

Civilian-Based Resistance in the Baltic States. Historic Precedents and Current Capabilities¹

Marta Kepe

Marta Kepe and Anika Binnendijk’s analysis of current policies and historic experiences of the Baltic states suggests several areas in which civilians could contribute to national resistance during a military crisis. Such contributions could prove particularly significant in a scenario in which allied forces assist the Baltic states in regaining control over their territories or parts of them. Civilian actions could help prepare the ground for the arrival of allied reinforcements, both through direct support of indigenous military forces and contributions to the morale and information and security environments for allied forces. Civilian capacity for resistance could thus have implications for defense planning among all potential participants in a conflict, including the adversary.

Marta Kepe and Anika Binnendijk examined ways in which Baltic civilians have contributed—or could contribute—to imposing direct or indirect costs on an occupying force, securing external support, denying an occupier’s political and economic consolidation, reducing an occupier’s capacity for repression, or maintaining and expanding popular support. We considered the relevance of each of these proximate objectives during the course of resistance and the contributions of each objective to positive or negative resistance outcomes. Examples from Baltic history also revealed the extent to which external factors—including geopolitical dynamics and occupier goals, strategies, and domestic political realities—have previously influenced the attainability and significance of the proximate objectives. Our analysis of more-recent Baltic policies and activities through the lens of the proximate objectives then identified ways in which Baltic civilians might be able to contribute to resistance efforts in the event of a large-scale conventional military assault and occupation.

Table 1 Proximate Objectives of Civilian Defense in Case of Military Invasion

Proximate Objective	Imposing direct or indirect costs on an occupying force	Securing external support	Denying an occupier’s political and economic consolidation	Reducing an occupier’s capacity for repression	Maintaining and expanding popular support
Potential Contribution to Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it untenable or undesirable for occupying power to remain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase international pressure to withdraw • Enhance resources for resistance • Apply direct costs through military intervention or sanctions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserve legitimacy and function of occupied government • Deny adversary political or economic support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish backfire to erode occupier legitimacy • Preserve popular will to resist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broaden base and resilience of resistance • Preserve popular will to resist

Summary of Findings

1. Civilians could represent a powerful asset in the competition for information and messaging.

Our study identifies ways in which civilian activities could contribute to Baltic domestic and international strategic communication efforts. These include maintaining and expanding broad-based support for the resistance and engaging external and domestic audiences, building morale by ensuring communication of accurate information regarding the nature of the occupation, objectives of the resistance campaign, and instructions for civilian action, and ensuring that consistent messaging highlighting the illegitimacy

¹ This paper represents a summary of Anika Binnendijk, Marta Kepe, “Civilian-Based Resistance in the Baltic States Historical Precedents and Current Capabilities,” RAND, 2021.

of the occupying power is disseminated abroad to help build support within allied populations for what could be a long and costly conventional campaign. Civilians could document and disseminate instances of repression to provoke outrage and provide testimony to domestic and international audiences. Finally, targeted messaging could theoretically encourage fractures within an aggressor's government, media, society, and military forces, although there is skepticism among the Baltic states about the efficacy of these efforts in the Russian case.

2. Civilians would play a central role in leading national continuity and powering civic mobilization.

One of the most significant roles for Baltic civilians during an occupation scenario would be to protect the core elements of national institutions and society. Such a role would provide a focal point for foreign governments and communities to engage and help with a rapid return to functioning governance following the crisis. An active and organized civilian resistance role in protecting and supporting national continuity, particularly one that included Russian minority populations, would also reinforce the illegitimacy of external aggression. As was the case during the final years of Baltic resistance, existing community networks represent a fulcrum for mobilization during a national crisis, and mapping and planning their use could prove particularly important.

3. Clear delineation of military and civilian roles and opportunities to contribute throughout a spectrum of risk would harness popular potential to inflict costs while protecting vulnerable populations.

Baltic governments currently emphasize the responsibility of civilians to prioritize their own safety, as well as that of their families and their communities, during a national crisis. Civilian protection would also require clear separation of armed and unarmed resistance functions, with roles provided for those able and willing to contribute within each category. Low-risk activities such as dispersed acts of unarmed resistance can increase opportunities for widespread participation and bolster morale among the population. At the highest end of the risk spectrum, provision of institutional avenues for military resistance within the national chain of command ensures that those civilians interested and able in transitioning to armed roles can do so consistently with international law and without endangering civilian populations.

4. Economic emergency plans could buffer the impact of a crisis on civilian communities and increase costs to the adversary.

Economic planning by each Baltic government can help ensure the security of the supply of vital goods and services, and the protection of critical infrastructure during a national emergency. Establishing strong public-private partnerships with private goods and services suppliers, developing the necessary contractual base, having preplanned distribution points, and including these aspects in relevant crisis management exercises can help reduce the disruption to the availability of goods. In the case of a hostile occupation, these actions could help diminish the humanitarian impact and ensure the retention of some control over national economic centers of gravity. Ultimately, these actions could also increase the stress on an occupying force's logistics chains by denying it access to material military resources.

5. Ultimately, allied military and economic intervention remains crucial.

A robust allied response would prove determinative in defending or, if necessary, liberating Baltic territory or populations from foreign occupation. Thus, it will remain critical that NATO, the EU, and the United States continue to demonstrate strong military commitment to Baltic states' territorial integrity and sovereignty against external aggression. The most impactful nonmilitary costs, such as comprehensive sanctions, would similarly require cooperation and sacrifice from international allies and partners to develop and implement.