

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Ukraine - 01 03 22, HC 1089

Tuesday 1 March 2022

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Liam Byrne; Alicia Kearns; Bob Seely; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 36-62

Witnesses

I: HE Vadym Prystaiko, Ukrainian Ambassador to the UK, and Captain Dmytro Donskoi, Ukrainian Defence and Air Attaché.

II: Dr Artis Pabriks, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Latvia, Gabrielius Landsbergis, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lithuania, and Ms Eva-Maria Liimets, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Estonia.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: HE Vadym Prystaiko and Captain Dmytro Donskoi.

Q36 **Chair:** Welcome to this morning's emergency session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is very good to have with us the ambassador from Ukraine. Ambassador, thank you very much for joining us. Perhaps you would like to start with the humanitarian situation and explain to us what we are seeing.

Ambassador Prystaiko: Thank you very much, dear colleagues. It is my honour to be with you today, and thank you for gathering this meeting, Tom.

We have two major things to look after right now, today. One is how we are struggling and putting up the fight militarily. We are holding together. I want to tell you that our armed forces are trying their best. People are signing up for territorial defence and for reserves. In two days, we have plus 100,000 people in the forces. We have some issues with equipping and arming them, but that is just logistical; we will cover it. We have started to receive military aid, sometimes on the level of jets, from our neighbouring NATO nations, from our neighbours and close allies.

This can be covered separately, but we are most concerned now with the humanitarian—with the civilian population. There are two groups. One is those ones who stay in the cities and are mostly suffering in big cities like Kyiv and Kharkiv—in Kharkiv it is even worse. These people have to be fed. So far they have everything—they have communications, electricity, sewers and water—but we see that these infrastructural objects are starting to be targeted specifically. The rest of Ukraine, especially the south, is very much in danger, with some of the towns already being occupied by Russian forces.

The second part of the humanitarian effort is mostly the people fleeing from central Ukraine and the east of Ukraine towards western parts of Ukraine. There are people coming in cars, but trains are still operational. People leaving mostly to Poland—the bottleneck is there. If we are correct now, 7 million people have already been displaced, and they are trying to find their way to the western part of Ukraine. This part where we are right now has been taken care of by Poland, Slovakia and other nations, but sooner or later they will run out of free hotels, houses and sport facilities where they are now establishing the receiving points, checkpoints and everything.

We are very thankful for all the nations that are supporting the efforts of our neighbours. The visa barriers that were lifted by many nations, the UK included, are very important. We still have to work on the procedures. We are working with your interior Departments to try to understand how the things announced yesterday can be implemented.



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The last thing I would like to raise for your awareness is that we will have to step up with the military assistance as well. There are just a couple of nations in the world that are doing it; the UK is one of them, but we realise the different nations have different capabilities, not even talking about the political will and humanitarian sort of approach and a part of their hearts to those who are suffering right now.

If you don't want me to go on, I will stop here. I am more than happy to reply to specific questions.

- Q37 **Chair:** Thank you very much. What is your assessment at the moment of Russia's progress towards the extraordinary goals that President Putin seems to have set himself?

Ambassador Prystaiko: They have managed to take over some of the thousand smaller towns and one of the regional centres. The aim is obvious: they are trying to get access from their territory towards Crimea. Their bigger plan is to have it all the way to Transnistria, where they have supported this unrecognised republic for many years with their 14th army in there, which will cut Ukraine off from the sea completely, including all the south, Odesa and all of those places.

The second priority they have is to supply water to Crimea. They have already started stealing water from the major river. They blew up the dam that was covering the canal from the Dnieper river to Crimea. They are now trying to revive this canal. This is where most of the advance has been done—under the nose of Ukraine.

Kyiv and Kharkiv are the places that are most in danger. They are starting both from their own border—we have a border with them on the north—and from the territory of Belarus. In the east of Ukraine, both of the unrecognised republics of Luhansk and Donetsk—the so-called people's republics—are advancing on their own, but their advancement is rather symbolic. I believe the Russians specifically cut them a part in the military advance, and they are mostly attacking Mariupol city, which is on the Sea of Azov, which is a big metallurgy hub.

- Q38 **Chair:** We have seen reports this morning about children being killed and injured in many of these towns. Can you give us an update on how the medical services are managing to hold on?

Ambassador Prystaiko: Surprisingly, this part is doing quite well. I am in constant contact with the Minister of Health. They are co-ordinating their efforts, but to realise how difficult this situation is, we have to have the full information from Ukraine, and some of these towns and cities are isolated. The supplies are still there, but nothing can return lives. The people are already suffering. We have found a softness in our hearts for treating the Russian wounded. We have promised them that they will be treated in our hospitals along with our own people, and then be returned to Russia after the war is over.

- Q39 **Chair:** What are the reports of civilian damage? We have seen very serious explosions and the detonation of bombs in Kharkiv, and very



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serious damage in Kyiv from the attack overnight. Do we know how many civilians have been killed and injured?

