

Estonian Fears, Hopes and Efforts: The Russian War against Ukraine

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Abstract

Debates following events in February 2022 in Estonian society have been hot, and despite diverging opinion, there has emerged a mainstream viewpoint of how to assist Ukraine, how to respond to Russia, what to expect from NATO allies, and how to deal with the inner cohesion of Estonia's multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. The least problematic has been the understanding of how to help Ukraine, with Estonia emerging as the leading donating nation *per capita*. As to Russia, most of the Estonian public and elite supports significantly more severe sanctions than are currently enacted. Although there have been voices which have demanded straightforward intervention of NATO into the conflict, the strongest consensus is behind the view according to which the West should not get directly involved, yet it should indirectly support Ukraine in a greater degree than it has managed to do so far. Despite its membership in NATO, the Estonian political and military elite has been afraid that Russia is about to use the same logic of argument and action against the Baltic States.

Key words: Estonia, Russian Invasion of Ukraine, NATO, Sanctions, Estonian Society

Among the Estonian elite, Russian war against Ukraine is not expected to end before the end of 2022, but it may well also last to the end of 2023. Estonian predictions in this question are mostly following the US and UK official sources. The main question for Estonia is if, and when, after the end of the war in Ukraine, Russia might be ready and motivated to challenge NATO in the Baltic states.

Views on the future European relationship with Russia differ a lot, between the ethnic groups and the political parties. The current governmental coalition and most Estonian speakers would prefer Russia losing the war in Ukraine, and this together with sanctions causing regime change in the Kremlin. However, it is unclear what would be the obligation for a new and hopefully more liberal-minded Russian government.

The Soviet Past and Russki Mir

Although Estonia's contemporary perception of Russia is most acutely influenced by Russia's aggressive stance in recent decades, the deeper source of the ill feelings towards Russia relies on Estonia's painful historical experience with Russia. These feelings are also aggravated by the still unresolved challenges of social segregation between the Estonian and Russian-speaking communities and the concomitant security threats emanating from Russia. The high-water mark of the painful history of Soviet occupation in Estonia are the massive killings and the deportation of tens of thousands of Estonian citizens to Siberia in the 1940s and 50s. During the last two decades, the Estonian elite has been especially concerned about Russia's near abroad and "borderization" policy (Toal and Merabishvili, 2019). Russia appears to rely on a geopolitical reading of its identity in the terms of a traditional land-power, which necessitates maintaining physical control and a sphere of influence over its border regions to guarantee safety and security (Karaganov and Suslov, 2019). Over more than a decade the Kremlin has promoted a narrative of "Global Anti-Russia" in the form of the NATO Alliance threatening Russia's independence. Especially the coloured revolutions have been troubling the Russian leadership. In this context, gaining control over its neighbor's territory, resources, infrastructure, strategic locations, and military capabilities sounds like a rational strategy from a geopolitical perspective, in order to avoid a situation where the "enemies" get control over Russia's bordering countries (Karaganov and Suslov, 2018). In order to understand Russian neo-imperial ambitions in the post-Soviet space, one needs to be versed in the *Russkiy Mir* concept. Within the frame of this concept the Kremlin attaches to states like Ukraine, but also the Baltic States, an emotional geostrategic value. The concept of *Russkiy Mir* has been developed as an ideological tool in Russia since the late 1990s (Svarin, 2016). It refers to the mythical ideal of Russian culture and Russian language. It

is important to realize that with this narrative, Russia has simultaneously been constructing its own inner social cohesion and attempting to tear apart that of its neighbours. On the one hand, Russia has been actively forging narratives that enable it to consolidate the national spirit. Vital in this regard have been the memories of the World War II and the special role that Soviet Union played in it (Persson, 2022). Nevertheless, especially in recent years, it has gradually evolved into the idea that Russia should protect and support anyone who identifies as Russian, speaks Russian, and considers Russia to be his or her cultural pivot. Crucially, the breadth of the term has ever widened and has come to include Central and East European states and the Russian diaspora in distant countries as well (Veebel, Ploom, Sazonov, 2021).

