

WINTER IS COMING: THE BALTICS AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Implications and Policy Recommendations



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Contents

1. Introduction	5
2. A Unified Baltic Region	5
3. Estonia	9
3.1 Defence and Security	9
3.2 Economic and Social Implications	10
3.3 Political Implications	11
4. Latvia	12
4.1 Defence and Security	12
4.2 Economic and Social Implications	14
4.3 Political Implications	15
5. Lithuania	15
5.1 Defence and Security	15
5.2 Economic and Social Implications	17
5.3 Political Implications	18
6. Going Forward	19



Figure 1. Polish, Ukrainian and Baltic women. Illustration by Anna Hladkovska.

1. Introduction

Like the House of Stark in *Game of Thrones* representing the Wardens of the North, the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—are playing a crucial role in protecting the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) north-eastern flank. For a long time, Baltic states have been warning their NATO allies that winter is coming. Now, winter is here, not only in the literal sense, but also metaphorically. Economically, the Baltic states are in for a rough ride, which will negatively impact government budgets, and by implication, defence and security, with possible repercussions also for Ukraine.

Although the Baltic states have been on the frontlines of Russian aggression for a long time, the situation could get worse. How the three Baltic states will respond to the winter, both internally and in relation to Ukraine, and how much they are supported by their other NATO allies, will determine whether they will emerge stronger or weaker from the Russia-induced crisis. This analysis focuses on (1) the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on each Baltic state; and (2) it lays out a range of policy recommendations for the Baltics, the EU and NATO.

2. A Unified Baltic Region

Well before the February 2022 escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war, representatives of all three Baltic states have been some of the most vocal proponents warning about the impending Russian threat in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region. In response to calling out the Putin regime's revanchism, they were frequently dubbed "Russophobic" by Kremlin propaganda, a response echoed and widely rolled out throughout the European Union (EU) and beyond.¹

From military support for Ukraine, to implementing sanctions against Russia, the Baltic states are paying a high price in terms of economic and social costs.

Figure 2. The Baltics and its proximity to Russia and Ukraine.

Map created with mapchart.net



In February 2022, one of the worst predicted scenarios came true, with great implications, not only for Ukraine, but also for countries thousands of miles removed from the battlefield that were experiencing serious food shortages. While some NATO member states—like Hungary—remain reluctant to push back against the Putin regime’s imperialist actions in Ukraine, the Baltic states have demonstrated, since early on, tremendous leadership by providing significant diplomatic, military and humanitarian support to Ukraine.² Their actions were based on a widespread belief that the fate of Ukraine is directly tied to that of the Baltics and NATO. Consequently, a key message coming from the Baltics has been that NATO and its allies should amplify support for Ukraine. As unequivocally stated by Estonia’s Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, the only “path to peace” is that “Ukraine must win this war and Russia must retreat to its borders.”³

Lithuania’s Vice Defence Minister, Margiris Abukevicius, recently noted that he is highly sceptical that diplomacy with Russia works. Moscow tends to make unrealistic demands and then expect other states to negotiate with it. Moreover, compromise is viewed by Russia as a weakness and Moscow frequently uses negotiation only to lock in military victories.⁴ Such sentiments are widely shared in the Baltics, and the three states put their money where their mouths are as they early on began to push for sanctions against the Kremlin. They also recalled some of their top diplomats and expelled Russian diplomats as early as March 2022.⁵

While using diplomatic measures to show disapproval of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, the three Baltic states led early diplomatic measures to ramp up support for Kyiv. Already in April 2022, when other heads of state and government were still reluctant to travel to Ukraine due to safety concerns, the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—Alar Karis, Egils Levits and Gitanas Nausėda respectively—together with Poland’s president visited Kyiv to meet in-person with Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.⁶ The visit sent a political message of moral support for Ukraine and demonstrated that Ukraine has been able to defend itself against all odds.

In terms of military support, Latvia’s Minister of Defence, Artis Pabriks, recently remarked; “If other countries did as much as we are doing, the war would be over.”⁷ His statement is far from being exaggerated. In terms of government support to Ukraine as percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) from 24 January to 3 October 2022, Estonia (0.8%), Latvia (0.9%), and Lithuania (0.4%) rank as the number one, two, and four donors respectively.⁸ Although the U.S. and United Kingdom provided EUR 26.9 billion and EUR 3.8 billion respectively in government support for Ukraine during that same period, those amounts represent merely 0.2% of their GDPs.

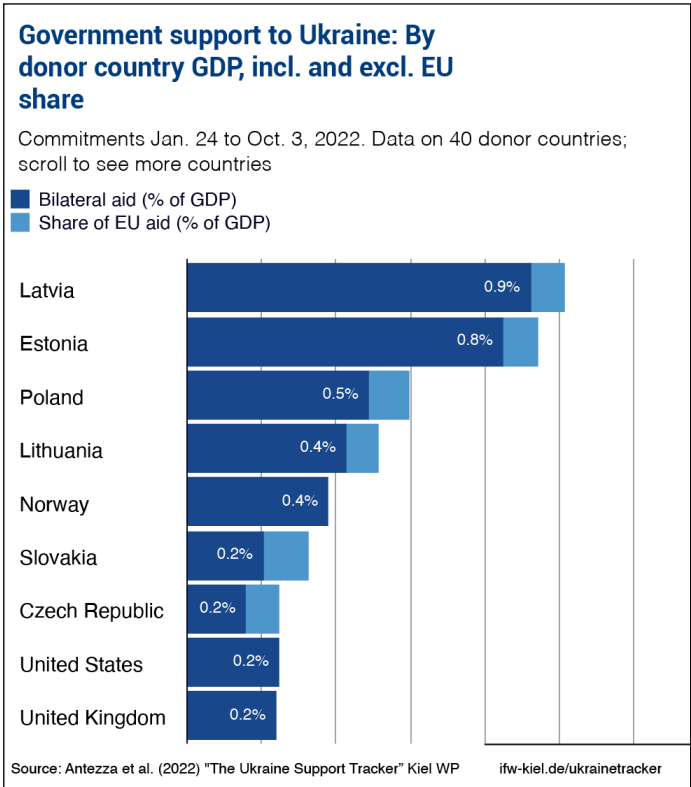


Chart 1. Source: Antezza et al (2022) "The Ukraine Support Tracker" Kiel WP ifw-kiel.de/ukrainetracker

