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From Wales to The Hague: Forecast of Defence Expenditure of the Bucharest Nine Countries until 2035

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Abstract

This paper analyses projections of defence expenditure in the Bucharest Nine (B9) countries in the context of NATO's new commitment from the 2025 Hague Summit. Based on historical data and national declarations, we model two scenarios for development through 2035: the baseline trend and national ambition. The results show significant polarization within B9 countries. While the countries of the northeastern flank (Poland, the Baltic states) are accelerating toward 5.5% of GDP, the countries of Central Europe and the Balkans are converging more toward the baseline level of 3.5%. The study identifies the fiscal limits of this transformation and structural differences in the implementation of the new alliance goals.).

KEY WORDS: *NATO; defence expenditure; Bucharest Nine; defence forecasting; fiscal sustainability; burden sharing; security policy; Hague Summit.*

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1. Introduction

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the security situation in Europe has transformed from the post-Cold War assumption that interstate conflicts would diminish to a renewed focus on territorial defence, deterrence, and high readiness. In response, the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014 marked a turning point in burden-sharing within the Alliance: Allies jointly committed to halting the decline in defence expenditure, striving to meet the goal of spending at least 2% of GDP on defence within ten years, and dedicating at least 20% of defence expenditure to major equipment (including related research and development) to support modernization and future capability development [1], [2]. These commitments were politically significant because they sought to translate strategic reassurances—particularly for allies on NATO's eastern flank—into measurable fiscal efforts, while preserving the principle that national defence budgets remain sovereign decisions [1], [3].

However, the decade following the Wales summit showed that fiscal trajectories were neither linear nor uniform. While some allies maintained high levels of effort throughout the period, many others approached the 2% target only gradually, and crucially, several did so just before the 2024 deadline, leading to a visible surge in spending toward the end of the decade rather than a smooth convergence [2]. This trend accelerated after 2022, as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine heightened the urgency of conventional and hybrid threats and triggered extensive procurement, ammunition replenishment, and force expansion programs across Europe. By 2024, a record number of NATO members had reached the 2% threshold, underscoring both the political significance of the Wales commitment and the extent to which compliance with this commitment only materialized in the late phase of the cycle [4]. Concurrently, the political debate has moved beyond the targets set in Wales. Recognizing that collective defence depends not only on armed forces but also on resilience and supporting infrastructure, NATO leaders adopted a new 5% commitment at the 2025 Hague Summit, to be met by 2035, structured as a minimum of 3.5% of GDP for core defence expenditure (in accordance with NATO's current definition of defence expenditure—core expenditure) plus an additional 1.5% of GDP for defence- and security-related investments, such as infrastructure adaptation and cyber resilience [5].

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Since Russia's invasion of Crimea, increasing defence capabilities has been a trend across NATO; due to its aggression in Ukraine, Russia is generally perceived by member states as one of the greatest threats. This reality heightens the importance of NATO's eastern flank, specifically the group known as the Bucharest Nine (B9), which includes Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. This group was formally established in November 2015 in Bucharest on the initiative of Romania and Poland. In this paper, I therefore focus on the B9 countries and expand upon my previous articles [6], [7], which focused on defence expenditure in the B9 countries, by providing a forecast of defence expenditure trends through 2035.

This paper examines the evolution of defence expenditure of selected NATO members from 2014 to 2024 (2025e) and provides a forecast through 2035. Based on NATO expenditure data and GDP assumptions derived from international macroeconomic forecasts; we model two scenarios: an optimistic one (credible convergence toward the 3.5% commitment by 2035) and a realistic one (continuation of the growth dynamics that countries have followed over the past decade). The aim is to assess long-term fiscal feasibility and the implied modernization path under alternative political and economic constraints.

2. Method of Investigation

The forecast of potential trends in defence expenditure is based on the official historical dataset "*NATO Information on Defence Expenditures*," specifically the time series of data from 2014 to 2025 [8]. This dataset ensures consistency in reporting standards across member states and enables comparisons between individual countries. The geographical scope of the study is intentionally limited to the Bucharest Nine (B9) format, due to the shared geopolitical exposure and specific security dynamics of the Alliance's eastern flank. The selection of this sample is justified by two key factors. First, it is the immediate geographical proximity to the Russian Federation and to the zone of ongoing conflict in Ukraine, which places these countries in the position of so-called frontline states. Second, all these states are united by their historical experience with the hegemony of the former Soviet Union and the presence of Warsaw Pact troops on their territory. This shared historical memory shapes their strategic culture and makes them disproportionately more sensitive to changes in the European security architecture than Western NATO members. As a result of this perception of an existential threat, the B9 members act within the Alliance as the main driving force and pioneers of a structural transition to a "high-tension peacetime" fiscal model for defence expenditure.

A critical challenge in forecasting future spending is the evolving definition of the expenditure target itself. While the 2014 Wales Pledge focused on a monolithic target of 2% of GDP, the current new comprehensive target from The Hague stands at 5% of GDP. Conceptually, this new figure consists of 3.5% for core defence (military) expenditure and an additional 1.5% allocated to broader security resilience (e.g., critical infrastructure protection, cyber defence, and civil preparedness) [5]. However, a methodological limitation arises from the fact that current NATO reporting standards (STANAG definitions) and historical datasets do not explicitly separate resilience expenditure from traditional military budget items, nor do they yet provide a standardized metric for the 1.5% component. As a result, it is often unclear whether national statements on future spending refer to the strict military budget or to the comprehensive security budget. To maintain methodological rigor and continuity with historical data, this study strictly applies NATO's standard definition of defence expenditure (military budget). Therefore, the projections presented here primarily track the trajectory of the military component, which serves as the basis for the 3.5% baseline target.

For the purposes of this study, two distinct projection scenarios were defined:

- The Baseline Trend Scenario, which represents a trajectory of defence expenditure based on historical growth patterns (2014–2025), anchored at the 2025 spending level.
- The National Ambition Scenario reflects the explicit policy goals and strategic commitments declared by individual member states and models a linear convergence toward these goals.

For the Baseline Trend Scenario, standard linear regression based on data from 2014–2025 was deemed inappropriate due to a structural break in defence expenditure observed primarily in 2024/2025. Standard regression would underestimate future spending by reverting to the historical average. Instead, we used a shifted linear extrapolation method. This approach applies the historical growth trend (slope coefficient β) derived from the 2014–2025 period but anchors the projection at the actual expenditure level in 2025 (s_{2025}), thereby ensuring that the recent achievement of the 2% target serves as the basis for future growth.

$$s_t = s_{2025} + \beta \times (t - 2025) \tag{1}$$

In the case of the Baltic states and Poland, the established ceiling (High-Tension Peacetime) is applied, which is derived from three factors:

- NATO historical data – The 5.5% limit is empirically supported by historical spending patterns of NATO member states during the Cold War. As noted by Sandler and Hartley (1999) and historical SIPRI data, major European powers such as the United Kingdom maintained defence expenditure between 4.5% and 5.5% during periods of heightened tension without transitioning to a command economy [9].

