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The War in Ukraine: Estonia and European Strategic Autonomy Responding to Russia

Debates following the events of February 2022 in Estonian society have been hot, and despite diverging opinion, a mainstream viewpoint on how to assist Ukraine, how to respond to Russia, what to expect from NATO allies and how to deal with the inner cohesion of Estonia's multi-ethnic and multilingual society has emerged. The least problematic has been the understanding of how to help Ukraine, with Estonia emerging as the leading donating nation *per capita* in 2022. As for the response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, the majority of the Estonian public and elite support significantly more severe sanctions than those that have been enacted. Although there have been voices which have demanded the straightforward intervention of NATO in the conflict, the strongest consensus backs the view that the Western world should not become directly involved but should indirectly support Ukraine to a greater degree than it has managed to thus far. Despite its membership in NATO, the Estonian political and military elite, as well as the Estonian language part of the society remains afraid that Russia will use the same logic and action against the Baltic States. The main question for Estonia is if and when, after the end of the war in Ukraine, Russia might be ready and motivated to challenge NATO in the Baltic states.

Introduction

Estonia, as a small country, next to a big empire, has had traumatic historical experiences with its neighbour, Russia. The historical context consists of more than 300 years of occupation, first by the Tsarist Empire and afterwards by the Soviet Union. Those centuries included numerous deportations of Estonians to Siberia, confiscation of property, forceful collectivization and illegal killings of Estonian civilians by Russian authorities.

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Following the large-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine in 2022, a mainstream viewpoint has emerged in Estonia's media concerning how to assist Ukraine, how to respond to Russia, what to expect from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, and how to deal with the inner cohesion of Estonian multi-ethnic and multilingual society. The least problematic issue has been the understanding of how to help Ukraine, with Estonia emerging as the leading donating nation *per capita* in 2022 (Hankewitz, 2022). Concerning the response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, most of the Estonian public and elite support significantly more severe sanctions than those that have been enacted so far. Although there have been voices that have demanded the straightforward intervention of NATO in the conflict, the strongest consensus supports the view that the West should not get directly involved in the conflict but rather indirectly support Ukraine to a greater degree.

The chapter will first analyse why Russian President Vladimir Putin eventually chose to act in the most violent manner in Ukraine, and whether the West, or Peoples Republic of China (PRC), has other more beneficial or less violent options for Russia and Ukraine on the table. It also explores what else can be expected from President Putin in terms of aggressive ambitions in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and how the European Union (EU) and NATO should respond to Russia's manoeuvres and threats to secure Estonia and the rest of the Baltic States. Finally, the chapter takes an inside look at the opinions and preferences of different social and political groups in Estonia in terms of Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Estonia and Ukraine: Russia's *Ruskiy Mir* and Near Abroad Ambitions

Although Estonia's contemporary perception of Russia is most acutely influenced by Russia's aggressive stance in recent decades, the deeper source of the ill feelings towards Russia relies on Estonia's painful historical experience with Russia, consisting numerous deportations of Estonians to Siberia, illegal killings, confiscation of property and relocation of ethnic Russians to Estonia (Kasekamp, 2017). These feelings are also aggravated by the still unresolved challenges of social segregation between Estonian and Russian-speaking communities and the concomitant security threats emanating from Russia (Taagepera, 2009).

Recent history saw the occupation by the Tsarist Russian Empire of the territory of Estonia for most of the 18th and 19th centuries. Next to earlier and

partial Danish, Swedish and Polish occupations, the longest and territorially most inclusive occupation has been that by the German crusaders starting from the 13th century and lasting to the 18th century, when the Estonian and Latvian territories were taken over by the Russian Empire. Nevertheless, it was the last few centuries of rule by Tsarist Russia, and especially the harsh Soviet occupation which followed (Kasekamp, 2015).

The high-water mark of the painful history of Soviet occupation in Estonia is the massive killings and the deportation of tens of thousands of Estonian citizens to Siberia in the 1940s. This fact has played a key role in creating strong anti-Russian positions both among the political elite and Estonia's citizens. All in all, the Soviet occupation alone caused Estonia to lose more than 20% of its population and around 15% of its territory (Kangilaski et al., 2015).

