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DEFENDING NATO'S EASTERN FLANK:  
A CONVERSATION ON RUSSIA WITH  
ESTONIA'S MINISTER OF DEFENSE

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PARTICIPANTS:

**Welcome and Introduction:**

MICHAEL O'HANLON  
Senior Fellow and Director of Research  
The Brookings Institution

**Keynote Address:**

HIS EXCELLENCY JÜRI LUIK  
Minister of Defense  
The Republic of Estonia

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ANDERSON COURT REPORTING  
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190

## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to Brookings. I'm Mike O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy program. It is my distinct privilege and pleasure to welcome Juri Luik, the minister of defense for the Republic of Estonia to Brookings today for a conversation about his country's military preparations and more generally NATO's preparations for defending its eastern flank.

I'm just going to give a couple words of additional introduction and then we'll hear from the minister. He and I will then converse a little bit on stage and will look forward to your thoughts in the Q&A part of the final 20 minutes or so of the hour.

So we have really seen a man of a remarkable career and now reengage and retake the position of minister of defense, a position he had held in the early years when Estonia had regained its independence. As you know, and if you drive around Washington, watch up and down Mass Avenue, you would have seen a year ago or so that the three Baltic States were celebrating 100 years of independence, but of course it was an independence that was taken from them and they suffered enormously in the period of World War II and then during the Soviet annexation, if you will, a process that was never recognized by the United States government, and which mercifully came to an end with the end of the Cold War. So Estonia has now been back as an independent state for some three decades, and it has been a member of NATO since 2004 in the big round of expansion that had been announced in 2002.

I should also note by way of introduction that the Minister has had a number of positions in his government, which give him a broad view of the problem, not strictly in military terms, including being minister and ambassador extraordinaire to Moscow, get this, from 2012 to 2015. So he was there in a pretty interesting and important time.

One last point by way of general introduction about Estonia. As you know, NATO has its cyber command and does a great deal of cyber activity and exercising in Estonia. So it has been important in that regard as well. It's a country that meets its 2 percent obligations, spending as a fraction of GDP, so its military budget in percentage terms is among NATO's highest. This still of course only

permits a small military with a country of 1.3 million people, but a very impressive military nonetheless.

And so without further ado, Mr. Minister, thank you for being here, and the floor is yours.

MINISTER LUIK: Thank you very much, Mike. I'm extremely happy to be here in such a distinguished institution with such distinguished participants. Very happy to see Strobe here, my old friend. I'd been Estonia ambassador to Washington in 2003 to 2007, and was a frequent visitor here in these august settings, always had very interesting debates.

Let me start with some words of introduction, and I'd be very happy to continue in the discussion format. Let me offer you ta view from NATO's eastern flank about the security situation in the Baltic Sea region and what we, Estonia, the United States, and allies, are doing together in order to strengthen our common security and defense.

Allow me however, to first say a few words about the significance and the role that is played by the NATO alliance in general. We have a working alliance but we need to strengthen it further, including through even stronger commitment by every member. That is why we all pledged to spend more on defense, and to do it wisely.

Estonia achieved their NATO agreed defense spending target of 2 percent of GDP, and we are now even exceeding it years ago. And a growing number of allies have done it as well. The burden sharing in NATO is increasingly fair. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea and NATO's summits in Wales in 2014, north Atlantic alliance has returned to its core task, collective defense. And it has done so for a very good reason.

Russia did not only launch a massive armaments and defense reforms program since 2009, but it also unilaterally took the course of outright and aggressive confrontation with the West, particularly against the United States. It attacks and invades its neighbors, it deploys forces and wages indiscriminate war. In Syria, defending a criminal regime, and it interferes also militarily, including using private military companies, in Venezuela, in Libya, and other countries.

The security situation in Europe has deteriorated since 2014 due to Russia's efforts to strengthen its regional posture. Russia deploys to its western military district a wide range of modern

offensive weapons and capabilities, including SSC8 land-based missile systems that stood in violation with the INF Treaty. These dual-capable weapon systems are suitable for surprise precision strikes, threaten the entire Europe, and good in conflict situations, become a game changer.

