Sovereign Uncertainty and the Dangers to Liberalism at the Baltic Frontier

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In 2016 on the hills of Vilnius, I was looking at the NATO war jets scything the sky, recalling the words of my informants: "The war will happen, Russians want to get what is theirs"; "Russians cannot settle down"; "nobody believed in 1940 that people will be taken to Siberia"; "the war is likely, they will fly here and bomb, nobody will be able to stop them"; "like after WWII, nobody will defend us"; "three hours and Lithuania is gone"; and "we have to defend the Suvalkai corridor."[1] The city was changed: it was reshaped by the anticipation of eventual war. I resisted accepting such a future, questioning, disagreeing, making cynical comments, but without much success. There were moments when I was overcome by this anticipation, feeling the anxiety of the eventual war rising in my mind. At one point, I stopped debating with others and asked myself, "Why war?"

In 1940, Margaret Mead, an anthropologist of great renown, asked the same question—why war? Arguing against biological explanations, that war is the inevitable consequence of "basic, competitive, aggressive, warring human nature," she claimed that warfare is only "an invention like any other of the inventions in terms of which we order our lives, such as writing, marriage, cooking our food instead of eating it raw, trial by jury or burial of the dead."[2] A war frontier in Lithuania is an invention engendered by the changed geopolitical situation after 2014, when the Russian Federation annexed Crimea and launched an undeclared war in eastern Ukraine. After these events, Lithuania's president Dalia Grybauskaitė described Russia as a "terrorist state," warning that if "open aggression against its neighbor [Ukraine] is not stopped, then that aggression might spread further into Europe," the Baltics being the next target.[3] In 2014 the Lithuanian government openly recognized the Russian Federation as a threat to the country, emphasizing its revisionist policy toward Cold War outcomes, including the sovereignty of the

1. This article is based on the research conducted for the collaborative project "Social and Historical Justice: Ethnic and Generational Perspective" funded by the Lithuanian Research Council (LIP-031/2016). I use the term "Baltic frontier" since all three Baltic states, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, can be defined by similar political developments; on Latvia see Liene Ozoliņa, in this Forum. This essay covers primarily the period of 2016–17; it has been updated in November 2018.

2. Margaret Mead, "Warfare is Only an Invention—Not a Biological Necessity," in Douglas Hunt, ed., *The Dolphin Reader*, 2nd edition (Boston, 1990): 415–21, at http://users.metu.edu.tr/utuba/Mead.pdf(accessed April 7, 2018).

3. See Rayyan Sabet-Parry and wire reports, "Lithuania President calls Russia "terrorist state,'" *The Baltic Times*, November 20, 2014, at http://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/35799/ (accessed May 7, 2018).

Baltic states.[4] NATO has extended its military assistance by deploying NATO troops and equipment. Russia's largest military presence since the Cold War in the Kaliningrad region and NATO's enhanced forward presence in the Baltic countries have further shaped heightened insecurity at the Baltic frontier.

I argue that the Baltic war frontier institutes *sovereign uncertainty* and gives rise to social disruptions, distrust, and conflict. I advance the term *sovereign uncertainty* to refer to a condition of unpredictable state sovereignty, shaped by various challenges to statehood, such as territorial border violations, cyber interfarence, or propaganda, as well as geopolitical insecurity. I use this term to explain the apparently paradoxical developments in a liberal democracy, discussed in this essay, including divisive historical justice politics, the defense of majority rights, and public othering of minorities, all of which undermine liberal ideals of tolerance, multiculturalism, and the pluralism of opinions.

The war frontier could be ignored by some citizens because no actual fighting is taking place in Lithuania. It has real effects, however, from universal conscription to the termination of Russian language TV channels. Whether embraced or ignored, it is a defining part of government policies, public space, and everyday life.

