



REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA  
MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

# Russia's War in Ukraine: Myths and Lessons

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DISCUSSION PAPER







## ABSTRACT

Following Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Euro-Atlantic community has been unanimously supporting Ukraine's road to victory, but considerably diverging on Russia's long-term threat. Some common narratives that have surfaced during the ongoing war suggest that Russia is conventionally weakened, has strategically failed, and is completely deterred by NATO – thereby, of little serious danger for the Allies. The following paper addresses these misconceptions.

Russia has long-term hostile strategic goals and its imperialistic war has strong support among the Russian society. Russia is in control of the war strategy and has an upper hand for escalation, if necessary. Russia has experienced failure, but merely on a tactical level. As long as Russia can determine the future of Ukraine's territorial integrity, it will be strategically on a winning track. Russia has borne heavy losses in manpower and equipment, but still has significant stocks and means to keep its war machine going. Russia's impudent demands, aggressive behaviour and inclination to miscalculate suggest that NATO's collective defence posture requires a shift unseen in decades.

Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, Russia remains the most dangerous, immediate and long-term threat to the Euro-Atlantic community and rules-based world order. NATO cannot rule out becoming Russia's military target. It is time to face the challenges honestly, take NATO's defence strategy to the next level, and make sure we are truly prepared. NATO's modern forward defence posture requires enhanced early warning; upgraded readiness; resistance and resolve; increased defence investment that is rapidly materialised in capabilities and stocks; and capable and willing people to defend our democracies. The Alliance must make it unmistakably clear to Russia that an attack against NATO would be a dead-end attempt with an intolerably high price tag.

## INTRODUCTION

Europe is at war. Russia's brutal, unprovoked and unjustified aggression against Ukraine has revealed Russia's true nature beyond any doubt. The Euro-Atlantic community is facing a major test of unity, strategic resolve, and ability to adapt. The outcome of this war will define the future of transatlantic security, becoming a benchmark and a leading case globally for decades. If we fail to win this war now, it will most likely repeat elsewhere and demand a much higher price.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is fundamentally changing Euro-Atlantic security. Yet, the direct outcomes and consequences are still blurred by the fog of war. Some voices claim that Russia's threat has subsided entirely, or has at least become a mere shadow of what it used to be. Could NATO breathe a sigh of relief or should it tackle a more substantial to-do list? In the enormous pool of new knowledge and lessons waiting to be learned, which way should NATO swim? This discussion paper intends to break some common myths about this war that could lead us to wrong strategic conclusions and provide a way forward for NATO.

## RUSSIA IS STILL HERE

Most of Russia's attention is currently focused on its ruthless war in Ukraine, but Putin has not lost sight of the bigger objectives. In fact, in Russia's view, success in Ukraine serves as a major stepping stone for reaching further goals.

Russia's long-term strategic aims remain unchanged: to dissolve the rules-based world order. Putin has written and talked about this

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for the past 15 years, and Russia's actions have brutally proved it. Re-establishing spheres of influence in Eastern Europe and recreating buffer zones are the key steps in turning the current international order around for Russia. This is the most important reason why Russian tanks rolled over the Ukrainian border on February 24, 2022, and why similar scenarios have unfolded in Russia's "near-abroad" many times before.

As long as Russia maintains its long-term goals, it will remain the most dangerous threat for Euro-Atlantic security. Unless Russia is utterly defeated in Ukraine, there is no reason to expect its strategic objectives to change. Nonetheless, the current stalemate has given rise to several misinterpretations about Russia's future path.

### Myth 1: Putin's War

The first missiles that targeted Ukraine were quickly followed by widespread condemnation by global leaders and heads of states, as well as hundreds of thousands of protesters on the streets around the world and masses in social media. Many referred to the aggression against Ukraine as Putin's war. Considering the *de facto* autocratic power of the President of Russia, he most likely was the sole decision-maker behind the war plan becoming a reality. Yet, he is not alone.

Putin and his policies enjoy widespread support in Russia, which has only strengthened during the war in Ukraine. Along with the invasion, public approval<sup>1</sup> of Putin's actions among Russia's populace spiked to a 7-year-high in March (83%) and remains so (81% in December 2022) despite the Western sanctions. Same goes for the public assessment of Russia's general direction being the right one, which jumped to 69% – the highest recorded since 1996. The Kremlin unanimously deems the war necessary and just, and the vast majority of the population agrees: 71% supports the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine. This backing has remained intact, regardless of estimates of the war having left more than 100,000 troops dead, wounded or missing, and in spite of the partial mobilisation wave of 300,000 men announced on September 21, 2022. These figures are telling, even when accepting the limitations of public opinion surveys in Russia.

The imperialist mindset is historically rooted in Russia. The Russian empire has taken different forms throughout centuries, but the empire state of mind at the heart of it has remained unchanged. Russia has never been a democratic country and is unlikely to become one. Even after overthrowing previous rulers, the populace has always leaned towards yet another autocratic regime. The window of limited democratisation attempts in the 1990s is remembered as a period of humiliation and chaos in Russia – an unfortunate outcome of the Soviet leaders' weakness and historical injustice that must be righted. The invasion of Ukraine is seen as a long-awaited follow-up to

the imperialistic pride and sense of impunity based on the myths of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945).