NATO's actions and measures adjusting its deterrents and defense posture, have been taken in a step-by-step order that is transparent, non-provocative, and based on sufficiency. Russia, on the other hand, would hardly exclude the use of force when circumstances seem promising for exploiting our vulnerabilities.

The U.S. led exercise Defender Europe 2020, the biggest allied exercise since the end of Cold War, will surely send a powerful and convincing strategic message to Moscow. Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, recently stated that Russia would respond to Defender with its own borders, which is of course very reassuring to all of us. But he also added that Russia keeps its nukes at home differently from the U.S. That statement is of course to remind us that Russia has a huge nuclear arsenal.

As the frontline state, we in Estonia work daily to ensure a credible defense and deterrents on the border with Russia. We will continue to maintain defense ponding, but in order to improve our readiness we conduct regular no-notice defense readiness exercises for our reserve army. For instance, in 2019, we held SNAPEX for two reserve battalions at the same time. Less than 40 hours after the government's decision to launch the exercise, one infantry battalion had move more than 60 miles from the formation location and was ready for battle. You know, if you have a reserve army you have to make sure that A, it works; B, it works in time.

So Estonia is doing these SNAPEX exercises, starting from a B team, giving a signal to the Estonia government that now there's a crisis and we work very quickly and, as I pointed out, in 40 hours the battalion is already in place out of its organizational area. This is equal to how the professionals work. So for a small country whose defense is based on reserves, this is something which has to be trained and retrained all the time, and this is really important for us.

In addition to Estonia's efforts, NATO has made substantial and visible steps in bolstering

collective defense. Besides U.S. leadership, its continuing commitment in NATO, and military presence in Europe, especially on the eastern flank, our European allies have considerably bolstered their commitment. The UK left NATO enhanced forward battle group, which is supported by France and Denmark, in Estonia, is an interoperable and integral part of our defense forces. It serves as an example of long-term real commitment to transatlantic security and ability to deter and defend the alliance borders.

Just as a side remark, people often say Europe is not doing enough. I think we have to qualify this by remembering that there are now countries like Great Britain, like Germany, and many, many other European countries, France, who are standing in the front line in the Baltic States. They are standing as a tripwire, and they are really making perhaps not a large military effort, but an enormous political effort in bringing their boys into the harm's way and providing this important line of deterrence when it comes to supporting the Baltic States. So we are deeply appreciative to countries like the United Kingdom, which is in Estonia. Canada, which is the lead nation in Latvia, Germany.

I think we all understand what a difficult decision it must have been for Germans, for the German government, to take an armored battalion and bring it to Lithuania. I think we all imagine how difficult and complicated such a decision must have been. But it was made, so kudos for that.

When it comes to resources, continuing U.S. contribution to our defense capability development is visible, and it's very much appreciated. It enhances our national and regional capabilities but also interoperability with the U.S. and other allies. Baltic region is a single operational area, and all national efforts must and do support wider regional and NATO plans and activities in the region.

Our cooperation with Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland is very close and wide ranging. And we have dedicated to develop our national capabilities while increasing interoperability and working together to use all resources in a way that will bring most value to the region.

Estonia of course is an active contributor to the global security. We are fully aware of our responsibilities in the fight against terrorism, and working shoulder to shoulder with our allies. You know, again, sometimes in the NATO debates there are southern allies who point out that we are investing too much to the east, we are focusing on the eastern flank. I always point out that all actual NATO operations

are basically related to the south or to the southeast. And it comes to Afghanistan, Iraq, Estonia is now in Mali, which is not a NATO operation but certainly proves a point of us being in the south quite far from Estonian force, as you can appreciate.

We welcome the conclusions of the Afghanistan/U.S. Joint Statement for Peace and Settlement between the U.S. and Taliban. We think these are important first steps in pursuit of a peaceful settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan. Estonia continues its commitment to the resolute support mission and cooperation inherent resolve against the threat posed by ISI in Iraq and Syria.