The Emergence of the Baltic frontier in Lithuania

The year 2014 was a turning point in the post-Cold War history of the Baltics. After the annexation of Crimea and the errruption of war in eastern Ukraine, the Lithuanian government accepted new foreign and domestic policy measures to protect its sovereignty by preventing new occupation and hybrid warfare scenarios that occurred in Ukraine. To protect the state economically, the government broke away from Gazprom dependence in the natural gas market. On December 3, 2014, a $128 million liquefied natural gas floating storage and regasification unit terminal was launched. It meets Lithuania's full demand and is famously named, "Independence." Lithuania's defense budget doubled since 2013 and is projected to reach 2.01% of the GDP in 2019 and 2.5% in 2030.

In public spaces, various discussions of hybrid threats, disinformation, bots and trolls, and fake news all reflect on and shape sovereign uncertainty at the war frontier. Some disinformation about NATO aggression create spectacles of imagined warfare: a fake US Department of Defense page announced that a B-52 bomber in Lithuania destroyed an apartment building in the Klaipėda region by discharging a B-61 nuclear bomb model, which caused a fire and damaged a gas supply system. Other fake news reports criminalize and dehumanize NATO troops: German division soldiers were reported to have raped a fifteen-year-old girl from a Lithuanian orphanage; when four US armored vehicles collided during a road march, a major fake news portal, DELFI page, announced that a child was killed; another child was "killed" during NATO's "Saber Strike 2018" exercises.

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4. The Russian Federation under President Boris Yeltsin recognized the independence of Baltic countries in 1991.

Figure 1. March 11th, the Restored [in 1990] Independence Day celebration. Author: Andrius Dukšta.

Sovereign uncertainty is articulated in cybersecurity discussions of "cyber war," "cyberattacks," and "cyber threats." According to the *Assessment of Threats to National Security/2018*, the "biggest threat to the national security of Lithuania in cyberspace comes from Russia."[5] In 2017, there were 55,000 cyberattacks in Lithuania, 10% more than in 2016.[6] One-third of these "attacks" targeted the energy sector of Lithuania. Unlike in the 2002 and 2012 National Security Strategies, which refered to mutual trust and collaboration with the Russian Federation, the 2017 National Security Strategy explicitly named the Russian Federation the major security and cybersecurity threat.

Media announcements of NATO troops, international or national military exercises, military parades and public military equipment displays routinely reintegrate the knowledge about the war frontier into everyday life. Citizens no longer wonder about military troops during major state holidays (see Figure 1), military convoys on highways, or NATO servicemen in major Lithuanian cities during state holidays. Some citizens actively embrace the public campaigns by visiting military equipment displays, meeting troops (see Figure 2), and joining military parades (see Figure 3).

Civic vigilance, mobilized by the government and the media, is integral to political belonging at the Baltic frontier. In 2014 and 2015, the Ministry of National Defense published several manuals on how to prepare to survive emergencies and war, which they distributed to schools and libraries. The manuals instructed citizens on chemical, radiological, and other attacks and

5. See State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania, *National Threat Assessment 2018* (Vilnius, 2018), 33, at https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ENG.pdf (accessed November 11, 2018).
6. See Press announcements, President of the Republic of Lithuania, "Hibridinėms grėsmėms—griežtesnis ES atsakas" (In Response to Hybrid Threats, A Stronger EU Response), October 18, 2018, at https://www.lrp.lt/lt/spaudos-centras/pranesimai-spaudai/31137 (accessed November 11, 2018).

Figure 2. **Meeting with civilians in Vilnius during the 25th anniversary of co-operation with Pennsylvania National Guard, June 10, 2018. Author's photo.**
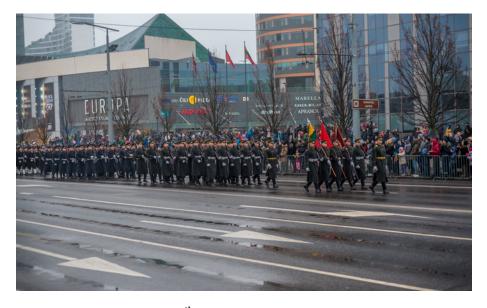

Figure 3. **Celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Lithuanian Army. November 24, 2018. The military parade. Author: Andrius Dukšta.**

emergencies, as well as provided information on evacuation and survival in a seized territory.[7] During Lithuanian National television advertisements in 2016, videos instructed viewers how to resist propaganda or recruitment by foreign spies. Some actual Russian spies were caught and imprisoned, while three "undercover spies"—all Russian diplomats, were sent to Russia after the poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skirpal and his daughter Yulia Skripal in London in March of 2018. The State Security expanded surveillance of minority populations, which, like in the Donbas area in Ukraine, could be a "potential" target of Russia's provocations. Some Russian television channel programs were temporarily cut to prevent citizens from consuming Russia's propaganda.