Russia's leadership has prepared the society for a large-scale war with the West for the past 20 years. Ever since Putin's rise to power in 2000, a propaganda narrative opposing the West, according to which the West's goal is to destroy Russia, has been systematically developed. The narrative claims that Russia has to defend its natural resources, traditional values and even its entire existence from the morally degenerate West. The confrontation has been deliberately deepened and enforced by parallels between Putin's actions and events of the past, often distorting or falsifying historical facts. One such chapter – Putin openly attacking Ukraine's status as a nation and a legitimate country, denying centuries of historical events along the way – preceded the current invasion of Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>

In order to suppress any possible domestic resistance, the regime has systematically worked to destroy the remnants of opposition and civil society through repressive legislation and extensive use of force. The measures have only grown harsher over time. Heavily state-controlled media, intense propaganda and increasingly limited access to alternative sources of information has made aligning with the prevailing opinion easy. Economically, war preparations have been spurred by oil and gas exports massing up financial reserves. Energy exports also allowed gaining political influence in Europe.

Democratic accountability has no place in the Kremlin's regime, which makes Russia's pain threshold considerably higher. Russia will not back down in seemingly dire situations. Observers saw Putin's announcement of mobilisation as a sign of weakness and desperation. Instead, it should be seen as proof of the strength of Russia's political leadership, its almost religious conviction that it can obtain its goals, and a willingness to sacrifice for them. The Kremlin demonstrated that a political-military loss in Ukraine has a higher risk than public discontent. Whereas the announcement prompted some street protests and around 300,000 men escaping Russia, the scale was insignificant for a country of 145 million people. Moreover, the discontent only appeared along with the risk of personal obligation and after setbacks on the battlefield. The general criticism is more about the military failures and the conduct of war, not its essence.

Furthermore, the war keeps reproducing support for it. Mobilisation brings the war closer to the population and losses contribute to

The general criticism is more about the military failures and the conduct of war, not its essence.

flaring more hatred towards the "other side". Putin presents lost troops as heroes who truly lived and died for a purpose, unlike the tens of thousands dying for nothing in traffic or from alcohol.<sup>3</sup> This genuinely speaks to Russian society. Instead of sparking social unrest, drafting 300,000 men is more likely to increase the number of families who genuinely consider this war 'their war'. Accordingly, should these men fall on the battlefield, it is the Ukrainians along with their Western supporters who are to blame for their deaths, not Putin. Kremlin is right and honourable to stand up to these belligerents, to the evil West.

It is not how Putin sees the world, but how Russia does. Even if Putin were stopped, the next man in line would not be any different, because Russia is not any different.

## **Myth 2: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine is a Strategic Failure**

In the early days of war, Ukraine surprised most of the world with a significantly mightier response to Russia's aggression than anticipated. Russia, on the other hand, failed to meet its own expectations of a "three-day special military operation" and its image as the world's second strongest, invincible armed force collapsed. This combination quickly resulted in triumphal declarations of Russia and its actions having become a strategic failure. However appealing it may sound, it is premature to declare winners and losers.

Over more than ten months of ruthless fighting, Ukraine has achieved remarkable and encouraging success on the front lines. Yet, Russia still occupies 18% of Ukraine – an area almost 2.5 times the size of Estonia, and larger than the individual territories of more than 30 other countries in Europe. Since the Kharkiv counteroffensive in September, Ukraine has managed to liberate some 6,000 square kilometres in the Kherson direction – less than 1% of the territory of Ukraine. Thereafter, positive change on the fronts has remained sparse. With the war's centre of gravity increasingly on critical infrastructure, it raises longer-term concerns about the outcome of the war.

Should Russia manage to gain any territory as a result of this war – either *de iure* at a negotiation



table or *de facto* by freezing the situation in its current state, keeping the occupied areas under its authority for a longer time – it will have essentially moved closer to its goal. The Kremlin will have demonstrated that altering national borders with military force is feasible and the West and its rules-based world order can be weakened. Hence, as long as the territorial integrity of Ukraine has not been fully restored, it is the rules-based order of the West that is facing a strategic failure. It may have come at a higher cost than expected, but Russia is still on track towards its strategic aims. Historically, political concessions are only a fast track to another “special military operation”, possibly against Allied countries. If it works, why stop?

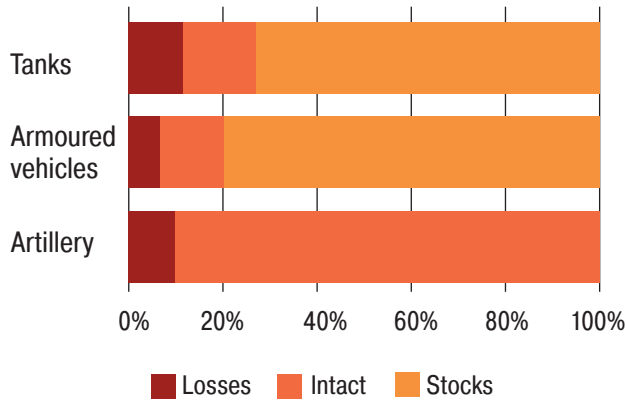
There are numerous examples of how territory fallen under Russia’s control has become extremely difficult to regain – with South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia (2008) and Crimea in Ukraine (2014) being the most recent ones. Frozen conflicts are Russia’s comfort zone and *modus operandi*. From the West’s perspective, reversing territorial gains is incomparably more challenging than reconsidering policies

or easing sanctions. Temporary solutions in terms of territories lost and gained are most likely permanent, while democratic elections may bring completely new strategies and policies. Moreover, Russia is capable of holding technically independent countries in the palm

The worst-case scenario for Russia results in a 5.6% decline of GDP in 2023<sup>6</sup> – under 100 billion USD, corresponding to a mere few weeks’ cost of damages caused to Ukraine.

of its hand. These days, Belarus functions more as Russia’s military training base rather than a sovereign state. Russia’s influence over Georgia has been growing substantially over recent years, demonstrated by the government’s reluctance to join any international sanctions against Russia.