Although the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 might have been a harbinger of better relations between the two neighbours, relations with the now independent Russia remained complicated. In response to Estonia's refusal to offer unconditional citizenship to local Russian speakers, the first and most pro-democratic Russian government led by President Boris Yeltsin enacted economic sanctions against Estonia early in the 1990s (Veebel, 2022).

During the last two decades, the Estonian elite has been especially concerned about Russia's near abroad and "borderization" policy (Toal & Merabishvili, 2019). Russia appears to rely on a geopolitical reading of its identity in terms of a traditional land-power, which necessitates maintaining physical control and a sphere of influence over its border regions to guarantee safety and security (Karaganov & Suslov, 2019).¹ Over more than a decade, the Kremlin has promoted a narrative of a "Global Anti-Russia" in the form of NATO threatening Russia's independence. The "color revolutions" have been especially troubling to Russian leadership. In this context, gaining control over its neighbour's territory, resources, infrastructure, strategic locations and military capabilities becomes a rational strategy from a geopolitical perspective in order to avoid a situation in which the competing global powers United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) gain control over the countries bordering Russia (Karaganov & Suslov, 2018).

In turn, Russia's policy has provoked strong apprehension among its closest neighbours. Therefore, since the Russian war in Georgia in 2008 and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Estonia has committed to using all of its diplomatic and media capabilities to warn its allies within the EU and NATO about Russia's aggressive ambitions. Despite its membership in the EU and NATO, the Estonian political and military elite has been afraid that Russia will use the same arguments and actions against the Baltic States.

Russkiy Mir Concept and Soviet Nostalgia

To understand Russian neo-imperial ambitions in the post-Soviet space, it is worth becoming versed in the *Russkiy Mir* concept. Within the frame of this concept, the Kremlin attaches to states such as Ukraine and the Baltic States an emotional geostrategic value. The concept of *Russkiy Mir* has been developed as an ideological tool in Russia since the late 1990s (Svarin, 2016). It refers to a mythical ideal of Russian culture and Russian language. Russia has been actively forging narratives along these lines that enable it to consolidate a national spirit. The memories of WWII and the special role that the Soviet Union played in it have been vital in this regard (Persson, 2022). Nevertheless, in recent years, this has gradually evolved into the notion that Russia should protect and support anyone who identifies as Russian, speaks Russian, and considers Russia to be their cultural pivot. What is peculiar is that, by enhancing this idea and targeting the diaspora, the Kremlin expected that these narratives would create conditions for the stronger allegiance of the Russophone population to Russia. At the same time, through its actions, the Kremlin has also attempted to fracture the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual communities of its neighbours (Sazonov et al., 2022).

In the eyes of Russia's political elite, Russia has "privileged interests and status", "unique" and "historically specific" relations with neighbouring countries (Veebel, 2017). This applies also to partly Slavic-populated regions (Berls, 2021). The protection of those who identify themselves as Russians has served as a source of legitimacy for Russian political leaders in recent decades. As the Russian President Vladimir Putin has asserted, "Millions of Russians and Russian-speaking people live in Ukraine and will continue to do so. Russia will always defend their interests using political, diplomatic and legal means" (Prague Post, 2014). The Russian Federation used this justification in 2014 after Russia occupied Crimea. It is likewise possible to quote former Russian Prime Minister and President, Dmitry Medvedev: "Protecting the rights and interests of Russian citizens abroad remains our most important task" (Estonian Public Broadcast, 2016). This logic of justification has been used by the Kremlin ever since the war against Georgia in 2008, when it copied the precedent of Kosovo and started using this for its security purposes. While Moscow has remained thoroughly critical of the intrusion of the West into the sovereignty of Serbia, it can be argued to have mirrored the formal logic of that precedent. Thus, the Kremlin can be seen to have applied lawfare here (Ingimundarson, 2022).