Moreover, we are further increasing our sizable contribution to Operation Barkhane in Mali. We also contribute to the U.S. led Operation Sentinel, aimed at increasing security in key waterways in the Middle East.

Dear friends, Russia's confrontation with the West is an existential necessity for the current regime in Moscow. Dialogue with Kremlin is difficult, actually at the moment it's futile, as long as it is not interested in solving any crisis or conflicts, but rather seeks to exploit existing ones and create new hot spots.

Furthermore, Russia's ruling kleptocratic elite is now very busy with clearing the path to post-2024 preservation of power. The biggest problem of Putin's regime is that it is not able to offer to Russia's people a better future. Therefore it makes desperate efforts to offer them a "better past." Russia and the West are at odds with each other over all relevant issues. And the list of disputes includes the interpretation of history, more precisely that of World War II, and the preceding years that led to the outbreak of war.

For instance, Kremlin accuses Poland for being almost a partner in the crime of Nazi Germany, bearing an equal responsibility for the outbreak of the World War II. Moscow's cynicism and willingness to turn history into a theatre of absurd seems to have no limits.

Russia also claims that the Estonia/Russian Tartu Peace Treaty, signed by Estonia and Soviet Russia in 1920, that ended Estonia's war on independence, and actually qualified the independence of Estonia from Russia, is null and void, since Estonia, in 1940, voluntarily joined the

Soviet Union. The two neighboring countries thus have no mutually accepted basis for the legal continuity of their bilateral relations. The U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo has recently rightly compared Tartu Peace Treaty's importance with that of the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

Both the Treaty of Tartu and, I quote "And the U.S. Declaration of Independence speak of a spirit of self-determination, the right of nations' people to end the rule of foreign power over their territory and achieve their own independence."

Now why does Kremlin stick so fiercely to the narrative that Russia liberated and did not conquer Central and Eastern Europe, including the Baltic States? And why it is so keen to forget all horrors of the Stalinist regime. The answer comprises both domestic and international aspects, including patriotic national identity building.

A particularly important feature for the Baltic States and NATO in this context is Russia's refusal to give up its centuries-long concept of buffer zones. Moscow perceives buffer zones as the only way to protect power and to protect Russia's western and southern rims from the Arctic to the Caspian and East Mediterranean.

I stop here, and look forward to our conversation. Thank you. Thank you very much.

MR. O'HANLON: Mr. Minister, thank you. It's a powerful perspective and reminder of the severity of the challenges we face and what's been done to address them.

If I could, before we get into a couple more questions on defense policy, I wanted to ask you about your best effort to read the Russian mind and their long-term aspirations. Because as I hear your speech, on the one hand you talk about spheres of influence. And sometimes that's interpreted as just Russia not wanting countries along its borders to be part of NATO. But you also talked about Russia essentially rejected the 1920 treaty that gave you independence and implying that maybe you shouldn't be independent after all.

We know that Vladimir Putin has called the dissolution of the Soviet Union the greatest strategic catastrophe of the 20th Century. That sort of implies he wants to put it back together. And we also know that he's claimed a right to defend Russian speakers wherever they may be, and 25 percent of

your population, of course, roughly is Russian speaking.

So do you think that Russia's main interest in the Baltics, including in Estonia, is to retake them in some way at some point? Or is it more about harassment, more about destabilization, more about making NATO pay a price for having expanded, more about just making sure everyone knows that he's not happy with the current situation?

MINISTER LUIK: I think it's an excellent question. And of course finally there are a lot of motivations kind of melded together so you cannot sort of bring out only one of them.

For me a lot of what Putin does has its main roots in the internal policy of Russia. And I seriously believe that things might become even more complicated. As you have seen, President Putin has developed a very sophisticated but complicated system of leaving the presidency but staying in power. And of course to be absolutely sure that this system works is very difficult. I mean there are so many variables here. So the desire to mobilize the nation, to give the space, political space to transformation of power, is something which is I believe a real risk. So when I saw that Putin has suddenly thrown out a list of changes to the constitution, I became quite worried.

