

## The Impact of Russian Aggression Against Ukraine on Estonian Security

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## **The Impact of Russian Aggression Against Ukraine on Estonian Security**

### **Abstract**

Historically, Estonia has suffered many years of hostilities inflicted by Russia, with Russia being a constant threat towards the nation's identity and sovereignty, including the loss of its independence and coming under and enduring belligerent Russian occupation. Recently, Moscow's policy escalated by their unilaterally using military power against Ukraine in an attempt to subordinate the nation while harbouring desires to restore their sphere of influence. 2022's aggression came as no surprise to Tallinn, as the nation's leadership had issued warnings about Russia's intentions, based on understanding its nature and being aware of what a so-called "Russian world" means. This article aims to focus on presenting the impact of Russian aggression against Ukraine on Estonia within three domains of understanding; those of the political, public, and military, and the author will use scientific methods including the collection of original data and a systematic review of existing literature and studies, along with analyses, syntheses, and elements of comparative analysis. The case study, of course, concerns Estonia. The research contends that the Russian Federation is and will continue to be considered an existential threat, one which carries out both continuous and decisive non-military and military activities against its neighbours. These activities require Estonia to improve internal security with the need of regional and international support.

**Keywords:** Estonia, Russian Aggression Against Ukraine, Security Environment, Defence Forces

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## **Introduction**

Throughout its history, Estonia has perceived Russia as an existential threat, having experienced – on numerous occasions in the past – the meaning and implications of the so-called “*Ruski Mir*” ideology, and especially when the country was under Russian occupation for nearly half a century. Understanding the Russian Federation, that which is the heir of the country’s previous system, plays a large role with respect to national security, and is directly related to Moscow’s ongoing imperialist ambitions and their desire to subjugate and control independent nations once again. This state of affairs has been characteristic of Russia for several centuries. Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas stressed that Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine shows “how high the price of freedom is” (Government of Estonia, 2022), highlighting the need for unity and cooperation within NATO, the EU, and regionally, as Estonia may be yet again a target of Russian aggression.

This article aims to review the security situation which will lead to a presentation of the impact of Russian aggression against Ukraine on Estonia. In this endeavour, three major domains will be studied, namely, those of the political, public, and military. Open-source documents as well as academic and journal articles related to security will be studied, implementing a collection of original data and a systematic review of the existing literature, and formal statements and studies utilising analysis, synthesis, and comparative analysis. Estonia is the substance of this research as a case study. The specificity of this paper required the author to make use of current documents from official websites.

The first part will present decisions and actions in the political sphere with a focus on the national level. The next parts will review the threat assessments, decisions supporting resilience, and societal awareness leading to building resistance potential. The armed forces and territorial-defence-unit capabilities will be discussed, and their support for the Ukrainian fight for territorial integrity will be included. The conclusions will summarise the research, reflecting the complexity of the security situation and the challenges faced by the nation. It will allow the author to answer what the major decisions and actions taken or planned are with regard to preparing the nation to face Russian hostility as and when it comes. The paper argues that the decisions taken by Estonia are both a reflection of reality along with the pragmatic approach of this small state based on the internal and international situation offering predictions with regard to possible regional consequences.

## **The Consolidation of Political Decisions Facing Russian Aggression Against Ukraine**

The Russian Federation has posed, is posing, and will continue to pose an existential threat to the sovereignty of Estonia because of Russia's aggressive policy involving its repeated use of a military instrument of power this century (2008, 2014, and 2022 thus far) to forward its foreign policy and attack sovereign nations. Such a perception of Russia was presented by Estonian leaders after gaining independence. In 1994, Lennart Meri, a former President of Estonia, warned about the West's so-called "appeasement" policy toward Russia and Russia's inclination to "solve their country's immense problems by outward expansion and by threatening their neighbours" (Archive of the Office of the President of the Republic, 1994). What is more, in 2014, Toomas Ilves, the then-Estonian President stated, "The annexation of territory, the violation of borders, aggression, and an anti-liberal ideology combined with religious conservatism, with political authoritarianism, and imperialist bravado. It's all back!" (Waylly, 2014). The kidnapping of Estonian security officer Eston Kohver in the same year, was a red flag for Tallinn with regard to "constant, multi-vector Russian pressure, yet, rather than a prelude to kinetic operations, this pressure is part of Moscow's wider so-called "political war" with the West" (Galeotti, 2019; Banka, 2023). Therefore, it was not a surprise for Estonia to learn that "Putin has chosen the path of war" due to his being afraid of progressive democratic values close to Russia's borders (Office of the President of the Republic, 2022).