When launching a war against Ukraine in 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin had reason to believe that a significant share of the people

living in Ukraine would support Russia's military invasion or that it would at least help him divide society and create internal tensions and chaos in Ukraine (The Kremlin, 2022), resulting in the autonomy or separation of some regions (Illarionov, 2022). In this way, Putin expected a desire to gain control over Ukraine. As it turned out, this judgement was largely unfounded and in practice Russia had very limited success only in the East and South of Ukraine. Putin was thus unable to mobilise the support of Ukraine's Russian-speaking community and use it to Russia's benefit. There are various reasons for this failure. To some extent, those who supported Russia had already left Ukraine for Russia. Likewise, the Russian-speaking community in Ukraine had no authoritative leader under whose flag Russian-speaking Ukrainians could rally. The attempt to reinstate former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in this role was bound to be unsuccessful. Thus, considering also the failure in occupying Kyiv, it was not possible for the Kremlin to set up an alternative to the current Ukrainian administration.

Russian vs. Estonian: narratives and attitudes

Estonian society exhibits several problems that harm its cohesion. Due to historical reasons, many Estonian speakers still perceive Russian speakers as occupants. The latter are considered people who were sent to Estonia after the Second World War by the Soviet authorities, to replace the Estonians recently deported to Siberia (altogether more than 30,000 people constituting 3% of Estonia's population were deported, although at least 25% of these returned from Siberia after the death of Stalin). During the Soviet period, this created a fear that the Estonian speaking population would be gradually replaced by Russophones. Today, while Russian speakers from around 25% of the Estonian population, they represent about 50% of the population in Tallinn, Estonia's capital, and more than 90% of the populations of Narva and Kohtla-Järve, two cities among the five largest cities in Estonia (Statistics Estonia, 2023).

As a second layer of this problem, there is also a long-term citizenship issue with Russian speakers living permanently in Estonia, who do not have Estonian citizens among their parents or grandparents. Even if people in this group do not have any other form of citizenship, they cannot automatically apply for Estonian citizenship. As a precondition they first have to be successful in passing combined exams on the topics of Estonian language and culture and can only start the application process afterwards. (Estonian Police and Border Guard Board 2023). Altogether there are around 400,000 Russian speakers in Estonia, of whom 100,000 have Estonian (and EU) citizenship, 100,000 have

Russian passports, and 200,000 do not have any citizenship, holding only permanent residency status (The Estonian Cooperation Assembly, 2022).

Differences among the two main language groups in Estonia have many aspects, and important effects, with Estonian speaking and Russian speaking communities in Estonia differing significantly in terms of their attitudes towards the EU, NATO and Russia. A major implication that concerns the security and foreign policy of Estonia is the diverging attitudes toward the international organisations Estonia belongs to as well as toward Russia. Estonian speakers are mostly positive towards NATO and the EU and critical towards Russia, whereas local Russian speakers see the logic of Estonian relations with the EU, NATO and Russia the other way around. For example, according to the 2021 RAIT Faktum & Ariko study, Russia is regarded as an aggressive and hostile actor by 70% of Estonian speakers, a view shared by only 20% of Russian speakers. Interestingly, the opinion of NATO is the opposite, with 80% of Russian speakers seeing NATO as a hostile and aggressive actor, and 75% of Estonians fully supporting NATO membership and its presence in the region (RAIT Faktum & Ariko, 2021).

If the picture described demands action by the government to avoid growing tensions and escalation inside Estonian society, the current and previous governments have acted rather in ignorance of this risk despite the complicated security situation. Russian populated regions are treated very similarly to the rest of Estonia, without the application of additional programs for integration. Russian language media is covered by the Estonian Public Broadcasting Company; however, the Russian language channels covered by state-owned media are not particularly popular among Russian speakers in Estonia, who tend to watch the more entertaining Russian propaganda channels (Estonian State Chancellery, 2022).

In 2022 and 2023, the differences in understanding of Russian actions in Ukraine and expected engagement towards the Baltic states had only grown between Estonian speakers and pro-Kremlin Russian speakers. The main reason for this is the success of Russian propaganda, as well as the removal of several well-known Soviet time war monuments (Brüggemann et al., 2008) by the decision of the Estonian government (Republic of Estonia Government Office, 2023). The biggest tensions appeared in August 2022 around the removal of the T-34 tank monument in Narva (The Guardian, 2022). Altogether at least 200 monuments are demanded to be removed as carrying propaganda value for Russia and pro-Kremlin groups (Republic of Estonia Government Office, 2023).