Ambassador Prystaiko: We just talked to people in the Kharkiv administration. They are still trying to get the bodies and those who are wounded from under the rubble. In one attack on a military establishment, 70 people were killed in one building. The losses are enormous. We are trying not to publicise these losses, for obvious reasons, but we will have an update on civilian casualties to share with you very soon.

Chair: Thank you very much. Bob—go on.

Q40 **Bob Seely:** Good morning, Ambassador. I hope you are well.

I have two lines of questioning, if I may. First, to develop some of the points that were made just now, can you tell us that there isn't going to be a food crisis as the shops run out of food, with potentially some pressure from looting? If the major cities begin to run out of food, that is both a humanitarian crisis, but also potentially a military route to victory—around the idea of Russia mounting what are effectively sloppy sieges of the major population centres, until desperate and hungry people either come out on to the streets to try to fight them, or give up in some form, because there are no supplies. What is your opinion about those scenarios?

Ambassador Prystaiko: I have some numbers, which I will be able to share with you only in closed conversations, unfortunately, because that is exactly Russia's purpose—you correctly pick up that they will try to crush the will of the Ukrainian people to resist. So far, I am asking private citizens to send me pictures of supermarkets and of how shelves are doing and how water is supplied. We see problems with cash, for example, and people running out of cash; if we have an interruption in services, the bank terminals will not work and we will have to have some, I don't know, military solution to the distribution of food.

I am working already with your Government and our embassies around the globe are working to reach out to humanitarian organisations. We have to pump up, if I may use that term, as much food as we can before all the routes are blocked. So far, we are holding all the routes to the west of Ukraine, so we have a lifeline, but there is a bottleneck—a very serious one. I am just thinking about whether humanitarian ships will be allowed in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, but we still have to explore that option.

Q41 **Bob Seely:** Do you think the Russian strategy is to militarily defeat Ukraine, or to starve and pressure its major cities until there is effectively a form of surrender?

Ambassador Prystaiko: They had hoped to be able to show their superiority everywhere and that Ukrainians would meet them with flowers, but there has been a lack of progress. That would be the picture that Putin would put on TV, explaining that it is not actually Ukrainians but some mythical Nazis that they were fighting, while the rest of the Ukrainians were greeting them with flowers. That is not happening. People are



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throwing Molotov cocktails from their cars as they pass by Russian tanks. All of this—all the hands in support and our resilience—is going against his plans, and people in Russia are starting to ask, “What are we doing there, and why?”

I believe that they might use the tactics that you described in the second part—try to block our cities, try to soften the political position, maybe try some riots in Ukraine, because of the lack of groups against the Government. In some cities, we introduced martial law. In some cities, looters have been ordered to be shot on the spot. There are people who have taken advantage of very difficult situations, and we are dealing with them in a military way.

Q42 Bob Seely: When it comes to civil breakdown, it is not an either/or with arms or food. It is an “and”. You need arms and you need food.

One more slightly general question: how generalised do you think the fighting is? The media tends to focus on the most visible. Is it the case that much Russian armour, because it has been moving across the countryside and more sparsely-populated areas, is pushing into open space, finding little resistance until it comes to larger towns and cities, and then, coming into FIBUA—fighting in built-up areas—begins to face problems from anti-tank weapons, RPGs, and small-arms fire? Is that an accurate assessment?

Ambassador Prystaiko: Very accurate. We have, 1,110 km of border with Belarus, 400 km with the unrecognised republics, and almost 700 km with the Russian Federation, so there are thousands of kilometres of border, which is very difficult to defend, so we are not stretching our forces to defend lines or fronts. Instead, we are trying to defend major cities.

Kharkiv and Kyiv have symbolic meaning to Putin. They are not even important strategic sites. Kyiv is obviously the cradle of Orthodoxy, and even the word “Rus” came from Kyiv roots, so it is symbolic and very important. In Kharkiv, Russia is using the same textbook that it used in 1918; when the Bolsheviks at that time couldn’t take Kyiv, they took Kharkiv and announced that Kharkiv was the new capital of the Ukrainian People’s Republic; as soon as Kyiv fell, they moved the capital back to Kyiv. I believe that that is one of the scenarios. I don’t want to give Russia a hint, but I believe that they are already doing it.

On what we are trying to do, we are using the tactic of mobile groups, which are bringing down their tanks. I will be able to update the figure, but we have more than 200 tanks and more than 700 trucks—trucks are very important because they have to supply their everything. The anti-air, the armoured vehicles, the armoured personnel vehicles—all of them will be used quite successfully. As will those NLAWs and Javelins, and also our rockets, ourselves. We use Bayraktars and will be happy to use any support—air support—we can ask for, and use our own assets.

Q43 Bob Seely: On the Turkish drones, I think there is confusion as to how many you have. Did you buy enough? How many are being used? How



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effective are they, and do you have any other loitering drones apart from the Turkish drones?

Ambassador Prystaiko: We do not have attack drones. We started producing our so-called kamikaze drones, but they are not in operation yet. We use reconnaissance drones from different nations. However, the attacking capability is in Bayraktars. We need more, and Turkey is supplying, but we are still far from being able to use them effectively. We will do it, but the scale is not there. We have enough operators, who are now trained, and are being trained in Turkey itself.