Estonia decided to close ranks within NATO and the EU as an advocate of a decisive approach, assessing that Russia would remain a major threat, although not yet ready to attack Estonia due to its membership in the Alliance. Therefore, in April 2022, Estonia published a statement of the Riigikogu (State Assembly of Estonia) on the "war crimes and genocide of the Russian Federation in Ukraine" (Riigikogu, 2022a). Next, Estonia recognised Russia as "a terrorist regime, and the Russian Federation as a country which supports terrorism, and whose actions we must confront together" (Riigikogu, 2022b). The adopted resolutions show an explicit position regarding the perception of Russian aggression as actions incompatible with any dimension of international relations and legal regulations constituting the basis for peaceful existence that have been developed in the post-war period. At the same time, Estonia has fully supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine, being aware that the revisionist policy of Russia poses a real threat to the nation's statehood. In this context, the country's accession to NATO and the EU in 2004

proved to be critical for regional security along with its cooperation with the United States, Poland, and the Nordic countries (Galeotti, 2019).

Prime Minister Kallas has repeatedly stressed that Estonia is aware of Moscow's use of hybrid tools, which requires a constant monitoring of these activities and which also requires building Estonia's resilience in every sphere of its functioning (Postimees, 2023). It is linked with the Kremlin's short-term (until 2022), medium-term (2025), and long-term (2030) plans, covering three main domains, the first of which being political, military, and military-technical and security-related aims; the second being trade and economy; and, finally, humanitarian and social objectives. Dan Fried stressed the importance of the Baltic states' membership in NATO, postulating that if their accession had not taken place in 2004, Russia would have committed military aggression toward the Baltics, but now the Russian state is limited only to political intrigues (Postimees, 2023). This justified statement exemplifies why Russia has been so opposed to NATO enlargement to include new states; Russia is afraid of entering into direct conflict with NATO and activating Article V. The 2021 National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation still reiterated the build-up of NATO military infrastructure near Russia's borders as a military threat (Postimees, 2023) (Президент Российской Федерации, 2021, p. 11). For Estonia, Finland's accession to NATO, and Sweden's future accession, is another aspect of strengthening its security; crossing this so-called accession "red line" is a noticeable political and military defeat for Russia.

Tallinn explicitly expressed the requirement for the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court to initiate and continue investigations to prosecute Russian war crimes. Politically, this was expressed through unequivocally positive support for the European Union's sanctions on Russia, even though they affected domestic economies. This was a joint position with other countries being encouraged to implement further sanction packages. An expression of this active approach was the sanctions against Russian citizens associated with the war and their support of it, as well as the transferring frozen assets of Russian oligarchs to Ukraine. Estonia initiated the development of legal bases for such steps in January 2023 (ERR News, 2023a).

Estonia will not cease its multidimensional support for Ukraine. The country's willingness to continue providing support was demonstrated by the signing of the "Joint Statement by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania on support for Ukraine" document by the Estonian Prime Minister, along with the leadership of the other two signatories. The document, signed on 17<sup>th</sup> August 2023, emphasised "supporting Ukraine until

victory” and the “steadfast support for Ukraine on its path to join the Alliance” (Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023). Estonia’s voice within joint statements matters considerably as it is supported by other European nations. Moreover, that document is in line with the “G-7: Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine” document. Nevertheless, politically, at least one party represented in parliament, in the form of the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE), has not expressed clear support for Ukraine in some aspects. The party leader assumes that “there are limits to our ability to help Ukraine”, so it can be interpreted that he believes that accepting Ukrainian refugees should be stopped, which also goes for bringing about lower immigration rates. In the meantime, however, political help and other forms of assistance are to be continued as the war has a direct impact on Estonia due to the fact that war-related tensions could easily escalate (Jarosak, Helme, 2023). Therefore, at least 17 members of parliament (17%) are, through their scepticism, fuelling societal frustrations.

It should be noted that Estonia is relatively small in many respects, but its voice matters based on the country’s clear awareness of threats and its lack of confidence in a peaceful coexistence with Moscow in the future. Estonia has the potential to build coalitions both within NATO and the EU, as well as regionally, e.g., other Baltic states and Poland, which allows the promotion of selected initiatives. This is a bold approach given its geostrategic location and immediate border with Russia, which, as mentioned, questions the sovereignty of Estonia as a historical mistake as expressed by Mr Medvedev. To answer such an aggressive narrative, the Estonian government’s political decisions clearly demonstrate a decisive stand and are decisions of great pragmatism. They are followed by actions to endure international willingness and vigilance, in concert with societal preparation within a comprehensive approach to security, including building both a spirit of resilience and defence capabilities to use if required.