Now let's see where it develops. There are different proposals for the constitution changes, some of them are purely for power preservation, some of them are to change the nature of the Russian regime even more inward looking and even more to have a kind of a closed society. But I'm pretty sure that this transformation time could lead to further foreign adventures, military or otherwise. I actually interpret the present, I call it Putin's war on history. I interpret the present war, of course it's a great moment to utilize it because of the end of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Great Patriotic War. It is again part of the internal political consolidation.

But the fact is also that the Russian leadership as it stands today, has not accepted, fundamentally has not accepted the results of the fall apart of the Soviet Union. I mean exactly in what way would they want to remedy it very much depends on the situation. I mean these are opportunist people so they are looking for circumstances which might lead to new opportunities. An opportunity was grabbed with Ukraine, unfortunately, in a very difficult moment for Ukraine Russia attacked, and it's a very



sad example to all of us.

So that's why I'm always saying that our biggest, our strongest trump card is firmness, clarity of our intentions, peaceful intentions, and the fact that NATO is in the Baltic States is kind of embodiment of that firmness, that clarity. NATO's border is not a line in the sand. I don't think Putin believes lines in the sand. It's a real order, it's a real protected territory, and the NATO units in Estonia and Lithuania make it abundantly clear.

MR. O'HANLON: All right, that's a great answer. Our colleague Angela Stent, who's also a Professor at Georgetown, you probably know her work. She says that Putin is often described as a great chess player but he's actually better understood as a judo practitioner. Not only in his sports, but in his geopolitics. Because he looks for the opportunity, looks for the mistake, looks for the action of the adversary and then reacts and tries to exploit. Sounds like you agree.

MINISTER LUIK: I think that's exactly to the point.

MR. O'HANLON: So let me now move over toward defense policy, and it follows naturally from this question of Russian motives. And it really is going to be a question about how much is enough, or have we done enough to essentially protect NATO's eastern flank, and specifically the Baltics.

You mentioned that we now have battalions, multinational battalions in each of the three Baltic States, led by the United Kingdom and your country and then Canada, and then Germany and then finally the United States with its presence of about 5,000 U.S. personnel in Poland.

So it's about 5,000 Americans in Poland, about 5,000 more NATO in the Baltic States and what is sort of, you know, impressive combat capability but also an amalgamation of companies and not even full battalions for the most part. And then of course the Baltic States are impressive. And I appreciated your statistics on what your armed forces are capable of doing on short notice, but they're small. And 2 percent of GDP is impressive relative to the NATO standard, but it may not be seen as all that high relative to historical standards like the Cold War.

So basically have we done enough? Do you think that being clear in our intentions with this tripwire force, as you described it, is adequate, and Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania all reaching that 2

percent goal, or do you think we need to think harder about the ability to really defend in a front-line way the Baltic States and then reinforce those positions quickly, even more than NATO has done so far.

So how much of this is a sort of a signaling issue and we have therefore largely achieved our goals, and how much of it is a real defense planning question where we've got to have more capability and the ability to bring a lot more fast?

MINISTER LUIK: As a defense minister I have a whole list of things in my pocket which I would like to get as soon as possible. When people speak about battalions, I would say better to have a brigade. People speaking of brigades, I am shooting for a division. So it's clear that to have credible deterrence we have to do more. Because I don't believe that Russians would take purely symbolic deterrents seriously.

We have the tripwire, but we don't have a clear answer to the question what will happen if somebody trips on the tripwire. I mean what are the next steps. I'm not saying that we don't have answers, what I'm saying is that NATO is lacking operational capable mobile forces which could be quickly deployed as necessary, as Secretary Mattis called them, speed of relevance.

So training the reinforcements, something which became a forgotten culture after the Cold War, we have to remind ourselves how it was done. And that's why I mentioned the U.S. Exercise Defender of 2020. This is basically very similar to the Cold War Reforger Exercise.

