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Issue Brief

Trump's Outreach to Putin has Implications for the Baltics

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Summary

Since the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Baltic states have been at the forefront of efforts in supporting Ukraine's war efforts. Trump vowing to end the conflict swiftly and the US becoming less promising as regards its security assurances to Europe complicates the security situation of these small states.

The three Baltic states—Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia—have been the most ardent supporters of Ukraine in defending its territory against the Russian invasion. Despite their minuscule economy, they have contributed higher percentages of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) than other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members, barring Denmark. From January 2022 to December 2024, Estonia has allocated more than two and a half per cent of its GDP, while Lithuania and Latvia have allocated around two per cent each, including bilateral as well as multilateral aid.¹ During the same period, military aid given to Ukraine by Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was Euros 0.7, 0.5 and 0.91 billion, respectively.²

Estonia has donated missiles for the Javelin anti-tank missile system, howitzers, anti-tank mines, anti-tank grenade launchers, mortars, vehicles, communications equipment, medical supplies, personal protective equipment, machine guns, ammunitions for light weaponry, various vehicles and vessels, diving equipment, winter uniforms, camouflage suits, dry food packages and mobile field hospitals.³ It has also provided training for Ukrainian soldiers.⁴

Lithuania primarily delivered armoured vehicles, heavy ammunition, anti-drone systems, modern initiation systems, trucks, thermal imaging sights and man-portable short-range air defence systems.⁵ Latvia gave anti-aircraft missiles, helicopters, howitzers, drones, weapons and personal equipment, dry food rations, ammunition and anti-tank weapons.⁶ Apart from financial and military support, the Baltic states also accepted a large number of Ukrainian refugees⁷ and invested heavily in educational, language and employment programmes.⁸

The Baltics’ support to Ukraine during the initial phase of the war, when bigger states like France and Germany were cautious of sending support to Ukraine, can be owed to their history. The 20th century oppression from the Soviets and Germany has hardened the security and territorial concerns for these states. Kaja Kallas, the former Estonian Prime Minister and current High Representative of the European

¹ Pietro Bompreszi et al., [“Ukraine Support After Three Years of War: Aid Remains Low But Steady and There is a Shift Toward Weapons Procurement”](#), Kiel Institute for The World Economy.

² Christoph Trebesch et al., [“Ukraine Support Tracker Data: Which Countries Help Ukraine and How?”](#), Kiel Working Paper, No. 2218, 2024, pp. 1–75.

³ [“Estonia’s Aid to Ukraine”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Estonia, 10 January 2024.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ [“Lithuania Strengthens Its Military Support to Ukraine with New Trailers and Ammunition”](#), *Army Recognition*, 13 December 2024; Iryna Kutielieva, [“Lithuania Hands Over New Military Aid Package to Ukraine”](#), *Ukrainska Pravda*, 19 February 2025; [“Lithuania Transferred to Ukraine Mobile Short-range Air Defence Systems with Missiles”](#), Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Lithuania, 30 January 2025.

⁶ [“Latvia’s Aid to Ukraine: As of June, 2024”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Latvia.

⁷ Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania accepted around 40,000, 53,000 and 80,000 Ukrainian refugees, respectively (viz. around 3 per cent, 2.7 and 2.8 per cent, respectively).

⁸ Isabella Hannén and Jason C. Moyer, [“Baltic States’ Contributions to Ukraine”](#), Wilson Center, 29 January 2024.

Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has been at the forefront in supporting Ukraine and reinforcing European unity against Russian aggression.

The Baltic states’ punching above their weight in securing European frontiers in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is now up against President Donald Trump’s Ukraine policy. While campaigning for the US elections, Trump had promised to end the Ukraine war within 24 hours after being sworn in. Trump’s recent phone call with Russian President Putin on ending the war felt like a betrayal to Europe and Ukraine, which were not consulted a priori. To add to the woes, US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth commented in Brussels that no American peacekeepers would be sent to Ukraine, and it is unlikely that Ukraine would return to pre-2014 borders or be admitted to NATO after the end of the war.⁹ He later defended his comments that not recognising Ukraine’s pre-2014 border, in lieu of ‘hard power realities on the ground’, is not a concession to Putin.¹⁰

Trump’s primary concern lies in ending a costly and bloody war and even bringing Russia back to the G7 to prevent the latter from becoming a ‘junior partner’ of China.¹¹

US Vice President J.D. Vance seeks to reset the US–Russia ties and commented: “It’s not in Putin’s interest to be the little brother in a coalition with China.”¹² Moreover, adding to European woes, Vance, speaking at the Munich Security Conference, stressed that alleged Russian interference in Western democracy has been overstated and refusing to curb migration in Europe was a “much greater threat to democracy than Moscow’s meddling in elections”.¹³ For Kallas, the European Union’s foreign policy chief, Vance’s speech gave the impression that the US was quarrelling with Europe.¹⁴

Hegseth in Brussels also affirmed that “safeguarding European security must be an imperative for European members of NATO”.¹⁵ The debate on ‘European Security by Europeans’ has been here for decades. It is just that the Trump administration has been accentuating the strategic shift away from Europe. While Europe may share uncertainty about future American involvement in guaranteeing its security, the

⁹ Andrew Gray and Lili Bayer, [“Hegseth Says Ukraine Cannot Expect Return to Old Borders, NATO Membership”](#), *Reuters*, 13 February 2025.