## RUSSIA'S LOSSES VS STOCKS



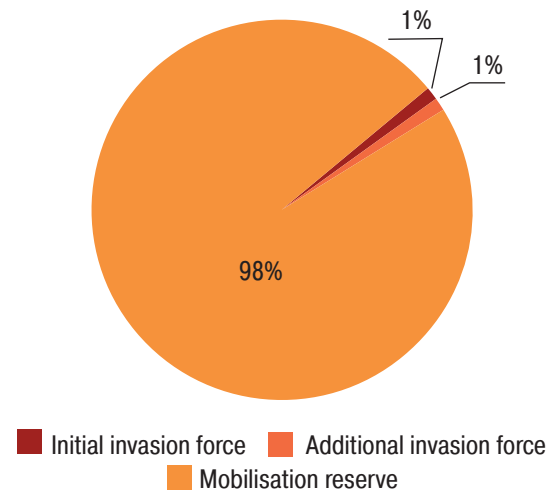
Russia has also successfully created a new costly reality for the West. By destroying Ukraine's economy and civilian infrastructure, Russia has ensured a high price for peace and prosperity. The cost of reconstruction and recovery in Ukraine was estimated to total 349 billion USD – more than 1.6 times the GDP of Ukraine in 2021 – just after the first three months of war.<sup>4</sup> This figure does not include the intense fighting over the summer and autumn, nor the systematic destruction of energy infrastructure since the outset of winter. With the skyrocketing inflation and energy prices to date, the war's cost to global economy is estimated to reach 2.8 trillion USD by the end of 2023.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the worst-case scenario for Russia results in a 5.6% decline of GDP in 2023<sup>6</sup> – under 100 billion USD, corresponding to a mere few weeks' cost of damages caused to Ukraine. Russia has determined that exhausting and demolishing its opponents is a cheaper and

Russia still has friends and silent supporters across the globe.

more attainable goal than achieving equivalent economic well-being.

The sanctions imposed by the EU, UK, U.S. and like-minded countries remain crucial as they continue to weaken Russia's economy. Yet, the influence is far too slow to cause significant changes in the cost of living or relative poverty rates. Making Russia's society second-guess their judgement of the war or force the Kremlin into reconsidering its actions is still out of reach. Furthermore, as the votes at the United Nations General Assembly demonstrate<sup>7</sup>, the Western isolation policy does not enjoy universal support – Russia still has friends and silent supporters across the globe.

## RUSSIA'S MANPOWER



Russia's losses this far, either strategic, military or economic, are not as all-encompassing and ultimate as they may appear. Much of the road to victory for Ukraine and the democratic rules-based world order is still an expensive uphill battle.

### Myth 3: Russia is Militarily and Strategically Weakened – Enough to Eliminate Russia's Threat for Years to Come

As the war stretched out over weeks and months, and figures reflecting Russia's losses on the battlefield continued to grow, a popular opinion of a weak Russia – enough so to disqualify it as a threat all along – started to gain ground. Indeed, we have seen the Russian army suffer significant costs in manpower and military capabilities alike, but these costs matter very little. For Russia, the ends justify the means and the price tag has not been high enough.

Russia has shown that failure in military quality can be substituted with quantity, remaining just as dangerous. Russia's losses in manpower would be unbearable in democratic states today. Meanwhile, an autocracy with roughly 30 million men in mobilisation reserve can write this off as a necessary cost that can be regained rather expeditiously. Russia doubled their invasion force compared to February 2022 with the September mobilisation wave. Nearly a third of the mobilised men were on the front line within five weeks. At least 150,000 Russian troops have received extended training before deployment. Meanwhile, Western training efforts for Ukrainians, although significant and superior in quality, will provide some 10-20% of Russia's capacity.

Russia's storages hold massive amounts of usable Soviet era weapon systems that are not modern, but still capable. Proportionately, Russia has borne most losses in tanks and

armoured vehicles – more or less 40% and 20% respectively of the initial war force. In storage bases, Russia still has nearly 10,000 tanks and 36,000 armoured vehicles. A third of these can likely be reconditioned, adding at least 3000 tanks and 12,000 armoured vehicles to the front line. For scale: Germany has around 250 Leopard-2 battle tanks and Estonia has none. Losses in artillery are a mere 10% of the 5000 combat-ready systems Russia had before the war. Ammunition stocks are at 7 million units, allowing to continue the war with the same intensity at least until mid-2023 – and this estimate is constantly extending due to increasing production rates, which are likely significantly up from the pre-war 1.7 million units per year. Russia still has plenty of precision-guided weapons, particularly cruise missiles and S-300 missiles (used as surface-to-surface missiles to attack land targets) in stock – enough to continue the current average strike intensity for at least a year. Additional production and further procurements from belligerent countries like Iran and North Korea will add to this. Losses of air assets remain below 10% – too little to affect combat capability even according to more demanding standards. It is imprudent to belittle Russia's military might, especially when no NATO European Ally could individually match the warfighting brigades needed to defend against and defeat Russia. The United States' role in NATO remains irreplaceable for Europe's security.

Military capability will undeniably always be the highest priority for Russia. Rebuilding and rearming stands above any other expense. Russia's defence budget for 2023 makes up a third of their entire national budget.<sup>8</sup> In December, Putin personally announced there would be no constraints in financing the army.<sup>9</sup> Russia clearly intends to fulfil its strategic goals through military means and is rearranging its economy accordingly. Their defence industry is picking up the pace, small arms production rates are already on a 40% rise. There is further room for growth, as we recall from WWII and the Cold War.