Q44 **Royston Smith:** Thank you for joining us this morning, Ambassador. No one can doubt that Ukraine has been invaded by a despot, and no one in their right mind would believe that Russia has any legitimate reason to do so, but this needs to end, and it needs to end as quickly as it can. That may well be through negotiated settlement of one type or another. Can you update us, as far as you are able, on what you know about the negotiations that have already taken place? What is your assessment of what, if anything, Russia wants to get out of those negotiations?

Ambassador Prystaiko: You have probably seen that we sat yesterday at the negotiation table. My personal opinion and professional one, as I was negotiating Minsk before, so I understand what they are doing, is that they are preparing the picture—the “right” political picture for everybody: the Ukrainians are giving up and sitting at the table.

We sent a very serious delegation from the top, which was headed by the Minister of Defence. You can imagine, for a fighting nation to send its own Minister to negotiations, we are trying to show how serious we are. Unfortunately, Russians are using the same leader of their group as was negotiating with us eight years ago in the Minsk agreements, so instead of discussing with us the war that they are waging on us right now, what they are doing is more or less bringing us back to the table of negotiations for the fate of the runaway republics. Russians already made it so complicated and they already recognise their independence, so there is not much to discuss.

They want four things that are already on the table. First, Ukraine must recognise Crimea as Russian territory. Secondly, they want us to recognise two of those runaway republics. Thirdly, they want us to change our constitution and strike NATO and the EU out of it and everything else, including simple things such as federalisation. Fourthly, they want Ukraine to demilitarise—I don’t even know what they mean by that.

As of now, the delegations are so far from each other that it is very difficult. We just stated our positions and then went back to our capitals.

Q45 **Royston Smith:** They have not been reasonable in any of this, so I don’t suppose we should be surprised that they are not reasonable in the negotiations either. What can the West do to try to get Putin to change his calculations on Ukraine? In everything that we do—politically, and everything else—we are looking for a ladder for to come down when the time comes. What can we do to maybe give him that opportunity to back



out?

Ambassador Prystaiko: Thank you for asking the question in that way. Yesterday, and before yesterday, I had a few dozen people here with big brains—experts—asking the same question. Frankly speaking, we came up with nothing. As of now, he doesn't need anything; he doesn't want anything. He is threatening you—not us, but you—with raised alertness of his strategic nuclear weapons, which is totally unfounded. He believes, I guess, that you—the West—are getting more and more serious, and he wants to pre-emptively tell you not to come here: "The war in Ukraine is under my command. Stay away." I believe that is the point when we will break his plans, because other than that we do not see anything he needs from us or from anybody else.

The only soft spot Putin still has is his own population. We don't believe that the circle around him are self-sufficient enough to take the risk of telling him, "No." From the pictures of his national security council meetings and his Parliament, we can conclude that there is no one who is able to tell him anything, at least not publicly. Maybe somebody is advising him, but we don't see those people; we don't know who is in charge of it there.

Chair: We are going to have to leave it there, Ambassador. Thank you very much indeed for your time; it is extremely well received. Please do keep us informed as matters develop.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Artis Pabriks, Gabrielijs Landsbergis, and Ms Eva-Maria Liimets.

Q46 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the second part of the Foreign Affairs Committee sitting today. We are fortunate to have with us the Defence Minister of Latvia and the Foreign Minister of Lithuania—thank you very much indeed for joining us—and we are expecting the Minister from Estonia. She is here—hello, Minister, it is very nice to see you.

This session is clearly called because of the war, the unprovoked act of aggression in Ukraine and the violence being committed against the Ukrainian people, but this is also a war that puts our NATO allies and our European allies in the Baltic states under pressure. I am very grateful that all three of you are here. I would be very interested to hear from each of you what you need from the United Kingdom and what you are seeing on your border. Perhaps I can start with you, Defence Minister from Latvia.

Dr Pabriks: As I have only a few minutes, I would also like to say hello to Gabrielijs, my old friend. He will continue then.

First, you know the latest news, that Belarusian troops also crossed the border with Ukraine, which basically means that we have two aggressors at this moment officially: Russia and Belarus. Also, as you know, Belarus is a bordering country with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, so the country that



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borders us is now also committing the act of aggression against Ukraine. That is No. 1.

No. 2: if I have to describe briefly my assessment of the situation in Ukraine, I am very concerned that, at this moment, Russian troops, following orders from the top, will basically fall into a similar mould to that which President Assad was using against his population. We have already seen, for several days, increased bombings of the civilian population, of civilian headquarters, of civilian houses and apartments, so this is what will happen. Also, the weaponry, which is slowly arriving around Kyiv, that is meant exactly for such occasions and will be used, believe me, if you know Russians.

The third thing is that it seems that they are also extending the frontlines, so they are moving less in columns. They are now starting to move in a different way to Ukraine, so the pressure will increase. The fourth point is that the morale of the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian army and defence forces is very high, so these people, these soldiers, will defend their homeland, their country up until the last moment. We have to take this into account.