Collectively, the Baltics have been taking a unified and outward approach in their response to Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, the domestic situation and individual responses in each Baltic country are less understood. From military support for Ukraine, to implementing sanctions against Russia, the Baltic states are paying a high price in terms of economic and social costs. In the Baltics, the average GDP growth rate has fallen from 5.0% in 2021 to 1.6% in 2022, while a meagre 0.4% GDP growth is forecast for 2023. Meanwhile, inflation also skyrocketed in 2022. Those issues will be addressed in the coming sections.

GDP growth, Baltic countries⁹

Annual percentage change

Country/Year	2021	2022	2023	2024
Estonia	8.0	0.6	0.3	3.5
Latvia	3.9	1.5	1.1	3.5
Lithuania	6.0	2.2	0.1	3.0
Baltics	5.9	1.6	0.4	3.3

Inflation, Baltics¹⁰

HIPC, year-on-year percentage change

Country/Year	2021	2022	2023	2024
Estonia	4.5	18.9	8.5	2.0
Latvia	3.3	16.9	9.9	2.1
Lithuania	4.6	19.0	9.0	2.0

Source: SEB 2022, *Nordic Outlook: Challenging Times Ahead*, 15 November.

3. Estonia

The 24th of February of each year marks Estonia's Independence Day. In 2022, on the 31st anniversary of freedom from Soviet occupation, Estonia saw history repeating itself some 1,200 kilometres (or 700 miles) away from its borders. Like the other Baltic states, Estonia has been warning of the threat posed by a resurgent and revanchist Russia for years.¹¹ Many Estonians possess lived experiences of Russian aggression; it is no wonder that, despite the coalition government collapse in June, Estonia has maintained its approach towards the Russian-induced war.¹²

Since the February escalation, and on par with its neighbours, Estonia has championed support for Ukraine which has helped the country to defend itself against Russian aggression. It has donated almost 40% of its annual military budget to Ukraine or the equivalent of more than 0.8% of its GDP, the second highest of all nations per capita after Latvia.¹³ Estonia, with a population of just over 1.3 million people, has welcomed over 110,000 people fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with over 60,000 having remained in Estonia.¹⁴ The country is therefore wrestling with a 4.6% increase in population within a short span of time, whilst navigating political, economic and social issues of its own. Still, Tallinn sees no other choice but to contribute to the Ukrainian cause, as the fate of the country is also a matter of Estonian, Baltic and NATO security.¹⁵

3.1 Defence and Security

To date, Estonia has provided military aid to Ukraine worth over EUR 255 million, including Javelin anti-tank missiles, howitzers, anti-tank mines, anti-tank grenade launchers, mortars, ammunition, vehicles, communication devices, medical equipment and supplies, personal protective equipment and military food rations.¹⁶ In cooperation with Germany, Estonia has also donated two field hospitals along with medical equipment.¹⁷

In addition to military support, Estonia is aiding Ukraine to build up its e-governance and cyber-security capabilities amid the heightened rate of Russian cyber-attacks.¹⁸ In September 2022, Estonia and Ukraine signed a memorandum of cooperation to promote exchange of experience in the field of digital transformation. As one of the highest-ranking countries on the National Cyber Security Index,

[Estonia] has donated almost 40% of its annual military budget to Ukraine or the equivalent of more than 0.8% of its GDP, the second highest of all nations per capita after Latvia.

Estonian experts have consistently advised Ukraine in increasing Ukraine's cyber resilience, offering broad-based assistance in ensuring cyber security both during the current fight against Russia and for the future.¹⁹

A defining feature of Estonia's approach is ramping up mobilisation of its own resources and calling on NATO allies to follow suit. The Minister of Defence, Hanno Pevkur, has announced Estonia will be increasing its defence budget next year by 42%, therefore committing 3% of GDP to defence, which is one percentage point higher than the NATO quota that was agreed to by member states in 2006. Estonia recently also ordered six M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) launchers.²⁰ Since summer 2022, the U.S. has sent twenty HIMARS to Ukraine, which have widely been regarded by military analysts as game changers on the battlefield.²¹

At the July 2022 NATO summit in Madrid, allies agreed that the U.S. and United Kingdom would send additional defence forces to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.²² There are fears however of these commitments not being upheld. In September, news of the U.K.—NATO's framework nation in Estonia—pulling out half of its forces from Estonia sparked concern.²³ Pevkur assured that NATO's engaged Forward Presence would not be diluted and that the news would not entail a decrease in the agreed British presence; merely a recalling of the additional rotation. Nonetheless the instability of the British government means that the commitments declared by the previous Truss government may not stand under the new Sunak administration amid economic turmoil. Sustained Western solidarity is vital to ensure that the Baltic states are not disproportionately supporting the Ukrainian cause.