The West emphasizes the role of international sanctions, particularly in halting Russia's manufacturing capacity over lack of advanced technology, e.g. semiconductors. While the sanctions have and will continue to hinder Russia's military rebuild, the scope remains limited and the priorities unaltered. Russia is actively looking for ways to work around sanctions and will most likely succeed. North Korea and Iran have been under sanctions for decades, yet they are developing nuclear technology, performing ballistic missile tests

and producing an array of high precision weaponry in quantities allowing for substantial exports, including of the kamikaze drones filled with Western technology targeted at Ukrainian cities. There is no reason to think Russia would differ. Russia will buy dual-use goods from Iran, North Korea and China, who see supporting Russia as a useful measure for exhausting the West's political attention and resources. Besides, microchips are only necessary for high-precision weaponry, while unguided munitions are perfectly sufficient for Russia's tactics of terror.

Russia could even restore its military readiness to 23 February 2022 level in the units that pose the biggest threat to the Baltics within a mere few years. This is a tangible task, because not much reconstitution is necessary to gain military superiority in the Baltic region. Russia has already announced increasing military staff by 350,000 PAX, forming new corps and divisions and creating new Leningrad and Moscow military districts in the region.<sup>10</sup>

Arguably, the speed of total military rebuild is a secondary question overall. Russia's massive military force is targeting Ukraine today and Russia has stocks and means to continue for many months. This issue will not go away by waiting for a time when Putin runs out of missiles, and each day in Ukraine is a brutal reminder of that.

#### **Myth 4: NATO's Deterrence of Russia is Complete**

The war in Ukraine has also been surrounded by debates on whether a similar scenario could possibly threaten NATO Allies and whether NATO's deterrence posture remains credible. The general take is that since Russia has not escalated the war against NATO or its Allies, deterrence works. Some statements go further, claiming Russia is even absolutely deterred from ever attacking NATO.

However, the security demands Russia presented to the U.S. and NATO in December 2021 give plenty of reason for continued concern. With some demands involving

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Russia does not need any game-changing decisions from the West or Ukraine as a basis for escalatory retaliation. Russia escalates when it deems the means necessary for its objectives.

Ukraine, the document was predominantly about taking NATO back to 1997. It was a de facto draft proposal for a new security architecture at the expense of the Eastern Allies. The Kremlin has not backed down from these demands and repeats them regularly.

The seriousness of these demands have been reflected in the military domain, as Russia has planned and exercised an attack against NATO Allies for decades<sup>12</sup>. From regular major anti-NATO military exercises<sup>13</sup> such as Zapad to missile attack simulations against Estonia, with a backdrop of routine provocative violations of Allied borders across air and sea. Such an array of operations signals Russia's intent.

NATO Allies tried to deter Russia from starting the invasion of Ukraine with seemingly serious and significant non-military (D-I-E<sup>14</sup>) means. Yet, long talks at the long table in the Kremlin, revealing an unprecedented amount of intelligence information, and threats about the harshest sanctions failed to change Putin's calculations. Russia knew what they were facing and proceeded with their invasion plan anyway. Furthermore, as it turned out – based on false assumptions and with insufficient readiness.

Putin can be considered a rational actor who miscalculated significantly, but the Russian viewpoint of a rational actor also differs from the Western one. Russia's actions over the past year would not qualify as rational behaviour for any Western state. Perceived rationality matters little when accompanied by readiness to pursue hostile goals by military means. Security is not a gambling game of rationality. Any military conflict with Russia would be disastrous, regardless of whether it happens due to Russia's rationale or a miscalculation.

Over the past year and particularly during recent months, the rhetoric of Russia's media and society have been increasingly aggressive. Putin's close circles are growing ever tighter with highly belligerent individuals. Opinions aiming to intensify the war in Ukraine and supporting a more rigorous approach towards

## RUSSIA'S DEMANDS SUMMARIZED<sup>11</sup>

- We insist that serious long-term legal guarantees are provided, which would exclude NATO's further advancement to the east and deployment of weapons on Russia's western borders, both of which are a threat to Russia;
- It is necessary to officially disavow the decision taken at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest about "Ukraine and Georgia becoming NATO members";
- We insist on the adoption of a legally binding agreement regarding the U.S. and other NATO members' non-deployment of strike weapons systems which threaten the territory of the Russian Federation on the territories of adjacent countries, both members and non-members of NATO;
- Withdrawal of regions for operative military exercises to an agreed distance from Russia-NATO contact line;
- Coordination of the closest approach point of combat ships and aircraft to prevent dangerous military activities, primarily in the Baltic and Black Sea regions;
- Renewal of regular dialogue between the defence ministries in the Russia-U.S. and Russia-NATO formats;
- We call on Washington to join Russia's unilateral moratorium on the deployment of surface short- and intermediate-range missiles in Europe, to agree on and introduce measures for the verification of reciprocal obligations.

the West are gaining more traction. Instead of de-escalation, it is far more likely that Russia will become even more hostile and escalatory in the coming years. With Russia's strategic aims unchanged, the risk in NATO's eastern direction is growing – particularly in the Baltics, which Russia considers a weak spot of NATO.

The combination of Russia's strategic objectives, risk tolerance and susceptibility for miscalculation underline how dangerous Russia's threat is for NATO. As long as any gaps of hope or opportunity remain for Russia, Allied deterrence has grounds to improve.