Political scientists and journalists stress that hybrid resistance, which would include resistance carried out by paramilitary groups or civilians, will be very important since the odds will not be in favor of Lithuania should war break out. They also ask how many people would defend their country.[8] According to a 2017 study, 60% of 16–29 year-old men and over 50% of 30–69 year-old men would be willing to contribute to the defense of Lithuania.[9] In Biržai I observed young teenagers taking an oath to defend Lithuania and joining a paramilitary organization, the Lithuanian Riflemen Union (Figures 4 and 5).

While in March 2015 the Lithuanian government reinstated conscription, it was not enforced since the required quota was fulfilled until 2018. The film *Waiting for Invasion* (2017) followed two young men, 20 and 24-years old, through their voluntary conscription and service in the Lithuanian Army.[10] The volunteers observed that they would be "the meat of the war," but insisted that "I won't kneel for my enemy" (Aironas Babkauskas, 20) or "I'd sacrifice my life for the sake of Lithuania because this is my home" (Stasys Vasiliauskas, 24). When in 2017 popular singers Stanas and Zvonkus created an ironic song "Russians are attacking," portraying Russians as weirdos and drunkards and mocking the Lithuanian discourse of the new eventual war, they were publicly shamed as unpatriotic and later apologized. The song mocked the public discourse of Russia's threat:

> I just open my eyes and hear—Russia will attack . . .
> Everybody knows from the start / from the time at school that
> Russia will attack, Russia will attack, Russians are attacking again

7. A version with cartoons, "Prepare to Survive Emergencies and War: A Cheerful Take on Serious Recommendations," Ministry of National Defense, 2015, is available online. For a discussion of manuals in English, see *The Guardian* news article, "Ready for Russia: Lithuanians Taught How to Resist Invasion," December 5, 2016, at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/05/ready-for-russia-lithuanians-taught-how-to-resist-invasion (accessed November 11, 2018).

8. LRT E. Jakilaitis' program "Dėmesio centre. Pilietinės pasipriešinimo galimybės Lietuvoje" (The Center of Attention: Potential Civic Resistance in Lithuania), April 4, 2018, 21:19, at https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/1013688390/demesio-centre-pilietinio-pasipriesinimo-galimybes-lietuvoje (accessed April 10, 2018). See also Ainė Ramonaitė et al., *Kas eitų ginti Lietuvos?* (Who Would Defend Lithuania?) (Vilnius, 2018).

9. Ainė Ramonaitė et al., *Kas eitų ginti Lietuvos?* (Who Would Defend Lithuania?) (Vilnius, 2018).

10. The film with English subtitles is available at http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2017/02/waiting-invasion-170214101245958.html (accessed May 10, 2018).

Figure 4. Teenagers give an oath to defend Lithuania and join paramilitary organization, the Lithuanian Riflemen Union. March 11, 2017. Biržai. Author's photos.

> Hate speech is overflowing; Russia will attack . . .
> The castle of Gediminas is collapsing because Russia will attack
> And all summer it will rain again because Russia will attack.[11]

The Soviet Past as the Future

At the Baltic frontier, history provides important frameworks to articulate sovereign uncertainty and imagine a military future. All three Baltic states, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, independent since 1918, fell under the Soviet "sphere of influence" in 1939, when Nazi Germany and the USSR signed the

11. The castle of Gediminas is the foremost state and historic symbol of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. The song is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=so9OFNVx2xY (accessed May 17, 2018).

Figure 5. New Lithuanian Riflemen Union members are having porridge after the oath. March 11, 2017. Biržai. Author's photo.

Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (officially known as the Treaty of Non-aggression), dividing Europe. The end of WWII sealed the fate of the Baltic states by leaving them under Soviet rule until 1991.[12] Lithuanian historian Arvydas Anušauskas argues that based on incomplete archival data, in Lithuania no less than 456,000 people were Soviet "genocide and terror victims and experienced violence."[13] This translates into "every third adult Lithuanian or every second man, every eight woman, and every fifteenth child."[14] Claims for restoration of historical justice became public during perestroika and united people during the nationalist movement of 1988–90, epitomized in Lithuania's secession from the USSR. Although a legitimate part of history during the postsocialist period, it was not until 2014 when historical justice narratives gained the potential to unite citizens again.

In October 2017, Rūta Vanagaitė, a writer and public intellectual caused a great scandal when she falsely announced that Ramanauskas-Vanagas, a general of the Lithuanian partisans, was not tortured by the Soviet state security, but rather collaborated with them. "Alma litera," the publisher of her books, including a popularly-written book on the Holocaust in Lithuania, stopped selling Vanagaitė's books, escalating the scandal. The year 2018

12. The Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian SSR Supreme Soviets declared independence in 1990.
13. Arvydas Anušauskas, *Teroras 1940–1958 m.* (Terror 1940–1958) (Vilnius, 2012), 280.
14. Ibid., 280.

was announced as "The Year of Ramanauskas-Vanagas," as planned before this incident. In 2017, the campaign #AšEsuVanagas (#IAmVanagas) transformed a family holiday of visiting the graves of the deceased on All Saints Day into a public holiday by inviting people to light a candle at the sites of graves, arrests, or death places of Lithuanian partisans/freedom fighters. The year 2018 marked another important event, the discovery of Ramanauskas-Vanagas's remains in a secret KGB burial site, followed by the state reburial of Ramanauskas-Vanagas in the statesmen pantheon in Vilnius. On November 20, 2018, the Lithuanian Parliament almost unanimously voted (ninety-one in favor, seven abstained) to recognize A. Ramanauskas-Vanagas as the Lithuanian head of state in 1954–57, when he was the last remaining partisan leader fighting against Soviet occupation.

The anti-Soviet resistance during WWII and the post-war era is a template through which new potential Russian aggression and resistance to it are presently imagined. On the Foreign Ministry Facebook page, a video portrays a young family with small children, from whom "everything can suddenly be taken away," as during WWII: "the freedom fighters legacy . . . survived in the memory of this nation. It all shows that if something happens we will fight and remain resilient just as you would for your own family, culture, and nation."[15] The Baltic history of resistance against Soviet power after WWII has been internationalized, becoming part of western history on the Soviet occupation of the Baltics, as in the NATO-sponsored film *Forest Brothers–Fight for the Baltics*, which argues that "the legacy of a struggle by a small force against overwhelming odds lives on today in the Special Forces units of all three countries."[16] A Lithuanian special forces officer in the film confirms that "all our history derives from the Forest Brothers."[17]

From the perspective of officials of the Russian Federation, such narratives of history are "historical distortions" and the "denial of Nuremberg results."[18] Since 2000, Russia has put particular emphasis on the Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War. Russia demands that the USSR/Russia be acknowledged as the liberator of Europe from Nazism; whoever questions this role is accused of falsifying history and demeaning the memory of World War II victims. Russian state ideologues construe the "double genocide" (perpetrated by the Nazis and the Soviets) approach in eastern Europe and the Baltic States as an unacceptable historical revisionism, rewriting of history, and questioning the results of World War II.

Majority Rights and the Dangers to Liberalism

At the Baltic frontier, the national majority is threatened and reconstituted as a potential victim. The Russian-speaking minorities, however, become a

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15. See Lithuanian Foreign Ministry Facebook page, October 5, 2018, at https://www.facebook.com/urministerija/videos/329404531154376/ (accessed November 5, 2018).

16. See NATO website, published July 11, 2017, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5rQFp7FF9c (accessed November 5, 2017).