Estonian officials implore for the decisions taken in Madrid to strengthen NATO's eastern flank defence be implemented quickly.²⁴ Estonia's Prime Minister, Kaja Kallas, has called on NATO to set up

more permanent bases in the Baltic states, while Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu urged all NATO members to follow Estonia's suit and increase defence spending to at least 3% of their GDP.²⁵

3.2 Economic and Social Implications

In September 2022, Eurostat reported that annual inflation in Estonia hit 24.2%.²⁶ Moreover, inflation has run at over 20% every month since May, and although it has slightly decreased since the August peak of 25.2%, Estonia's inflation rate remains the highest in Europe.

The main cause of Estonia's high inflation relates to high energy prices, with rises of 40.8% compared to September last year.²⁷ Prior to the February escalation, refined petroleum and natural gas imported from Russia represented 55% and 95% respectively of the country's total imports of these resources.²⁸ These imports represent a small percentage—5% and 7% respectively—of Estonia's overall energy needs, but the demand to replace gas with coal or other polluting fuels has raised prices of European emissions quotas and consequently of energy in general.²⁹ High demand and supply problems are further fuelling inflation, with strong support of sanctions against Russia and Belarus affecting the sourcing of raw materials and semi-finished products. Replacement of all imports would cost Estonian companies EUR 860 million in 2021 prices—equal to 5% of Estonia's total imports.³⁰

Coinciding with the February escalation, Estonian companies—Alexela and Infortar—built a liquified natural gas (LNG) terminal at Paldiski in a record time of six months. At the time of publication, the new terminal will be connected to Elering—Estonia's gas and electricity transmission system operator.³¹ The new terminal will help to diversify Estonia's energy supplies, which is crucial ahead of January when the three Baltic states are planning on prohibiting Russian gas imports.

The strain on the Estonian economy may also impact the success of Ukrainian refugee integration schemes. International experience shows that rapid access to the labour market and education systems is key for successful integration. But this will only be possible if substantial investment is put into general public services and individual healthcare, pensions and other social protection schemes. According to Magnus Piirits, an expert at Foresight Centre: “large-scale integration activities” must be considered “so that refugees can cope with everyday life as well as possible” and ensure that the burden on social systems remains affordable for Estonians.³²

The potential of the new wave of refugees settling in Estonia would postpone the country's decreasing population problem and could help improve the ratio of people of working age to retired people until 2060.³³ However, pre-existing social tensions among the Estonian population need to be addressed if Ukrainian refugees are to settle in Estonia in the long term. Almost a quarter of Estonia's population self-identify as ethnic Russians, and many remain within the sphere of Russian state influence. The divide spans ethnic and generational lines.³⁴ Young Russian-speaking Estonians automatically qualify for citizenship, are offered Estonian language education, and receive economic benefits their elder relatives did not have, leading to a disparity in ethnic-Russian integration levels within Estonian culture.³⁵ Tensions are bolstered by Russian disinformation campaigns, which are particularly successful among the older generation based in Estonia's eastern regions with a poorer grasp of Estonian. Prior to the February escalation, Estonian experts estimated that Russian state media was heavily consumed by around one-fifth of the Russian-speaking population.³⁶ Despite the current governmental ban on Russian and Belarusian state television stations and the launching of Estonia's own Russian-language media outlets, reports of people buying antennas

and setting up virtual private networks (VPNs) to reach Kremlin-supported channels indicate the information bubble has not burst.³⁷

The socio-economic challenge facing Estonia is therefore how to maintain investment in and management of two cultural integration pathways amidst an economic downturn. In addition to purely economic support from foreign partners, cooperation and knowledge sharing activities among the refugee hosting countries needs to remain a key pursuit for the stability and security of the region.

3.3 Political Implications

Estonia has maintained a hard stance against Russian aggression despite its own internal political issues. In June 2022, Estonia's governing coalition collapsed after Prime Minister, Kaja Kallas, accused her coalition partners, the Estonian Centre Party (EK), of working against the nation's “core values” and failing to protect its independence amid the Ukraine war.³⁸ There are conflicting reports as to the true reason behind the fall out. Official accounts attribute the collapse to EK's opposition to an education bill, which aimed to make the Estonian language mandatory in all kindergartens, with another language of instruction being permissible in addition to, but not instead of, Estonian.³⁹ Estonian-only education has been a staple policy for Kallas' Reform Party for a long time, arguing that the EK's disagreement with this policy indicates it is working against Estonian unity in a time of a security crisis. The EK's historical ties with Putin's United Russia Party, past corruption scandals, and the traditional view that a large component of its support base derives from the Russian-speaking minority, have made the party an easy target for such allegations. The disagreement however is also fuelling the Kremlin's allegations of Estonian Russophobia, with some Estonian politicians arguing that the disagreement is playing into the Kremlin's hands.⁴⁰

Despite internal social, economic and political problems, Estonia continues to stand firmly in support of Ukraine on the domestic and international political stage. In September, Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu met with UN Under-Secretary General Rosemary DiCarlo in New York, to discuss international efforts to support Ukraine and the issue of holding Russia legally responsible for humanitarian crimes.⁴¹ In October, along with the other Baltic states, Estonia published a joint statement calling on EU and other international partners to create a Special Tribunal that will prosecute Russia's top political and military leadership.⁴² Later the same month, Parliament declared Russia a "terrorist regime", along with the "Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics", established by the Russian Federation and the notorious Wagner Group—the shadowy private Russian military organisation.⁴³