¹⁰ Kateryna Denisova, [“Recognizing Ukraine Won’t Restore Pre-2014 Borders ‘Not a Concession’ to Putin, Hegseth Says”](#), *The Kyiv Independent*, 13 February 2025.

¹¹ [“Trump Says Russia Should be Readmitted to G7”](#), *Reuters*, 14 February 2025.

¹² Bojan Pancevski and Alexander Ward, [“Vance Wields Threat of Sanctions, Military Action to Push Putin Into Ukraine Deal”](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 February 2025.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Léonie Chao-Fong and Jakub Krupa, [“Zelenskyy Demands ‘Real Security Guarantees’ Before Peace Talks; Vance Accused of ‘Trying to Pick a Fight’ with EU – As it Happened”](#), *The Guardian*, 14 February 2025.

¹⁵ Mykola Bielieskov, [“Europe Must Prepare to Defend Itself in an Increasingly Multipolar World”](#), *Atlantic Council*, 12 February 2025.

Baltics may even be less confident about a unified and coherent European strategy in assuring the Baltics’ security. Even in the pre-Trump era, there were debates on whether the US would risk a nuclear war with Russia in defending ‘tiny’ Baltics, where American interests are insignificant. It is unsurprising to say that in Trump’s realpolitik world, smaller states are left to look after their own security.

It is no wonder that since the onset of the Ukraine war, small Baltic states have been doing everything to socialise the wider Europe about a unified security outlook. These states not only increased their defence spending beyond NATO’s required 2 per cent of the total GDP, but they have also taken up an ‘unprecedented level of regional security cooperation’, including bilateral defence cooperation agreements with other NATO members such as Poland and the Nordic states.¹⁶ Moreover, these states showcased wider European support by taking active measures to end its complete reliance on Russian gas by 2022.¹⁷

With Trump vowing to end the conflict swiftly and the US becoming less promising as regards the security assurance of Europe, the task for the Baltics to keep wider Europe convinced, in the coming decades, that the former’s security would impact the latter’s too, becomes even more difficult. There are already signs of dissension among European states on dealing with post-war Ukraine after being sidelined by Trump in the pre-negotiation process.¹⁸

Owing to the massive human, economic and military costs involved in its war of attrition in Ukraine, Russia may not be able to mount an immediate conventional military challenge to the Baltics. However, this possibility cannot be discounted in the coming decades. The curse of geography would force Russia to make a military push in the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea region. With relatively minuscule investments in the Far East and the short-term infeasibility of transport in the High North, Russia largely depends on the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea ports for its exports to the world. Owing to the Ukraine war, Russia has remained invested even more in the Baltic Sea region for its exports. Russia inaugurated two major ports, Vysotsky and Luga port, near St. Petersburg to boost its exports through its westernmost region.¹⁹

As Russia rebuilds its economy after the Ukraine War, its larger geoeconomic interests would compel it to have a military presence in the Baltic and Black Sea

¹⁶ Anna Wieslander, [“How the Nordic-Baltic States are Leading the Way on European Security”](#), *Atlantic Council*, 4 December 2024.

¹⁷ Derek E. Mix, [“Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania: Background and U.S.-Baltic Relations”](#), *Congressional Research Service*, No. R46319, 7 January 2025.

¹⁸ Sriram Lakshman, [“European Leaders Differ on Peacekeeping in Post-War Ukraine”](#), *The Hindu*, 18 February 2025; Jorge Liboreiro, [“European Leaders Stress Support for Ukraine But Disagree on Peacekeeping Mission”](#), *Euroneews*, 17 February 2025.

¹⁹ [“Russia Expands Baltic Sea Ports Capacity to Reach Emerging African and LatAm Consumer Markets”](#), *Russia’s Pivot to Asia*, 26 September 2024.

region. Military dominance would help Russia protect its crucial sea lines of communication and larger geoeconomic interests. Russia already possesses a vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Black Sea, as it occupies around a fifth of Ukraine’s territory. Russia’s new deep sea port in Anaklia exacerbates Russian military dominance in the region.²⁰

Meanwhile, Russia’s Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities in Kaliningrad cannot be discounted. Russia successfully showed its A2/AD capabilities during the 2015 Syrian War. Kaliningrad ensures that the Baltic Sea is far from a ‘NATO lake’ despite Finland and Sweden joining NATO. Economic sanctions and human resource crunch will unlikely deter Russia from continuing its naval doctrine in the coming years, as evidenced by Russia’s continued hybrid ‘adventures’ in the Baltic Sea. These relate to the operation of Russia’s ‘shadow fleets’ which ‘intentionally’ carry out unsafe operations, avoid any commercial screening or inspection, and even engage in the automatic identification system (AIS) blackouts or spoofing.²¹ Unlike the large Ukrainian territory, the Baltics’ flatland and small territory (around one-fifth that of Ukraine in terms of area) does not offer room for a strategic retreat.

