



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
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**ESTONIA AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE:
TIME TO LISTEN TO EASTERN EUROPEANS**

NINO CHANADIRI

192

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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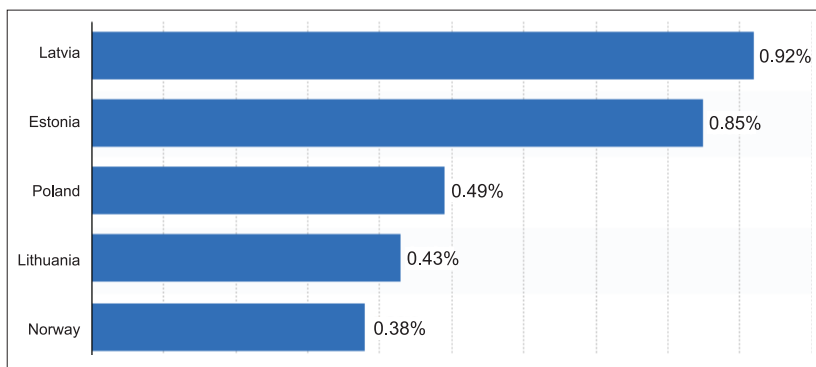
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Estonia, a small country on the Baltic sea coast with a population of 1.3 million, became one of the role models alongside the other Baltic states when it comes to supporting Ukraine after the Russian invasion in February. According the data available about the bilateral aid to Ukraine from winter 2022 to October 3, Estonia is among those countries which are assisting the most. Estonia has provided aid to Ukraine worth more than 0.8% of its own GDP. It includes financial, humanitarian and military assistance. However, Estonian officials have noted that it is not enough and everyone should do more while Ukraine is still in a war as “deeds speak louder than words.”¹



Total bilateral aid commitments to Ukraine as a percentage of donor gross domestic product (GDP) between January 24 and October 3, 2022 by country. Source: Statista.Com (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1303450/bilateral-aid-to-ukraine-in-a-percent-of-donor-gdp/>)

It has been explained by Estonian officials many times that Estonia’s support for Ukraine is dictated by a moral responsibility to support a country invaded by a common rival – Russia, which commits international crimes on Ukrainian territory. However, Estonia’s actions are also closely connected to its national interests and security needs that are linked to the overall situation on the common stage of Eastern Europe. To fully understand Estonia’s actions and their importance during the war in Ukraine, it is necessary to look at Estonian experiences in a broader perspective and consider Estonia’s historic relations with Russia, its current security challenges, its interests and their relevance in terms of the ongoing war in Ukraine that affects the entire European continent. It can also help to answer the questions: What causes Estonia’s desire to provide support in all possible ways to Ukraine? Why is it more important than ever that the rest of the West listen to Eastern European voices when they

provide warnings about potential security threats coming from Russia in the coming years if the united Western front fails to ensure Russia's defeat in the war in Ukraine?

Grounds for Estonia's Understanding of the War in Ukraine

Estonia, a NATO member state neighboring Russia, shares the Soviet past and the experience of Soviet atrocities with other Eastern European countries, including Ukraine. The memory of mass deportations and killings during this era is still alive in Estonian society. Every year, Estonia celebrates its re-independence day in August which marks the country's independence from the Soviet Union. It is also a period of remembrance for a "Singing Revolution," a process known as Estonia's non-violent resistance against the Soviet regime and its fight for independence.²

Estonia has been a NATO member state since 2004, something which gives the country and its society more of a sense of security and Estonian officials often note that "Estonia is and will remain protected"³ thanks to its own defense forces, allies in NATO and partners in the EU despite the situation in the region. However, the country periodically still faces security challenges from Russia. As recent as the summer of 2022, Estonia experienced two violations of its airspace by Russian helicopters.⁴ In 2021, this number was higher and the country experienced the violation of its airspace by Russia on five occasions.

