

Putin's Baltic Rhetoric and Cossack Buildup Signal Hybrid Threat

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Executive Summary: Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed on September 25 that the Baltic states violate Russian speakers' rights, and pledged "humanitarian measures," raising concerns that Moscow may be preparing a pretext for action against the region.

- Moscow is applying psychological and hybrid pressure, including rumors earlier this year of a separatist "People's Republic of Narva" in Estonia and recent threats to use nuclear weapons if the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) isolates Russia's Kaliningrad exclave.
- Russia's Northwestern Cossack Host and expanding Cossack structures in Kaliningrad may reveal its intentions, as these groups, deployed in Ukraine, could pose as indigenous minorities in the Baltic states and support Russian intervention.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent remarks about Russian speakers in the Baltic states have renewed concerns about Moscow's intentions toward the region. On September 25, speaking to journalists on the sidelines of the International United Cultures Forum in St. Petersburg, Putin said, "We know that [in the Baltic countries] they are violating the rights of the Russian-speaking population" and that "we are planning corresponding humanitarian measures in accordance with international law" ([TV Rain](#), September 25). These remarks were alarming amid policy-circle discussion that Putin might declare a new mobilization and open a front against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (see [EDM](#), September 14). While he stated that Russia is "not preparing for a war with Europe," Russian assurances have proven unreliable in the past ([Ukrainska Pravda](#), September 25). The Kremlin's protestations of peace in early 2022, before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, undermine the credibility of its statements. The Russian state has been dancing around the issue of Russian speakers in the Baltic states for some time. In May, the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs dismissed Russia's threat to take alleged discrimination against Russian speakers to the International Court of Justice ([Kyiv Independent](#), May 25). In July, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the Baltic countries of "preparing a massive deportation of Russian speakers" ([Delfi](#), July 8). Analysts have worried about a Russian military move against the three Baltic states since at least the start of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022, or, more accurately, since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Putin himself criticized the "swinish" treatment of Russian speakers in Latvia in 2023 ([Chayka](#), December 6, 2023). It is not surprising that lower-level officials have repeatedly kept the issue alive. Putin's raising the issue directly, however, arguably represents an escalation, and its potential as a *casus belli* is alarming.

Recent episodes in the region suggest that Moscow's rhetoric may form part of a broader pattern of psychological and hybrid pressure. Fears of an imminent Russian invasion were such that a Telegram post about plans to create a "People's Republic of Narva," complete with its own flag and insignia, aroused concern (see [EDM](#), March 24). The specter of Russian forces sending "little green men" to "liberate" the people of Narva gave Moscow useful information, whether or not it believed

it. German military expert Carlo Masala viewed the rumors as part of Moscow's psychological operations against the West ([Euronews](#), March 18). Putin's recent statements may serve the same purpose. On the other hand, floating a trial balloon in this manner is a well-practiced Russian strategy. The Baltic region has recently been an area of contention, with Moscow warning of "consequences" for threats (or perceived threats) to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad ([Vedomosti](#), October 1). On September 28, the Russian Embassy in Belgium warned NATO and the Belgian government that Russia was prepared to use its entire arsenal to defend Kaliningrad if NATO attempted to isolate it. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte said he did not take the threat seriously ([RIA Novosti](#), September 30). Nuclear weapons are not the only means by which Russia can threaten its neighbors, and the hybrid scenario envisaged in the "People's Republic of Narva" incident may not be far off the mark.

A telling sign of Moscow's intentions toward the Baltic countries may be the creation of a Northwestern Cossack Host in 2024 and its formal induction into larger Cossack structures (see [EDM](#), February 10, 2024). Cossacks perform several roles that could be useful in a Russian hybrid intervention in the Baltic. First, the folkloric character of even the neo-Cossacks gives them the imprimatur of a native ethnic people who could represent an indigenous minority. Kremlin plans to "develop" Cossacks in the Kaliningrad oblast are proceeding rapidly. In April, the Kremlin created a "working group for the development of Cossacks in the Baltic region" and approved a regional department for Cossack affairs ([Russian Cossacks](#), April 7). Given the region's proximity to Lithuania and Latvia, it seems reasonable to suppose that such groups could infiltrate these countries or even present themselves as indigenes. Second, Cossacks played a significant role in the annexation of Crimea and have contributed a sizable contingent to Russia's war against Ukraine. In a meeting with the ataman of the Pskov Cossacks, Russian Supreme Ataman of the All-Russian Cossack Society Vitaly Kuznetsov praised the valor of the Baltika Battalion, which is fighting as part of the Terek Cossack volunteer host ([VsKO](#), January 31). Third, Cossacks act as a kind of civic defense force for the Russian Federation, providing a bulwark against Western information operations by promoting, for instance, the exploits of heroic Cossacks such as Vladimir Gavrilenko in the Kharkiv direction ([VsKO](#), September 24). Fourth, although most Russian speakers in Estonia identify as "Russian Estonians" and Cossack groups with an online presence claim closer affiliation with Ukrainian than Russian Cossacks, pro-Russian loyalties or groups cannot be ruled out ([Postimees](#), March 29, 2011; [ERR](#), April 9, 2024). The presence of heavily armed Cossack troops in the Baltic region, already positioned to welcome an invading Russian force, could prove important in the event of a Russian operation there.

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