updated August 31, 2015, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_98527.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_98527.htm).