- Structural limits of market economies – Israel serves as a contemporary example of a "high-tension in peacetime" economy. Long-term analyses suggest that defence expenditure fluctuating between 5% and 6% represents a sustainable equilibrium for a technologically advanced market economy facing persistent security threats. [10].
- Demarcation from a war economy – The 5.5% threshold distinguishes a state of high alert from a full-scale war economy. Given that current Russian defence spending is estimated at 6% to 7.5% of GDP during periods of active military operations, a peacetime projection for NATO allies exceeding this level would be conceptually flawed [11].

In the case of the National Ambition Scenario, we use government statements or declarations that specify the future achievement of a certain milestone in the implementation of the defence budget. Therefore, if a country has declared national goals (National Ambition Scenario), we do not use historical extrapolation, but rather a linear trajectory toward that goal. We also use information on the proposed budget for 2026, but in the context of historical trends, it is difficult to predict whether a given country will reach the required level of defence expenditure, or what level will be recognized in NATO reporting. In cases where a given country does not explicitly declare earlier fulfilment, we select the target level for 2035 (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Romania, and Slovakia). For the Baltic states and Poland, the threshold is used, which thus serves as the target level.

For the period up to the target year ($t \leq t_{target}$):

$$s_t = s_{2025} + \frac{s_{target} + s_{2025}}{t_{target} - 2025} \times (t - 2025) \tag{2}$$

For the period after the goal has been achieved ($t > t_{target}$):

$$s_t = s_{target} \tag{3}$$

3. Case studies projection of defence expenditure in B9 countries in context of Hague summit

Although the B9 countries share a common geographical area in the eastern flank, they are former Warsaw Pact states and perceive Russian threats in a similar way; projections of their spending trajectories following the Hague Summit (2025) reveal a significant divergence in the pace and scope of implementation of the new commitment. Based on the modelled data (see the following charts), two structurally distinct groups can be identified within the B9 countries:

- "accelerators" (Poland and the Baltic states), whose National Ambition scenarios aim for rapid saturation at 5.50% of GDP,
- and "pragmatic modernizers" (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria), whose ambitions are primarily aimed at gradually reaching the basic core threshold of 3.50% over a longer time horizon.

This heterogeneity is fundamentally reflected in the relationship between the Baseline Trend and National Ambition scenarios. While for the Frontline States there is minimal deviation or rapid convergence of both scenarios toward maximum values—which indicates a high degree of political and social consensus on the militarization of the economy— for states in the central and southern parts of the B9, we often see a widening gap between inertial trends and declared ambitions. This indicates that achieving the Hague targets in these countries will not be the result of an automatic trend but will require additional and politically costly fiscal interventions beyond current practices.

The following case studies therefore examine in detail the specific situation of each B9 member. The analysis for each country combines a qualitative assessment of the policy response to the new commitment (including its legislative anchoring) with a quantitative projection of expenditure through 2035 to verify the feasibility of reaching the set milestones (the baseline target of 3.5% or the ambitious threshold of 5.5%), in the context of national budgetary constraints and strategic priorities.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria's official stance on the commitment (2025) has been consistently supportive in available government communications. Following the summit, Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov publicly confirmed that Bulgaria accepts the commitment, including the 3.5% + 1.5% structure, and simultaneously announced the preparation of a national plan (investment framework) for defence investments. In terms of strategic and planning frameworks, public sources indicate that Bulgaria had already been working on a national trajectory to achieve the Alliance's 2% of GDP target by 2024. However, following The Hague 2025, the Prime Minister explicitly announced the intention to draft a new National Defence Plan, thereby de facto signalling the need to update the document hierarchy toward the new 5% target. From a practical standpoint, this is a key indicator: it is not merely a political declaration at the summit, but a transition to national planning in line with the Alliance's requirement for annual plans and a credible path [12], [13].

According to the government's post-summit communication, the deadline for fulfilling the commitment primarily refers to the Alliance's 2035 horizon, but at the same time, the Ministry of Defence has indicated a more ambitious interim timeline. Defence Minister Atanas Zaprjanov stated the goal of reaching 3.5% of GDP by 2032, as this is the minimum level required for the successful modernization and implementation of investment projects within the military. This statement can be interpreted as an effort to meet the core part of the commitment before 2035, while the additional 1.5% is framed in communications more broadly as a category of investments in resilience, infrastructure, and industry, typically with a significant inter-ministerial dimension [14].

In addition to the planning aspect, the fiscal dimension of implementing increased defence expenditure is also significant for Bulgaria. In April 2025, the Prime Minister declared the intention to seek to have defence expenditure excluded or otherwise accounted for in the calculation of the budget deficit, in the context of meeting fiscal criteria and efforts to adopt the euro. In terms of the feasibility of increasing spending—and thus the ability to approach the trajectory toward 3.5% and eventually 5%, this serves as an enabler that could significantly influence the pace of fulfilling the commitment in the future, particularly in a situation where rapid increases in defence budgets create pressure on deficit rules. [15].

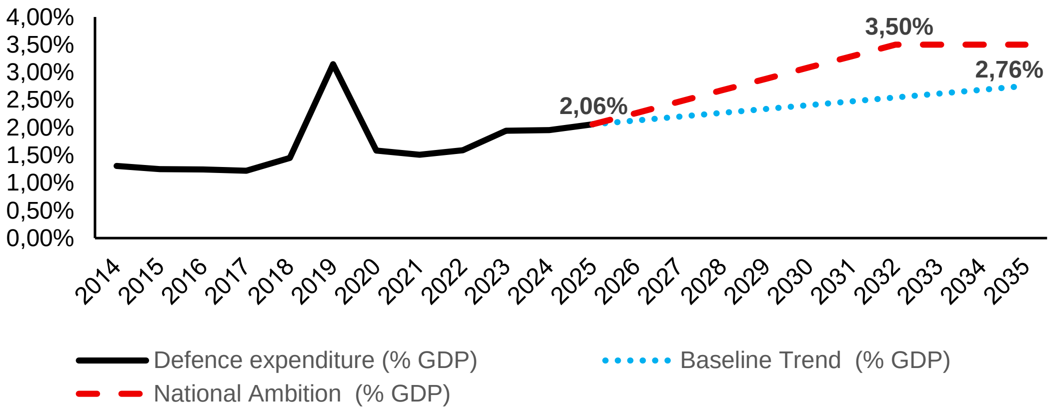

Fig. 1. Development and prediction of defence expenditure in Bulgaria; source of data [5].