### **Myth 5: Western Actions Leave Russia No Choice But to Escalate**

Ever since supporting Ukraine became a matter of discussion, cautious voices warning of Western action causing further escalation by Russia came along. Initially, any military aid to Ukraine was seen as escalatory enough to potentially make Russia consider an Allied country and, therefore, NATO as an immediate party of the conflict, and turn to targeting NATO instead. Gradually, the support packages grew to include more advanced systems such as HIMARS and NASAMS, followed by decisions to deliver Patriots and modern armoured combat vehicles. While each respective announcement still brings about a fear

of triggering “uncontrollable escalation”, there is very little substantiated evidence for it on the ground. Western military assistance in support of Ukraine has not been escalatory and it would not even have to be. Russia does not need any game-changing decisions from the West or Ukraine as a basis for escalatory retaliation. Russia escalates when it deems the means necessary for its objectives.

Such debates allow Russia not only to control escalation, but also our strategy. Western sensibility grants Russia a deliberate choice of when to push on the alleged “red lines” and nuclear rhetoric. War, however, has demonstrated that the fear of escalation is unnecessarily high.

Scenarios of Russia's tactical losses are systematically amplified with excessive concern for Russia's nuclear escalation. In fact, we have repeatedly witnessed that Russia considers conventional retreat acceptable and that nuclear rhetoric can also be muted with firm strategic messaging. Even the attacks against Russia's strategic capabilities in its strategic depth only triggered a tactical response against Ukraine.

Trickling military aid to Ukraine over a longer time in small quantities, carefully calculating each step and blunting Russia's capabilities creates a false premise for a successful strategy. Instead, the war is merely dragged out with an immense cost, primarily for Ukraine. War of attrition is a very heavy price for perceived strategic stability. Going forward, we must strive to refrain from paralyzing self-deterrence and excessive fear of escalation.

### **No Time to Rest**

In her latest State of the Union speech, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen said that the EU "should have listened to the voices inside our Union – in Poland, in the Baltics, and all across Central and Eastern Europe. They have been telling us for years that Putin would not stop".<sup>15</sup>

The message from these NATO Allies and European Union member states is clear: Russia remains the most dangerous, immediate and long-term threat to NATO. There is no substantial evidence to conclude that Russia would lack the intent, capabilities or ability to create a window of opportunity for launching a military attack against NATO. Russia's aggressiveness and unpredictability do not allow us to dismiss such probability or rule out any scenario, even despite the lack of absolute success in Ukraine. The intent is clearly there and the capabilities are only temporarily weakened. Removing the opportunity is in our hands. NATO must be prepared.

Concurrently, there is an increased risk for complacency, because Russia's military is both weakened and engaged in Ukraine. Russia will undoubtedly need some time to rebuild, but so does NATO. Our ability to swiftly strengthen our defences, train and equip our forces, increase our capabilities and replenish our

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stocks has plenty of room for improvement. We are better today than we were a year ago, but our adversaries will set the true benchmark.

There is also a risk that we only learn from the ongoing war. We will take advantage of the unprecedented insight into Russia's "special military operation" and the fresh-off-the-battlefield knowledge on how Russia fights its wars. But we must not assume that an attack against NATO would be planned and implemented with the same preparation time, command structure, capabilities, order of battle, and mistakes. Russia is drawing its own lessons from Ukraine and will likely do differently and better next time.

The task is straightforward: we must make it unmistakably clear to Russia that an attack against NATO does indeed come with an intolerably high price tag.

### **THE WAY FORWARD FOR NATO**

NATO has demonstrated exceptional unity and determination over the past year when it comes to standing up to Russia's aggressive behaviour and supporting Ukraine. An unprecedented amount of intelligence was shared between Allies and declassified to the public; Russia's demands were justifiably dismissed; and Allied posture in the East was strengthened. The political, economic and military (including lethal) support that the West – across country borders in Europe and party lines in the U.S. – has displayed and delivered to Ukraine has been extraordinary.

NATO took historic decisions and adopted a new landmark Strategic Concept at its Summit in Madrid to prepare for the new security reality. Significant long-term upgrades in Allied posture on the Eastern Front were agreed and, in parts, already implemented, i.e. increased and reinforced contributions by the UK and Germany, additional deployments by the U.S., deepened commitments by France and many more Allies. The voice and purpose of NATO has not been this clear, confident and relevant for decades.

On the other hand, the past year has exposed our hardships alike. We have stretched ourselves by compiling the support packages to Ukraine. The struggles are openly acknowledged, even though the cost seems relatively manageable on paper. Western defence budgets combined are well over a trillion USD, but our collective bilateral military aid to Ukraine makes up a mere 4% of it<sup>16</sup>. The European Union's revolutionary European Peace Facility



military support package to Ukraine amounts to over 3.1 billion EUR<sup>17</sup>, which corresponds to less than 0.02% of the EU's 16 trillion EUR GDP. It is time to honestly assess our capabilities and the true depth of the challenge ahead of us. Above all, we must also do something about it. The best time to start was yesterday, but the next best time is now.

From the Estonian point of view, there are five crucial strategic lessons from the war in Ukraine. By urgently addressing them, we can truly be ready for scenarios we intend to avoid.

### **Deterrence: We Need Much More than We Thought We Would, and We Need it Urgently**

On February 23, Ukraine stood ready to defend the country with dozens of warfighting brigades, a sizable amount of weaponry and ammunition with stocks already boosted by the U.S., the UK, Poland and the Baltics, and eight years of active war experience from Eastern Ukraine. This did not deter Russia.

What is Russia deterred by, then?

Western defence budgets combined are well over a trillion USD, but our collective bilateral military aid to Ukraine makes up a mere 4% of it<sup>16</sup>.