To bring an example of the externally intrusive interpretation of *Russkyi Mir* by president Putin, according to him, “Russia’s border doesn’t end anywhere” (BBC, 2016). In the eyes of Russia’s political elite, Russia has its “privileged interests and status,” or “unique,” or “historically specific” relations with some neighboring nations. This applies also to partly Slavic-populated regions, pending on this reading (Berls, 2021). The protection of those who identify themselves as Russians has served as a source of legitimacy and center of gravity for many Russians’ ideological narratives already for many years. As Vladimir Putin asserted, “*Millions of Russians and Russian-speaking people live in Ukraine and will continue to do so. Russia will always defend their interests using political, diplomatic and legal means*” (Prague Post, 2014). It is likewise possible to quote former Russian Prime Minister and President Dmitry Medvedev: “*Protecting the rights and interests of Russian citizens abroad remains our most important task*” (Estonian Public Broadcasting, 2016). Based on the influence of the narratives, when launching a war against Ukraine in 2022, Putin had reason to believe that a significant share of the people living in Ukraine would support Russia’s military invasion or that it would at least help him divide the society and create internal tensions and chaos in Ukraine. This would result in the separation of some regions in Ukraine. This way, Putin expected to get control over Ukraine. As it turned out, this judgment was largely unfounded and in practice Russia has had very limited success only in the East and South of Ukraine.

Public Attitude: Polarisation based on Language Lines

By many Estonian speakers, Russian speakers in Estonia (or in Ukraine) are still perceived as occupants. In spite of the change of generations, the latter are seen as people who were sent to Estonia after the Second World War to replace the Estonians recently deported to Siberia. During the Soviet time, this created a fear that the Estonian speaking population would be gradually substituted by the Russophones. Today, while Russian speakers form around 25 percent of the Estonian population, they still represent about 50 percent of the population in Tallinn, Estonia's capital, and more than 90 percent of the populations of Narva and Kohtla-Järve, two cities among the five largest cities in Estonia.

By 2022, differences of understanding Russian actions in Ukraine and Russia's expected behaviour towards the Baltic states, have grown between Estonian speakers and pro-Kremlin Russian speakers. The main reason is the success of Russian propaganda and narratives among some of the most vulnerable Russophone groups in Estonia. The picture depicted above has been somewhat complicated by the large influx of the Ukrainian refugees during 2022. The level of Ukrainian refugees exceeds 40,000 by August 2022. The Ukrainian refugees are primarily perceived, and thus welcomed, as victims of Russia, but also as a politically friendly labor force. At the same time, the Russian migrants bringing with them security risks are not seen as welcome. So, Estonia is focused on integration of the Ukrainians who have already arrived and keeps the border closed to Russian migrants.

The closure of the border for Russian tourists became an issue in August and September 2022. Due to the flight restrictions imposed by Western countries, Russian tourists had started to exploit the still remaining option of using their previously acquired Schengen visas to enter any of the bordering Schengen countries and go on holidays, by taking flights from there (Postimees 2022a). As the pressure to such countries as the Baltic ones increased significantly, the question of whether this option could be morally approved triggered a heated discussion, not merely among Estonian politicians, but also in the wider Estonian public. The Baltic states emerged as leaders in attempting to achieve an EU-wide ban on such movement of Russian tourists (ERR 2022a). While the EU decision has been delayed, the Baltic states preceded on their own to enact the ban in September 2022 (Kivi 2022). As long as Finland remains the country where the largest numbers of Russian tourists pour into the EU, it is also expected that the Finnish

government will follow suit and enact the ban (Ibid.). This question receives the most heated comments among the Estonian speaking public. The debate concentrates on the one hand on the question of what constitutes a real pressure on Russia's public, to step out publicly to stop Putin and end the war. On the other hand, the question concerns the individual responsibility of Russian citizens enjoying their holidays in Europe while their army is destroying a nation that has expressed a wish to live according to European values (Lucas 2022). Also, the Russophone social media in Estonia has not seen some heated debates on the issue (Bõkova 2022). Overall, the ascription of guilt (or responsibility) by the Estonian speaking majority to Russian citizens in this issue does not follow cultural or language-based differentiation, but strictly a juridical one. Last but not least, a considerably clear aspect of the matter is also a pure security problem of FSB agents potentially entering Estonia with malevolent plans (Politsei ja Piirivalveamet 2022).

A concomitant issue next to Russian citizens going on vacations through Estonia is, of course, the question of the responsibility of a relatively large number of Russian citizens who live in Estonia for the Putin regime. However, as they are not in a position to directly influence Russian politics, their responsibility in this regard has been left aside. Where Russian citizens living in Estonia come directly to the center is the question of a right to acquire, carry and use firearms in Estonia (Ots & Hindre 2022). Where, in both issues, the Estonian Russophone public comes into play is (if applicable) their partial identity with the Russian public through their information room being dominated by the Russia-controlled media. Therefore, a closure of border, as well as the ban of firearms, may come across as a harassment, even if of a relatively minor scale.

