

# Magical Realism? Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of the Nordic-Baltic Region

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## Abstract

This chapter examines whether Russia's war in Ukraine has fostered a Nordic-Baltic variant of "magical realism" – a strategic narrative in which improbable scenarios are normalised as politically plausible. Drawing on regional history and contemporary threat perceptions, it traces how Russia's brutality and ambiguity amplify anxieties while institutional assessments (NATO, EUCOM) risk overemphasising Russian reconstitution and underestimating allied advantages. The analysis situates quantitative claims within their social-scientific limits – constructed metrics, neglected error margins, and technocratic drift – and contrasts them with structural realities: Russia's military attrition, economic strain, and likely preference for sub-threshold coercion over large-scale invasion. It argues that the centre of gravity in the Nordic–Baltic region is not the Baltic Defence Line but the confidence-based social contract that binds ministers, mayors, police chiefs, and citizens. The strategic task is therefore twofold: pierce magical realism with contextualised appraisal, and prioritise resilience against hybrid operations – sabotage, cyber, influence, and aerial incursions – designed to erode public trust and allied resolve.

## Introduction

Has Russia's war in Ukraine nurtured a distinctly Nordic–Baltic variant of "magical realism" – a strategic narrative in which a plausible chain of events gradually shades into a seeming fiction, yet remains treated as realistic and politically imaginable? Borrowing from its origins in Latin

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American literature, “magical realism” describes a worldview in which the extraordinary is woven into an otherwise ordinary setting and is treated as normal rather than fantastical. The supernatural is not questioned or framed as an anomaly; it is presented as a natural extension of everyday reality. Miraculous or improbable developments are narrated in the same tone as routine occurrences, without justification or surprise. In such a narrative space, the boundary between the ordinary and the extraordinary dissolves, and both coexist comfortably.

In the European periphery – particularly in the Nordic–Baltic region, where geopolitical fragility is layered onto deep historical memory – this logic resonates strongly: strategic fears that during the 1990s seemed slightly more improbable now appear not only possible, but increasingly normalised. Here, along the Russian rim, democratic communities have for generations experienced Stalinist brutality: mass deportations, political suppression, ethnic discrimination, invasion, and systemic identity extinction. Magical realism in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania thus becomes a natural outcome of a post-colonial experience – a history shaped by two opposing realities: that of the conqueror and that of the conquered.

Russia's unprecedented brutality in Ukraine has fuelled this narrative. Beyond Finno-Baltic territories, millions of Europeans in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark believe that World War III may soon commence. Within two to five years – once Ukraine has crumbled under Russian belligerence or a stalemate has been installed – the world's largest state will turn its wrath westward, toward NATO's Achilles' heel: Europe's most vulnerable outpost, the Nordic-Baltic region (SAB, 2024; DDIS, 205). But how likely is this worst-case scenario?

### **Strategies Fuelling War**

Are new military adventures – from Northern Norway, along the Finnish border, and into the Baltics – a realistic option for Russia? Or is it merely an awkward form of magical realism: a narrative forged by irrational consternation among smaller states unable to defend themselves? The answer is that nobody knows. Decision-makers in Moscow, Helsinki, Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius are definitively adrift. Strategy is, after all, about managing the unforeseen. While minor disputes with Russia's hybrid warriors in the FSB, GRU, and SVR ebbs and flows, the point is – as always – to ‘get more

out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest'. This is, as pointed out by Sir Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: 'the art of creating power'* (Freedman 2013, xii). In the Nordic-Baltic region and beyond, power is created by taking precautionary action. Just in case minor disputes, accidentally or deliberately, spiral out of control. Under the Latin adage *Si vis pacem, para bellum* (if you want peace, prepare for war), Russian and Baltic adversaries act proactively against each other's pre-emptive efforts of attaining security.

But even though proactive defence conveys defensive intentions, the "collective West's" body language is always contextualised offensively by Russia. The escalating tit-for-tat logic that ultimately evolves leaves both Russia and the Nordic-Baltic region worse off. Even though NATO's 2025 modernisation plan is valued at \$1 trillion, and even though six percent of Russia's 2025 budget goes to defence, spiralling counter-reactions only fuel more uncertainty. This is fertile ground for magical realism: the psychological tension thrives while perceptions of an increasingly lowered threshold for a full-scale Russian attack accelerate. Under such circumstances, academics have one task: to plunge through magical realism and scrutinise how realistic a Russian full-scale invasion is.