The only way to prevent a Ukrainian scenario on NATO's soil is to make it clear beyond doubt that any aggression against NATO would be a dead-end attempt. The Alliance must be able to credibly deny Russia the option of achieving any military gains against NATO. For geographical and military reasons, the Baltic states remain directly exposed to a potential military threat. Russia, together with Belarus can maintain a significant military superiority with conventional forces in the Baltic region. Further forces can be massed on Russia's western border on short notice.

Currently, there is a critical time-forces-distance gap between the blue and red forces. At its peak in March, Russia controlled 27% of Ukraine – a mass of land about the size of all



three Baltic states combined, or half of Poland or Germany. The Baltics, cornered between Russia, Belarus and the Baltic Sea, lack the strategic depth to fall back anywhere. Territory cannot be exchanged for time.

In Russia's calculation, strategic success could be achieved in the Baltic region without a long war. The Alliance must therefore significantly reduce the risk of miscalculation by Russia of Allies' commitment to, and military capability required for, effective collective defence.

The Madrid Summit decisions to strengthen NATO's deterrence and forward defences were historic. However, Russia assesses our military posture, not our political decisions. Urgent development of our in-place forces, provided by both eastern Allies and forward deployed Allied forces; allocated reinforcements; capabilities; forces at high readiness; advance planning; prepositioned equipment; supplies; ammunition; as well as enhanced command and control remain of critical importance for building up NATO's strength and Forward Defence.

Failure to fulfil this task would amplify Russia's regional military advantage. Estonia's absolute priority is establishing a credible warfighting

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division in cooperation with contributing Allies, and we are on our way to having it combat-ready in 2024. Our security is at stake here. In July, Allied leaders will gather for another Summit in Vilnius. By then, we need tangible progress and results that contribute to making the vision from Madrid a new reality on NATO's soil.

Russia knows well that NATO is a nuclear alliance. It recognizes the ultimate security guarantees and strategic stability that nuclear weapons provide. NATO's nuclear deterrence is well defined politically and backed up by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States, and with the independent strategic nuclear forces of the UK and France that have a deterrent role of their own. Yet, Russia has still attempted

We operate in a new security reality where confrontation is a constant, and our mindset must shift accordingly.

to use nuclear blackmail. This implies that the Western nuclear messaging has to be more on point, the policy better communicated, the political will unquestionable and the capabilities more clearly demonstrated. Russia must be fully convinced that Allies are defended not only by superior conventional capabilities, but also by an active nuclear deterrent.

It is worth reminding that our benchmark is not how credible we ourselves think our deterrence posture is, but how credible Russia finds it. Russia will only refrain from testing NATO in case it is absolutely certain that the objectives it seeks bear an unacceptable cost for the Kremlin. It is our objective to ensure that a severe defeat at an immense price is the only scenario.

### **Early Warning: We Need it as Early as Possible, and We Need to Act Upon it as Early as Possible**

Even with a more credible posture, we need to prepare for the worst. Should our deterrence messaging fail to reach the intended recipient or not shake up its offensive plans, we will need to know – the earlier, the better. In the case of Ukraine, we had a decent sense of what is about to happen months before, which gave us the luxury of time to prepare and react. Can we reasonably expect to have the same advantage in case of an attack against NATO? If so, would our actions be any different? We must make sure that our answer to the first question is a confident “yes” and that we know every following step.

In spite of widely shared intelligence published all across Western media on a daily basis, too many decision-makers and leaders remained reluctant to believe that Russia would attack Ukraine up until the day of the invasion. Veritably, the West fell short of unity before the first Iskanders were already landing in Ukraine. Indications and warnings matter, but only if acted upon. Failure to preventively act on early warning is extremely costly. NATO must treat collective defence as a no fail mission.

We must also prepare for scenarios where early warning is not early enough or includes too



little information to draw the right conclusions at the right time. There are different military strategies that Russia could use to achieve its aims. The aggressor has the convenience of choosing the time, place and methods, thereby creating an advantage of a strategic surprise, as well as the initiative, intent and ability to escalate rapidly.

We operate in a new security reality where confrontation is a constant, and our mindset must shift accordingly. We must improve our intelligence and early warning and normalize scenario-based discussions, war-games and readiness exercises in NATO.



Excluding the U.S., an Ally on average spends 1.64% of its GDP on defence.

60 days before the war, NATO and the United States received demands from Russia, yet the Alliance opted not to take any significant political decisions or military actions until the war. As Russia continued to amass immense quantities of its forces and capabilities around Ukraine, including in Crimea and Belarus, strengthening the overall deterrence posture was predominantly done outside of NATO, in bilateral and other multilateral fora. Still, these initiatives were needed, welcomed and highly appreciated by the Eastern Allies.

NATO's first visible reaction to the deteriorating security situation was increasing readiness through the activation of NATO's defence plans for the Eastern Front after Article 4 consultations on February 24. The readiness culture shift since then has been commendable, but more work remains ahead. When the worst day looms, we must already have a rock solid understanding of:

- what exactly are we going to do (key: detailed defence plans);
- who is going to do it (key: allocated forces that are fully equipped, stocked and at the required readiness levels);
- what are they going to use (key: proper capabilities, modern equipment and adequate ammunition stocks);
- how will everything roll out in practice (key: exercises based on defence plans);
- who is going to run it all (key: clear command structure matching operational reality and capability of conducting combined-arms operations, including at higher command levels [division, corps, multi-corps, army, etc.]).