Estonia's firm policies against Russia are not limited to political and military leadership. The Baltic states and other countries bordering Russia have shown a strict and united front on Russian immigration. Estonia's Foreign Minister, Urmas Reinsalu, reported to Reuters that 300,000 Russians entered the country between February and August.⁴⁴ As a response, Estonia instituted bans on Russian tourists as a measure to ensure sanctions and the EU air travel bans against Russia are upheld.⁴⁵ In September 2022, Estonia also denied entry to dual Russian citizens who hold Schengen visas, with officials claiming there are reasons to question the truth in their statements on the purposes of their trip, therefore requiring stricter rules for this group.⁴⁶ The Estonian Police and Border Guard Board maintains that each case is thoroughly examined, and all circumstances are considered before deciding to deny entry to dual Russian citizens. In addition to closing its border to Russians, Estonia has announced it will not automatically grant asylum to Russians fleeing military mobilisation, arguing that refusal to fulfil the civic duty of Russia

does not necessarily constitute sufficient grounds for granting asylum.⁴⁷ The strictness of these policies has sparked concerns of discrimination. The UN has reportedly opposed Estonia's decision to stop issuing Schengen visas for Russian citizens, while some EU countries criticise the strictness of the approach, arguing that it is playing into Putin's rhetoric on the West waging a war against Russians.⁴⁸

4. Latvia

A month before the February escalation, Latvia was the target of some of the strongest cyber-attacks the country has ever experienced.⁴⁹ These attacks came from Russian state-backed groups and resulted in major interruptions to a variety of public and private services, ranging from ticket purchasing to donation platforms.⁵⁰ The news of the invasion of Ukraine led to the rapid mobilisation of support towards Ukraine, as well as renewed vigour in Latvia's own territorial defences together with NATO.⁵¹ These are considered vital measures, as an invasion by Russia would be a "do or die" event.⁵²

4.1 Defence and Security

Latvia's first defensive mobilisation following the February 2022 escalation was in the form of direct aid to Ukraine. The Baltic state has provided Ukraine with humanitarian aid, and a variety of war materiel valuing close to a third of its national defence budget.⁵³ When measured as percentage share of GDP, Latvia is the foremost supporter of Ukraine, having committed a total of 0.9% (EUR 298 million) in humanitarian, financial, and military aid.⁵⁴ Among other materiel, Latvia has provided Ukraine with ambulances, stinger anti-aircraft systems, Mi-17 combat aircraft, and a 155mm howitzer.⁵⁵

National defence has also been bolstered, with a few setbacks. Latvia currently has a fully professional volunteer army, which has been increased by 500 professional soldiers to 7,100 after the most recent invasion of Ukraine. Still, there are difficulties filling about 400 vacant positions in the Army.⁵⁶ At the same time, the National Guard is estimated to reach 10,000 by the end of 2022, growing from about 8,000 the year prior—indicative of the heightened perception of the Russian threat.⁵⁷ The escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war also skewed many Latvian constituents in favour of a higher-level of militarisation. The Ministry of Defence has established a plan to create a mandatory military service for men from the ages of 18 to 27 within the next five years.⁵⁸ However, at the time of writing, the recently-elected Parliament voted to retract the bill for the moment, owing to a multitude of comments that need to be reviewed and integrated, including on both infrastructure and the budget for new draftees.⁵⁹ Like its Estonian neighbour, Latvia is also purchasing six HIMARS.⁶⁰

In response to the February escalation, NATO deployed the Response Force: a high-readiness force comprising land, air, sea and special forces units, which supplements the Forward Presence Battle Group in Latvia.⁶¹ Simultaneously, Latvia has hosted several major training scenarios with NATO involvement; the exercise Silver Arrow involved around 4,200 troops from 17 allied countries, including the U.S. Army and Special Operation Forces exercising the rapid deployment of HIMARS.⁶² A variety of other multinational and domestic training scenarios have taken place in urban, maritime, and air environments.⁶³ These exercises also made use of Latvia's Ādaži base—Europe's first 5G defence testbed, used for joint high-tech training, experiments, and demonstrations between NATO, the U.S. Department of Defence, the European Defence Fund, and other allies.⁶⁴

Despite the above occurrences, the overall defence policy has not changed course, but has only been hastened. Latvia has increased its defence budget for 2022 to 2.2% of GDP (EUR 758 million) and envisions a gradual increase over three years to 2.5%. It has also prioritised the establishment of more multilateral and bilateral agreements; the U.S. Department of Defense entered a non-binding Security of Supply Arrangement with Latvia's Ministry of Defence, to provide reciprocal priority support for goods and services that promote national defence.⁶⁵

The escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war also skewed many Latvian constituents in favour of a higher-level of militarisation.

4.2 Economic and Social Implications

The full-scale military invasion of Ukraine directly opened a second front in Latvia in the form of an “energy war.”⁶⁶ For Latvia, the Russia-Ukraine war and the international reaction to it exposed several domestic weaknesses. Latvia’s electricity networks are still not synchronised with the Continental European power grid. Instead, Latvia’s power grid still heavily depends on the BRELL network, which ties it to Belarus and Russia. In October 2022, Parliament agreed to develop legislation allowing for the ban of commercial electricity flows from Russia, while aiming to close the BRELL network by 2025.⁶⁷ However, the priority issue remains natural gas for commercial and residential use. Skyrocketing gas prices resulting from the cut-off from the Russian market led the government to consider limiting the sale of gas reserves by Latvia’s main gas provider, to ensure that the needs of Latvian households are met.⁶⁸

That said, growing gas prices are becoming the front-running economic issue. Gas prices have tripled since the February escalation, and many households depend on gas as their primary source of heat.⁶⁹ For context, in Latvia, the average temperature during December and January is -4.6 and -4.7°C respectively.⁷⁰ While the government has promised support to cushion citizens from high energy prices, Latvia has experienced among the second highest inflation rate in Europe in 2022, at 16.9%—double that of Germany or France.⁷¹ The Latvian government also recently committed to support the construction of an LNG terminal in Skulte, but it is estimated that the project will take between two and three years.⁷²

