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Estonia: assessments of the Russian threat cause friction between Tallinn and Kyiv

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On 20 April, the Estonian government criticised Ukraine's information policy, including public speculation about a possible Russian attack on the Baltic states. This followed a suggestion by President Volodymyr Zelensky that Russia was preparing such an offensive and that not all NATO members would be "willing to defend them". Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna commented that Estonian intelligence assesses the situation differently and that Zelensky's remarks do not facilitate cooperation between Tallinn and Kyiv. Estonian Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur described Ukraine's information activities as an attempt to secure greater support from the West. The chair of the parliament's foreign affairs committee, Marko Mihkelson, stated that Ukrainian insinuations are weakening NATO's cohesion and that Zelensky is echoing Russian propaganda narratives. In an interview with TVP World in late March, Latvian Foreign Minister Baiba Braže said that Ukraine's information policy is detrimental to its plans to join NATO. Lithuanian Prime Minister Inga Ruginienė adopted the most conciliatory stance: in the context of Zelensky's remarks, she stated that rhetoric designed to instil fear should be avoided, as there are no grounds for it.

The intelligence services and leaders of the Baltic states assess that Russia's current mobilisation is not directed against countries on NATO's eastern flank. Media speculation regarding potential Russian aggression is increasingly met with irritation, particularly in Estonia and Latvia, as it fosters a climate of fear that is disproportionate to their assessment of the risk.

Commentary

- **Sharp criticism from Estonian politicians stems from frustration with Ukraine's tactics.** Kyiv has downplayed violations of Baltic airspace by Ukrainian drones, while issuing immediate apologies when similar incidents occurred on Finnish territory. Estonia has not received a satisfactory explanation even after a Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicle crashed into a chimney of the combined heat and power plant in Auvere (see: '*The Baltic states respond to incidents involving Ukrainian drones*'). Speculation about a potential Russian invasion is particularly problematic for Estonia, which has long struggled with a reputational issue surrounding Narva, an area portrayed by European media as especially vulnerable to attack. This deters potential foreign investors and tourists. At the same time, Ukraine continues to disregard Estonian requests made through diplomatic channels to refrain from harmful speculation.

- **Despite criticism from Estonia, Kyiv considers a Russian attack on the Baltic states to be a less likely scenario than a continuation of the invasion of Ukraine.** According to Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council (NSDC), further developments will depend on Russia's ability to rebuild its military capabilities. The primary objective of any such attack would be to test the credibility of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and to undermine NATO's unity, including with regard to supporting Ukraine. The NSDC's assessment comes in response to escalating restrictions on internet access in Russia (see: '*Russia blocks Telegram and cracks down on VPNs*'), which Zelensky has interpreted as part of preparations for mass mobilisation; the State Duma's adoption of regulations allowing the use of armed forces abroad under the pretext of 'protecting citizens' rights', and Russian accusations that Polish and Baltic airspace has been used for Ukrainian drone attacks on northern Russia. This narrative from Kyiv is intended to justify the need to increase support for Ukraine. At the same time, disregarding Estonia's objections reflects a broader pattern in Ukraine's strategic communications, characterised by relatively low sensitivity to how its actions are perceived by countries that are not regarded as priority partners.
- **Disagreements between Tallinn and Kyiv will not affect Estonia's support for Ukraine's war effort.** On 25 April, the two countries signed a letter of intent to establish a framework for cooperation between their defence industries. Since the start of Russia's invasion, Estonia has pursued a policy of full support for Ukraine, providing military, material, and humanitarian assistance, and offering firm political backing. During the tenure of Prime Minister Kaja Kallas (2021–24), Estonia was particularly active in lobbying at EU level for key initiatives to support Ukraine, including the use of frozen Russian assets and the commitment by the EU's member states to allocate the equivalent of 0.25% of their annual GDP to military aid for Ukraine.