17. Ibid.

18. Such an opinion was expressed by Maria Zakharova, Director of the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs Information and Press Department, on her Facebook page, on July 12, 2017.

potential threat because of Russia's policies toward the near abroad and its geopolitical interests in the Baltics.[19] Some mainstream media outlets have questioned Russian speakers' loyalty, and political scientists have measured it in their surveys.[20] Some journalists have labeled Russian-speakers with derogatory terms, such as the "fifth column" or "vatnikai" (supporters of the Russian expansionist politics). Such othering coexists with government policies on how to counteract growing intolerance in order to integrate minorities into Lithuanian society. Expanded surveillance of these groups after 2014, however, undermine liberal initiatives of tolerance and multiculturalism. The government also monitors various Russian NGO programs to ensure that minority communities do not receive funding or engage in politically-dubious collaboration with Russia.

The Victory Day celebrations (May 9) of Lithuanian Russians and other minorities are presented as rituals of threat and disloyalty by the Lithuanian media (Figures 6 and 7). In 2017, major Lithuanian internet and print media sites related Victory Day to the Russian Federation's politics of expansionism and Russia's threat to Lithuania with such headlines as: "LŽ archive: A Day of Foreign Victory"; "The Kremlin Hides a Terrible Truth Under Military Parades and Ribbons of Saint George"; and "Victory Day in the Eyes of Vilnius Inhabitants: They Celebrate Stalin and Threaten to Burn Us."[21]

The protection and promotion of majority rights results in the exclusion of Russian speakers. Some Lithuanian Russians do not take their children to Victory Day events, fearing "provocations from Lithuanian nationalists." Others celebrate Victory Day secretly.[22] Victory Day in one Russian community, which I attended in 2017, was celebrated behind closed doors. The date of the event was not announced publicly: it was not celebrated on May 9 but on May 8, and it was purposefully scheduled on a weekday. The songs were thoroughly selected and most of them were about war and losses, mothers' pain, and the death of soldiers; there were no victorious marches. The organizers

19. According to the Department of National Minorities under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, in Lithuania, in 2011, minorities constituted 16% of the population, including Poles 6.5%, Russians 5.8%, Belorussians 1.2%, etc.

20. See Vaidas Saldžiūnas, "Spec. Tyrimas: ką darytų Lietuvos rusai ir lenkai, jei Kremlius pultų Baltijos šalis?" (Special Investigation: If the Kremlin attacked the Baltic countries, what would Lithuanian Russians and Poles do?), DELFI, August 8, 2016, at http://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/spec-tyrimas-ka-darytu-lietuvos-rusai-ir-lenkai-jei-kremlius-pultu-baltijos-salis.d?id=71971382 (accessed May 17, 2018); see also Monika Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2015 "Žiniasklaidoje vyraujančios tematikos apie tautines grupes 2014–2015 m. apžvalga" (Review of Themes on the National Minorities in 2014–2015 Media Coverage), (2015), 36–37. In: *Lietuvoje gyvenančių tautinėms mažumoms priklausančių asmenų padėties tyrimo ir rezultatų analizės ataskaita* (The Report on Research and Analysis of Results on the Condition of National Minority Individuals who Live in Lithuania), at https://tmde.lrv.lt/uploads/tmde/documents/files/2_%20%C5%BDiniasklaidos%20turinio%20tyrimo%20ATASKAITA.pdf (accessed May 17, 2018).

21. Neringa Klumbytė, "Bipolinės istorinio teisingumo struktūros ir politinė atskirtis. Lietuvos rusakalbių prisiminimai apie Antrąjį pasaulinį karą Lietuvos ir Rusijos istorijos politikos kontekste" ("Political Exclusion and Bipolar Structures of Historical Justice: Memories of WWII among Lithuanian Russian-Speakers in the Context of the Politics of History in Lithuania and Russia"), *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas* vol. 2, no. 41 (2017): 136–67.