The mix of high energy prices and rapidly rising inflation are creating fears of economic instability in the employment market especially when anticipating the full swing winter and the heating season. The Latvian government has

pledged approximately EUR 225 million to support households with central heating, but as different municipal governments have different rates—it remains to be seen what the impact of the government support will be.⁷³ A long-term shift towards renewable energy and energy autonomy is envisioned for early 2023 to be led by a new Ministry of Energy and Climate.⁷⁴

The flux of defence, energy, and economic issues are reverberating on the political front. Internationally, Latvia has sought allies in favour of cutting European energy dependence on Russia. The Nord Stream II pipeline project was cancelled by Germany in February, but Russia remains Europe’s largest gas supplier. Through Nord Stream I, Germany was still importing 26% of its gas needs from Russia in early 2022.⁷⁵ Political friction is rising between Latvia and European countries like Hungary that are choosing to rule out any cutting of their Russian gas supplies.⁷⁶

Despite the energy crisis, Latvia has experienced economic growth in 2022, in part due to softening of the COVID pandemic lockdown regimes of 2021.⁷⁷ By the second quarter of 2022, Latvia’s GDP had grown 0.4% over the prior year. However, GDP has fallen by 1% since the beginning of 2022 based on the cutting of economic ties with Russia and Belarus.⁷⁸ Trade in certain sectors—wholesale, transport and logistics—has fallen steeply by approximately 14%; trade in certain sectors like pharmaceuticals, however, has grown.⁷⁹ The increasing inflation has also cut consumer spending, further reducing expected GDP growth.⁸⁰ Altogether, the economy is expected to stagnate in 2023, with a growth rate of only 1.1%; it is anticipated to perform much better in 2024, with growth projected at 3.5%.⁸¹ The European Commission has also approved EUR 181.5 million in support to Latvian SMEs, to mitigate the shock of the war and to be disbursed via state-subsidies on new loans and leases.⁸²

4.3 Political Implications

The parliamentary elections in October 2022 reflected a major shift away from pro-Russian sentiment. This was the first time the pro-Russian party, Harmony Centre, did not pass the 5% threshold since the second regaining of Latvia's independence in 1991. Instead, the pro-European New Unity party tripled its support in the Saima, Latvia's Parliament, from eight to twenty-four seats.⁸³ The move to New Unity—a centre-left party—is also indicative of a movement towards stability in the COVID recovery era, in light of a slowdown in the economy and fear of Russia. The new Speaker of the Saima met the U.S. Ambassador in November in order to express Latvia's continued commitment to Ukraine.⁸⁴

These have been significant changes, given that approximately a third of Latvia's inhabitants are ethnic-Russians. They have also been the main constituency for the outgoing Harmony Centre, highlighting a significant shift towards pro-European policies among the minority.⁸⁵ Still, the protest against the Russian invasion of Ukraine has not been monolithic. While the leader of Harmony Centre condemned Russian aggression on 24th February, pro-Russian elements emerged within the party and elsewhere in Latvia.⁸⁶ For example, the mayor of Latvia's sixth-largest city pronounced Crimea as a part of the Russian Federation, receiving critique from within his own party. He and several other public servants have been requested to provide explanations to the Latvian Security Police.⁸⁷

Latvia, with a population of approximately 1.9 million people, has registered approximately 40,000 Ukrainian refugees since the beginning of the February escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war. Approximately a fourth have been provided municipal civil protection commissions, while the others have found a place of residence on their own.⁸⁸ So far, Latvia has successfully aided the refugees, but it is anticipated to cost

approximately EUR 215 million to continue to provide adequate support for existing refugees and new arrivals in 2023.⁸⁹

While Latvia is building support for Ukrainian refugees, a new law was passed limiting non-permanent resident permits for Russian and Belarusian citizens.⁹⁰ This policy is in line with broader caution advised by the European Commission in the Schengen area towards Russian citizens, limiting the provision of certain visas to Russian citizens for security purposes, focusing especially on tourist travel.⁹¹ In September, visas were refused to twenty-three Russians, while two applied for asylum.⁹²

5. Lithuania

Russia's former Prime Minister, Mikhail Kasyanov, has stated that "if Ukraine fails, the Baltic states will be next."⁹³ Moreover, according to Russian exiled businessman, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia would start with Lithuania.⁹⁴ Similar threats are commonplace. In June 2022, a bill was tabled in the Russian Duma to revoke recognition of Lithuanian independence.⁹⁵ Later that month, Lithuania experienced the "biggest cyber-attack in a decade", which was directed against a state-owned energy group company.⁹⁶ Other Lithuanian institutions were widely attacked shortly after Vilnius started applying sanctions against Russia, including to the transit through Lithuania to Kaliningrad, the Russian exclave by the Baltic Sea.⁹⁷ Overall, the perception of the Russian threat has heightened in the wake of Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine.