**Readiness: In Order to Defend Every Inch of NATO Territory, We Need to Be at the First Inch Before the Adversary – Ready for a Conventional and Nuclear War with Russia**

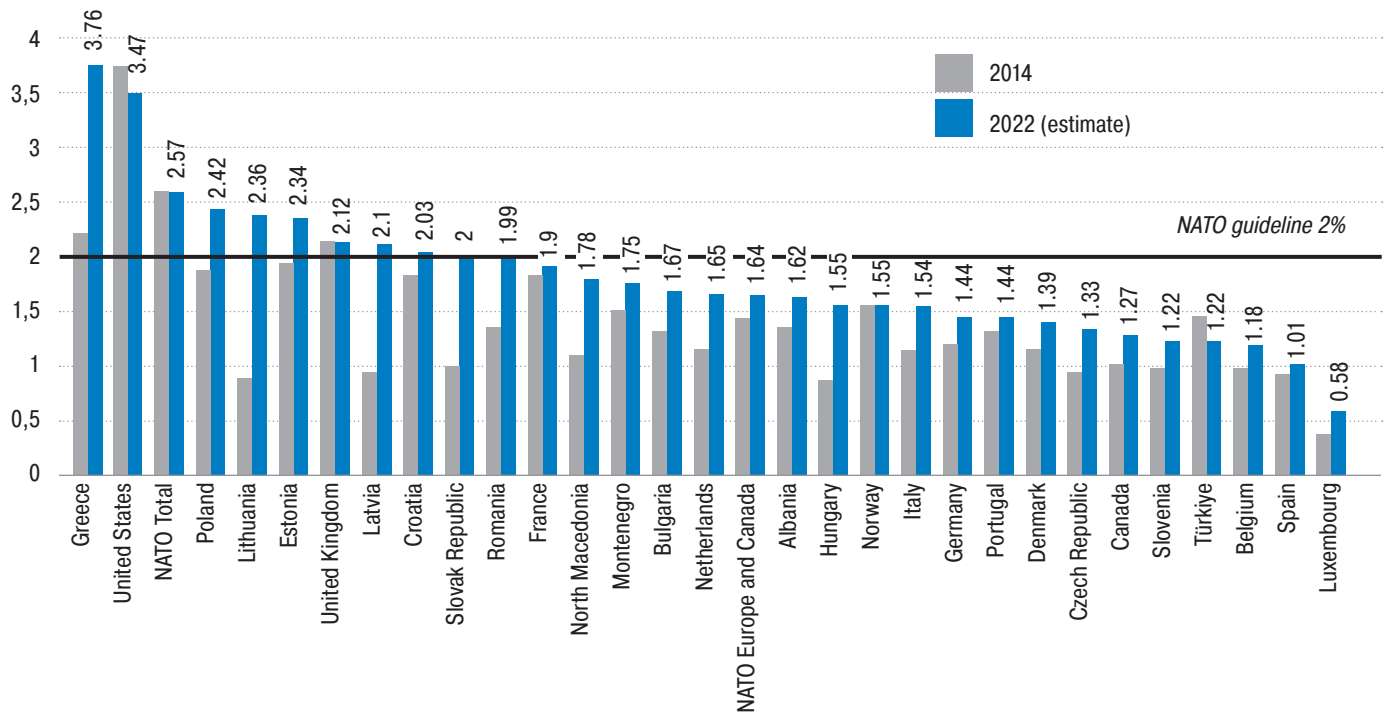
Allied leaders reaffirm their commitment to defend every inch of NATO frequently and with confidence. We need to translate this vow into true readiness in terms of mindset and operational activities. NATO must be fast, resistant and well equipped – and not afraid to put these qualities into practice, should the perspective of a D-Day present itself.

To make it all happen at the required speed, we should favour prepositioning and developing our ability to deploy rapidly during snap exercises. Furthermore, we need to guarantee that our backs are covered in the long-term by:

- an enduring ability of our forces to fight a war of attrition;
- sufficient amounts of prepositioned stocks;
- increased days of supply;
- ample industrial capacity to sustain, regenerate and adapt.

Unfortunately, NATO's decision-making, conceptualizing and planning processes take years, as do the exercises to train for these plans.

## DEFENCE EXPENDITURE AS A SHARE OF GDP (%) (based on 2015 prices and exchange rates)



NATO's previous command structure adaptation has not reached its end goal in 4 years, but a highly demanding change already lies ahead. Achieving a new force posture – from NATO's defence planning targets to actually hitting

We need robust military capabilities to defend the Euro-Atlantic area, which only increased defence investment could provide.

targets in the training areas – will take even longer. For instance, Germany has committed to setting up three combat-ready army divisions. Even with the *zeitenwende* mindset and the goal of becoming the leader of European defence, it will not be achieved before the 2030s<sup>18</sup>.

Regrettably, time is not our only hindrance. Frankly, the current level of funds dedicated to defence will not even realistically allow achieving the required force posture.

### Forces and Capabilities: for More Defence Tomorrow, We Need More Investments Today

At the NATO Wales Summit in 2014, Allies agreed on a Defence Investment Pledge aiming to spend a minimum of 2% of their GDP on

defence, or at least to reach this goal within a decade. Back then, it was an ambitious target as only three Allies – the U.S., the UK and Greece – were spending above the 2% guideline. Eight years later, it remains as ambitious. A mere third of the Allies can meet the pledge. Excluding the U.S., an Ally on average spends 1.64% of its GDP on defence. The progress compared to 2014 is a disturbingly low 0.21% points.<sup>19</sup> Creating meaningful additional value for our defence with these means is an utterly demanding task, with limited chance of success in the current and future security environment. Even more so, when over 50% of some national defence budgets are devoted to personnel costs. Spiralling inflation rates further deepen the challenge.

