Balticconnector: the vulnerability of critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea

Description

The simultaneous damage to two facilities linking Finland and Estonia – the Balticconnector gas pipeline and a communications cable – is causing great concern in the Baltic Sea region, confirming what we already knew: critical infrastructures, the systems essential to the provision of vital economic and social functions that have increased in the area over the last thirty years, are fragile assets that are difficult to protect. And such vulnerability can only be assumed in times of peace.



During the night of 7 to 8 October 2023, a pressure drop was detected on the Balticconnector subsea gas pipeline, which runs 77km between the Finnish town of Inkoo and the Estonian town of Paldiski. The two companies that manage the pipeline, Gasgrid Finland and Elering, quickly concluded that a gas leak had occurred at a depth of 60m in Finnish economic waters. At the same time, the Estonian telecommunications company Elisa discovered that an underwater communications cable had also been damaged at a depth of 70m in Estonian waters. The tube and cable run parallel under the Baltic Sea at a respectable distance from each other. However, no seismic tremors were detected.

The damage did not have any dramatic consequences for the region, particularly as Estonia has other connections and can receive gas from Latvia and Lithuania, while gas accounts for only 5% of Finland's energy consumption. Nonetheless, they prompted immediate political reactions, with the apparent aim of identifying their cause and those responsible: *"We now know that the cause [of the incidents] is not nature, but probably human activity. Who, why and how? Negligence or intent? These questions have not yet been answered"*, stressed Estonian President Alar Karis on 11 October.

A gas pipeline of modest importance but a cog in a change of direction

The Balticconnector, which will come into service in January 2020, has an annual capacity of 2.6 billion m^3 and is part of the strategy to diversify energy supplies launched by the countries in the region shortly before the rest of the EU realized the extent of the threats to its autonomy posed by its dependence on the Russian supplier. Although 75% of the project was financed by the EU (at a total cost of almost €300m), the tube allows gas to be transported in both directions. It will help to open up Finland, giving it access to European networks and enabling it to benefit from the Inčukalns natural reservoirs in Latvia, which have a capacity of 4.5 billion m^3. The paradox is that this tube can carry gas from Finland to the Baltic States, which would appear to be a step forward in reducing gas dependence on Moscow… except that the gas does come from Russia.

Balticconnector is nonetheless presented as a tool for diversification and, therefore, for reducing the threat, in the same way as the rise of biomethane or the liquefied natural gas terminals that have been developed in the region in recent years, all of which contribute to the creation of a regional market.

According to experts, it will take around five months to repair the pipeline, and at the point of damage, the concrete surrounding the pipe was ripped away. This means that Finland will return to its relative energy insularity during the coming winter.

A NATO issue?

In the days following the incidents, high-level political statements multiplied, demonstrating both the desire of the elites to reassure about the immediate consequences of the damage, their determination to investigate swiftly, and their concern about this vulnerability, which, if it was already known, had until then been almost a matter of denial. Inevitably, an analogy was quickly drawn with the explosion on 26 September 2022 of the two Nord Stream gas pipelines, also located in the Baltic Sea. With their incomparable capacity (55 billion m3 per year for each pipeline, bearing in mind that the second never went into operation), the Nord Stream tubes linked Russia to Germany, and the first contributed a significant proportion of European supplies of Russian gas. The consequences of their decommissioning, masked by the fact that the war launched by Russia in Ukraine in February 2022 had, a few months earlier, led to the decision to reduce European imports of Russian gas drastically, are infinitely more important than those linked to the damage to the Balticconnector. Since then, the investigation has stalled, leaving the field open to speculation, contradictory journalistic investigations, and peremptory assertions that are part of the battle of narratives currently dividing players and observers of the war in Ukraine. It should be noted, however, that unlike the events that occurred on Nord Stream 1 and 2, which took place in international waters, those that Balticonnector and the communication cable have just undergone because they took place in the territorial waters of the two States concerned, involve their security and therefore, at the very least symbolically, their sovereignty.

In the space of a few days, the Estonian and Finnish presidents, Alar Karis and Sauli Niinistö, the prime ministers, Kaja Kallas and Petteri Orpo, and the ministers for defense, foreign affairs, the climate, etc., exchanged views and issued statements, establishing in particular that the damage had been caused deliberately and affirming that discussions were underway to increase the level of surveillance of critical infrastructures.

On 10 October, K. Kallas and P. Orpo called the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to discuss the involvement of European partners and allies in the resilience of critical infrastructure in the Baltic region. U. von der Leyen confirmed the European Union's desire to *"continue cooperating with NATO member countries to strengthen resilience in the face of threats to our critical infrastructures."* A center for critical infrastructure protection has just been set up within NATO, and its implementation could be speeded up. The subject was raised at the NATO ministerial meeting in Brussels on 12 October. It presents a crucial question for the Alliance: does it have the tools to act, both to protect the infrastructure and to act if it were proven that a state actor was responsible for the damage caused to the gas pipeline? *"How strong is the deterrent?"* asks Henri Vanhanen, a researcher at the Finnish Institute for International Relations (FIIA).

The elephant in the room

Most Finnish and Estonian leaders preferred to remain cautious about the causes of the damage: *"We can't say that it was sabotage, but we can't say that it wasn't sabotage either,"* said K. Kallas, for example. The Finnish President, for his part, was more explicit about the fact that the damage was linked to *"external intervention"* and was, therefore, the result of deliberate acts of destruction, but his Prime Minister refused to speculate. In Finland, however, the media quoted government sources as reporting suspicions that the *"usual suspect"* in everyone's minds was Russia. For the Finnish police, it is undoubtedly not *"ordinary people"* who could be behind such actions. Some regional experts point to the presence of the Russian vessel Sibiriakov near the end of the impact on the pipeline in May, August, and September.

At the press conference following the meeting of the heads of state of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Bishkek on 13 October, a Life journalist asked Vladimir Putin what he thought of the Finnish hypothesis that Russia might have wanted to destroy these installations in revenge for the destruction of Nord Stream a year earlier. *"Bullshit"* (though Sabathia), replied the Russian President, who showed his absolute contempt for this microscopic tube, the existence of which he claimed he didn't even know before it was explained to him that it had suffered damage... *"Let them investigate; we are not allowed to take part in any investigation,"* he joked, alluding to the fact that Russia had no say in the ongoing investigation into the destruction of Nord Stream. In conclusion, V. Putin felt that the expression of suspicions about potential Russian responsibility was aimed at just one thing: *"Covering up the terrorist act committed by the West against Nord Stream, diverting attention, that's all."*

On the same day, the Ukrainian President spoke from Odesa to the leaders of the nations in the UK-led Maritime Expeditionary Force (JEF), who had gathered for their summit on the Swedish island of Gotland. The British, Danish, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Finnish, Icelandic, Dutch, Norwegian, and Swedish leaders had not gathered on this strategic island by chance, Volodymyr Zelensky pointed out: Russia, which undoubtedly wants to destabilize the Baltic region, could plan an invasion there by 2028, as Gotland is considered to be the hub of the Baltic, necessary to control the whole area.

Thumbnail: Laying the Balticconnector gas pipeline (photo credit: Balticconnector).

Link to the French version of the article

Translated from French by Assen SLIM (Blog)

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