The next point is: what is Putin's end game at this moment? I do not believe that he is capable, or Russian troops together with Belarusian troops are capable, of occupying the whole of Ukraine or even keeping for a longer time parts of Ukraine, apart from maybe the Donbas, Luhansk area and Crimea, where they already were before the war. That means that what they will do is try to basically devastate the Ukrainian army and try to kill the elite. Then, they will say that they have completed their action, which is the demilitarisation and "denazification" of Ukraine. That is how they understand it, because Nazis are in the Government, according to their understanding, and the army is the military part, so they have to be killed. So this is our assumption.

What should our response be as far as Ukraine and as far as our own alliance are concerned? First, we need to extend all possible sanctions to Belarus, so that Lukashenko and all the people understand what they are doing. Secondly—this is a long-term perspective—we must mount up our support as much as we can to the Ukrainian defence forces. It is our moral duty to assist Ukrainians to defend their families, their houses and their country. Latvia is doing as much as possible. We are sending lethal weapons, we are sending humanitarian assistance. Our population's hearts and minds are in Ukraine at this moment and it will be like that.

As far as our own security is concerned, at this moment we do not have the danger of some kind of direct invasion in the Baltic states or in Latvia, but we see that this is a long-term game. Today—and this is why I am in a hurry—the Latvian Government agreed that during the next three years we will increase our defence spending to 2.5% of our GDP. That has been agreed today.

Secondly, we are of course a small country. Even if we are increasing our defence spending—and being a border country of NATO and the EU, which



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is maybe not so relevant for the UK; allow me that sidestep—we cannot guarantee our citizens the security that is granted to many other NATO members that do not directly border such a large aggressor state. Our military situation is still asymmetric, so we also need military assistance in terms of capabilities and firepower. For instance, from Ukraine we see that we will need additional weaponry for air defence systems and coastal defence systems, because the coastline is open to the Russian troops in the former Königsberg region—Kaliningrad, which is also full of Russian troops. Basically, we need a military assistance in the shorter and longer term.

I know that British troops are now present in Estonia; you are leading the eFP group. As far as possible support for Latvia is concerned—we see the United Kingdom as a major ally among the European nations—I humbly suggest that we could use JEF and the JEF flag more obviously in our country. We could have additional maritime co-operation. If you could assist us with some kind of—even temporary—placement of air defence systems, or the appearance of your air forces in our military airfields, that would be highly appreciated. Of course, any type of military and industrial co-operation would bolster our military forces. Ladies and Gentlemen, I will stop with that. If you have any comments or questions, I would be happy to take them now. I still have some minutes. Thank you.

- Q47 **Chair:** Thank you very much. May I ask one final question before I hand over to Bob Seely? By the way, if the Ministers from Estonia and Lithuania have thoughts, please do share them. What do you assess Russia's military capability to be? There are different ways in which people have been looking at it, and I would be interested in Latvia's perspective. How do you consider it?

Dr Pabriks: What was the question?

Chair: What do you assess Russia's military capability to be? In many ways, it is a very large military, but it is certainly not as technically capable as your own.

Dr Pabriks: Right. Of course, the Russian forces are larger than the Ukrainian forces. Of course, they have much firepower, and they can bring these troops in. But I must say that the morale of Russian soldiers is falling every day. We can see that there are a lot of young guys who are not experienced and do not understand where they are. I started this initiative on Twitter, a joke: that we could give a thousand euros or pounds to every Russian soldier who lays down their weapons and goes over, but in fact it is turning into less of a joke. I think that such an announcement from StratCom would be extremely positive. Yes, they can kill a lot of civilians in Ukraine using their firepower, but on the other hand I do not see their soldier capacity and morale so far, because they are waging occupational war. I think it's highly important that we also increase our communication systems, so that we try to deliver to the Russian population what is happening to their soldiers and that the Russian population is at least partly responsible for the leadership's actions.



Q48 **Chair:** Thank you. May I ask the Foreign Minister of Lithuania how you assess the Russian perspective on this war? You will have much better links into Russia than we do. Do you see the level of support diminishing? Do you see any change in the reaction?

Gabrielius Landsbergis: Hello. First, let me say thanks for everything that you are doing. Your Government was incredibly active in their response—in many cases leading with suggestions, and taking a step in many rightful directions. That was well noted, and noted here in the region. What we are seeing now—I think Artis mentioned this—is that the war is not going the way that it was planned, if one can say that it was planned at all. Today it is getting clearer that Putin has no boundaries to what instruments he is going to use and unleash against the Ukrainians. The indiscriminate shelling of districts in Kharkiv and other towns, with the killing of civilians, shows that he will go far and it is possible that this war will become a massacre. The world will have to answer the very important question of, “What is our stance on this?” The images that are reaching us already pose those questions.