Fig. 1 shows historical analysis of defence expenditure from 2014 to 2023 reveals significant volatility, with the share of GDP ranging from a low of 1.22% (in 2017) to a sharp spike of 3.14% in 2019. After consolidation and exceeding the 2% threshold in 2025 (2.06%), the long-term projection (2026–2035) branches into two scenarios. While the "Baseline Trend" assumes linear, more moderate growth toward a final value of 2.76% in 2035, the "National Ambition" scenario models a significantly more dynamic acceleration. This ambitious model anticipates reaching the target level of 3.50% of GDP as early as 2031 and maintaining it thereafter, which, compared to the baseline trend, implies a substantially higher allocation of resources to defence in the coming decade.

Czech Republic

During Petr Fiala's administration, the Czech Republic has endorsed this new commitment and has explicitly communicated this position through its defence and foreign affairs ministries. Following the summit, the Ministry of Defence stated that NATO member states had committed to increasing their defence budgets to 3.5% of GDP and, at the same time, to spending an additional 1.5% of GDP on related expenditure by 2035 at the latest [16]. However, in terms of the national budget trajectory, the Czech Republic had already approved its own interim target prior to The Hague 2025. On March 5, 2025, the government decided on a gradual increase in defence expenditure of at least 0.2% of GDP annually so that the Czech Republic would reach at least 3% of GDP by 2030. The Ministry of Defence subsequently linked this logic directly to the Hague commitment, whereby 3.5% is to come primarily from the MoD budget (core expenditure according to the Alliance's definition), while the approved increase to 3% in 2030 is presented as a step toward meeting the 3.5% target by 2035; the 1.5% category is intended to cover broader related expenditure across the state (resilience, infrastructure, cybersecurity, stockpiles, industry, etc.) [17], [18].

This commitment has not yet been incorporated into strategic and policy documents, and given that the previous commitment from Wales (2014)—the minimum threshold of 2% of GDP—did not receive legislative backing until 2023 (Act No. 177/2023 Coll., on Defence Financing), it is clear that the legislative anchoring of the Hague commitment has a long way to go. While the government and the Ministry of Defence reflect the new commitment in their statements, strategic documents focused on defence—such as the Defence Strategy of the Czech Republic (2023), the Long-Term Defence Outlook (2019), or the Concept for the Development of the Czech Army (2023)—have not yet been amended. An indicator of the gradual incorporation of changes into these documents is that, in the summer of 2025, in connection with the Report on the State of Defence, the Ministry of Defence explicitly mentions the new capability requirements and the expenditure framework from The Hague (3.5% + 1.5%) as factors increasing the demands on defence capabilities and investment [19].

A key aspect of the Czech case is the political volatility following the 2025 parliamentary elections and its impact on the interpretive framing of the commitment. Even before the summit, in his role as opposition leader, Andrej Babiš publicly described the 5% target as unacceptable. Following the elections, when Babiš became prime minister and the government's Policy Statement was adopted (January 5, 2026), there has been no clear declaration yet regarding the fulfilment of the new commitment to NATO. The document emphasizes an audit of acquisitions, improved management, and, in particular, the intention to reassess and draft a new, realistic, and fiscally sustainable "*Concept for the Development of the Czech Armed Forces 2035*", which is intended to set priorities and define how to fulfil international NATO commitments based on national security needs, but without explicitly confirming the specific figure of 5% or the fixed deadline of 2035 at the national level [20].

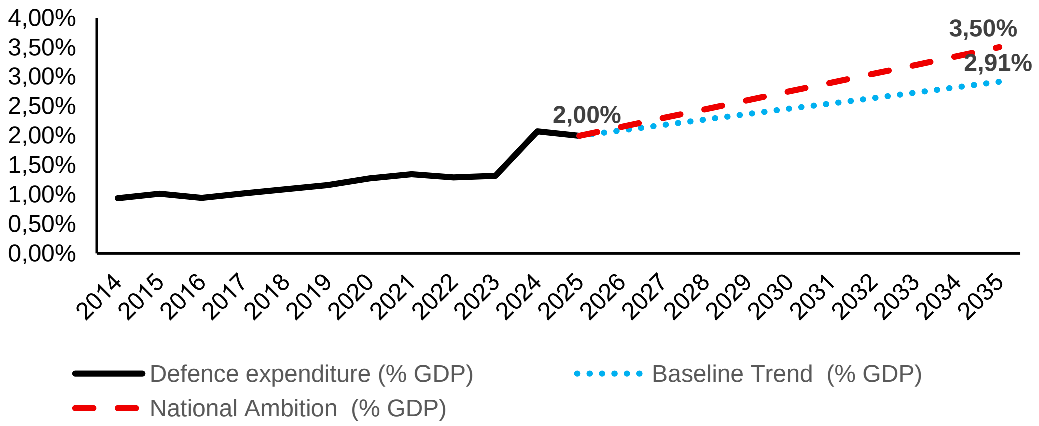

Fig. 2. Development and prediction of defence expenditure in Czech Republic; source of data [5].

As shown in the graph (Fig. 2), an analysis of historical data (2014–2023) indicates that defence expenditure has long remained below the recommended level, ranging from 0.94% (in 2014 and 2016) to a peak of 1.35% in 2021. A major structural shift occurs in 2024, when spending jumped to 2.08% of GDP, followed by a slight correction to 2.00% in 2025. For the period 2026–2035, the forecast defines two distinct trajectories. While the "Baseline Trend" scenario anticipates a gradual linear increase from 2.09% to a final 2.91% in 2035, the "National Ambition" scenario assumes a significantly more dynamic acceleration. This model aims to reach the 3.00% threshold as early as 2031 and subsequently grow to 3.50% by 2035. The difference between the two scenarios at the end of the period under review thus amounts to a significant 0.59% of GDP, reflecting differing levels of political will and resource allocation for the modernization of the armed forces.

Estonia

Estonia not only supported the new commitment but also framed it as a goal it intends to achieve well before 2035. In a government report released on the very day of the summit, Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal described the agreement as a historic decision. He also noted that Estonia's spending is already very close to the target and that next year Estonia will increase its net defence expenditure to more than 5% of GDP, which signals an exceptionally ambitious interpretation, particularly regarding the core component [21]. In terms of strategic and budgetary documents, Estonia's implementation is more visible than that of many other allies, as the new targets are reflected in fiscal planning documents for 2026 and beyond. In September 2025, when approving the state budget for 2026, the government stated that "at least 5% of GDP" would be allocated to national defence in 2026 in accordance with NATO criteria, and simultaneously listed key capabilities that are prioritized, such as air and missile defence, drones, and others [22].