The picture depicted above is increasingly complicated by the large influx of Ukrainian refugees following Russia's invasion in 2022-2023 as

Ukrainian refugees also use the Russian language for everyday social communication. The number of Ukrainian refugees exceeded 40,000 by August 2022 and reached 70,000 in June 2023 (which is around 6% of Estonian current population). The Ukrainian refugees are not only welcomed as victims of Russia, but also as a valuable boost to the labour force for the ageing Estonian society (Statistics Estonia, 2022). At the same time, nationalist and populist political groups (represented in Estonian Parliament by the EKRE Party) see them as a source of corruption, prostitution, diseases, money laundering and tensions with local Russian speakers (Jakobson & Kasekamp, 2023).

To conclude, there are different views among the language groups in Estonia towards the Russian aggression in Ukraine. First, Estonian speakers support the strongest possible response against Russia, and they are happy that Europe is helping Ukraine and sanctioning Russia. (Estonian Ministry of Interior, 2022). At the same time, Russophones in Estonia mostly support Russia's official claims about the Ukrainian war and are, therefore, not only critical of but even angry towards the Western and Estonian responses. Finally, the Russian speaking non-Russians mostly support Ukraine (as most of them are Ukrainians) and the Western and Estonian support packages to Ukraine, as well as the sanction packages against Russia (Estonian Ministry of Defence, 2022).

Related Rise of Energy Costs and Inflation

In most energy sectors, affordability is the main issue. Even as Estonia itself consumes very little Russian gas, oil and electricity, the absence of these from the European market is raising the prices of other suppliers to new heights, making them, therefore, unaffordable for many social groups. This has an especially strong impact on less well-off groups, such as local Russian speakers in Estonia, whose average income is 25 to 30% lower than the national average (The Estonian Cooperation Assembly, 2022).

As far as electricity is concerned, Estonia produces almost as much electricity as it consumes. Nevertheless, under EU market conditions, deficits and high prices are very present in the Estonian market. This was aggravated by the closure of the Ignalina nuclear plant in Lithuania. More solar and wind energy investments would be of help, but these are currently hindered by bureaucratic rules which do not allow small private producers to join the market quickly enough. Regarding gas, Estonia uses it in a very limited amount. While in the past, the country used to rely on Russian gas, nowadays Estonia is switching to LNG, with a new terminal finalised in Paldiski and a

partnership agreement with Finland to share LNG resources (Estonian Ministry of Economy and Communication, 2022). High prices and unaffordability will thus continue to present big challenges. In turn, oil-based fuels for the future will mostly originate from European markets.

Finally, oil shale is a sector that cannot be ignored within the Estonian economy as a provider of both energy and employment. The industry is relevant for Estonia in economic terms, producing about 5% of the country's GDP and employing approximately 2.5% of the total labour force. It has enormous importance in regional, socio-economic and security-related terms. A recent study (Praxis, 2020) concluded that closing down the oil shale industry in the Ida-Virumaa region could mean that at least 8,000 people will be at risk of poverty. Closing local oil shale mining companies also has a wider negative impact on the tax revenues of local governments in the region, which, in turn, affects the potential for economic growth in this area. What makes the situation particularly complicated is the fact that it is mostly Russian-speaking people who live in the Ida-Virumaa region and who work in the oil shale mining industry there. Losing jobs would mean more social and financial tensions in the region and some Russian speakers turning actively to pro-Kremlin.

Growing energy prices have also caused rapid growth of inflation, reaching 20% in May 2022 on an annual basis and continuing to show double digits in the first half of 2023 (11% in May 2023) (Euro-area statistics, 2023).

Policy Trends in Estonia in 2022-2023

According to the recent studies of the Estonian State Chancellery (Estonian State Chancellery, 2022) and Estonian Ministry of Interior (Estonian Ministry of Interior, 2022), Estonians are sensitive to any Russian interference both in Estonia and in Europe as a whole. Any signs of such activity on behalf of Russia find a lot of attention in traditional media and on social media. Russian interference is often suspected even without actual facts supporting it. By the same token, Estonians see other Europeans as more blind or even naïve. Thus, the latter need to be warned (Veebel, 2022). Based on media statements and author's interviews, many among the Estonian military (Herem, 2022) and political elite consider only the US to be capable of deterring or properly responding to Russia. Nevertheless, collective effort from other NATO member states is considered to potentially have a sufficient effect (Laanet, 2022).