## **The Threat Perception – News**

Since Estonia gained its independence in 1991, the country’s security policy has been focused on the existential threat of being Russia’s neighbour. This is related to NATO and EU membership, a strategic alliance with the United States, collective defence, deterrence, and building national resilience as security pillars. In recent years, Russian intelligence has been intensified, looking to support Russia’s political goals and to create a favourable environment for itself, especially focussing on a dedicated

region of Estonia with a significant Russian majority (the Ida-Viru or Harju counties serve as good examples). The range of interests has been wide, focusing on NATO and EU activities, studying the foreign security policy of states, military potential, domestic politics and economy, the attitude of society, and other aspects. These activities are ongoing and will certainly continue to be with regard to the ongoing state of “hybrid” warfare.

The perception of threats was reflected in a report drawn up by the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (EFSI), which indicated the need to observe Russia’s activities in neighbouring countries, where it strives for dominance by threatening their security (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2021, p. 6). The 2021 report singled out Ukraine and Belarus as priority countries for Moscow. One of the Kremlin’s recognised goals was to build armed forces capable of a “full-scale confrontation with NATO” while trying to undermine NATO’s unity, especially its transatlantic relations (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2021, pp. 45–47). This goal was to be achieved by comprehensive psychological and information operations, espionage, covert influence operations, and cyber-attacks coordinated by the secret services (FSB, SVR, and GRU) operating in concert.<sup>1</sup> 2022’s EFSI report assessed the Kremlin’s intentions and China’s role in its relations with Russia. The report examined the sequence of Russian preparations for war through large-scale exercises, intelligence activities, and cyber espionage to shape the future environment of operations or conduct military operations. One of the assessed threats was the aggression against Ukraine, as “the linchpin that keeps Russian imperial ambition together” (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2022, pp. 9–22, 28). The report, presented immediately before the attack, included a review of the capabilities of the Russian forces, considering their concentration on the Ukrainian border as a direct threat to Ukraine and an ultimatum to the West. It was indicated that they would be ready to launch an offensive against Ukraine “if the Russian leadership so decides” (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2022, p. 9) as early as the second half of February 2022. This was a correct assessment as far as time as an operational factor is concerned, but the potential of the so-called “second army of the world” was significantly overestimated.

In April 2022, the Annual Review of the Estonian Internal Security Service indicated that the day of the invasion, February 24th, coincidentally being the Anniversary of the Republic of Estonia, “did

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Security Service (FSB), Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (formerly the Main Intelligence Directorate G.U. or GRU).

not mark the beginning of Putin's aggressive foreign policy but only its continuation with military means" (Estonian Internal Security Service, 2022, p. 4). It quotes Jüri Uluots<sup>2</sup>: "Due to the primordial nature of its socio-political ideology, the nation of Greater Russia cannot help but continue to invade the living space of other nations, attack them, harm them, and conquer them. At the same time, new reasons and theories for the attacks are found again and again" (Estonian Internal Security Service, 2022, p. 3). It was both prescient, and is an accurate judgement of the current security environment, because the causes do not change, and the military instrument of power is used after other tools do not allow a desired end state to be achieved. Historically, this is the nature of the state, because "Russia wants to be an empire, but it also wants to be autarky – a closed world built on a radical negation of what comes from the West" (Wołodźko, 2023, p. 112).

2023's EFSI report leaves no doubt about Russia's intentions. It was estimated that while an attack on Estonia is not likely in 2023, the threat has increased, and the Russian armed forces still have a large combat potential that can be recreated at the country's border within the next four years (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2023, p. 10). It is, however, doubtful, and the Shoigu's declarations about creating new units along Estonian and Finnish borders are not realistic because of a lack of resources to do so. This assessment has been an impetus to the ongoing expediting of Estonian-armed-forces development including the procurement of modern weapon systems and a program of intensive exercises with other NATO nations. The close cooperation with our allies has moved to a new level, leading to a shift to the desire to implement the so-called "deterrence by denial" concept as the key to defending the country and population, taking into account Russia's brutality against Ukraine's people and infrastructure (Wojciechowski, Śliwa, 2021; Kuczyńska-Zonik, Sierzputowska, 2023). Such a conceptual change is based on an assessment that there will be no change in Russia's hostile foreign policy, and that includes the Kremlin's utilisation of military power. It requires a close observation of Russia, investigating any developments which could be further used against Estonia and which endanger its national security.