5.1 Defence and Security

As is the case with the other two Baltics, Lithuania's military support for Ukraine predates the February escalation. Nonetheless, the country has so far provided substantial support to Ukraine,

including in the form of twenty M113 armoured vehicles, 105 mm calibre howitzers, air defence systems (Stinger), anti-tank weapons, body armour and helmets, 120 mm mortars, small arms and ammunition, thermal imagers, drones, anti-drones, surveillance radars, trucks, and SUVs.⁹⁸ However, a critical point has already been reached, where Lithuania no longer has certain military equipment that could be donated to Ukraine without risking its own security. Considering this, in November, the proposal to transfer Lithuania's howitzers and air defence systems was turned down.⁹⁹ Other ways to support Ukraine than providing ammunition and training will be sought, since Lithuania has allocated half a billion euros for support to Ukraine in next year's budget.¹⁰⁰

Shortly after the February escalation, Lithuanian political parties agreed to prepare a new national defence agreement, which was adopted in July. The last such strategic document, signed in 2018, pledged to increase the defence spending up to 2.5% of GDP until 2030.¹⁰¹ Putin's February invasion accelerated the implementation of this goal and the significant increase (additional EUR 300 million) of defence spending was approved by a unanimous vote in the Parliament, while an additional EUR 148 million was allocated in September after updating the GDP forecasts.¹⁰² Lithuania also committed nearly EUR 500 million in the purchase of eight HIMARS, MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) with a range of up to 300 kilometres, and other military equipment.¹⁰³

Lithuania's new defence agreement declares that 2.5% of GDP defence spending was already reached—way above the 2% NATO threshold—and it shall be maintained until at least 2030. This highlights an important shift in threat perception, directly related to the February escalation. It also sets short-term national security strategies, in addition to setting up a cyber force in the

Lithuanian army by 2024.¹⁰⁴ There is still no final agreement on the introduction of universal compulsory military service, whereas only partial conscription for men aged eighteen to twenty-three was re-introduced in 2015, the year after Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine.

Another important strategy for civil resistance was approved by the Parliament of Lithuania in May, which involves integrating citizens into the national defence and security system, as well as using non-governmental organisations and diaspora capabilities for civil resistance training.¹⁰⁵ Importantly, this strategy enables the general public to participate in civil resistance, the popularity of which has been growing rapidly in the context of recent events. On March 11, 2022—Lithuanian Restoration Day—a record number of people joined the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union by taking the oath, including Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė and Speaker of the Parliament Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen.¹⁰⁶

For Lithuania, border protection against a possible incursion from Russian forces in Kaliningrad and Belarus remains critical since those borders can be used to physically isolate the Baltics from the rest of the NATO alliance through the Suwalki Gap. According to Lithuanian officials, the Kaliningrad region has been highly militarised in recent years, including with nuclear weapons, Iskander ballistic missiles and S-400 systems.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, in August 2022, Russia announced the deployment of three MiG-31 fighters equipped with Kinzhal hypersonic missiles at Kaliningrad's Chkalovsky Air Base; these fighters have been selected for "round-the-clock combat duty."¹⁰⁸ At the same time, Belarus remains a key security threat due to the Minsk-induced migrant crisis (ongoing for over a year at the time of writing), turbulence at the Astravyets nuclear power plant, and joint Russia-Belarusian military drills.



Figure 3. Map of the Suwalki Gap¹⁰⁹
Map created with mapchart.net

Due to the growing threats, Lithuania and NATO took initiatives to strengthen military capabilities in the region. In June, Germany agreed to assign a brigade to Lithuania; its first element arrived in the country on 5 September.¹¹⁰ For the moment, it will operate on a rotational basis, but Vilnius aims for the brigade to become a permanent feature. During the meeting of the “Bucharest nine” on 14 October, U.S. Secretary of Defence, Lloyd Austin, promised that the U.S. will continue rotating (ongoing since 2019) the U.S. heavy battalion in Pabradė, Lithuania, at least until the beginning of 2026.¹¹¹ The importance to NATO of its Eastern flank security was also highlighted by its choosing of Vilnius to host the next NATO summit in July 2023.¹¹²

5.2 Economic and Social Implications

While most EU member states have struggled to decouple from Russian gas imports, nearly a decade ago, Lithuania had set in motion a process that allowed it by April 2022 to cease all Russian gas imports for domestic consumption.¹¹³ In 2009, when Lithuania closed Ignalina’s atomic plant, the country’s dependency on Russian energy—gas and electricity—was about 80%, with prices of natural gas around 40% higher than for Western Europe.¹¹⁴ Lithuania made the strategic decision to build a modern LNG terminal as an alternative natural gas supply source, beginning operation in 2015.¹¹⁵ Today, the LNG terminal—appropriately named *Independence*—can fully meet Lithuania’s gas demand, as well as supply gas to neighbouring countries, thereby freeing the country from its Russian dependence.

Unfortunately, LNG cannot shield Lithuania from the global increase of energy prices; the closure of Ignalina's atomic plant left Lithuania highly dependent on electricity imports, especially after the suspension of supply from Russia and Belarus—imports are carried out via connections with Sweden, Poland and Latvia.¹¹⁶ In August 2022, when the price of electricity peaked in the Nordpool market without any additional decisions and compensation from the government, it was expected that household expenses for heating in the winter of 2022/23 might increase up to 90% compared to last year.¹¹⁷ Just before the start of the heating season, the Lithuanian government approved compensation mechanisms not only for households, but for businesses as well; this ensured that Lithuanian companies would remain competitive in the EU market. Meanwhile the decision of the EU to set gas price limits is eagerly awaited.