The United States is bringing, in April and May, 25,000 men and women from the continental United States to Europe. Now this is a big number. It's not a big number in Cold War terms, but in present terms it's a big number. And of course this exercise will be interlocking with exercises in different NATO countries which sort of add their own manpower to the exercise. For instance, Estonia is doing its own biggest military exercise, Spring Storm, so to say, together with the American exercise. So all in all, we are talking about roughly 40,000 men and women exercising in Europe. This is a considerable force, and I think it underlines the fact that it is not only the tripwire but it is also our ability to quickly reinforce, which builds a credible deterrent. Because the political deterrent carries you only so far. But the opponent has to know that you have developed all the nooks and crannies of this challenge and

you actually have the capabilities to reinforce your redline.

MR. O'HANLON: So one more question along those lines and then pretty soon I'll go to the audience. General Richard Sherriff, who as you know, is deputy supreme allied commander of Europe, he retired from that position a few years ago and wrote a book, and we hosted him here for a book talk. And you probably read it, it's called *War with Russia*. And it's a novel but it's meant to, you know, assume the scenario that he took very seriously, that you take very seriously, a Russian attack on the Baltics. And he paints a very dire picture. Of course this was also several years ago when NATO hadn't made as much progress on burden sharing.

But he also raised some doubts about whether the enhanced forward presence should continue to be the small pieces of individual national contribution, you know, again, a company here, a company there, or whether it should be a more integrated traditional combat brigade, or maybe even two brigades, that would in addition to the reinforcement capability you're talking about, provide a tougher more credible forward defense in place.

Is that kind of a debate needed, do we also need a debate about whether the Baltics should maybe even envision 3 or 4 percent of their GDP going to their militaries? Or do you feel like if we get the reinforcement capability more clearly demonstrated through exercises and other preparations, that that should be adequate?

MINISTER LUIK: I think from the military point of view General Sherriff is of course right. I wrote a study, I was then a student in a think tank called ICDS, and I wrote a study with him which was called *Closing the Border Gap*. And I saw some of those ideas also in his book. It is clear that from the purely military perspective, it would be wise to have combat brigades in place. Also because Russia has the ability to close the so-called 828d bubble and make it more difficult to bring in reinforcements.

But I think we have to look at it also from the point of view of real politics, I mean the likelihood that countries would come up with brigades and station them into the Baltic States. At the moment, in the present circumstances, is quite small still. So I think we are at the moment making the best of what we have. In Estonia you have British battalion with one additional company. It's either

French or Danes. So this makes it actually a battle-ready formation. Now in other Baltic States you have, I think in Latvia there are 10 to 12 nations. This is clearly more complicated, and probably has a more political ring to it. But the fact, again, that so many nations participate that there is an Italian flag, a Spanish flag, you know, all nations, literally, present. It is of course a very strong symbolic point.

MR. O'HANLON: That's very good. Thank you. I'm going to now open it up. Please wait for a microphone, and once you get it, please identify yourself before asking your question. We'll start with the gentleman near the back.

MR. NIKRADZA: Thank you very much. My name is David Nikradza, I represent Georgian Television Station Formula in Washington, DC. Recently Georgia hit by massive cyber-attack from Russia. Our international community condemned Russia's action, and Secretary Campel said that additional technical assistance will be offered for Georgia. I wonder if alliance is going to strength cyber security in the region and whether our candidate states will be included.

Thank you very much.

MINISTER LUIK: I think the alliance, NATO grappled a long time, was a new threat of with cyber warfare. I think we have now found a good solution whereby countries bring their national capabilities and allow NATO to coordinate but do not give these assets to any type of joint unit or what have you. In some ways it has certain similarity to nuclear sharing policy of the alliance. So these are national capabilities.

And if partners have national capabilities which they can provide, I'm sure NATO can use them as well or work them with certain caveats, limits, and framework, but work with them as well. I think that would be only natural.

And of course when it comes to the Georgian case, then I'm very happy that the last cyber-attack against Georgia was called out by the international community, including the United States, including Estonia. We have actually reached a moment whereby we can actually identify the perpetrators. The perpetrators of cyber-attacks should know that this common understanding that cyber warfare is great because you can never identify the perpetrator. It's not true anymore. There are already

forensic possibilities to pinpoint quite clearly who is there to be blamed.

