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Russia's Proposal to Redraw Baltic Sea Borders Sparks Concern From Neighbors

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The Russian port city of Baltiysk on the Baltic Sea. **MT**

A Russian Defense Ministry proposal to redraw Russia's maritime borders in the Baltic Sea has sparked concern from Moscow's neighbors in the region, with officials from Finland to Lithuania decrying what they describe as an attempt to sow confusion and destabilize regional security.

While the Kremlin insisted Wednesday that the government draft resolution was not politically motivated, experts told The Moscow Times that the proposed changes could be used to put pressure on Russia's western neighbors — all of whom are EU and NATO members.

"This is an issue that shows Russia can and is going to create problems and disputes where the situation was already unproblematic," said Arkady Moshes, who heads the Russia program at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA).

"So it's a part of this hybrid pressure," he told The Moscow Times.

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According to the Defense Ministry's draft resolution — which has since disappeared from the government's website after it was published Tuesday — Russia's maritime borders around the Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad and the eastern part of the Gulf of Finland would be changed in order to "correspond to the modern geographical situation."

While the proposal did not provide details on how the borders might change, it nevertheless prompted condemnation from Russia's neighbors in the Baltic Sea region that would be impacted by any territorial revisions.

"This is an obvious escalation against NATO and the EU, and must be met with an appropriately firm response," Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said Wednesday.

Finland's Foreign Ministry issued a similar statement, calling the Russian Defense Ministry's draft resolution a distraction and "a form of hybrid influencing." Authorities in Sweden, meanwhile, claimed Moscow might be seeking to take control over the Baltic Sea.

"If Russia has clear geographical and technical reasons [for the proposal] ... then it will become a technical issue, and the border might be corrected," analyst Moshes told The Moscow Times.

"But [these technical arguments] will have to be presented, and the process will then be dealt with in accordance with [international] rules," he added.

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Later on Wednesday, Russian state media, citing an anonymous diplomatic source, reported that Moscow "does not have any intentions to revise" its territorial boundaries in the Baltic Sea despite the proposed changes.

In either case, it remains unclear what any revisions might look like given a lack of concrete information provided in the Defense Ministry's draft resolution, according to Ryhor Nizhnikau, a senior research fellow at FIIA.

"However, if the draft is approved, it might create a sort of gray zone on the borders," he told The Moscow Times.

"We might expect a scenario in which a commercial vessel enters what Russia claims to be its waters and is then intercepted by the Russian military, accusing it of violating Russia's borders," Nizhnikau said.

"So, this [draft resolution] creates extra pressure on the governments of neighboring countries, military, and also commercial entities," he added.

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