### **Territorial Ambitions**

Such scrutiny builds upon information, but data is never neutral. Empirical evidence of imminent or plausible Russian war plans are therefore inherently uncertain. This is partly because the Kremlin pursues a doctrine of strategic ambiguity; a rule of thumb designed to instil fear among smaller neighbours. As ambiguity fuels Russian respect and recognition, Nordic-Baltic anxiety is a valued currency in Moscow. But uncertainty also thrives because war plans are made within a complex social and political context. Putin's psychology, Kremlin groupthink and self-censorship, Russia's economy, and its 'Armed Forces' operational status vis-à-vis NATO rivals – these are all fluctuating variables and vague indicators. Sometimes they co-vary, sometimes not. Russian war planning is, by and large, a social phenomenon with no clear-cut answers.

Consistent patterns of intent may nevertheless be traced. For as long as President Putin craves a multipolar world free from American dominance, Russian foreign policy ambitions will likely follow a two-tier approach: (i)

break the transatlantic relationship that allows US and European forces to operate effectively in the Nordic-Baltic region and (ii) re-establish the exclusive sphere of influence that Russia once enjoyed. This approach provides Moscow's General Staff with strategic depth and warning time – geopolitical principles that insulate Russian resilience against the West's coercive diplomacy. In doing so, Putin seeks to elevate Russia into the inner circle of global powers.

These ambitions are reinforced by political rhetoric. The Kremlin's narrative against the Baltic states increasingly resembles the discourse used prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. *Russkiy Mir* (the Russian World) functions as both an ideological and geographic expression of expansionist intent – a humiliated power that seeks revenge by reclaiming former territories. States that historically belonged to the Soviet Union, the Russian Empire, the Grand Duchy of Moscow, or even Kyivan Rus, cannot be considered safe (President of Russia, 2021). This rhetoric is energised by political programmes aimed to protect “compatriots abroad”. Countries like Estonia and Latvia, where approximately 25 to 30 percent of the population is Russophone, are thereby part of *Russkiy Mir*. From this, we may logically expect that large swaths of the Nordic-Baltic region should be reunited with Russia's “historical territories”.

### **No Biases Attached?**

But rhetorical language is only words, and words are empty unless they are underpinned by capabilities and put into action. Evidence-based facts are therefore essential, including those from NATO and US European Command (EUCOM). According to NATO's Secretary General, Mark Rutte, Russia's wartime production is four times the Alliance's annual output; within five years Russia could be fully combat-ready. NATO members would thus require a 400% increase in air and missile defence, thousands of additional armoured vehicles and tanks, millions of shells, and more robust logistics, transport, supply, and medical support (Chatham House, 2025). But how objective are these claims?

On one reading, they align with EUCOM's 2025 testimony. General Christopher Cavoli told the US Senate Armed Services Committee that Russia is producing “vast quantities” of new hardware and reconstituting forces faster than expected. He cited roughly 1,500 tanks, 3,000 armoured vehicles,

and about 200 Iskander and cruise missiles annually; Russian shell output already exceeds projected US-European monthly production ( $\approx 250,000$  vs.  $\approx 180,000$ ). Russia is reportedly on track for 1.5 million active personnel, recruiting  $\sim 30,000$  per month, with  $\sim 600,000$  on the Ukrainian front. Forces that were “poorly resourced and disorganised” in early 2022 have “improved significantly” and gained combat experience (United States Senate Armed Services Committee, 2025).

On another reading, neither NATO nor EUCOM is neutral. Their assessments arise from institutional incentives and member-state intelligence, shaped by professional socialisation and doctrinal preferences. This is not hard science; it is social science, and thus interpretive. Even when judgments converge under a shared flag or trusted commanders, numbers warrant caution. Quantification compresses multidimensional realities into narrow metrics; what resists operationalisation is sidelined. Because figures look impartial, they are treated as objective even when embedding cultural or ideological assumptions – what appears “measured” is often constructed. Error margins – labour shortages, technological constraints, defence-industrial choke points, contestable assumptions about Russia’s combat effectiveness – are easily forgotten downstream. And because numbers aggregate and display well, they can crowd out domain knowledge, historical experience, and qualitative expertise, yielding technocratic decisions that are statistically defensible yet strategically shallow. Most importantly, Russia’s strengths and NATO’s shortcomings are often insufficiently contextualised. A recurring Western pattern is to overstate Russian reconstitution while underestimating the Alliance’s structural advantages. A more balanced appraisal situates quantitative claims within a broader strategic context – and recognises what numbers can and cannot show.