And we believe in Estonia that public blaming and shaming is the best way to deter these attacks. Naming the perpetrators, even if it's a cyber-attack, which perhaps is not visible in any meaningful way.

MR. O'HANLON: Very quick follow up on that before we come to this gentleman. When you talk about naming and shaming being the best response, I agree but I also wonder how you would respond to somebody who says, well Vladimir Putin doesn't care if you name and shame him. He'll just tell a lie and say it wasn't him. But I think I want to hear your answer. I think the answer is that because within the NATO alliance and the EU, we trust our own intelligence and it's pretty rock solid. Therefore the kind of sanctions that have been imposed on Russia are established and sustained, even when there's a lot of debate within NATO, within the EU, about how to treat Putin, how to react. But we have such strong consensus on Russian guilt that we are able to use these kinds of attacks as one of the reasons we then keep these sanctions so strong for so long.

Is that how you look at it? I mean why does name and shame work with someone like Vladimir Putin.

MINISTER LUIK: I think Putin often looks for dignity of deniability. It's not only cyber-attacks, it's easy to say I didn't do a cyber-attack. I mean the guy is saying I have no troops in eastern Ukraine, or I haven't deployed, or I have forbidden missiles, or etcetera, etcetera, I don't have Wagner in Africa. So he's going to deny whatever you say.

But I think naming and shaming and showing who has attacked, it still has a certain preventive nature. It makes it more difficult to blatantly violate the law, blatantly violate the sovereignty of other countries.

An important example from Estonia is also that when our air space is violated by Russian planes, we always make it public, we always call in the Russian Ambassador, we always pass on an official protest so that it's not something they know that every time they do it they have to go through this process of explaining that it wasn't them or it was just an accident. But anyway, it creates a kind of a not

a very easy and comfortable situation to the violators.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Sir?

MR. ANDERSON: Mark Anderson, I'm an independent journalist. Kind of a two-part question. On the one hand you said earlier, Mr. Speaker, that you expected or would prefer that Russia would drop its buffer zones; is that correct, did I hear you right? That Russia should get rid of or disband its buffer zones?

MINISTER LUIK: Well, it's policy. It's policy.

MR. ANDERSON: Yeah, it's a two-part question. I mean wouldn't any nation be expected to maintain buffer zones? Because Russia is going to perceive NATO as the expansionist power block. It's almost like everything's in reverse, it depends on which end of the telescope you're looking down.

And in addition, Vladimir Putin is a lot of things, rather untrustworthy in a lot of ways, but he's not stupid. What benefit would he get out of attacking the Baltics? I mean the response, the retaliation would be overwhelming. He's a lot things, but he's not stupid. So I just don't see Russia being that reckless. I'm just playing the Devil's Advocate.

MINISTER LUIK: You know, wars have been started by very smart men. So it's not necessarily a guarantee that only stupid people start wars. It will be evident usually later that it was extremely stupid to start a war, but often people don't get it beforehand. I mean it's, starting a conflict is often something which is to do with, let me ask you. Why did Russia attack Ukraine?

I mean if I would have been a think tanker before the Ukrainian/Russian War and I would have been sitting here and I would have said "You know, at some point I envision Ukraine and Russia having war between themselves." I would have been considered crazy. I mean I would have been kicked out of the think tank community. Russia and Ukraine, I mean two brotherly nations, one nation born out of the other nation, part of the common heritage. If some nations can be part of common heritage, then it's Russia and Ukraine. And still we have a war between them.

So I'm always very careful when people say to me Putin would never attack you.

Because people who say that, I apologize, but people who say that don't have means to guarantee what they say. They might be right, but they might be wrong. And if they are wrong, they cannot help me. So that's why I prefer kind of clarity and preparedness.

I mean NATO battalions compared to the Russian armies, tank armies on the other side of the Estonian border, I mean it's a very small military capability, really small. So it's not something where we could say it's extremely provocative, or I am personally a great believer that weakness is the most provocative way of provoking a conflict rather than strength. And I think we saw it in Ukraine, the moment of weakness, which was immediately utilized. So we must be strong.