Next to the West, a critical question touches on the role of non-Western third nations such as China, but also Turkey, as *de facto* friendlier nations towards Russia. Their main immediate role is to replace the trade channels

that were cut off or harmed by Western sanctions and the voluntary exit of the Western companies from Russia. The measures by which the rest of the world shares the West's condemnation of Russia are vital. Based on the interviews conducted by the authors of this chapter according to the Estonian elite, global views and third countries' policies will ultimately play a crucial role, and the West should actively try to engage these third countries as allies. The view is that Estonia should engage with everyone who can help defeat Russia. The position of third countries, including China, India, Brazil, Egypt, Vietnam, Bangladesh, etc, are vital as Russia is hoping to reduce the impact of Western sanctions through trade with those states. These states may also help Russia to access technologies sanctioned by Western countries. In Estonia, it is the position and role of China that is debated, sometimes, India too, while the position of other countries is rather neglected. The most complicated questions often concern the positioning of the closest Western allies. Some of these have already started to support Russia. From the Estonian perspective, Italy, Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey have been doubtful partners in the past due to their relations with Russia.

Estonian Donations to Ukraine

Since the beginning of the conflict, Estonians have continued to support Ukraine with both military and humanitarian aid and have also supported the sending of large-scale private aid to Ukraine. Per capita, Estonia has been among the biggest donors of military and other aid to Ukraine, for example in May 2022 Estonia was the leading nation in the world (Hankewitz, 2022). Altogether, by May 2022, a total of €230 million worth of military aid had gone to Ukraine from Estonia, in the form of around 3,000 EUR-pallets and 20 units of machinery. In addition to Javelin anti-tank missiles and 122mm-155mm howitzers, Estonia has sent minesweepers, anti-tank grenade launchers, and guided anti-tank systems, as well as other military and supporting equipment. Estonia has also delivered 4x4 armoured vehicles to Ukraine. By August 2022, the Estonian government had provided Ukraine with a total of €250 million in military aid, including howitzers, anti-tank munitions and weapon systems, grenade launchers, communication equipment, light weapons, tactical gear, medical supplies and food (Rojoef, 2022). However, by the end of 2022, Estonian defence forces had reached their limits of assistance for the Ukrainians, as further help was only possible by sacrificing Estonian own readiness and capabilities.

Next to gunnery and munitions, Estonia has deployed military personnel in support of the UK's initiative to train Ukrainian forces. The country also sent medical supplies and established a field hospital for Ukrainian troops in partnership with Germany.

According to the Estonian Minister of Defence, Hanno Pevkur, the Estonian Defence Forces are especially proficient in training reservists for combat in an intense conventional war against a larger adversary – meaning, precisely for the kind of war that Ukraine is in right now.” Also, “our moral responsibility is to continue supporting Ukraine. They are fighting for our shared values, and if there is anything we can send to Ukrainians, we have to do so.” (Estonian National Broadcasting, 2022). This way, Estonia has donated one-third of its military budget to embattled Ukraine to strengthen its fight against Russia.

In addition, the Estonian government has helped to deliver tens of millions of euros worth of privately collected aid, all of which reached Ukraine. As for humanitarian aid, the Estonian people, government, and private sector have given over €20 million to Ukraine in total (Estonian National Broadcasting, 2023). Even if it is shocking, the outbreak of war in Ukraine has not been surprising for Estonians. Sharing a similar past and thus, an urge to maintain their freedom, the need for help is well received.

Alongside the public sector also non-governmental organisations have been both active and successful with helping Ukraine. Volunteer groups like “Slava Ukrainu” have also bought, donated, and delivered a large number of SUVs and ambulance cars that were requested by the Ukrainians (Estonian Public Broadcasting, 2022a).