A lack of resources undermines our security and defence in the long-term. We need robust military capabilities to defend the Euro-Atlantic area, which only increased defence investment could provide. Russia's war on Ukraine has proven that we must develop unity of command, sufficient mass of heavy high-end forces, at high readiness, as well as prioritize air defence and deep fires. We also need significantly scaled up stockpiles for prolonged war, including prepositioning. Over summer, Ukraine fired 6,000 to 7,000 artillery rounds each day<sup>20</sup> to counter Russia's rate of 20,000 to 60,000. The U.S. is currently producing 14,000 155mm shells a month, aiming to increase the figure to 20,000 by the upcoming spring.<sup>21</sup> Should Ukraine's artillery only rely on 155mm, a month of production stock would be long gone in three days. Our



industrial capacity is too shallow to keep up with the security environment or provide confidence for whatever comes next. Yet, this is the only possible result after a longstanding low demand. Allies must increase budgets and enhance procurements today to set us up for success. The defence industry will only then boost its production and supply, not vice versa. A more ambitious defence investment commitment by the Allies is due at the Vilnius Summit.

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many Allies have committed to larger and swifter investments in defence. Some opted to

Our efficiency and speed of turning every dollar and euro into forces, capabilities and lethality determines the true increase of our defence.

speed up reaching the 2% target, some pledged short-term boosts, and others committed to higher levels of spending in the long run. The greatest change has famously been initiated by Germany, where a 100 billion EUR special fund for defence development and commitment was agreed to reach the 2% guideline. The most ambitious target has been set by Poland, aiming to spend 3% already in 2023, which nearly doubles its 2022 defence budget. Estonia will cross the 3% line in 2024. In German budget terms, the latter would be more than the 100 billion euros special fund in a single year. These pledges are an important contribution to strengthening Allied security, but also a clear reminder that better defence is rather a question of political priorities than limited resources.

Allies should aim at maximising the benefit of these funds. Our efficiency and speed of turning every dollar and euro into forces, capabilities and lethality determines the true increase of our defence. Poland sets an exemplary case, having accelerated several of its earlier procurements by years, and signing deals for major equipment such as K2 tanks with deliveries starting within months.<sup>22</sup> The Estonian government allocated additional funds totalling over 1.6 billion EUR for defence in 2022, and a lion's share of it was under contract or delivered before the end of the year. For scale, that is an increase corresponding to 4.7% of the national GDP – about 940 billion USD in U.S. budget terms. The security environment does not wait after bureaucratic procedures – our defence is more urgent.

## People in Defence: We Need the Capable and the Willing to Defend our Democracies

However, capabilities and stocks are only part of the equation. We also need people: capable, well-trained forces and reserves, who could secure Allied success on the battlefield; and resilient societies with strong spirit and will to defend our democratic values. Ukraine has provided clear-cut proof of the essential importance of both of these components.

NATO's current strength relies on nearly 3.5 million of military and civilian personnel.<sup>23</sup> Allies need to ensure that this significant force is fit for purpose. Moreover, our training capacity must ensure the readiness levels and ability to force generate quickly and sizably, if necessary. The aggression against Ukraine has dictated national policy changes concerning state defence and wartime structures. Poland aims to double its 150,000 strong military by 2035.<sup>24</sup> Latvia is planning to re-introduce conscription and Lithuania is raising conscription rates. Estonia is increasing annual conscription by 15% by 2026 and the Defence Forces' wartime structure by close to 30% to 36,500 by 2023. Soon-to-be-Ally Sweden is more than doubling its number of conscripts by 2035.<sup>25</sup>

However, it is not only the military that bears the weight of standing against an adversary. The support and contributions of whole populations are essential to win a war. Allied citizens' support for NATO and collective defence is high: 71% of them consider NATO important to the future security of their country, and 67% agree their country should defend another NATO country if attacked.<sup>26</sup> These figures substantially contribute to the Allied capability of enduring defence in case of need. Estonia has been systematically working on sparking and strengthening the willingness to defend, which is further boosted by the ongoing war.

The risks to our democratic societies will not diminish, regardless of the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine.

According to polls, Estonian people are more willing than ever to defend their country, with 81% considering it necessary to provide armed resistance in the event of an attack.<sup>27</sup> Voluntary defence organizations have been flooded with interest in all three Baltic states alike.

Understanding defence as a collective task is on the rise, and it is important to sustain this trend. While strategic communication supports deterrence messaging, it is as important to inform and educate the domestic audiences about the true cost of war and the relative cost of preparedness for peace. The risks to our democratic societies will not diminish, regardless of the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine.

## CONCLUSION

Irrespective of the outcome and the end date of the war in Ukraine, the new security reality is here to stay. The Euro-Atlantic community must fully acknowledge that there is no turning back to a pre-24 February 2022 world. Russia has articulated its strategic aims plain as a day, and is consistently demonstrating and signalling its readiness to employ brutal force with a heavy price to go after these aims. Russia remains the most dangerous, immediate and long-term threat to NATO.

NATO must be prepared, and the action plan is simple: first, NATO must complete the strategy shift from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial, in order to truly deter Russia. Might in words is not enough – these words should be converted to real and visible changes on the Allied terrain, particularly on the Eastern Front and in the Baltic states. Second, NATO must become a more rapid, more capable, and more resilient Alliance. In war, there are no silver medals for the runner-up. And third, NATO must invest more in defence now. We need to find the resources to start filling our capability gaps, and even more urgently, filling our stocks. It is a costly task, but much cheaper than war.

Estonia is one of the many Allies taking great leaps rapidly towards these aims, because of the firm belief in NATO's Article 3 commitment and task. However, this is a job for all of NATO, as collective security for all is at stake.



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- <sup>19</sup> All data on NATO defence expenditure here and hereafter: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2022)*, 27 June 2022.
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