Cyber-attacks from Russia are also well known for Estonia. Amidst the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Estonia made a decision this summer to remove Soviet monuments from public spaces, including the most controversial monument of the tank in Narva, a town near the Russian border with a predominantly Russian speaking population. The tank symbolized the capture of Narva by the Red Army. Despite the dissatisfaction in the local Russian population, the tank, as a symbol of occupation, was removed. As a response, Russian authorities decided to install the identical tank monument across the river from Narva on the Russian side of the border with Estonia.⁵ The decision about the removal of the monuments was followed by a cyber-attack from Russia on both private and public sector institutions. According to the Estonian side, the attacks were ineffective. However, the attacks were described as among the most "extensive" during the last decades.⁶

How Russia views Estonia after the dissolution of Soviet Union was well reflected in Dmitry Medvedev's reaction to the Estonian decision to ban Russian tourists from entering the country. As a comment, Medvedev said that Estonia's independence was a Russian shortcoming, clearly noting that Moscow views it as a mistake.⁷ Despite bitter reaction from Russia, Estonia made a decision to ban Russian tourists and was encouraging other EU states to follow this path. Estonia was noting that it is an effective sanction, considering the fact that only a small privileged part of Russian society living mostly in big cities can afford traveling.⁸ Taking this opportunity from them was justified both from a moral perspective – that it is not normal that Russian citizens continue enjoying normal life when Russia is committing war crimes in Ukraine. It was also justified because it could bring consequences to Russia as well as those privileged part of society, dissatisfied by the inconvenience, would see the fault of their political elite.

Considering the situation in the Eastern European region and the remaining threats from Russia, it should not be a surprise that Estonia plans to increase its defense expenditure. According to the Estonian Ministry of Defense, the country's defense expenditure will exceed 3% of the GDP for the first time in 2024.⁹

Having Russia as a common security threat unites Estonia with not only other Baltic states in a same context but also Ukraine and Georgia. That is the reason why Estonia has always been a supporter of these two countries on the international arena and this is also why they have historically good relations with Estonia. Russia's attack on Ukraine has been viewed in Estonia as not only a brutal violation of the territorial integrity of a sovereign state but also as a continuation of Russia's imperial politics which consider the entire post-Soviet space as its own sphere of influence. In this sense, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was not only an invasion of this specific country but also a signal to other potentially vulnerable states as well that they can be the next in line if Russia succeeds in Ukraine. Estonia's deep understanding of this reality was the impetus for its significant and multi-dimensional support for Ukraine.



Freedom Square, Tallinn, 2022 (Photo by Nino Chanadiri)

Political, Military and Development Support

Estonia has been supporting Ukraine in different ways. Starting with political support, Estonia has been a key supporter of Ukraine against Russia's invasion from the first day of the war. It has been expressed not only in words but also in official steps. In April 2022, Estonia became the first country which officially recognized Russia's actions in Ukraine as genocide.¹⁰ On September 24, Estonia submitted a declaration of intervention to the International Court of Justice in relation to the case of Ukraine versus Russia, declaring Russia as party to the conflict committing genocide.¹¹ On October 18, the Estonian parliament declared Russia as a terrorist regime, repeating the example from its Baltic neighbors – Latvia and Lithuania.¹²

Estonia has always been among those countries which has been advocating for Ukraine and Georgia at EU and NATO levels, supporting their integration

into the Euro-Atlantic structures and sharing its experience of reforms. On September 30, hours after Russia announced the annexation of four regions of Ukraine - Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk and Donetsk,¹³ Ukraine officially applied for NATO membership.¹⁴ On October 3, nine presidents from Central and Eastern Europe, including Estonia, declared their support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and the 2008 NATO summit decision which stated that Ukraine and Georgia will become NATO member states.¹⁵ This once again showed the united vision against Russia aggression in these parts of Europe and the understanding of the importance of Ukraine's integration into the Euro-Atlantic family.

As for military support, Estonia has been providing weaponry, military equipment, communication devices and medical equipment to Ukraine. It also provides trainings for the troops which are on the battlefield.¹⁶ Estonia has been among those which have been pushing on the bigger partners in terms of military capabilities to send military equipment and weapons to Ukraine. Recently, the Estonian Foreign Affairs Minister has been reminding Western partners, including the US and France, to provide air defense systems to Ukraine as quickly as possible.¹⁷

Alongside the military and political support, Estonia has been involved in reconstruction and development plans in Ukraine. Estonia concentrates on rebuilding the Zhytomyr region. It has already been announced that Estonia will build a kindergarten in the town of Ovruch which will also include the involvement of private companies from Estonia.¹⁸

Estonia is also among those countries receiving Ukrainian refugees. According to the data, almost 112,000 refugees crossed the border by the end of October and more than 61,000 Ukrainians are staying in Estonia.¹⁹ However, the country has been announcing that it is preparing for more border crossings. Border guards are ready to receive more refugees; however, Estonian officials are also trying to be ready for all scenarios, including situations like on Belarusian-Polish border as Ukrainians are crossing the border from the Russian side as well and Russia might use this for its own advantage.²⁰