## **The Populace Dimension of Security**

The slowly-changing approach of Russian-speaking persons has been visible since the beginning of the war as some of them have started to

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<sup>2</sup> Jüri Uluots (1890–1945) – a former Prime Minister of Estonia, historian, and statesperson.



consider a change of citizenship. It has not been particularly common, but 291 persons did decide to apply for Estonian citizenship in 2021; in 2022 that number increased to 726 persons (ERR News, 2023b) and 372 persons had followed suit by August 2023 (Eesti Rahvusringhääling, 2023). The advantage is that those people are mostly middle-aged and younger men and women; it demonstrates where they consider their future lies, especially due to the fact that the application process requires some effort needing to be made with regard to a B1-level language exam and a test on Estonia's Constitution. The process slowed down in February 2023 when the Russian Embassy in Tallinn paused procedures as regards people's renouncing of their Russian citizenship. It was a countermeasure move partially connected also with the "expulsion of 21 Russian diplomats and embassy staff in order to "reach parity" between the two nations" diplomatic personnel" (Estonian World Review, 2023).

According to a census from 2022, the major minority language is Russian (382,155 speakers) comprising 22.5% of the population (Statistics Estonia, 2023). What is important, still, is that many Russian-speaking persons hold "grey" passports, i.e., they are citizens neither of Estonia nor of the Russian Federation. In reality, it is a useful travelling document allowing holders cheaper purchases in Russia, the option of avoiding conscription, and which grants access to 42 countries without a visa. The aforementioned language exam is much easier for the younger generation as they already use Estonian, and the process will be sped up, due to the fact that the teaching of the Russian language will soon come to an end in schools. The transition to Estonian will start in preschools and the first and fourth grades in 2024, and the full transition should be completed by the 2029/2030 academic year (European Commission, 2022). So far, however, there have been some challenges, such as the need to generate the required number of teachers to transfer to an Estonian-language-only education, but the process of improving Estonian language skills has already started. The "Amendment Law to the Basic School and Gymnasium Law and Other Laws (Transition to Estonian-Language Education) 722 SE" adopted such a plan in December 2022. A population census completed in December of the same year presented an interesting trend: in the 15–29 age group, 90.9% speak Estonian, 48.7% speak Russian, and 85% speak English; in the 65+ age group, 77.9% speak Estonian 84.6% speak Russian, and 14.4% speak English (Statistics Estonia, 2022). Therefore, Russian language usage will, through there being inevitably fewer and fewer users of the language, diminish in the years to come. This is important, as the Estonian language will enhance better familiarisation with Estonian culture and politics thereby limiting

the impact of Russian propaganda and information operations. The shift to Estonian-language education is a most deliberate step to deny access to Russian language information programmes and platforms in order to negate any disinformation campaigns targeted at selected groups using the Kremlin narrative. Nevertheless, such messages are still crossing borders, albeit those messages having a more limited effect compared to the last three decades. A big challenge in this sense is that many Ukrainian refugees speak Russian, and it causes the need for additional investments to be made in order to assimilate them, investments which are already ongoing.

Estonia is very concerned about those Russian and Belarusian citizens living in Estonia who are under the influence of widely-spread Russian narratives. Therefore, some specific steps have already been taken. The Minister of Justice has proposed an amendment to the law aiming to exclude “citizens of a foreign country recognised as an aggressor state” from the right to vote in local elections. For them, including those “grey” passports holders, voting in local elections has been allowed, but voting in parliamentary elections has not. This is concerning, due to the fact that as many as 67,774 citizens of the Russian Federation and 1,052 citizens of Belarus are persons entitled to vote (a total of almost 69,000 persons as of May 2023) (ERR News, 2023c). The issue is still under discussion as it could require a change of constitution guaranteeing voting rights, but does require the support of as many as 81 out of 101 members of parliament. The decision could affect especially the city of Narva, where, during the times of the Soviet Union, ethnic Russians replaced indigenous Estonians. Out of some 54,000 people, as many as 45,300 are Russians (84.4%), so the new law will affect the outcome of local elections significantly (Invest in Narva, 2023). An example is the case of pro-Russian persons such as Mihhail Stalnuhhin and Aivo Peterson, who have garnered a reasonable number of votes in local elections, proving that Russian-influence agents could win their political battles locally. They are *persona no grata* to whom visas are to be cancelled, as has happened in the case of 55 Russians and 17 Belarusians as at August 2023. In the past, a few cases have even been publicised, such as when Ramil Usmanov (a pro-Kremlin provocateur), Alexey Esakov (an organiser of Russia’s “Immortal Regiment” marches), or Andrey Kornilov (another pro-Kremlin activist) were expelled. Abolishing Schengen visas for Russian citizens further limited their freedom to travel.