Within the EU, this approach is supported by the submitted Draft Budgetary Plan of Estonia 2026, which explicitly states that defence expenditure will reach at least 5% of GDP annually starting in 2026 and uses a figure of 5.1% of GDP for 2026 in its tables [23]. The document further describes the use of flexibility provisions (escape clauses) to rapidly increase defence expenditure. The May 2025 statement from the Estonian Ministry of Defence is also important for indicating the longer-term trajectory: Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur stated that Estonia is committed to spending approximately 5.4% of GDP annually on defence in the years 2026–2029. This declaration reinforces the interpretation that Estonia does not view 2035 as the planned target date, but rather as the Alliance's absolute deadline, while national planning aims to reach and maintain levels around 5% as early as 2026 [24].

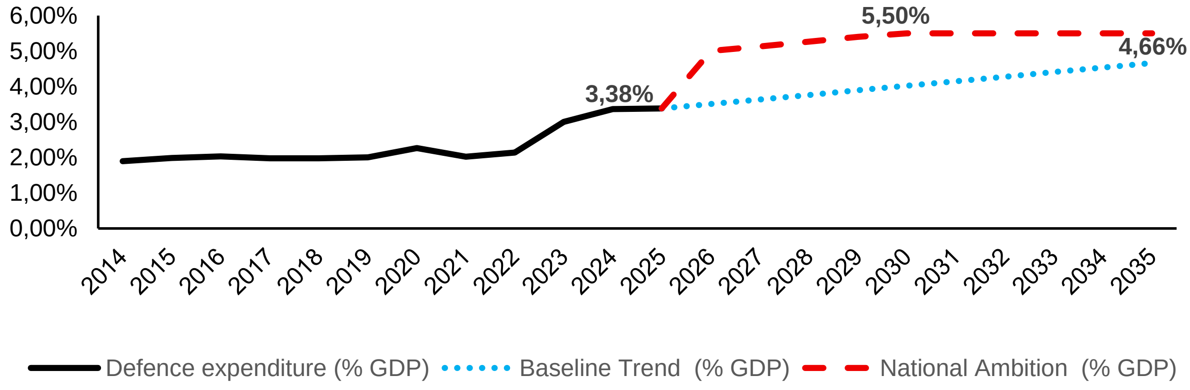

Fig. 3. Development and prediction of defence expenditure in Estonia; source of data [5].

The trend in Estonia's defence expenditure (Figure 3) for the period 2014–2025 shows a high degree of consistency with NATO standards, with figures hovering close to the 2% threshold since 2014 (1.90% in 2014). The turning point is the 2023–2024 period, when there was an unprecedented acceleration from 2.14% (2022) to 3.00% (2023) and subsequently to 3.37% (2024). The long-term projection (2026–2035) then works with extremely ambitious parameters. The baseline scenario (Baseline Trend) assumes continuous growth from 3.51% to 4.66% in 2035. The "National Ambition" scenario, however, defines an even more aggressive trajectory: it starts at 5.00% (2026) and quickly reaches a saturation level of 5.50% in 2030, at which it subsequently stabilizes until the end of the projection period. This model suggests a transition to a war economy or massive rearmament exceeding normal European standards.

Hungary

Hungary publicly endorses the new framework, but its official communications frame it largely in terms of economic and fiscal conditions. On the day of the summit, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó stated that the allies had committed to spending 5% of GDP in two categories over ten years, and described this as a great opportunity for Hungary, particularly in terms of the defence industry and expected demand in the sector. Immediately following the summit, Defence Minister Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky also emphasized the need for further increases in defence budgets, but explicitly added that, in Hungary's view, it is essential for the EU to relax fiscal rules in order to reach the recommended 5% level. This emphasis on budgetary constraints is an important interpretive marker: Hungary declares its support for the alliance's goal, but at the same time makes it contingent on enablers at the European fiscal level [25], [26].

In terms of strategic documents, as of January 2026, there is more evidence of continuity with the older framework than of a full implementation of the new commitment; the publicly available National Military Strategy of Hungary (Government Resolution 1393/2021) is conceived as a long-term development roadmap for the armed forces through 2030, but it was drafted prior to the Hague Agreement. As for the deadline for fulfilling the commitment, the Alliance's deadline is 2035. Official Hungarian statements from the 2025 summit period tend to use the phrasing "within ten years" and include the condition of fiscal feasibility. An important factor for the outlook in the coming years could be the 2026 parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for April 12, 2026, according to the officially announced date. Reuters also reports that the opposition Tisza party, led by Péter Magyar, is ahead of Fidesz in some polls and is positioning itself as a force that wants to strengthen Hungary's position in the EU and NATO while simultaneously unblocking frozen EU funds [27].

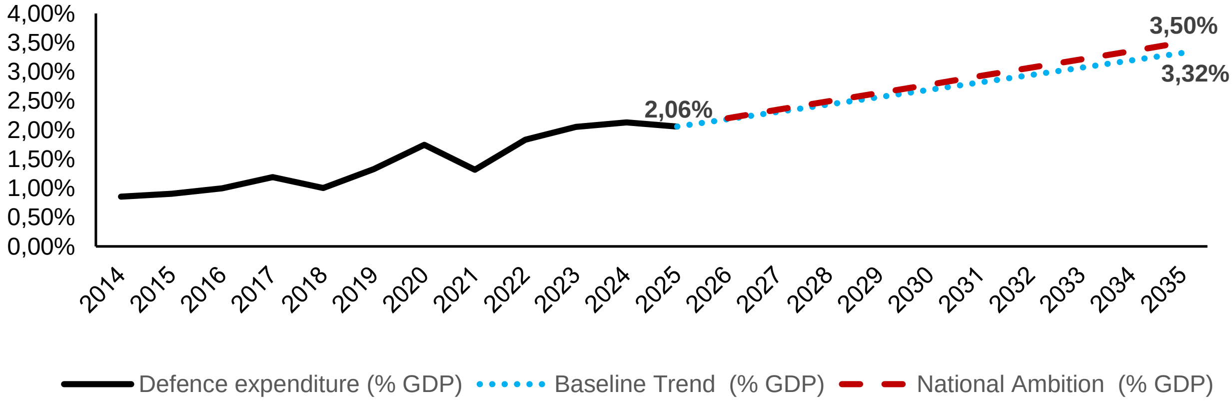

Fig. 4. Development and prediction of defence expenditure in Hungary; source of data [5].