Time to Listen to Eastern Europeans

It is no secret that the security challenges coming to Eastern Europe from Russia have not been seen as alarming for the western part of the

continent for a long time. Despite the calls from the Baltic states and other Eastern European countries that appeasing the dictator in Russia was not a successful path for regional security, partnerships with Russia were still forming in the energy and other sectors even after the experience of the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia and the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea. February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine once again, was like an alarm bell for the entire West that something radical should have been done, otherwise Ukraine would not be the latest state to experience Russian aggression. However, it was still expected that the attitudes about how to solve the conflict would be different across European continent. The sanctions against Russia, imposed by the West, also affects Western economies. To avoid too much damage, some might prefer fast solutions to the situation including Ukraine giving away some parts of its territory in exchange of a peace treaty with Russia. However, the Ukrainian side critically rejected any opportunity of such a scenario, saying that Ukraine will fight for its territory.²¹ Eastern European countries, including Estonia, strongly believe that the only right way can be continuing to support Ukraine and putting effort forth in order to punish Russia for its crimes. Russia successfully avoided heavy consequences in the previous cases of its invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, something which eventually did lead to the current situation. In one of her interviews, the Estonian Prime Minister mentioned that it is important now for other countries to listen to them.

“In the cases of Georgia, Donbas and Crimea, we – and by ‘we’ I mean the EU and the rest of the free world – acted in accordance to what the big EU countries said: Let’s have a peace treaty and this will all be over. But Russia only understands weakness and strength, and a peace treaty means showing weakness for them: yielding territories and nothing happening to Russia and Russians. Therefore, every next step will be bolder on the Russian side,” said Kaja Kallas.²²

Ending the war in Ukraine with a peace treaty that will leave Russia unpunished for its actions and crimes against humanity is not seen as a desired peace by Estonian officials. While for some countries ending the fire is the ultimate goal, the Estonian Prime Minister says that it will not stop Russia’s terror on the occupied territories - “ If the aggressor is not punished and we go back to business as usual, then everything will continue,” said the Prime Minister of Estonia.²³ Recently, the Estonian

Defense Minister has been warning that if the West does not continue to put pressure on Russia and does not ensure Ukraine's victory, Russia can rebuild its forces in two to four years²⁴ which means that security challenges from Russia vis-à-vis the Eastern European region will persist and no country can be safe if the Russian imperialist foreign policy does not come to an end. Thus in Estonia, making sure that the aggressor is punished is crucial and a united Western front is important to achieve this goal.

What is more, Ukraine's victory is perceived in Estonia as a victory of the "free world" and even though the process of achieving this victory comes with heavy consequences for Europe and its partners, Estonia's current and former officials are sure that that it is a price worth paying for the common good. As the former President of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid, said, the free world's failure to win this war will encourage other autocrats as well. The lessons should be learned from 2008 in Georgia and 2014 in Ukraine where lacking an adequate response to Russian aggression only encourages future aggressive moves like the one in 2022.²⁵

Conclusion

Estonia as country close to Russia's border and with experiences of Russian brutalities in the past and security challenges in the present views the war in Ukraine as not only as a matter of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of one country but also as a matter of Eastern European security. Ensuring a Ukrainian victory in the war and keeping Russia responsible for its crimes is crucial for a stable security environment in Eastern Europe. In Estonia, attacking Ukraine was seen as a Russian signal to other Eastern European states as well that they might appear next in line in the future. Estonia as a neighbor of Russia which views Estonian independence as a "mistake," believes that its future security depends on the developments in Ukraine and if Russia, as a perpetrator, manages to avoid the consequences of its actions again as happened in previous cases.

Understanding this, Estonia is among the top countries which are helping Ukraine the most in terms of political, military and humanitarian support. It remains a supporter of Ukraine's integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures as well. In addition, Estonia has a mission to persuade other countries of the need for continued support for Ukraine and its importance

for overall Western security, unity and stability. It often reminds other Western countries of the previous mistakes made by the collective West that allowed Russia to continue its aggressive foreign policy and that it is important to make sure that peace is stable after the war by not allowing Russia to get away its crimes through signing a peace treaty which might easily be violated as also occurred in the past cases. It is now important for the rest of the Western world to learn from the past experiences and listen to Eastern European voices when it comes to the security challenges and the actions needed to limit these challenges in Europe.

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