Another example of voluntary aid concerns medical equipment. In February, the National Defence Promotion Foundation, with the Estonian Reserve Officers’ Association, started a charity campaign to support the purchasing and sending of medical equipment and supplies to Ukraine to support treatment of the wounded. By mid-May, the donation campaign had successfully raised over €2 million, of which €1 million had already been used to directly provide aid to Ukrainian hospitals. So far, the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has delivered two direct aid shipments to the border of Poland and Ukraine, where the shipments of medical equipment were handed over to Chernihiv and Dnipro chambers of commerce respectively. The Ukrainian chambers then delivered the supplies to their local hospitals and to the front lines (Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2022). In addition, the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry’s (ECCI) campaign has supported the purchase and delivery of 12 fully equipped ambulances to Ukraine. Likewise, it supported crises and psychological assistance for

refugees, especially children. In March, a consignment of essential medicines worth €200,000 was sent to Ukraine including 9,000 medical packages. In addition, the ECCI are currently working to complete an additional 4,500 first aid kits. The campaign supported the establishment of the DocuMental health support program for war victims and has funded the children's mental health support program Triumf Hero development, available free of charge in the Ukrainian language. Together, with the Tallinn Children's Hospital Support Fund, the campaign also supported the purchase of two respirators for the Kyiv Children's Hospital (Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2022).

According to the Kiel Institute for World Economy, per GDP, Estonia has donated far more to Ukraine than any other nation, including the US, the UK, and other larger European economies. In April 2023, it was estimated that Estonia had donated €220 million; considering the country's population, it is the largest donor per capita (Hankewitz, 2022). Along with Estonia's donation, its fellow Baltic state Latvia also donated nearly one-third of its military budget to Kyiv, while Poland donated nearly 13% and Slovakia 11.6%, according to an infographic accompanying a tweet by the Andalou Agency (Donmez, 2022).

Internal Activities: Deterrence and Information

The Russian war against Ukraine has revealed the weaknesses of Estonia's deterrence posture and its defence capabilities. Therefore, activities to rethink Estonia's defence strategy and to upgrade its forces and equipment have already started. Central objectives include doubling the size of the Defence League and procuring mid-range air defence and MLRS rocket launchers. The main acute concern touches on Estonia's ability to simultaneously improve the effect of the NATO collective deterrence posture (by additional deployments and exercises) in the region and at the same time also improve its own national defence capability quickly enough to avoid possible Russian aggression in the upcoming years. The biggest complications have been caused by the budgetary limits, long procurement cycles of weapon systems and the current high demand for weapon systems in the global market. On the positive side, budgetary concerns have been bypassed in 2023, and the coalition has supported extraordinary allocations to the defence forces for reforms and capability building.

NATO's collective deterrence in the Baltics has so far been relying on a model of deterrence by punishment (Freedman, 2021), stationing only so-called trip-wire troops over to be located in the three small states. However, as

the Ukrainian war has demonstrated that Russia may embark on risky, if not irrational, conventional attacks, the need for a permanent stronger presence in the Baltics, amounting to deterrence by denial (Veebel, 2018), has become a new accepted norm.

Before the Russian attack against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, it was considered that a Russian initiated imperial war could expand from Ukraine to Moldova and/ potentially involve Belarus but would not reach NATO territory. However, since the launch of the conflict, this position has changed based on Russia's aggressive rhetoric and conduct. Now it is rather believed that Putin could target NATO territory, even by nuclear assets. Estonian Chief of Defence General Martin Herem, believes that if Russia is not defeated in Ukraine, an attack against the Baltic States will follow in the coming years (Herem, 2023). Accordingly, Estonia is preparing for a possible full-scale conventional conflict with Russia. It is against this backdrop that the current deterrence level is not perceived as sufficient against Russian ambitions. In parallel, Estonia is supporting Ukraine as much as possible, hoping that Russian losses will at least postpone if not prevent Russian military action against the Baltic States.

According to the interviews conducted by the authors the role of the allies is also crucial to achieving effective deterrence by denial. In that regard, there are concerns in Estonia regarding its strategic partners. While the US and the UK are considered to be meeting Estonia's needs and expectations, the same cannot be said for France, Germany, and Italy. Thus, although not directly applicable, a longtime trust in NATO and relative distrust in the EU's defence arrangements have been confirmed by the Estonian elite. At the same time, Baltic cooperation and unity have been working well, and the partnership with Poland has become stronger. Both are also considered vital for Estonia's survival.