Russian foreign and security policy factors in history and identity as a ‘great power’. Putin has famously stressed that the Soviet Union’s collapse was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”.²² Russia sees its security negatively impacted if it fails to control critical geographical frontiers. With the Arctic remaining frozen for most of the year and transporting from Europe to the Far East ports via land requiring higher costs and time, Russian security necessitates that the countries in and around the Black and Baltic Sea region not fall to American control, for it could choke Russian economic lifeline. Putin had always been uncomfortable sharing a European landscape with the Americans. Needless to say, he has invariably raised the torch of a multipolar world. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference some 18 years ago, he attacked the US for a unipolar world and signalled his intent of having a ‘confrontationist approach’ to the collective West.²³

Though the Russian Black Sea Fleet suffered losses during the Ukraine War (as of June 2024, five medium-sized amphibious ships and 21 corvette-sized or larger combat vessels, including the cruiser *Moskva*, have been damaged or destroyed)²⁴,

²⁰ Rayhan Demytrie et al., [“Russia’s New Black Sea Naval Base Alarms Georgia”](#), *BBC News*, 13 December 2023.

²¹ Anna Caprile and Gabija Leclerc, [“Russia’s ‘Shadow Fleet’: Bringing the Threat to Light”](#), *European Parliamentary Research Service*, PE 766.242, November 2024.

²² [“Putin: Soviet Collapse a ‘Genuine Tragedy’”](#), *NBC News*, 26 April 2005.

²³ Frederick Kempe, [“Dispatch from Munich: Trump Has Put European History in Motion Again”](#), *Atlantic Council*, 14 February 2025.

²⁴ Mathieu Boulègue et al., [“Assessing Russian Plans for Military Regeneration: Modernization and Reconstitution Challenges for Moscow’s War Machine”](#), Research Paper, *Chatham House*, 9 July 2024.

the overall capability of the Russian Federation Navy remains undiminished.²⁵ Russia’s military presence in Kaliningrad and the narrow Suwalki Gap, separating the three Baltic nations from the rest of Europe, complicates security assistance to the Baltics during a conventional war.

The Kaliningrad Exclave hosts enhanced electronic warfare systems, integrated anti-aircraft/missile systems, precision strike capabilities including coastal missile complexes and short-range ballistic missile systems, and Iskander missiles aimed at gaining A2/AD. Primarily, the exclave hosts the Baltic Fleet, the 11th Army Corps, and a few squadrons consisting of a mix of Su-30SM, Su-24 and Su-27. In May 2022, Russia carried out a simulated nuclear missile strike from this exclave.

It is also delusional to believe that merely the presence of a trip-wire force would ensure NATO’s ‘deterrence by denial’ in the Baltics²⁶ at a time when Baltics’ railway infrastructure, which is crucial for logistics during any conventional war, remains more integrated to Belarus and Russia than the rest of Europe.²⁷

Trump’s style of handling the Ukraine crisis, therefore, has security implications for Europe and the Baltics. European security without American involvement raises alarms in Europe and forces them to reconsider the idea of an independent European security strategy. After a protracted war, the US will have to deal with a weakened Russia, while Moscow, despite losing significant troops and resources, would not lose the annexed territory if Trump’s proposal is carried out in the negotiation plan. Kirill Dmitriev, a close adviser to Putin, suggested that sanctions reduction would be a key focus of Russia’s negotiation with the US on ending the war.²⁸ Most surprisingly, Trump dispatched Scott Bessent, the secretary of the Treasury, to Ukraine to explore a possible deal to get Ukrainian rare-earth and critical minerals in exchange for continued US military aid.²⁹

In a scenario where Ukraine is denied its pre-2014 territory and NATO membership, and Russia is brought back to the G7, the real losers would be Ukraine, who fought for around three years to defend its territory, and the Baltics and wider Europe, who invested significantly to support Ukraine’s war effort. Going forward, with even lesser American involvement in European security affairs likely, the Baltics will hope that their European counterparts can come together to fashion a unified European security strategy.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Paul Poast and Dan Reiter, [“Death Without Deterrence, or Why Tripwire Forces Are Not Enough”](#), *War on the Rocks*, 17 June 2021.

²⁷ Justina Budginate-Froehly, [“The Missing Link: Railway Infrastructure of the Baltic States and its Defence-related Implications”](#), *Globsec*, 12 January 2024.

²⁸ Léonie Chao-Fong and Jakub Krupa, [“Zelenskyy Demands ‘Real Security Guarantees’ Before Peace Talks”](#), no. 14.

²⁹ Tom Balmforth et al., [“Trump Official Says Minerals Deal Will Give Kyiv Post-War ‘Security Shield’”](#), *Reuters*, 12 February 2025.

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