There is another security-related decision which has been made because as many as 1,300 Russian and Belarusian citizens residing in Estonia, i.e., stateless “grey” passport owners, have been denied their right to own

firearms (ERR News, 2023d). The decision, namely, “The Weapons Act”, was a preventive measure related to limiting any risk toward security and public order and referred to some 3,000 weapons. Another important decision was to remove all the monuments and memorials related to the Russian occupation and both world wars, which glorified totalitarian regimes. There were suspicions that it could cause significant opposition or even riots, akin to those which were witnessed in 2007, but the impact was very limited, and an example of the very modest protest was the removal of a T-34 located next to Narva, despite initial expectations that it could trigger the aforementioned strong opposition. Such monuments were places for Russian-speaking people to celebrate, for instance, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May every year for their “Immortal Regiment” parades. Historically, the end of the Second World War has been seen by Estonians not as the beginning of a second period of independence, but as the beginning of the Soviet occupation. Therefore, removing those symbols of the past was a symbolic representation of the final break from the heritage of Russian control and influence.

The decisions presented above have caused waves of cyber-attacks by Russian-based hacker groups against national entities and attempts to influence critical infrastructure. July 2023 was significant in this respect, because it was when the Estonian Information System Authority (RIA) recorded 269 “impactful” incidents along with finding 529 malware-infected devices (ERR News, 2023e).

Estonia formulates its legal regulations based on not only exclusion, however, and a good example is the Council of Rectors’ appeal to permit Russian nationals already enrolled in Estonian higher education institutions to “conclude their current studies here and then continue with further education in Estonia or to stay and find employment” (ERR News, 2023f). The appeal concerns 342 students exploring their options to stay in Estonia and to start the future in a democratic environment. This, along with investments in the Narva area, are important efforts to engage “and incorporate its Russophone population lest they become a security risk” (Galeotti, 2019). Although, among Russian-speaking populations, the perception of Russia is evolving, it will take at least two generations to observe a significant mental shift. Younger generations are more assimilated within Estonia, compared to older generations living with memories of the past, as those harbour some sentiment about the Soviet period, and remember Russia as a superpower, albeit in a previous global system. The question is, however, whether enough has been done to integrate the Russian-speaking population after three decades of sovereignty. The problem relates to both sides, though, because for Estonians, Russian-

speaking people were not an indigenous part of society and were one of the outcomes of Soviet occupation with all the negative memories of the past. Those Russians decided to stay in their own circles while living with such memories, while being influenced by aggressive Russian propaganda (notably increasing in strength after the year 2000), and while lacking any willingness or need to learn the Estonian language. The older generation thinks in different terms as they were educated the Soviet way, and is extremely unlikely that they will change their perception of the world.

Russian intelligence services have been active in all the Baltic countries, and they will continue to use information operations to preserve influence over target groups (Struberga, 2022, p. 127; Lawrence, 2023, pp. 24–25). The failure of those services, seen in the past as very powerful and effective, when attempting to impact Ukrainian societies is promising, as is an assessment of its military power, but should not be underestimated. Estonia strongly supports Ukrainian war refugees, counting some 100,000 having been welcomed on its territory, but this aspect must be closely observed as the refugee flow has created a window of opportunity for Russian intelligence services to send operatives and deploy agents of influence to destabilise internal security and create pro-Russian/anti-Ukrainian attitudes. It is underpinned by the Compatriots Foundation to forward the Kremlin's influence-operations using Kremlin-controlled media, right-wing extremists, social media, and agents of influence. This could conceivably be part of a long-term plan to activate those agents at some future point; a moment determined by Russian intentions and the desire to destabilise or weaken the cohesion of societies or degrade the nation's position internationally. The Russian aggression was an impetus to make decisions specifically with regards to the social domain, including actions to better integrate the Russian-speaking part of Estonian society. Those actions are valid, even though they do encounter some resistance, but Estonia will reap the rewards only in the years to come; the positive outcomes of such actions do not appear quickly, and Tallinn is fully aware that it is a critical requirement, as the Kremlin will not give up its propaganda drives to divide society and poison the minds of targeted groups.