### **On Strengths and Vulnerabilities**

The dynamics on the Ukrainian battlefield invite many interpretations – some of which are less influenced by Western delusions or defeatism. Thanks to Putin’s ill-conceived 2022-decision to launch a strategic assault on Ukraine, the Kremlin is now arguably at its weakest military position since World War II. Since 1945, neither the Soviet Union nor Russia has suffered losses as staggering as those seen in Ukraine – amounting to over one million casualties.

According to Ukraine's Ministry of Defence (2025), Russian forces have lost approximately 170,000 pieces of military hardware, including 11,000 tanks, 30,000 artillery systems, 23,000 armoured vehicles, 420 planes, 340 helicopters, and 28 ships.<sup>1</sup> The Kremlin's misjudgement of a swift regime change in Europe's second-largest state has backfired – drawing two of Russia's most strategically sensitive buffer states, Sweden and Finland, into the world's mightiest military alliance.

As Russia's armed forces became bogged down in the Donbas quagmire, the Nordic-Baltic region has witnessed an unprecedented surge in foreign military support. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are no longer defended by small NATO tripwire battalions from 13 member states, as was the case during the post-Crimean 2014–2022 era. Today, Russia's western rim states face a growing and coherent NATO reinforcement and readiness architecture at the divisional level, from 18 European member states that ruinously rotates in and out of the region. This means that if Russia launches a military attack, it will not be a war between Russia and the Baltic states, but between Russia and 30 European countries – that is part of a US-led alliance accountable for more than half of the world's military expenditure. Only the European NATO-allies spend twice as much as Russia on defence, they have a ninefold economic output (GDP), twice as many soldiers and a threefold population. These resources are gradually enabled partly through NATO's streamlined command structure in Brunssum, Netherlands, but also through bilateral agreements under the United States' global Security Cooperation Agreement regime: Combined, the eight Nordic-Baltic nations benefit from no fewer than 58 US-designated military areas, allowing the world's most capable military power to project force into the region rapidly, if needed.

In addition to these bilateral agreements, NATO's multinational framework further reinforces the region's security. The Western surge in military investment has made the Nordic-Baltic region part of a military alliance capable of mobilizing approximately 3.4 million troops, 22,000 aircraft, and 2,100 naval vessels (Statista, 2025). Altogether, the 32 NATO member states account for 55 percent of global military spending – 31 percent more than in 2015 (NATO, 2025a). Many member states also possess some of the world's largest economies, including Germany, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ukraine's Ministry of Defence is soaked into an existential war for survival. Figures, numbers and assessments from the Ministry must therefore be taken with a grain of salt due to political, institutional, and value-based biases.

United Kingdom, and France. This means the Nordic-Baltic region is now integrated into an alliance that collectively produces more than half of the world's total GDP.

### **High Risk, Low Reward**

What most directly threatens the Nordic-Baltic region is the world's largest state – Russia – whose economy is roughly the size of Texas. Russia is in demographic decline, losing nearly 700,000 citizens annually to natural causes since 2020 (Rosstat, 2025). About 700,000 men fled after the Kremlin announced mobilisation amid Ukraine's counteroffensive in September 2022. Approximately one million have fled, died or become severely wounded.

Since the full-scale invasion, the Russian Army has lost its 170 battalion tactical groups – once the jewel of its force – designed to penetrate defences and seize territory. It has also forfeited much of its capacity for large-scale, joint air-ground operations at brigade and divisional levels. This degradation reflects the deaths of thousands of experienced officers; the loss of junior and mid-level leaders with joint expertise; reliance on undertrained replacements; and rigid, centralised command with insecure communications and weak battlefield networking. Consequently, Russia has been forced into a personnel-intensive war of attrition. Operating largely at platoon and company echelons, tactics are more often infiltrations with two to five men, or small-scale motorcycle and car manoeuvres than complex, multi-domain operations across land, sea, air, cyber, and space (ISW, 2025).

Unable to win decisive battles, the military offers large bonuses – roughly 25 months of salary – to attract up to 30,000 recruits per month. Territorial gains nevertheless remain modest: in 2023 fewer than 500 square kilometres, in 2024 slightly over 4,000 ( $\approx 0.7\%$  of Ukraine), and by mid-2025 roughly 3,500, or  $\approx 0.6\%$  of the country.

### **Labour, Inflation, and Strategic Costs**

Russia's war strategy has produced a tightening labour market. A shortage of working-age men is pushing up wages across sectors. Attritional warfare that prizes quantity over skill carries a familiar macroeconomic cost: an overheated economy. Rising wages lift consumption and, in turn, prices, and inflation. Officially, inflation sits just below 10% (TradingEconomics.com,

2025); unofficial estimates place it nearer 15%. In response, the Central Bank raised the policy rate to 21% – a 22-year high – before cutting to 16,5% in October, while mortgage rates spiked above 30% and now hover in the mid-20s (Kluge, 2025). If Moscow intends to rebuild its forces and expand the personnel pool to 1,5 million, the labour shortfall will impose substantial economic costs.