Perhaps the most direct, if also a strongly symbolic, problem that surfaced due to the Russian aggression in Ukraine has been the World War II memorial T-34 tank removal from Narva. For the Estonian public it had become a crucial issue of not allowing any symbol of the Russian war machine to stay intact in the Estonian public space (Postimees 2022b; Kiisler 2022). On the other hand, for local Russian speakers, the tank commemorated the World War II efforts of Russia, symbolizing not the war, but bringing peace to Europe. Next to that level, probably a more daily meaning of the tank was to be a part of a local Russian identity, a place to take one's wedding vows and photos (Nikolajev 2022). Yet, it is important to realize that not all Russophone people identify themselves with the tank (Straube 2022).

There are two relevant contexts in which to place the connotations that the tank carried and carries. First is the Russian propaganda that had not only solidified the place of World War II memories in the identity of local Russophones, but also exploited the memories of war to bolster Russia's imperial ambitions nowadays (Solman 2022). The second context is the Estonian integration policy. The tank had stayed in its place for over 30 years since Estonia became independent, only to become an unbearable issue in 2022. As such, it symbolizes the rather low profile of Estonian attempts to tie the Russophone minority to Estonian society. A more sustained and efficient integration policy would have probably removed the tank earlier, even if only symbolically from the central place of the local Russian identity.

Altogether, it is worthwhile to exemplify the implications of the differences among language groups in Estonia towards the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Estonian speakers tend to support the strongest possible measures against Russia, they are happy that Europe acts together, many of them find EU/NATO measures even too soft to have a sufficient and quick effect on Russia, and sanctions are seen as working but rather too slowly. At the same time, Russophones mostly support Russian version of interpreting the Ukrainian war and are therefore not only critical of but even angry towards the Western and Estonian countermeasures.

Policy trends: what has been done after 24th February 2022

On a popular level, Estonians are sensitive to any Russian interference both in Estonia and also in the whole of Europe. All signs of such an activity on behalf of Russia as well as the confirmed cases find a lot of attention in the media and in social media. The sensitivity can be so strong that in some cases, Russian interference is suspected even without actual facts supporting it. On a professional level, Russian interference is constantly analysed by the State Chancellery and by the Ministry of Interior. Drawing from both sources, it is no wonder that Estonian politicians and officials seldom consider themselves not merely as experts of Russian hybrid warfare but likewise as among the truth-tellers in this field. By the same token, the other Europeans are seen as more blind or even naïve. Thus, the latter need to be warned.

As Estonia itself is one of the leading nations that has donated the highest sums *per capita* to Ukraine, the wider Western help is also closely and

critically followed. In that regard, the CEE countries are held in esteem, as well as the United Kingdom and the United States. On the other hand, Germany, France, and Italy are considered much more suspiciously.

Most of the Estonian military and political elite considers only the United States to be capable to deter or properly respond to Russia. Nevertheless, based on Ukrainian experience, also collective effort from other NATO members states might have a sufficient effect. Still, participation of nuclear powers is essential, otherwise Russia is seen to turn the conventional confrontation quickly into nuclear blackmail. The United States, while contributing a lot when measured in dollars, has, however, been unable to take a convincing political position against Russia. More is needed, especially when a nuclear bluff or blackmail is expected from the Russian side. Therefore, in the Estonian eyes, the US needs to have a more clear and decisive strategic position on Russia at the moment and after the war ends.

Next to the United States., the UK is treated as the second most capable nation to respond to Russia in a way the Kremlin can understand. Often, as far as strategic messaging to Russia is in the limelight, the UK is seen as even the leading strategic force to send clear messages. The UK has a central place in the Baltics, as it has played key roles in both supporting Ukraine against Russia and by keeping Baltic deterrence credible in the recent years. Considering the growing risks, more British contribution is welcomed in Estonia and in Ukraine.

The EU on the other hand, even if the implementation of the sanctions was relatively quick, has not performed according to needs and expectations. A more united and integrated Europe is needed to counter current security and energy risks and threats. Still, more hopes are on the US-UK axis than on the EU. In comparison to the UK and the United States, for the Estonian taste, France, Germany and Italy have been too hesitant and lacking clear strategic messages. The economic, especially energy-related ties appear to weigh too heavy on their shoulders and tend to drag them down to look for compromises with Putin. At the same time, many CEE countries have been much more agile in responding to Russia. As Poland in particular has been punching above its weight in responding to Russian aggression against Ukraine, it is they, that have been viewed as the informal group leader. Poland is seen as a good example of how to send military equipment quickly and in big quantities. Likewise, the Czech and Slovak republics are seen as the ones who help as much as they can despite their small size.