22. Ibid.

Figure 6. The Immortal Regiment at the Victory Day in Klaipėda, Lithuania. May 9, 2017. Author's photo.

emphasized that they were happy to see Russians and Ukrainians, Armenians and Jews, and Lithuanians in the audience. It was, thus, not a *Russian* holiday. I sat in the front line next to an old lady who told me her story. The Ambassador of Kazakhstan brought her some soil from Kazakhstan where her parents perished in exile. She was a WWII veteran, but I learned about it only when she was invited on stage and took her jacket off, revealing hidden lines of medals. Medals and veterans, the icons of victory in WWII, which reminds Lithuanians of occupation and the loss of hundreds of thousands of citizens, are becoming private family stories, for some out of fear, since Soviet symbols are illegal in the public sphere. While Victory Day stands for injustice and danger to the majority, for Russian-speakers various prohibitions and negative labeling are about unfairness towards them.[23]

At the Baltic frontier, embracing the tolerance, multiculturalism, and pluralism that define the liberal public sphere may become dangerous. Tolerance toward Russian minorities who claim to have liberated Europe from the Nazis can be perceived as support for Russia's expansionist politics. Pluralism of opinions about Lithuanian armed anti-Soviet resistance can also be dangerous; it is increasingly unpatriotic to doubt Lithuanian partisan deeds and discussions of partisan crimes are usually constrained to scholars' circles. In the media, some journalists, politicians, and commentators argue that the questioning of Lithuanian partisan leader Ramanauskas-Vanagas play into

23. See Klumbytė, "Bipolinės istorinio"; Robert Hayden, "Justice as Unfairness," *Perspectives on Europe* vol. 44, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 16–23.

Figure 7. The Immortal Regiment at the Victory Day in Klaipėda, Lithuania. May 9, 2017. Author's photo.

the "Kremlin's hands."[24] The Russian Federation emphasized many times that the Soviet Army was fighting against the Nazis and Nazi collaborators.[25] Thus, pluralism may become a threat to national security and sovereignty.

24. See Aistė Meidutė, "Vanagaitė įkvėpė Kremlių: aukština NKVD smogikus ir vėl šmeižia partizanų vadus" (Vanagaitė Inspired the Kremlin: Celebration of the NKVD Gunmen and Defaming the Partisan Leaders Again). DELFI, July 23, 2018 at https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/demaskuok/vanagaite-ikvepe-kremliu-aukstina-nkvd-smogikus-ir-vel-smeizia-partizanu-vadus.d?id=78541305 (accessed November 11, 2018).

25. During the Nazi period (1941–44), 195,196 or over 95% of Lithuanian Jews were killed; more than 80% were killed in Lithuania, see Arvydas Anušauskas et al., *Lietuva 1940–1990: Okupuotos Lietuvos istorija* (Lithuania in 1940–1990: The History of Occupied Lithuania) (Vilnius, 2005), 222.

This contracting public sphere in Lithuania is also presented as a return to fascism in the media and political circles of the Russian Federation. Russian media have also called Lithuania a "failed state" and a NATO puppet, once again questioning the sovereignty that Lithuania aims to defend.

Warfare, writes Margaret Mead, "is a defective social institution," but "once an invention is made which proves congruent with human needs or social forms, it tends to persist."[26] Even if war will not take place in the Baltics, the effects of the undeclared but anticipated war are real, materializing in a new war frontier. This frontier engenders sovereign uncertainty and the rise of divisive politics of historical justice, protection of majority rights, and public othering of minorities, all of which relate to government and civil society initiatives to legitimate and secure statehood. The sovereign uncertainty that defines the Baltic frontier is essential for understanding how Lithuania can be a strong ally of NATO and the EU, a proponent of democratic politics and liberalism, and claim regional security expertise to lead western countries, while at the same time embrace divisive historical justice politics, defend majority rights, and publicly other its minorities, all of which undermine liberal ideals of tolerance, multiculturalism, and the pluralism of opinions. A frontier of undeclared but anticipated war is thus characterized by spaces of social disruption, distrust, and conflict. Its "defectiveness" may become invisible when war jets beautifully scythe the sky above the hills of Vilnius.

26. Margaret Mead, "Warfare is Only an Invention—Not a Biological Necessity."