I would like to draw a basic principle, if I may, of where my Government stands. We are at the point where half measures will no longer work. This principle has to be applied in all respects. First, when we talk about aiding Ukraine, there cannot be half measures. We have to do everything in our power to help them, including providing lethal weaponry. Artis said that they are doing that. We are also doing that. All three Baltic states are doing as much as we can. We also have to convince the countries that have started sending it that this is just the first step; we need to go further and we need to do more.

We are approaching a point where we will have to discuss the need for humanitarian corridors. There are already territories under Russian control where, from the images that we see, many people are injured and may even have been killed. They might lack water, food supplies and all that. We need to secure the corridors, so that they would be allowed to leave. A way to do that is to secure no-fly zones for humanitarian needs. With every passing hour—not even every passing day—that will become more needed.

Secondly, there cannot be half measures when it comes to sanctions. We have to raise the question about energy imports from Russia. I know that it is a very sensitive subject to many, but it has to be raised. We have to go all in.

Thirdly, this is about our region. For almost 20 years, we have been discussing the need to deter. I think this stage is over. We need to talk about defence, and when we are talking about defence, the Baltic states are approaching the situation where we see ourselves a bit like western Berlin. That means that we need anti-air and anti-rocket measures—we need all the credibility to defend the territory as NATO would defend any other territory in its alliance. Again, no half measures will suffice.



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A few days ago, we said that the world is changing. The thing is that with every passing day, the world keeps on changing. The question is, what result do we want for ourselves and our children that this world would stop at? Thank you. If you have any questions, I would be glad to answer them.

Q49 Bob Seely: Good morning to you all. I will come later to issues about ethnic Russian territory in the three Baltic republics, but before I do, I have a question for Dr Pabriks about the state of the Russian military. From your point of view as a Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, what has gone wrong? The Russians spent the first decade of this century developing their integrated characteristics of war: the military and the non-military, and the unification of these. From Georgia through to Syria, they reinvested in and redeveloped their conventional forces, but looking at the way the Russian troops are behaving in Ukraine now, I just feel like we are back in the 1980s, and that the post-cold war era did not happen.

Is that because they have missed out on morale or they have not focused enough on logistics, or is it just a ridiculous, foolish cockiness, in the same way that they sort of bimbled into Chechnya in the first Chechen war and got shot up badly in Grozny? How do you explain concisely why they are making such a moral and military mess of this situation?

Dr Pabriks: Thank you for the question. I guess the in-depth assessment should be made later, but as a person who was also forced to serve in the Soviet military, I would say that this is a traditional mess that follows the Russian army wherever it goes. In some actions, they could succeed, but in general, my impression is that they approached the Ukrainian border and then they were saying, "All right. Now we cross the border and see how it goes." Of course, I think they were fed the wrong information, or simply they were really too cocky and imagined that the Ukrainians would expect them with sunflowers. They expected them, as you know, with your anti-tank weapons and our Stingers, etc, so I think this is a tradition of the Russian army.

Also, I doubt the information that the Kremlin and others are receiving: what is this information line between down and up? They also have this long tradition, for instance, of never informing their soldiers about their mission, because soldiers do not have value. I do not know if it is correct information what was published yesterday, but it seems the Russian Defence Ministry was giving information that it might compensate families of fallen soldiers with a certain amount of money. The certain amount of money is about 90 euros, so if it is true, you understand what that tells us about Russian soldiers.

They were not prepared. Yes, they have a capacity, but they will use it without any limitations against citizens. They simply will be ready to terrorise, to murder, and make a mess of Ukraine to make people scared. As a result, obviously, the Ukrainians will stand even more, because this is a 40-year European nation and they have an enormous feeling of resistance at the moment. They are there defending their families.



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I apologise—you said something about Russian territories, or the Baltics?

Q50 Bob Seely: It was the second question for all three of you, whoever wants to answer. One still assumes that a direct invasion of your territories is very unlikely, not least because of your NATO membership, but given GRU activity in the past 25 to 30 years, both in Russia and elsewhere, it is not impossible that the Russian agencies will start planting bombs or pretending that there are ethnic Russians in your countries who will get murdered by “fascists” and so on. I find it very ironic that they are denazifying a country by trying to kill a Jewish leader, but that is just part of that weird irrationality.

Putin came to power, allegedly, on the back of the Moscow apartment bombs, and there is evidence since then that the FSB might have had a hand in that, shocking as that sounds, so it is not impossible that they will try to do similar things in your countries. Are you most threatened by a conventional military invasion, or are you most threatened by these destabilising violent acts done by “Russians” who may not even be your citizens?

Dr Pabriks: My last answer, then I apologise, but I have to run back to Cabinet. Before I answer, I simply wanted to say that I completed my PhD on ethnic relations and nationalism, so this is my academic story: I could speak for a very long time.

In short, I have been facing such questions quite a bit since 2014. I would say that we feel quite confident. First of all, we cannot imagine here larger numbers of green men. Secondly, even if the Ukrainian war radicalises certain people here, the numbers will not be large. It creates confusion in the ethnic Russian population in, for instance, Latvia, and I would say this will allow us to consolidate our population even more. You know, our societies are small, and we know people by their face. We have never, in reality, had any kind of ethnic conflict in our societies. Even in the late '80s and early '90s, there were no ethnic conflicts when we were fighting for our freedom. Now, 30 years later, in short, we are quite confident that there is no possibility to use such forces against us in our territory. We are quite confident. Thank you for inviting me to talk to you. I have to leave now.

Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Q51 Bob Seely: I ask the Estonian and Lithuanian representatives briefly to answer that point. Are you confident about the situation in your own countries, especially with agitators and provocateurs?

Chair: Minister Liimets, when I was first in Estonia, there were a lot of warnings to British troops to be careful of provocateurs. Do you have the same issue today?

Ms Liimets: First, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. We really appreciate your strong support, your presence and the power of your presence in terms of troops here.



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With regard to the situation in Estonia at the moment, Estonia has a Russian-speaking minority, which is well integrated into our society. Of course, we have to follow which disinformation comes from Russia to Estonia, but we don't see any particular tensions related to the war in Ukraine at the moment. The situation is more or less similar, but of course we raised our awareness of the situation so that we were prepared.

At the same time, for us, it is important that, internationally, we do everything possible to raise the cost of aggression to the aggressor, so that the aggressor will stop the war. It is therefore important that we politically isolate Russia. Here, we very much hope that the United Kingdom, which is a leading country internationally, will also make these efforts in the International Criminal Court, because the perpetrators must be brought to justice.

There are two things that I would like to emphasise, which are related to support for Ukraine. It has been mentioned, and I very much agree, that in Ukraine we have different scenarios regarding how these developments may progress. We have to be prepared to give long-term support for Ukraine. At the same time, we have to continue the quick support—political, economic, humanitarian and military support.

Last but not least, I want to come back to NATO's assessment of the current security situation in Europe and the fact that we need to adjust our defence and deterrence posture. We must strengthen it. Definitely, we should go from forward deterrence to forward defence, because the balance of power has changed and the security situation in Europe has changed.

Once more, I say that we are thankful to the UK for its active support of our region at the moment.

Q52 Chair: Thank you very much indeed. From the Estonian perspective, I have just been hearing reports that Estonia is massively increasing its defence budget as well. I don't know whether you can confirm that, and the increase in the purchase of equipment as well.

Ms Liimets: Yes, about 10 days or two weeks ago, we discussed that in our Government. We increased our budget. At the moment, it is about 2.5% of our GDP by 2024, and we do additional adjustments, but I would like to say that Estonia's percentage of defence budget from GDP has been over 2% since 2014. Of course, we very much hope that we also get NATO's support, because although our defence expenditure is increasing, it is not enough to quickly build up a strong enough military defence. Here, we rely on NATO's joint actions.

Q53 Liam Byrne: Thank you so much for joining us. It is a real pleasure to be together with allies this morning. I want to ask two questions. The first is to ask about your insight into potential divisions within the Russian leadership about the conduct of the campaign. My understanding is that Gerasimov's basic plan was for the deployment of Spetsnaz and paratroopers, together with significant Chechnyan resources, followed by



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the installation of Viktor Medvedchuk as a puppet leader, but that there are now some serious divisions within the Russian leadership, who are seriously concerned about the potential for Chechnyan brigades to inflict very significant civilian casualties, and there are obviously concerns about Medvedchuk as well—there are differences of opinions about his credentials. Do you have any insight from your sources into how the top of the Russian military and the top of Russian politics are now feeling about the conduct of the campaign over the weeks to come?

Ms Liimets: One of the very likely scenarios that we must be prepared for in the long term is a Syria-type war. It is not only military infrastructure that is targeted in Ukraine, but the civilian population. We see from different directions, based on how Russia's troops are moving towards bigger cities, that that is, unfortunately, one of the scenarios we have to be prepared for.

Gabrielius Landsbergis: To be honest, we are seeing that there is some discontent about the actions, but it is not intelligence; it is basically what we have from the public channels. We are seeing Gerasimov's eye-roll on the video; we are seeing how the central bank president put her hand in reaction to what Putin is saying. Obviously, many of them understand the situation that they are in, but the chain of command is constructed so that it is almost impossible at this stage to overrule or even advise Putin to do something else. Therefore, we have a leader who invested all his political career in a military action that is not going the way it was planned, so I think we are approaching a very dangerous escalation in Ukraine, and we are starting to see that, in order to build maximum pressure on the Ukrainian Government to capitulate—or at least to take on the requests from the Kremlin—they will basically shell and kill a number of civilians to put that pressure on the Government.

Therefore, I think, first of all, that it will be a very dangerous and very difficult for us to even withstand the few upcoming days. We have to be ready with our answers as well—political answers, with assistance and everything—because the next days will be heavy on everybody globally.

Q54 **Liam Byrne:** The second question is about the strategic outcome from this. I feel that what has happened now is as significant as the Berlin wall coming down or the tragedy of 9/11. We are now decisively in new times. It has been useful to understand your perspective, but we now need to shift from forward deterrence to forward defence. The blunt truth is that deterrence has failed, and therefore we need to rethink our assumptions.