An analysis of Hungary's expenditure trajectory (Fig. 4) for 2014–2025 illustrates a process of intensive modernization and the correction of long-term underinvestment in the defence sector. While spending reached a critically low level of 0.86% of GDP in 2014, dynamic growth over the following decade (interrupted only by fluctuations in 2020–2021) led to the alliance target being exceeded in 2023 (2.05%). The long-term projection (2026–2035) is characterized by a high degree of correlation between the baseline scenario and the national ambition. Both models predict stable linear growth without significant divergence, suggesting that the high pace of capacity expansion is already structurally embedded in the current defence policy framework. The 'Baseline Trend' scenario points toward 3.32% in 2035, while 'National Ambition' targets a slightly higher figure of 3.50%. This convergence suggests that the plan to reach a spending level exceeding 3% of GDP in the coming decade is highly realistic.

Latvia

Latvia is one of the most vocal advocates of the new framework and presented it as one of the main priorities of the Hague summit. Foreign Minister Baiba Braže described the 5% agreement as historic and emphasized that it is a key element in strengthening deterrence and defence within the context of NATO's regional plans; at the same time, Latvian public communications convey the message that Latvia is already close to meeting the new targets thanks to a rapid increase in defence expenditure [28]. President Edgars Rinkēvičs also affirmed this frontline framework ahead of the summit, emphasizing the need for consensus on the 5% target and the urgency of strengthening capabilities in response to the Russian threat [29].

In terms of how these goals are reflected in national documents, it is evident in Latvia that the new objectives have been incorporated most rapidly into the budget and the medium-term trajectory (i.e., the implementation phase), while the underlying strategic concepts are often of an older date. The most concrete basis is provided by the approved budget; on December 4, 2025, the Saeima adopted the defence budget for 2026, with the Ministry of Defence stating that national defence funding in 2026 will reach 4.91% of GDP (according to NATO methodology) and that the targeted shift toward 5% of GDP continues. At the same time, the Ministry of Finance states in official communications a trajectory according to which defence expenditure will reach 4.9% of GDP in 2026 and 5.0% of GDP in 2027. In practice, therefore, Latvia frames the year 2035 more as the Alliance's ultimate deadline rather than as its own planned target date. [30].

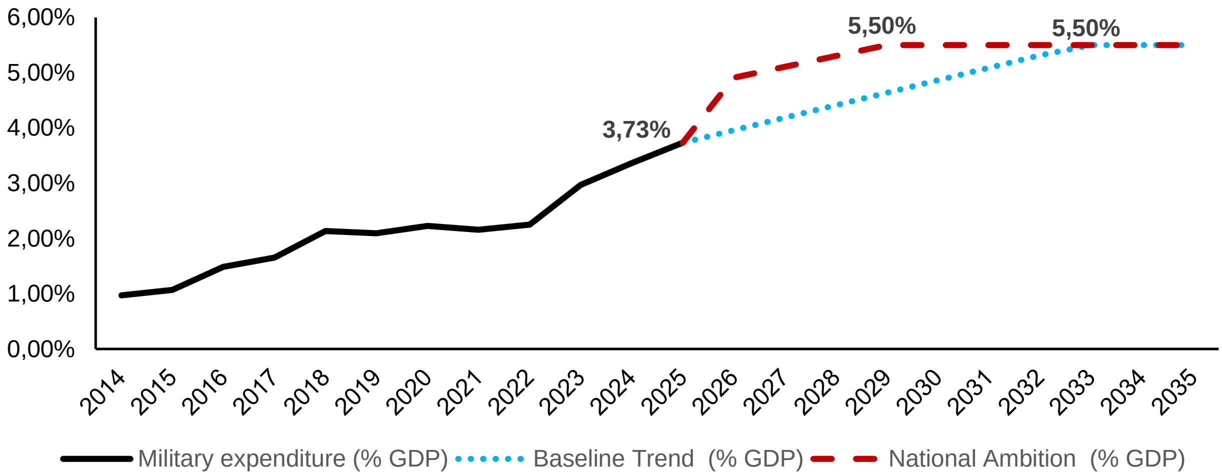

Fig. 5. Development and prediction of defence expenditure in Latvia; source of data [5].

An analysis of Latvia's defence expenditure (Fig. 5) reveals a country that responded to the deteriorating security environment well in advance. While spending remained below 1% in 2014 (0.97%), the alliance's Wales target was already exceeded in 2018 (2.13%). Since then, the trajectory has risen steeply to an estimated 3.73% in 2025. A unique feature of the long-term forecast (2026–2035) is the agreement between both scenarios on a target "saturation level" of 5.50% of GDP. The difference lies solely in the speed at which this maximum is reached. While the National Ambition scenario anticipates aggressive acceleration and reaches 5.50% as early as 2029 (starting at 4.91% in 2026), the Baseline scenario converges toward this value more gradually, reaching it only in 2034. These data indicate a strong political consensus on the militarization of the economy to an extent that has no parallel in the standard European context.

Lithuania

Lithuania is among the countries that support the new framework and view it as a goal they intend to achieve well before 2035. Even before the summit, Prime Minister Gintautas Paluckas described spending 5% of GDP on defence as an essential commitment for every member of the Alliance and stated that Lithuania would allocate nearly 4% of GDP in 2025 and aims to increase spending to 5.25% of GDP next year (i.e., 2026) [31]. In the context of the negotiations leading up to The Hague, Lithuania also advocated that the commitment should not include exceptions for individual allies [32].

In terms of its reflection in strategic documents, a key development for Lithuania occurred at the end of 2025, when the Ministry of Defence announced that the government had approved a draft National Security Strategy that explicitly sets a target of 5–6% of GDP by 2030 (as decided by the State Defence Council) as a long-term financial framework for modernizing capabilities and maintaining support for Ukraine [33]. However, the strongest evidence of implementation comes from budget documents and parliamentary decisions. In December 2025, the Lithuanian Seimas approved a defence budget for 2026 amounting to EUR 4.79 billion, which the Ministry of Defence states as 5.38% of GDP; the Ministry of Finance confirms the same figure in its official report on the adoption of the budget [34].