### **Implications Within the Military Field**

An advantage to be noted is that there is growing support among the Estonian population to contribute to defence efforts. Such a trend is the outcome of the Russian use of the military instrument of power to forward Russia's national interests and the assessment that it is endangering not

only the sovereignty of Ukraine, but also other nations, especially small ones. Estonia's support is important, as is the acceptance of increasing military spending and the necessity to contribute personally to security. A December 2022 survey presented positive answers from reservists, their relatives, and employers with regard to military exercises. The latter are hugely significant; the importance of employers who allow their staff to participate in military matters and who understand how important their staff members' roles are cannot be understated. The survey presented an important link between reservists, units combat readiness, and the value of military training, and was highlighted by the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces; he was glad that "reservists know the value of the experience gained in conscript service and understand the importance of their role in national defence" (Baltic News Service, 2023). A supporting factor is the presence of Estonian Defence Force (EDF) experts, in uniform, during news programmes, who explain military situations. It involves not only experts from the intelligence department participating in those programmes, but also representatives from academia such as the Estonian Military Academy along with retired officers who possess specific areas of expertise (ERR News, 2023g). It not only provides specific, current intel, but also simultaneously promotes and depicts defence-related entities as security providers, which is rooted in the Estonian spirit of protecting sovereignty.

Estonia supports Kyiv through its military assistance, weapon supplies, and with the training and education of military personnel and is complemented by the provision of humanitarian support, including food, medical supplies, and, for example, power generators, public transport buses, etc. This is a significant effort, because, according to the Institute of World Economy, Estonia allocates 0.85% of its GDP for this purpose. For comparison purposes, Poland allocates just 0.49% of its GDP, yet is one of the leading nations supporting Ukraine as regards GDP (Money.pl, 2022). Estonia has opted for additional military support worth 113 million euros, including howitzers (155 and 122 mm), military vehicles, Javelin anti-tank missiles, personal protective equipment (helmets, etc.), and food rations (Interia.pl, 2023). As a result, all of Estonia's (ongoing) support has reached a total of 370 million euros and counting, which exceeds 1% of its GDP. Other important donations have been in the forms of field hospitals and medical supplies as well as the treating of wounded soldiers and civilians. The transfer of equipment, which, in many categories, is of Soviet origin, allows their immediate use on the battlefield without requiring additional training. At the same time, donations of military equipment result in investments in the

purchase of weapon systems, thereby increasing the Ukrainian forces' combat potential. The advantage is that many Soviet systems are being replaced by systems that meet NATO standards, thereby increasing compatibility within the Alliance, and enabling better cooperation in training, repair, and logistics. Major procurement categories are e.g., short-range air defence systems, anti-tank missiles, long-range self-propelled artillery systems (HIMARS, K-9 Thunder) along with required ammunition, spare parts, etc. However, those donations bring about an urgent need to train reservists familiar with previous, already-donated armaments. There are bilateral projects, too; Latvia and Estonia are considering a joint purchase of medium-range air defence systems. In addition, Latvia plans to purchase Naval Strike Missile (NSM) anti-ship missiles to defend not only its own coastline, but also part of Estonia's coastline. Estonia's decision to purchase "Blue Spear" anti-ship missiles will allow integration with the Finnish MTO 85M (Saab RBS 15), permitting a complete blockade of the Gulf of Finland to the Russian fleet (MilitaryLeak, 2022). Riga and Tallinn have also decided to jointly purchase the German IRIS-T air defence system to integrate the air defence of those countries. Combined defence planning, the exchange of data and information, and the joint procurement of combat systems will enable better interaction on the battlefield through understanding and mutual support at all levels of war (Baltic Defense Review, 2023). It will be underpinned by cross-boundary cooperation which, although limited for now, is critical because of limited operational space, and not to mention the lack of strategic depth. In the event of war, state borders are not barriers, and the conduct of combined joint operations among both armed forces and territorial defence forces is required, along with the development of legal regulations that will enable such activities.