Next to the West, a critical question touches the role of non-Western third nations like China, but also Turkey as a de facto friendlier nation towards Russia. According to the Estonian elite, global views and third countries' policies will ultimately play a crucial role, and the West should actively try to engage them as allies. We should engage with everyone who helps to defeat Russia, even when we need to compromise the democratic standards. The position of third countries including China, India, Brazil, Egypt, Vietnam, Bangladesh, etc., is vital as Russia is hoping to reduce the impact of the Western sanctions through trade with those states. These states may also help Russia to receive technologies sanctioned by the Western countries. In Estonia, mostly the position and role of China is debated, sometimes India as well, while the rest of the countries are rather left aside. Altogether, in the current situation all reasonable allies are seen as welcome. Most complicated questions often concern the closest NATO allies. Some of them have already started to support Russia. From the Estonian perspective Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey have been doubtful partners in the past in relations with Russia. However, this should not limit working together with these states at this time.

Estonian Donations to Ukraine

Per capita, Estonia has been among the biggest donors of military and other aid to Ukraine, in May 2022 being a world-leading nation (Hankewitz, 2022). Altogether, by May 2022, a total of €230 million worth of military aid has gone to Ukraine from Estonia, consisting of about 3,000 EUR-pallets and 20 units of machinery. In addition to Javelin anti-tank missiles and 122mm Howitzers, Estonia has sent minesweepers, anti-tank grenade launchers and guided anti-tank systems, as well as other military and supporting equipment. Estonia has also delivered 4x4 armored vehicles to Ukraine. In addition, the state has helped deliver tens of millions of euros worth of privately collected aid, all of which has reached Ukraine. "Since the beginning of the conflict, we have continued to support Ukraine with both military and humanitarian aid and have also supported the sending of large-scale private aid to Ukraine" (Estonian Public Broadcasting, 2022b). Next to the gunnery and munitions, Estonia is considering deploying military personnel in support of the UK's initiative to train Ukrainian forces. The country also plans

to send medical supplies and set up a field hospital for Ukrainian troops in partnership with Germany.

According to the Minister of Defence, Hanno Pevkur, “The Estonian Defence Forces are especially proficient in training reservists for combat in an intense conventional war against a larger adversary – meaning, precisely for the kind of war that Ukraine is in right now,” said Pevkur.” Also, “our moral responsibility is to continue supporting Ukraine. They are fighting for our shared values, and if there is anything we can send to Ukrainians, we have to do so.” By August 2022, the Estonian government had provided Ukraine with a total of 250 million euros (\$251 million) in military aid, including howitzers, anti-tank munitions and weapon systems, grenade launchers, communication equipment, light weapons, tactical gear, medical supplies, and food (Manuel, 2022). This way, Estonia has donated one-third of its military budget to embattled Ukraine to strengthen its fight against Russia (Donmez, 2022).

As for humanitarian aid, Estonian people, government, and private sector have given over 20 million euros to Ukraine in total. (MoFA) Even if shocking, war in Ukraine has not been surprising for Estonians. Sharing a similar past and thence an urge to maintain their freedom, the need for help is well received. According to Nordstat, more than half of households in Estonia have donated money to Ukrainian causes. Volunteer groups have also bought, donated, and delivered a large number of SUVs that were requested by the Ukrainians to aid with the defense efforts (Estonian Public Broadcasting, 2022).

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

Conclusions: Lessons learned for Estonian political and military leaders.

Russian war against Ukraine has revealed the weaknesses of Estonian deterrence posture and its defence capabilities. Therefore, activities to rethink Estonia's defence strategy and to bring the forces and equipment to the level needed have already started. For example, the new aims include doubling the size of the Defence League, and procuring mid-range air-defence and MRLS rocket launchers. The main acute concern touches Estonia's ability to improve its deterrence posture and defence capability quickly enough to avoid possible Russian aggression in the upcoming years. Biggest complications have been identified to be caused by long procurement cycle of weapon systems and current high demand in the global market. On the positive side, budgetary concerns have been bypassed and the coalition has supported extraordinary allocation to defence forces for reforms and capability building.