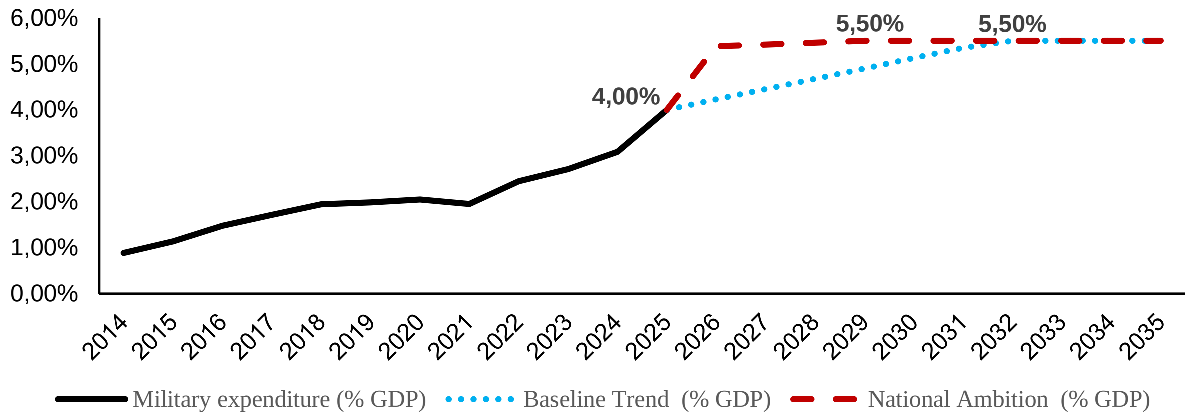

Fig. 6. Development and prediction of defence expenditure in Lithuania; source of data [5].

The trend in Lithuania's defence expenditure (Fig. 6) between 2014 and 2025 can be described as an unprecedented example of rapid militarization; the situation is similar in all the Baltic states, which feel threatened by Russia. While the country spent only 0.88% of GDP on defence in 2014, geopolitical pressure has led to steady growth, peaking at an estimated 4.00% in 2025. The long-term projection (2026–2035) then confirms the determination to maintain this high trajectory. A unique feature is the "National Ambition" scenario, which anticipates a sharp increase to 5.38% as early as the first year of the projection (2026) and subsequent near-immediate saturation at the target value of 5.50% (starting in 2029). Even the more conservative baseline scenario predicts a steep rise to the same 5.50% threshold (reached in 2032). These figures indicate that Lithuanian defence planning has effectively departed from standard alliance benchmarks and is setting its own, significantly higher standards of resilience.

Poland

Poland is unequivocally supportive of the new commitment and, in its government communications, frames it as a confirmation of the long-term direction that Warsaw had been advocating even before the summit. An official report by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the country's participation in the summit explicitly mentions the two-part structure of 3.5% + 1.5% and emphasizes the need for investment in infrastructure, logistics, and industry [35]. At the same time, the Ministry of National Defence described the summit as historic, among other things, precisely because of the agreement on the 5% target, with Polish Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz highlighting that the agreement covers not only modernization and armament but also military mobility and the broader security agenda [36].

In terms of how this is reflected in strategic documents, it is important for Poland that the new Hague parameters are not based primarily on a new strategy, but on a combination of the older security strategy and the legislative and budgetary framework for defence funding. The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland (2020) worked with the trajectory of increases at the time, e.g., the target of 2.5% of GDP by 2024, i.e., before the change after 2022 [37]. A key shift was brought about by *the Homeland Defence Act / Act on the Defence of the Fatherland* (*Ustawa o obronie Ojczyzny-2022*), which establishes a framework for increasing defence expenditure to at least 3% of GDP starting in 2023, enabling extensive modernization funding even outside standard budgetary channels [38]. In practical terms, this means that Poland already had domestic institutional enablers in place for high defence expenditure prior to The Hague 2025, and the Hague commitment thus serves to legitimize rather than initiate the trend of rapid increases in Poland's case. The strongest evidence of the new commitment's implementation, however, lies in budgetary decisions and official outlooks. In the summer of 2025, the Polish government approved a draft budget trajectory for 2026, which includes a level of approximately 4.8% of GDP (depending on the methodology); this figure is also cited in official documents related to the fiscal framework [39].

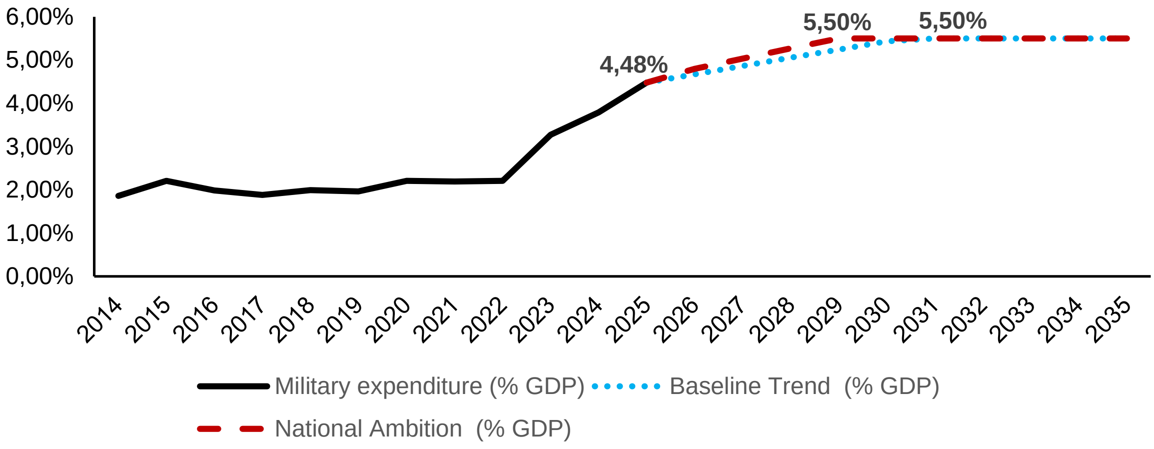

Fig. 7. Development and prediction of defence expenditure in Poland; source of data [5].

An analysis of Polish defence expenditure reveals the country's ambition to become a key security guarantor in Central Europe. Already during the 2014–2022 period (Fig. 7), Poland consistently met or hovered around the NATO standard (an average of approximately 2.05%), which provided a solid foundation for subsequent expansion. A shift in the security environment manifested itself in an immediate and massive acceleration: from 2.21% in 2022, spending jumped to 3.27% (2023), and the forecast for 2025 anticipates a record 4.48% of GDP. The long-term projection (2026–2035) confirms that these high figures are not merely a short-term anomaly, but the new norm. Both scenarios under consideration are heading toward the same target—saturation at 5.50% of GDP. The National Ambition scenario reaches this ceiling as early as 2029, while the Baseline scenario does so just two years later (2031). The fact that even the conservative scenario starts at 4.67% in 2026 indicates that the Polish economy is structurally geared toward maintaining one of the largest armies in NATO.

Romania

Romania supports the new investment framework, but its public messaging also reflects fiscal constraints, particularly the high deficit and efforts to maximize the use of the +1.5% through dual-use projects (infrastructure, mobility, cybersecurity). This framework was already in place before The Hague: interim President Ilie Bolojan (February 2025) publicly discussed the possibility of increasing defence expenditure to roughly 3% of GDP within 1–2 years [40]. Following the elections and the inauguration of President Nicușor Dan (2025), Romania also politically endorsed the two-part concept of 3.5% + 1.5%, including infrastructure and cybersecurity [41].