To turn to the security and defence policy of Estonia in more detail, major decisions have been taken, new approaches introduced, and investments made. Even while Russian aggression against Ukraine was, in general, expected and foreseen in Estonia, the amplitude of the war and Russian tactics used in Ukraine have initiated changes on a strategic level in terms of the deterrence and assurance posture, as well as redefining benchmarks in terms of fighting capability (firepower, ammunition reserves, etc) and social resilience.

The need to switch from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial has been well received by NATO. At the Madrid summit in 2022, the North Atlantic Council considered the assets and structures needed to prevent Russian aggression in the region and decided upon deploying a division to each Baltic state, including also a division headquarters (North Atlantic Treaty

Organisation, 2022). Estonia has also prioritised additional consultations on allied assistance in case of regional escalation. In terms of individual defence, an immediate need for mid-range air defence capabilities has been recognized, as has improving the readiness and size of the paramilitary National Defence League, increasing its active membership from 10,000 to 20,000. To meet the immediate needs for development, extraordinary budgetary allocations to the Defence Forces of €800 million to €1 billion were approved for new capabilities, building up ammunition reserves, and developing new structures (Estonian Ministry of Defence, 2022).

Views on a future European relationship with Russia differ significantly between ethnic groups and political parties. How the relations with Russia are expected to evolve after the end of the war in Ukraine depends a lot on the outcome of war. The current governing coalition and most Estonian speakers in Estonia would prefer that Russia lose the war in Ukraine and that this, together with sanctions, causes a regime change in the Kremlin. Elderly and Soviet nostalgic people in Estonia imagine that the conflict will end as Russia withdraws to a preferred new borderline and blocks all compensation talks so that nothing much will happen (Estonian Ministry of Interior, 2022). The radical pro-Putin group - mostly represented by Russian speakers in Estonia - follows the narratives of the Russian propaganda and believes that Ukraine is controlled by Nazis and Western anti-Russian states which are planning to attack Russia, and that the only way to stop this process is via the complete occupation, demilitarisation, and denazification of Ukraine. They expect that Russia will successfully reach Kyiv and force a regime change. The West is expected not to respond as it is unable to match Russian conventional superiority and nuclear threats and, after a decade or so, will accept the new status quo.

Conclusion

Among the Estonian political elite, the Russian war against Ukraine was not expected to end before the end of 2023. Estonian predictions on this mostly follow those by US and UK official sources. The main question for Estonia is if and when, after the end of the war in Ukraine, Russia might be ready and motivated to challenge NATO in the Baltic states. If the aggression comes, there is still time to prepare both in terms of national defence capability building and also in strengthening NATO's deterrence efficiency in the region by additional deployments, exercises and commitments. Meanwhile, it is well realised that current defence costs for Estonia are not sustainable in the long term and do not provide sufficiently fast effects when not assisted by other member states

of the alliance.

Defining, how the victory in the Ukrainian conflict would look like, has been a topic to be avoided in Estonian public debates, both by media and politicians. The best possible outcome for Estonia is that the war will cause regime change in Russia and bring more, even partially, democratic forces to power. However, it is hardly expected that Ukraine will be able to liberate all of its territory and obtain war reparation payments from Russia.

Still, the military and economic weakening of Russia might also be sufficient to secure the Baltic states for the upcoming 3 to 5 years. For this, Russia needs to suffer 50% more losses in Ukraine and start to struggle with internal complaints and a loss of public support (Herem, 2023b). The impact of economic sanctions is present, but it is slow, and it started to have economic effects from the end of 2022, while there are no visible effects on the Kremlin's public popularity even in June 2023.

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Notes

1 Russian President Vladimir Putin has also accused the West of provoking Russia politically and economically and of interfering in Russia's internal affairs. The main aim of this narrative is to exploit the existing fears of war and to increase the readiness of France and Germany to make compromises with Russia. See Veebel, Ploom and Sazonov (2021).