Russia's strategic weakness is its great border, and therefore fortifying the entire length of the border seems to me to make sense. In terms of the Baltic, what do you think will happen with Finland and Sweden? Do you think there is an interest that we share in encouraging Sweden and Finland to join?

Secondly, in terms of our capabilities, if we now know the Russian tactics are to send in long fires through artillery, before then trying to put in airborne special forces and Chechnyan ground forces, do we now need to start investing in ground-launched cruise missiles in order to get around



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the Russian area access denial systems and create a new point of vulnerability for them?

My questions are about our alliances with Finland and Sweden, and then about your observations on the new defence capabilities that will be needed. Eva-Maria, can I start with you?

Ms Liimets: Of course, from Estonia's perspective the more NATO allies in our region, the better it would be. I know that in Finland this debate strongly started yesterday. Of course this is a decision to be made by Finns, not by us, but I am very glad that NATO has emphasised all the time that our doors are open to every democratic country here in Europe, so that together we can protect our space of values more efficiently.

With regard to defence and deterrence, I would leave it for military and Defence Ministers to go into the details of which exact equipment we need, but definitely we need more. We must strengthen NATO's air policing and air defence, and have more troops, which are of both symbolic and defence value. We have to go forward with all these details.

Of course, we have already made many very important decisions about NATO over the last year, and now we just need to speed up with some of the decisions that we previously made.

Q55 **Liam Byrne:** Gabrieliuss, what is your point of view?

Gabrieliuss Landsbergis: First of all, I would not be surprised if we saw NATO enlargement even this year. Even a week ago, it might have seemed unrealistic that the debates that are going on in Finland and Sweden would lead somewhere, but many things seemed unrealistic a week ago. On that basis, I would say nothing is off the table.

If encouragement is needed, Sweden and Finland joining NATO increases regional security; that is quite easy to say. It increases Baltic security and Baltic Sea security, definitely. We are trying to take the position of not giving advice to the Governments, but I can say that we would definitely very much support this path.

Secondly, the way we see it is that the vulnerabilities of the Baltic region, from a military perspective, could be used to limit NATO's operational manoeuvring space when it comes to regional security outside NATO's border. From a strategic point of view, it is imperative to fix that. It has to be very clear, and Russia has to know, that Baltic countries are as defensible as any other part of NATO. That would give NATO allies a much wider operational space, and additional decisions could then be made in the future, so that we do not allow Russia to rearrange the whole region. If it is not stopped in Ukraine, it is clear to many that it will not stop there. There are many other places where it may be inclined to go.

Russia is now in Belarus, which is already an absolutely different geopolitical situation in the region. Now it is in Ukraine. It could be in Moldova—it is in parts of Moldova, in Transnistria. With a victory in this current war, Russia's geography could expand. In order to deter that and



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allow more manoeuvring space, the Baltics have to be secure. That is important.

- Q56 **Liam Byrne:** That is very useful. In terms of the vulnerabilities that need fixing, as you say, in the Baltic, what things are top of your mind and are most important?

Gabrielius Landsbergis: Basically, we have to think from all perspectives. We have given that a lot of time, in order to prepare for something that everybody believed would most likely never happen. We have kept increasing the capabilities for defence, but we were more thinking about deterrence. Now, it has to be actual defence. There are places in the Baltics that have to be secure. Maritime security, air defence, anti-missile defence—all these things have to be rethought, redrawn and built in.

There are many things happening, so I cannot say that nothing is being done, but I want to stress that in many cases we are still working on the previous doctrine of deterrence. We are doing what we should have done a week ago, but this week, we would do better to prepare for next week. We are thinking in those terms—not about next year or another decade, but about what has to be done for next week.

I agree with Eva that specific military details are best commented on by MODs—in my country, as well.

Liam Byrne: Thanks so much.

- Q57 **Chair:** The difference between deterrence and defence is clearly a difference of mission. Are the Estonian and Lithuanian Governments asking NATO Governments to change the NATO air policing role from a deterrence role to a defence role?

Gabrielius Landsbergis: Yes.

Chair: Thank you.

- Q58 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you both ever so much for joining us. Obviously, we are seeing increased hostilities, and increased use of chemical weapons, thermobaric weapons and incendiary munitions. That has to result in a further escalation of response.

When we were talking about humanitarian zones, you mentioned a humanitarian corridor, and it having to be policed. There is a big discussion in the UK about no-fly zones. I think that the position the Government have come to is that there will not be a no-fly zone put in place. A humanitarian corridor requires some form of no-fly zone to be put in place to protect it.

It would be really helpful for me to understand the position of your parliamentarians and Governments on a no-fly zone across any parts of Ukraine. Frankly, if we are to put one in place for a humanitarian corridor, we might as well put it in place more broadly. Is there an appetite for a no-fly zone across Ukraine if we see escalations around the types of weapon systems that I mentioned? Or is this just for



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humanitarian zones? Are they even willing to put planes in the air against Russian ones to protect a humanitarian corridor? Shall we go to Lithuania first?