Although activities and changes of situation and tactics in Ukrainian battlefields are, of course, continuing to impact Estonian positions in terms of what is needed and where to improve, the main thrust of the needed strategic changes are relatively clear. NATO's deterrence in the Baltics had so far been relying on a deterrence by punishment, bringing only so-called trip-wire troops over to be located in the three small states. However, as the Ukrainian war has demonstrated that Russia may embark on risky, if not irrational, conventional attacks, the need for permanently stronger presence in the Baltics, mounting to deterrence by denial, has become a new norm.

Before the Russian attack against Ukraine on 24th February 2022, it was considered that a Russian initiated imperial war could expand from Ukraine to Moldova and/or involve Belarus, but it will not reach- NATO territory. However, during the conflict this position has changed based on Russian aggressive rhetoric and conduct. Now it is rather believed that Putin could target NATO territory knowingly, even if not by nuclear assets. Current prediction according to Estonian CHOD Martin Herem is that if Russia is not defeated in Ukraine, the attack against the Baltic States will follow in upcoming years. Accordingly, Estonia is preparing for a possible full scale conventional conflict with Russia. It is against this backdrop that the current deterrence level is not perceived as enough against Russian ambitions. In parallel, Estonia is supporting Ukraine as much as possible by hoping that Russian losses there will at least postpone if not cancel Russian military plans against the Baltic States.

To achieve effective deterrence by denial, the role of the allies also becomes crucial. In that regard, there are worries in Estonia in terms of the strategic partners. When the U.S. and the UK are considered to meet the needs and expectations, that cannot be straightforwardly said about France, Germany, and Italy. Thus, although not directly applicable, a longtime trust in NATO and relative distrust in EU's defence arrangements has been confirmed for the Estonian elite. At the same time, Baltic cooperation and unity is working well and the partnership with Poland has become stronger. Both are considered as also vital for Estonia's survival.

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

The main processes include several decisions. A need to switch from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial has been well received by NATO. At the Madrid summit in 2022 the NAC considered the assets and structures needed to prevent Russian aggression in the region, and decided upon deploying a division to each Baltic state including also division HQ. Estonia has also prioritized additional consultations on allied assistance in case of regional escalation. In terms of individual defence, there has been recognized an immediate need for mid-range air defence capability, and improving the readiness and size of the paramilitary national Defence League, increasing its active members from 10,000 to 20,000. To meet the immediate needs for development, extraordinary budgetary allocations to Defence Forces of 800mil-1bil euros were approved for new capabilities, building up ammunition reserve and developing new structures.

But the Russian invasion also poses important questions about Estonia's integration policy. The best litmus test in this regard is the Narva tank. In a context where for more than 30 years the Estonian integration policy had relatively minuscule ambitions, actions, and success with the Narva (and other North-Eastern Estonian Russophone) people, the removal of a tank by the decision of central government, over the head of local council government, acquired a certain flavour of revenge to it. At the same time, since the tank entered the public attention in the summer of 2022, it was also

impossible – considering the brutalities that Russia committed in Ukraine – to allow the tank to stay in its place. Yet, it is to be wondered, if a more subtle approach by the Estonian government would have been more efficient, whereby the Estonian Russian speaking community would have been left alone in juxtaposing its long-term embrace of the policies of the Russian Federation, with the brutal reality of a Ukrainian war which the Kremlin brought home to the Donbas Russophones. This kind of contemplation over an inner identity issue could perhaps have won over more hearts and minds compared to the robust tank removal, an externally imposed problem. Nevertheless, the reality which necessitated the rather simple self-enactment of the Estonian community mirrors showed well, the relatively underdeveloped nature of Estonian integration policy.

Finally, coming back to Estonian views of the events in Ukraine, defining victory or success for Ukraine in the current conflict has been a topic to be avoided among Estonian political community in debates during recent months. Under the current circumstances in Ukraine, it is more about damage limitation, than about achieving something that would make Ukraine, Estonia, NATO, and EU feel victorious. The best possible scenario would be that Russia is forced out from the Ukrainian territory and that will cause a regime change in the Kremlin. The best possible outcome for Estonia is that the war will cause regime change in Russia and bring more, if not fully, democratic forces to power. Also, military and economic weakening of Russia might be sufficient to secure the Baltic states for upcoming 3–5 years. But Russia needs to suffer 50 percent more losses in Ukraine to start to struggle with internal complaints and a loss of public support. The impact of economic sanctions is present, but it is slow and it is likely to start having visible effects on Putin's popularity from the end of 2022.

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