At the same time, households are suffering from food price inflation, which reached a peak of nearly 30% in July 2022. Lower inflation is anticipated for the upcoming months, except in the energy sector. Economists predict that Lithuania's GDP growth will decline until the end of 2022 and is expected to reach 2.2%. Lithuania's GDP growth is forecasted to slow to 0.1% next year, and the average annual inflation will decrease to 9%.¹¹⁸ Sanctions against Belarus and Russia should start showing the impact on Lithuania's economy at the end of 2022, since most of them only came into force in the middle of the summer. Consequently, it is anticipated that unemployment will grow slightly (by 0.9%) in 2023.¹¹⁹

The recent quarter showed interesting trends in the labour market as Ukrainian refugees had a positive impact on the Lithuanian economy so far. Lithuania, a country of nearly 2.7 million people, is currently hosting over 70,000 Ukrainian refugees—roughly 2.6% of the population, of whom nearly 42,000 are of working age.¹²⁰ According to the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, from

the beginning of the war, Lithuania employed over 15,800 Ukrainians and 7,500 Belarusians, who already contributed around 10 million euros in taxes.¹²¹

Despite some of the socio-economic hardships, Lithuanians remain active supporters of the Ukrainian's fight for freedom. The vivid memory of Russian occupation during the Soviet period, and the fight for their own freedom motivated many Lithuanians to support Ukrainian initiatives. Many Lithuanian citizens offered their homes to Ukrainian refugees; the Lithuanian Blue-Yellow organisation is among the largest supporters of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.¹²² Lithuanians raised around EUR 6 million in just three days for Ukraine's Bayraktar drone, and they continue to fundraise money for other military equipment.¹²³

5.3 Political Implications

Despite last year's political tensions related to COVID-19, the migration crisis induced by Belarus, and China's pressure on Lithuania due to the latter's deepening relations with Taiwan—causing great public indignation and reducing the popularity of the Lithuanian government coalition—support for Ukraine became a politically unifying issue, and remains probably the only question on which Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė and President Gitanas Nausėda agree on.¹²⁴

Decisions regarding support for Ukraine are mostly adopted unanimously. In May, the Lithuanian Parliament recognised the war in Ukraine as a genocide and classified Russia as a terrorist state, echoing former Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė's 2014 interview in which she called Russia a terrorist state for its acts of aggression against Ukraine.¹²⁵ Along with the other Baltic states, Lithuania has called on other EU states to support the establishment of a Special Tribunal to hold Russia accountable for heinous crimes it is committing in Ukraine.¹²⁶

The February escalation highlighted the urgency to finally erase the country's Soviet heritage. Until April 2022, there were around 150 Soviet monuments around Lithuania, and most of them were protected as cultural heritage.¹²⁷ The lack of political will to remove them protected them for years, but finally the required decisions are about to be made to move most of them into Gruta's Park, a Soviet heritage museum.

6. Going Forward

Many Baltic officials, with recent memories of Russian imperialism under the Soviet system, have rightfully warned NATO of the impending dangers that Russia still poses to its neighbours. Those threats are far from over, and have intensified with revanchist Putin's actions in Ukraine. One study found that it would take Russian tanks between 36 and 60 hours to overtake Riga and Tallinn.¹²⁸ The study, however, predates both Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine and the poor performance of Russian equipment on display on the battlefield, and NATO's enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltics, but it is still telling in terms of geographical proximity.

Since October 2022, the Russia-Ukraine war has entered a new phase, with Russia targeting Ukraine's critical infrastructure, especially with regards to energy. As emphasised earlier in this analysis, winter is coming, both in the literal and metaphorical sense. Based on current battlefield dynamics, it is also unlikely that the war will end soon.¹²⁹ For Ukrainians with a living memory of difficult past winters, this one will most likely be the worst, potentially with additional waves of refugees crossing into Europe. Moreover, despite major battleground victories for Ukraine since launching its counteroffensive in September 2022, Russian destruction of critical infrastructure could change this dynamic of the war. That said, if Ukraine is not only going to survive but thrive during the winter, it will need a lot of sustained and ramped-up economic and military support, while greater pressure on Russia is needed. Similarly, given how the fate of Ukraine and the Baltics are intertwined, based on some of the above projections, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will also need additional support from the EU and NATO.

Thus far, as argued, the Baltics have remained steadfast. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, energy crisis, growing inflation, and other socio-economic pressures, will inevitably make the Baltics more susceptible to pressure. In the Baltics, given the roles

Importantly, [Lithuania's] strategy enables the general public to participate in civil resistance, the popularity of which has been growing rapidly...

that all three states have played thus far, the ability to overcome this winter will also impact NATO's ability to provide sustained military and economic support to Ukraine, which in turn, will play a decisive role in determining who will win the Russia-Ukraine war. That means promoting Baltic resilience—from defence to socio-economic—should be a key priority for NATO. Below are a number of policy recommendations for the Baltics, the EU, and NATO.

To the Baltics:

- Maintain the momentum forged since February 2022 of acting collectively. Baltic states have demonstrated that they pack a much harder punch when they act collectively. Although there were movements of collective cooperation that came to fruition during the Trump Administration, which were arguably driven by fear that Donald Trump was perhaps too close to the Kremlin for comfort, the type of cooperation that sprouted since February 2022 has proven to be highly successful and should be maintained in the areas of defence and security, as well as economic cooperation.
- As indicated by Lithuania's Vice Minister of National Defence, Margiris Abukevicius, resolving the Russia-Ukraine war is not a matter of "diplomacy." More likely, it will require a military solution where Ukraine's victory should be the end goal. Fleshing out what exactly winning the war would entail will steer policies in the right direction.
- The Baltics should continue to promote a unified transatlantic approach towards Russia, especially in terms of military cooperation with Ukraine, and expanding sanctions against Russia. A key message, whether to Berlin or Budapest, should be to highlight the comparatively high burden that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are carrying. If these relatively small states can do it, then so should other NATO and EU member states. As Latvia's Minister of Defence, Artis Pabriks recently put it; "We are willing to die for freedom. Are you?"¹³⁰
- One area of diplomatic neglect remains getting the global South on board. For example, when the UN General Assembly voted on Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian territories in October 2022, the vast majority of states that formally abstained from voting were African states with experiences of colonisation. Given Russia's imperialist actions in Ukraine, the Baltics states—each with their own experiences of Russian subjugation—could carry weight with engaging the developing world and talk with authority about their experiences.
- On defence, the Baltic states have to identify further areas of cooperation, especially with regards to large projects aimed at strengthening collective security that would require pooling resources. The Baltics recently joined Germany and several other NATO states to procure air defence systems.¹³¹ The same model can be used for smaller-scale Baltic defence projects.
- There is space to increase pan-Baltic collaboration in cybersecurity matters. An area of growing concern, collaboration remains largely trust-based between the leading authorities: cybersecurity emergency response teams. The recently established European Cybersecurity Competence Centre is another opportunity to advance a Baltic position and deepen European cybersecurity.