Understanding the role of operational space, time factors, and the support of NATO partners, Estonia has contributed to economic/military projects such as "Rail Baltica" and "Via Baltica" to "accelerate the deployment of heavy equipment" (Papatolios, 2021). Merging them with "Via Carpathia" will increase cargo capacity. Other projects include the "Military Schengen Area" and the EU PESCO "Military Mobility". Exercises such as "Defender Europe" emphasise the importance of the sea and land lines of communication, supporting the deterrence effect in the logistical dimension. This indicates the ability to move and deploy equipment in the short term, which is crucial for the Baltic states (Veebel et al., 2020, p. 375), and is also important for Estonia as, geographically, the nation is at the end of supply chain. This results in investment in *Host Nation Support* and the preparation of infrastructure for the reception

and deployment of NATO forces. Therefore, Estonia is expanding the Nursipal training ground to train national and international units.

The “National Defence Development Plan 2017–2026” emphasises comprehensive defence requirements involving all the national entities that are contributing to specific spheres of security (Ministry of Defence, 2017). Conscription is an important element of the armed forces’ support and enables the continuation of the close bond between society and the military, which ensures a continuing supply of trained reservists. Basic conscription service lasts eight months, with eleven months in selected specialities requiring the handling of certain categories of equipment.

Estonia’s defence budget is about 2.9% of its GDP, which is more than one billion euros for the first time; 30% of which is dedicated to the purchase of combat systems (Parliament of Estonia, 2022). The Armed Forces number some 4,000 soldiers and civilian personnel; rapid response units comprise about 37,000 individuals. Importantly, more than 40,000 reservists have been trained, and the total mobilisation potential is 230,000 people, an estimated 20% of the population (Website. Estonian Defence Forces, 2023). An important security provider is the volunteer Estonian Defence League (EDL, Est. Kaitseliit), subordinated during the war to the Estonian Chief of Defence. It counts 18,000 members and, with affiliated entities, has some 29,000 volunteers (Website. Estonian Defence League, 2023). EDL members are permitted to have weapons at home once they have completed their training and undergone medical check-ups, and membership requires participation in military exercises with regular armed forces. EDL units are certified with “snap mobilisations”, which are currently at a 79% call-up rate (Eesti Uuringukeskus OÜ, 2023, p. 4). In 2022, as many as 9264 reservists took part in training courses across Estonia (Kaitseministeerium, 2023). The six-week long training exercise “Ussisõnad” (Eng. Parseltongue; 28 August – 08 October) with as many as 10,000 reservists will enhance EDL capabilities to support the EDF’s professional units. The limitation is the voluntary nature of territorial defence, resulting in limited capabilities and readiness at the basic level (Szymański, 2015), as they are not comparable to professional soldiers. Estonia promotes the idea of hosting brigade-sized forces within the “enhanced Forward Presence” (eFP); consequently, the development of appropriate infrastructure for permanent deployment is being carried out. Other initiatives are the Baltic Combined Joint Staff Element (B-CJSE) (Latvian Public Broadcasting, 2015), the creation of a division-level headquarters, and the continuity of NATO Air Policing. The challenge is the manning of divisional structures with trained staff and to prepare capabilities at the division level. Subordinating existing

national brigades and closer links with eFP units is only the first step, but overall decisions to expand command and control within the NATO Force Structure are important.

It should be noted that the constitution states: “It is the duty of each citizen of Estonia to be loyal to the constitutional order and to defend the independence of Estonia. In the absence of other means of opposing a forcible attempt to change the constitutional order of Estonia, every citizen of Estonia has the right to resist such an attempt of his or her own initiative” (Riigikogu, 1922 with amendments from 2015, Art. 54). Support for the armed forces and the permanent presence of NATO units has significantly increased thanks to proper and timely decisions promoting security matters. A 2023 survey has provided some promising data; the Defence Forces and the Defence League are among the country’s most trusted institutions, reaching a 77% level of trust. Among the overall risks listed in the same survey, the country’s residents recognised the use of nuclear weapons (selected by 76% of the respondents), Russia’s war in Ukraine (72%), and Russia’s attempts to re-establish its power in neighbouring states (68%). The latter is also recognised as a threat of foreign intervention into Estonian politics and economy (61%) after fake news (84%) and cyberattacks (83%) (Eesti Uuringukeskus OÜ, 2023, pp. 14, 21, 24). An important decision concerns the organisation of a national defence education programme to increase the society’s readiness to protect Estonia’s independence and to promote a patriotic spirit (Baltic News Service, 2021). The EDF and EDL shape the patriotic spirit and forge mindsets of resilience in order to generate resistance in the event of an occupation (Śliwa, Allers, 2022). There are, however, challenges, such as the emigration of people of military age, along with poor physical and mental preparation in some people as regards disciplined service. In this regard, patriotic and military education is one of the important decisions which face Estonia and its future. This type of education’s aim is to foster people’s willingness to participate in defence activities, which has risen to 64% in 2023 “with 80% of male citizens of Estonian ethnicity and 53% of male citizens of other ethnicities showing willing” (Eesti Uuringukeskus OÜ, 2023, pp. 32–34). This trend reminds us that, in 1939, Estonia accepted the Soviet ultimatum without any fight, which cannot be allowed to happen again.