A key difference compared to some other countries in the region is that Romania has a new target explicitly set out in its national strategic document, the National Defence Strategy for the Period 2025–2030; the document directly specifies a target of 3.5% of GDP for core defence expenditure plus 1.5% of GDP for related expenditure. The broader institutional context also includes the fact that during a visit to Romania in the fall of 2025, NATO (Rutte) publicly emphasized the implementation of the Hague decisions (investments, industrial production) and worked within the framework of 5% by 2035. [42]. The latest reports on the 2026 budget project an optimistic figure of 2.81% of GDP, with a large portion of the funds earmarked for the acquisition of F-35 aircraft and Abram's tanks [43].

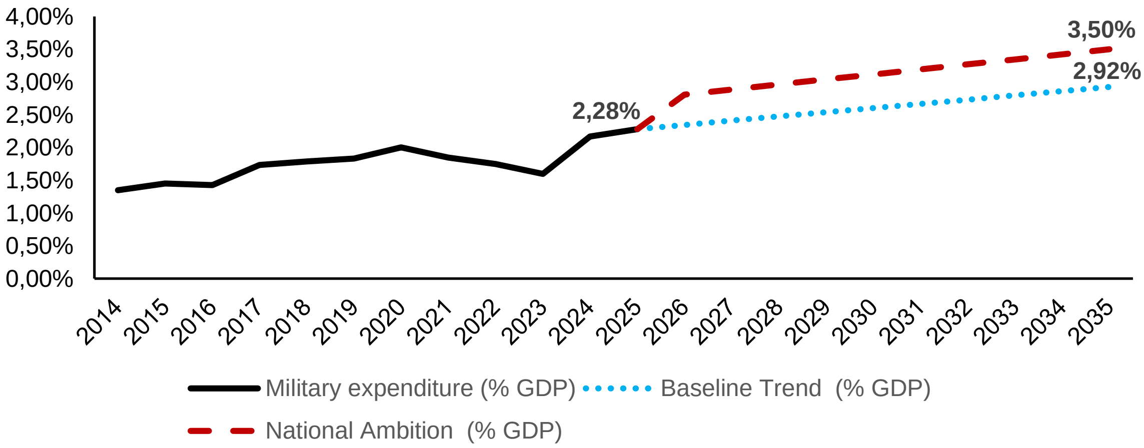

Fig. 8. Development and prediction of defence expenditure in Romania; source of data [5].

The trend in Romania's defence expenditure from 2014 to 2025 (Fig. 8) follows a nonlinear trajectory. Although the country reached 2.00% of GDP in 2020 (acquisition of F-16 aircraft), a temporary downturn occurred in the following period, culminating in a decline to 1.60% in 2023. A turnaround occurs only in 2024 (2.17%) and 2025 (2.28%), when spending stabilizes above the alliance minimum. The long-term forecast (2026–2035) anticipates a gradual increase in capacity, but not the extreme jumps typical of NATO's northeastern flank. The baseline scenario (Baseline Trend) projects a value of 2.92% in 2035. The National Ambition scenario is somewhat more progressive; it aims to exceed the 3% threshold in 2029 and reach a final 3.50% in 2035. The difference between the two scenarios (0.58 percentage points) indicates room for additional strategic investments beyond normal growth.

Slovakia

Slovakia's position within the Alliance is ambivalent and divided between the president's pro-Alliance rhetoric and the cautious and at times confrontational stance of Robert Fico's government: President Peter Pellegrini publicly declared that Slovakia would support an increase to 3.5% + 1.5% of GDP, emphasizing in his statements the need for Alliance unity [44]. Prime Minister Robert Fico, on the other hand, stressed that Slovakia "reserves the sovereign right" to decide on the pace and structure of spending increases; according to him, any growth should be directed primarily toward dual-use projects, not toward a rapid escalation of weapons system purchases. In a broader context, Fico also spoke openly before the summit about how neutrality could benefit Slovakia and criticized the planned demands as absurd, which shows that the government is also using the issue of defence funding to score political points within the framework of national politics [45].

It is evident from Slovakia's publicly available key strategic documents that they contain only a 2% commitment (Wales 2014), as they were drafted prior to 2025. As of January 2026, the incorporation of the new commitment in Slovakia is evident mainly at the political and communication level, rather than as a clearly updated strategic framework with a specific trajectory. Slovakia does not reject the target but insists that it will set the pace itself and that dual-use projects will take priority. Added to this is caution on the part of the ministry; Defence Minister Robert Kaliňák was quoted in the media (2024) as saying that a level of 3% of GDP is difficult to imagine in the given fiscal context, which implies that the government does not anticipate a rapid jump to the core 3.5% [46].

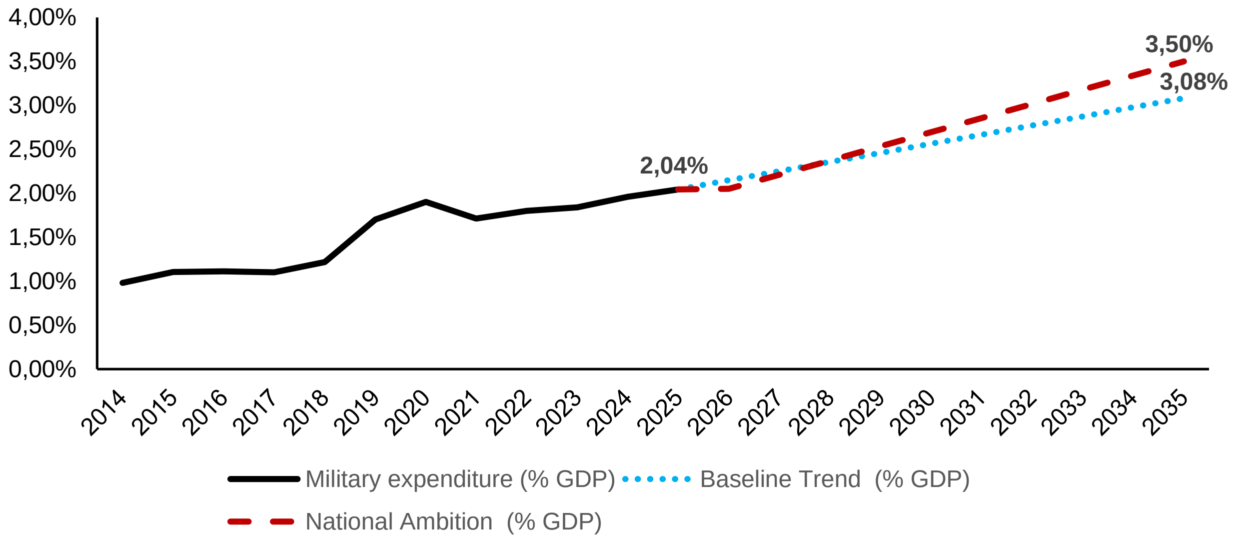

Fig. 9. Development and prediction of defence expenditure in Romania; source of data [5].