- In addition to purely economic support from foreign partners, cooperation and knowledge sharing activities on integration among the refugee hosting countries needs to remain a key pursuit for the stability and security of the Baltic region.

To the EU:

- The EU should acknowledge that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are carrying a heavy load on behalf of the EU and NATO. To continue building Baltic defensive capacity and secure supply chains within the EU, Brussels should mobilise resources towards its nascent defence initiatives like the EU Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). These resources should focus on filling gaps left by NATO collaboration or supplementing them. An example could be further advancing cybersecurity capacities for dual use and general civilian critical infrastructure in the Baltics.
- The EU should support the Baltics and Ukraine to reduce dependency on former Soviet infrastructure as to foster changing the eastern rail system. This would also help to solve the Kaliningrad transit issue, and in the long-term, reduce the risks of transporting military equipment into Baltic states by railroads in case of a military invasion. Also, to increase financial support for the Three Seas Investment (3SI) Fund which aims to reduce the Central and Eastern European countries infrastructure gap.

- The region's history and heightened security concerns underline Baltic responses to new waves of refugees and should be understood as such by NATO and EU partners. Long standing international norms on refugee rights and asylum-seeking procedures must of course be respected, with each application needing to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Equally, the EU must support Baltic countries in receiving refugees, acknowledge the disproportionate burden these countries are facing, while also providing support for Russians who actively oppose Putin and refuse to fight in the war.

To NATO:

- Given the proximity of the Baltics to Russia and its ally, Belarus, NATO should continue to focus on securing its eastern borders and promoting Baltic resilience. As such, NATO forward presence in the Baltics is welcomed, including permanent troops.
- While all three Baltic states differ from Ukraine in that they are NATO member states, and by implication any attack on one would activate NATO's Article V, they remain vulnerable to Russian military aggression. Baltic territories are relatively small in size, which means that in case of a possible invasion, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania do not have Ukraine's strategic depth that would allow these NATO member states to lose any territory and regroup for counterattacks. Therefore, prevention of any form of takeover of one inch of the Baltics, including the Suwalki Gap, is crucial. Moreover, one BBC simulation with former high-level British officials of a Crimea-type of scenario in

Latvia had a disastrous outcome: nuclear war.¹³² For these reasons, transforming NATO's long-time strategy from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial should be prioritised.

- Linked to the previous point, HIMARS have proven themselves worthy on the Ukrainian battlefield. Supplying HIMARS and other defence systems to the Baltics should be prioritised, not only for the sake of further NATO operability and to defend Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from Russian, and potential Belarussian, aggression, but given their support for and proximity to Ukraine, the Baltics could help to resupply Ukraine in the near future.
- Russia can be expected to increase cyber-attacks against the Baltics, NATO member states, and Ukraine in the coming months and years, especially given the relatively low-cost investment into the creation of cyber armies. That means, in line with the decisions taken at the Madrid Summit, NATO should invest in greater cyber defences by enhancing civil-military cooperation, and develop a rapid response system that would anticipate greater intensity of cyber-attacks. In the Baltics, it will be worthwhile supporting the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (Tallinn) and Regional Cyber Defence Centre (Kaunas). Given the direct backing that the Baltics are lending to Ukraine's cyber security, any additional support from NATO to Baltic cyber security will also positively impact Ukraine's ability to defend itself from Russian cyber-attacks.
- Putin has invested a lot in Russia's energy sector, especially in oil and gas, allowing him to achieve a variety of foreign policy goals. As the Baltics have demonstrated, NATO members are not yet free of Russia's energy hold over the region, a matter which has become particularly pronounced following the February escalation. In order to ensure independence from Russian energy, NATO countries have to invest more in the development of critical infrastructure. The NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence in Vilnius could play a leading role in identifying priorities for NATO, allies and close partners.
- The Baltic states are home to many independent Russian-speaking journalists—ethnically Russian but also Ukrainian and Belarussian—critical of the Kremlin's actions. With the support of NATO and the EU, the Baltics could work with those journalists to counter Russian disinformation. NATO could also provide greater support to the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, especially given its mandate and proximity. ■

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In this LSE IDEAS Special Report, the authors focus on the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on the Baltics. The report highlights both collective and country-level impacts and responses to the conflict. It is argued that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have been among the top supporters of Ukraine, not merely in terms of military aid, but also with regards to providing substantial diplomatic and humanitarian support during Ukraine's darkest hour since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Moreover, it is argued that this literal and metaphorical winter will be a key challenge, not only for Ukraine, but also for the Baltics. Given how closely the fate of Ukraine is intertwined with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the manner in which the Baltics and NATO respond to the winter could significantly influence the Russia-Ukraine war. A key strategic priority for the Baltics and NATO should be to promote resilience of everything from defense to energy security. Accordingly, the Report concludes with a variety of key policy recommendations aimed at the Baltics, EU and NATO.

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