At the same time, Russia faces agile adversaries – foremost a US military that accounts for over 40% of global defence spending. At NATO's 2025 summit, all 32 leaders reaffirmed an “ironclad commitment” to Article 5 (NATO, 2025b). The result is a credible US-anchored deterrent in which nuclear forces play an increasingly central role. Despite President Trump's pressure on NATO-Europe over decades of free-riding, Nordic-Baltic allies have been reassured that the US pivot to Asia will proceed “step by step”, leaving “no capability gaps for NATO in Europe” (Chatham House, 2025).

### **Russia's Battle-Avoidant Modus Operandi**

To avoid a nuclear escalation that leaves everybody worse off, Russia's most likely course of action will unfold below the threshold of open war. This reflects its limited capacity to sustain effective operations along a 3,172-kilometre front from the Barents Sea to Kaliningrad – and potentially farther west and south – and its long-term tie-down in the Donbas. A full-scale attack on Northern Norway, parts of Finland, or the Baltics is unlikely absent control of eastern Ukraine. Europe's second-largest force – roughly 900,000 active Ukrainian troops – will bind significant Russian capacity for years. This is even though the force will be reduced to 600,000 or 800,000 in an eventual US-brokered peace deal. Russian bindings will partly be due to persistent small-scale insurgent operations in Donbas, and partly by deployments along key corridors on the Russo-Ukrainian front.

Accordingly, the Nordic-Baltic region is unlikely to face a sweeping invasion through the 2020s and well into the 2030s. Instead, governments, military commands, mayors, police chiefs, and citizens will confront persistent, sub-threshold disruption: airspace incursions (e.g., the September 2025 breaches over Estonia and drone violations of Polish airspace), alongside hybrid attacks on critical vulnerabilities within civic communities. Such activity will not flow primarily through Russia's conventional chain of command but through security services like the FSB, GRU, SVR, and

Wagner; agencies operating with proxies in civilian guise with increasingly broader mandates.

Rather than major incursions, Russia's preferred course of action is more likely to feature targeted violence, weaponised migration, election interference, cyberattacks, sabotage, and provocative aerial intrusions. The near-term objective is less the forcible realisation of *Russkiy Mir* than the cultivation of anxiety, defeatism, and political paralysis inside Nordic–Baltic civic communities.

### **Targeting the Confidence-Based Social Contract**

This strategy follows an enduring logic commonly attributed to the Chinese general and philosopher Sun Tzu (2020), 2500 years ago: avoid strength and attack weakness; strike where the opponent is most vulnerable. As long as the Nordic-Baltic region remains within NATO, core vulnerabilities lie not along the Baltic Defence Line but in the political domain – above all, the collective will in Berlin, London, Paris and Washington to accept risk and, if necessary, use force even though their own citizens are not directly threatened.

The Baltic-Nordic region's first line of defence is therefore not NATO's material preponderance. It is the social fabric that bind together ministers, generals, mayors, police chiefs, and citizens – within a resilient community of like-minded states. Hence Russia's high-value target is the Western bond of public trust and confidence: the social contract between citizens and the state – the glue that holds governed and governance together (Borch and Heier, 2024). Membership in the world's most powerful alliance counts for little if the will to act erodes under the sway of “magical realism”.

### **Look to Latvia**

A useful approach may be to follow Latvia's strategy. Its comparatively high spending on “public order and safety” reflects a deliberate effort to protect what it sees as its foremost vulnerability: internal cohesion and the will to resist Russian harassment. Russia's most likely course of action is therefore understood primarily as an internal-security challenge rather than an external military contingency (Schultz et al., 2026). Unlike Estonia and Lithuania – where key hybrid-threat capabilities sit within defence,

cyber-defence, or strategic-communication structures – Latvia locates the core of its hybrid-threat response in Ministry of the Interior agencies, including the State Police, the State Security Service (VDD), the State Border Guard, and civil-protection and crisis-response bodies (Latvian Ministry of the Interior, 2023; Baltic Perspective, 2022). This placement directs the cost of safeguarding its most critical vulnerability into the public-order budget rather than defence. Consequently, Latvia's budgetary profile highlights a strategic choice that prioritise policing, internal security, and societal resilience over a slightly one-sided military expansion. In comparative perspective, this interior-centred model makes Latvia more dependent on internal-security institutions than its Baltic neighbours and helps explain its higher public-order expenditure.

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