The trend in Slovakia's defence expenditure from 2014 to 2025 (Fig. 9) reflects a gradual convergence toward NATO standards. Starting from an underfunded level of 0.98% (2014), the first significant acceleration occurred in 2019 (a jump to 1.70%). Although the following years saw slight stagnation, estimates for 2025 (2.04%) confirm the successful fulfilment of the 2% commitment. The long-term projection (2026–2035) suggests that this trend is not yet over. Both scenarios under consideration anticipate further growth, with their mutual dynamics being an interesting phenomenon. While the baseline trend grows at a steady pace toward a final value of 3.08% in 2035, the National Ambition scenario shows steeper growth toward the end of the period. It aims to reach 3.50% in 2035, which represents a difference of 0.42 percentage points compared to the baseline scenario and signals a commitment to significantly strengthening defence capabilities over the next decade.

4. Discussion

The case studies and aggregated data presented (see Table 1) indicate that although the B9 countries nominally share the common space of NATO's eastern flank and perceive Russia as the primary threat, their actual fiscal and strategic response to the conclusions of the 2025 Hague Summit is highly asymmetrical. An interpretation of the modelled trajectories allows us to identify three key phenomena that will shape the region's defence planning in the coming decade: the historical burden of delayed implementation, the existence of a structural implementation gap, and the political flexibility of a two-pronged objective.

Table 1 Summary of Compliance with Commitments and Forecasts of Defence Expenditures for B9 Countries

State	Achievement of the Walles Commitment (Year)	Baseline Trend		National Ambition	
		Defence Expenditures (% of GDP)	Year of achievement	Defence Expenditures (% of GDP)	Year of achievement
Bulgaria	2019; 2025	2,76	2035	3,5	2032
Czech Republic	2024-2025	2,91	2035	3,5	2035
Estonia	2016; 2019-2025	4,66	2035	5,5	2030
Hungary	2023-2025	3,32	2035	3,5	2035
Latvia	2018-2025	5,5	2033	5,5	2029
Lithuania	2020-2025	5,5	2032	5,5	2029
Poland	2015; 2020-2025	5,5	2031	5,5	2029
Romania	2020; 2024-2025	2,92	2035	3,5	2035
Slovak Republic	2025	3,08	2035	3,5	2035

Source: author, data [5].

The data in Table 1 show that for most countries in the "pragmatic modernizers" group (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania), the original 2% target set in Wales was not consistently met until the very end of the ten-year cycle, i.e., in 2024 or 2025. This historical experience poses a significant risk to the new Hague trajectory. For these countries, the forecast indicates that reaching the 3.50% target under the National Ambition scenario is scheduled precisely for the very latest deadline of 2035. It can therefore be assumed that efforts to meet the Hague limits may follow the historical pattern of "delayed convergence," where the most difficult fiscal decisions are made only at the end of the period under review, rather than through a steady increase that would ensure the timely development of necessary capacities.

A key analytical finding is the comparison of the Baseline Trend and National Ambition scenarios. For the "accelerators" group (Poland and the Baltic states), the gap between momentum and ambition is minimal. In the case of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, even a mere inertial trend leads to saturation at a maximum level of 5.50% of GDP, albeit with a slight delay (2031–2033) compared to the national ambition (2029). This demonstrates that the militarization of these economies is already structurally entrenched.

In contrast, in the countries of Central and Southeastern Europe, the Baseline Trend model does not even reach the baseline threshold of 3.50%. In the case of the Czech Republic (2.91%), Romania (2.92%), or Bulgaria (2.76%), the forecast indicates the existence of a significant implementation gap. For these countries to meet their declared targets, maintaining the current growth trajectory will not suffice. They will be forced to implement politically costly measures to accelerate spending beyond current norms, and this in an environment of pressure to reduce budget deficits, as explicitly articulated by Bulgaria and Hungary, for example.

The breakdown of the Hague target into 3.5% (core military expenditure) and 1.5% (resilience and related investments) emerges, in the context of the modelled data, as a key political tool for maintaining alliance cohesion. An analysis of the rhetoric of countries such as Slovakia and Romania reveals that these nations are deliberately focusing primarily on meeting the 3.5% core target, while planning to achieve the additional 1.5% through investments in infrastructure and dual-use projects.

This approach allows "pragmatic modernizers" to formally meet NATO's 5% requirement without having to face the extreme militarization of purely military budgets, as seen in Poland or the Baltic states, which would encounter resistance from domestic voters or economic performance limits. On the other hand, however, the flexibility of the 1.5% component carries the risk of analytical and accounting opacity, where civilian investments may be reclassified as security expenditures solely for the purpose of meeting formal criteria. The fact that the modelled projections primarily track the military (core) component thus accurately reflects the real fiscal pressure on defence ministries without this accounting "cushion."

5. Conclusions

The study analysed the fiscal trajectories of the B9 countries in the context of the new Alliance target set at the Hague Summit (2025). The modelling results demonstrate that the commitment to spend a total of 5% of GDP on defence and security represents not merely a quantitative shift but signals a fundamental structural transformation of defence planning. As the data analysis confirmed, this transformation faces significant regional divergence. While NATO's northeastern flank is already structurally poised for rapid and deep militarization, the states in the central and southern parts of the B9 will face a serious fiscal dilemma in their efforts to meet even the basic 3.5% target.

The study confirms the hypothesis that although political support for the new commitment is nominally high, for most B9 states, the mere inertia of historical trends will not be sufficient to achieve it. Actual implementation will require additional political interventions that will directly encounter the limits of economic performance, European fiscal rules, and social acceptability in individual countries.

Given the dynamics of the phenomenon under study, there is scope for follow-up research in three key areas. First, it is essential to focus on the methodological decomposition and actual structure of the 1.5% "resilience" component of the commitment to quantify the extent to which states are building new capabilities as opposed to merely shifting civilian expenditures on paper. Second, a critical factor for the feasibility of high national ambitions is the absorption capacity of the defence industry and market. Further research should examine the impacts of a massive increase in demand on inflation in the defence technology sector and the ability of states to manage exponentially higher acquisitions without an increase in inefficiency. Third, a relevant area is the macroeconomic modelling of the impacts of this transformation. It is desirable to verify whether, in countries with the highest spending dynamics, there is a crowding-out effect on investments in the civilian sector, or whether these massive expenditures act as a fiscal stimulus with a positive multiplier effect.

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