## Conclusions

Historical memory is of great importance and is passed down from generation to generation. Several waves of Russification, deportations, and



ruthless treatment by Russia (as is now happening in Ukraine) left Estonia with little illusions about the quality and way of life under Russian rule; past deportations carried out by the Soviets have had a lasting effect on virtually all Estonian families. The Russian Federation, as the successor of the Soviet Union, has not changed the perception of history among society and is seen as a real and present danger principally because it is obvious that Russia will not give up its imperialistic ambitions being an integral part of its strategy and “great power” mentality. It caused decisions to be made with regard to investing Estonia’s defence potential nationally, thereby contributing to security regionally within NATO and the EU. Next, Estonia has been very active on the international fora; being a small state, it has decided to build military capabilities alone and in concert with its Allies. Some decisive steps toward pro-Russian activists have also been made; many Soviet monuments have been removed, and the Russian language is to be limited in the years to come along with prohibiting Russian propaganda’s impact on societal groups. At the same time, some processes are providing opportunities such as the aforementioned options for Russian students to complete their education, free Estonian language education for everyone, and resilience-related decisions which include education in schools. These are important steps in supporting and raising the nation’s visibility as a reliable partner and dedicated nation, although for Russian propaganda it has been recognised as a threat. Such a decisive and continuing approach shows that decisions are followed by real actions toward building comprehensive, whole-of-government capacities supported by society, which also aims at integrating the Russian-speaking population. The current decisions will enhance national resilience and the ability to defend, but it is clear that this can happen only as part of the NATO structure.

Membership in NATO and the EU is crucial for Estonia’s security and is not only linked to the military domain, as Estonia is constantly attacked using non-military means and tools (Praks, 2019, pp. 151–152; Veebel, et al., 2021). NATO provides military capabilities that are supported by the national armed forces and territorial defence units (NATO Article 3 provisions). The European Union also provides stability in other areas. The only danger is that crucial NATO troops might not be deployed in time to Estonia which, even supported by the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) units, still has limited capabilities to conduct any longer fight an overwhelming Russian offensive were it to come. Therefore, Estonia, as host nation, has decided to allocate funds to create the appropriate conditions and infrastructure to enable an increase in the eFP’s size and capabilities with the aim of establishing a permanent presence. An important factor is the constant enhancement of public support for investment in national

security supported by information policy and pro-defence education, which is already bringing measurably positive effects. As a result, the armed forces' capabilities are growing, especially when one includes the procurement of modern combat platforms fully compatible with other NATO nations' equipment, which is crucial for the effective conduct of combined joint operations. Many decisions are based on the experience of the war in Ukraine, e.g., investment into territorial defence forces and recognising their importance in supporting operational units. Joint regional defence planning with other Baltic nations, although still developing, will enhance defence capabilities while facilitating deployment and interaction with NATO forces. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Estonia has limited means to fight alone, even with eFP troops factored into the equation. National security is supported by all civilian actors based on a developed legal framework allowing for the training of troops in peacetime along with the use of all necessary instruments of power in times of crisis and war. Estonia assumes that Russia will not change its current aggressive foreign policy through its using of armed forces as its main tool. It highlights an urgency to increase combat potential and prepare societies as deterrence factors which have to be credible enough to convince Russia of Estonia's ability to defend itself. In addition to decisions taken at the national level, another factor is the belief that the security of the state must be interlinked regionally due to a common history, geography, and geopolitical challenges, necessitating direct cooperation combining capabilities in all spheres of statehood. In this context, the statements of the leaders of the Baltic states are important. Kaja Kallas underlined it stating, "We know our neighbours", which requires "sharing knowledge about Russia's actions in order to take action against both direct and indirect attempts to exert influence" (NDR/Tagesschau.de, 2023).

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