Gabrielius Landsbergis: It is very likely that we are approaching a situation in which we will see a lot of civilian suffering, in numbers that we have not seen since the second world war, and I do not think that it is right to take this question off the table.

If there are formats where we need to discuss this, one option is the UN. I know that the Security Council is unable to come to a decision as a permanent member is an aggressor in the war, but UNGA—the General Assembly—definitely can discuss this, and they can discuss humanitarian corridors with no-fly zones imposed on them. Two thirds of the General Assembly can make a recommendation that this be applied. I know that it is not an easy task, but it has to be done, or at least tried.

Politically, I do not think that there is a grey zone any more. Every country, every member in UNGA, has to make a choice: which side are you on? That choice has to be represented by a vote in the General Assembly. It might come to that.

To add to that, I know that in many formats there is discussion between the allies about no-fly zones, and I know the issues concerning that, but I have to stress that we will probably have to limit the current debate to humanitarian corridors, so that people are allowed to leave the places and cities where they are being killed, burned, shot at and having other horrendous things done to them. They need to be allowed to leave. It is our obligation to at least grant them that.

- Q59 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you. Before we go to Estonia, my challenge is this: we absolutely want to protect civilian lives and want civilians to be able to escape, but in creating humanitarian corridors, we will remove all Ukrainian people who have a right to be there. We will allow them to flee, but they will leave behind them the territory for Putin to take. You know the position of the UK Government; do I understand that in Lithuania, there is an appetite in the Parliament or the Government for no-fly zone across wider areas, but limited to humanitarian corridors at this point?

Gabrielius Landsbergis: That is basically what is currently happening. The discussion, at least in our Government, is, "Okay, what is our answer to that?" Everything has happened in the last few days; we have to start somewhere. A few days ago, nobody believed that we could sanction SWIFT. Now it is an actual possibility. Nobody believed that we would forbid European air space to Russian aircraft, and now it is forbidden. We have to start somewhere, and you go on with the debate. We can do a European debate, and an alliance debate, but if things are not working that way, maybe we should start the debate in the UN—or go down parallel tracks, and start both debates simultaneously.

- Q60 **Alicia Kearns:** I am asking not because I expect allies such as you to go further. It is because I am genuinely grappling with this question. If we put in humanitarian corridors that are protected by some sort of allied air



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force, we might as well try to go further, because ultimately the longer we leave things, the less chance we have to operate or manoeuvre in any way. It would be helpful to understand what the discussion is in Estonia, in your Parliament and your Government, on no-fly zones more generally and also on humanitarian corridors.

Ms Liimets: Thank you for the opportunity to address this very important question. There are hundreds of thousands of people either on the roads or in the basements of their apartment buildings, waiting to be evacuated from the country—and not only Ukrainians; our citizens are still there, and we are trying to get them out, so the question is here. Of course, at the same time we have to think about how we could get humanitarian corridors in such a way that the whole international community supports it. I agree with what Gabrieliuss said. A UN Security Council resolution and a position on that would be the best solution. Today and tomorrow are therefore critical, because these discussions are taking place in New York.

I come back to the initial point: we have to raise the cost for the aggressor, so that he will stop bombing civilians. We need more international co-operation.

- Q61 **Alicia Kearns:** My view is that we should have put in a safe haven, but that would have had to happen last week. We could have done it in the west, but it is too late now, and that is not possible. Is there an appetite in Estonia for action if it was only from the Baltic states, eastern European countries and the UK? Is there appetite for action that is more substantial, and that is just from Baltic and eastern European states, or is there a feeling that the US would have to be involved if there were any stronger intervention?

Ms Liimets: From Estonia's perspective, we very much support close co-ordination with the United States and the US's presence in Europe. We welcome the recent decision to increase US troops in Europe, and this is definitely very important.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you.

- Q62 **Chair:** We have a few minutes left, and I know you both have to run, so I want to ask a very last question. You both have large communities of citizens inside the United Kingdom. Presumably, many of them will be feeling nervous about their families. What are the areas where you think the UK Government, and indeed British people generally, can support Estonians and Lithuanians inside the UK, and what areas should we be considering?

Ms Liimets: I believe that Estonian citizens in Estonia and the United Kingdom are in a good place. We have to think about how to protect people in Ukraine and evacuate our people from Ukraine. This is our focus at the moment, as well as strengthening defence and deterrence on the eastern flank of NATO and so forth, as was mentioned. I think that our citizens in the United Kingdom are in a good place.



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Gabrielius Landsbergis: I agree with Eva-Maria. Whatever you are doing to reassure everybody in the UK about your decisions, the allied decisions, the assistance that we are providing, and possible future outcomes is what every Government is doing to keep people informed and calm. Everybody is doing that, and we trust that you will do a good job.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed to both of you, particularly for your alliance, which, as we all know, manages to keep the United Kingdom incredibly safe by extending our borders and making sure that we partner with strong allies. I welcome the possibility of working even more closely with you in the future.