MR. O'HANLON: Before I go to Harlan for the next question. Just to follow up on this myself. I wonder though, when, and I realize this is not your immediate day-to-day concern, but when you think about the long-term future of Ukraine and Georgia, of course NATO has an open-door policy in effect. Since 2008 NATO has promised that someday we would try to bring Ukraine and Georgia in. But there's no interim security guarantee and there's no timetable. Vice President Pence, I think in 2017, went to Georgia and said again, the pledge remains, the open-door policy remains, but of course it's not something that has been acted upon.

Is it realistic to keep that promise or that hope and hope to implement it any time soon, or is that maybe a concept that's better rethought, that maybe, not that Russia deserves a sphere of influence, but that putting yourself in Moscow's eyes and coming right into the former Soviet space into the heartland, into Ukraine and Georgia, would really be a bridge too far, even if it might have been, you know, very smart and wonderful to have allies like the Baltic States join NATO, Ukraine and Georgia perhaps are just in a different category altogether. Is that a debate we should have as an alliance?

MINISTER LUIK: I don't think so because all these debates inadvertently sort of support the Russian buffer zone near broad policy. It's written in the books, at the Bucharest Summit, that Ukraine and Georgia will be members of NATO, both of them. Now even politically you couldn't remove it from there. And there are reasons to remove it from there. It might be that you cannot act on it today, but as we have seen with the Baltic States, what is written somewhere might not be useful today, but it might

be very useful tomorrow.

For instance, the United States government recognized, for 50 years, Estonian Ambassadors and Consular Generals in Washington. There were a lot of people in Washington who believed this wasn't a smart thing to do and is totally irrelevant and why should we do stuff like that. After 50 years suddenly the guy who was our Consular General for 50 years, a fairly old distinguished diplomat, became our first Ambassador to Washington. So I've always said to Ukrainians and Georgians, this line in the document is inactive today but tomorrow people will refer to it if they want to take you in. So it's not worthless. To me the Bucharest document is an important document. And it's clear that it will not happen now, but I'm pretty sure it will happen at some point.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Harlan.

MR. ALMOND: I'm Harlan Almond. Mr. Minister, thank you very much for your comments.

I am just literally back from Romania where I've been working very closely with the minister of defense and the chief of defense on their strategic defense review. And two areas where I think that they've done some very interesting analysis.

First, is a forensic study of the brigade and battalion tactical groups that the Russians have mounted, particularly their strengths and weaknesses. As well as a very interesting analysis of the drone attacks against Saudi oil facilities last summer.

And the results from those analysis reveal a number of systems that are not very, very expensive, but could relatively easily disrupt a potential Russian attack. I wonder if Estonia is using that same level analysis to look at other systems that could be hugely disruptive but are far less expensive than F-35 and M-1 tanks.

MINISTER LUIK: For a small country it's unavoidable that you would use the advantages of your brains against the overwhelming army force. And it is indeed true that a lot of things can be done using the meager capabilities you have. A lot of weaknesses, the opposing side always has a lot of weaknesses. I think we shouldn't also mystify the Russian army. I mean it has its problems, it has a lot



of problems. So I think it's right to say that defending the Baltic States is not only a problem of force counting, but it's an almost I would say an intellectual problem. And so indeed, without going into details, we are taking that into consideration.

And sometimes, if your enemy goes high tech, it helps you to go low tech because you have then a lot of advantages which the high tech options do not provide, as we have seen in our international operations elsewhere around the world where extremely low tech opponent has been successful, essentially, against the very high tech international coalition.

MR. O'HANLON: That's very memorable. It's almost like a Michelle Obama line, when they go high tech we go low tech. I won't forget that one. See if anybody else has some questions, we've got five more minutes or so. We got two in the back, why don't we take them together and then see if we can come back to the Minister at that point.

MS. STILOVOKU: Yana Stilovoku, One Plus Media, Ukraine. My question is about this common problem in Ukraine and in Estonia at some part of population which are tuned into Russian media, Russian propaganda. And Russia is counting on them as like the field in where all kinds of provocations can be done. How do you see the possibilities to deter this danger, like to work with it, how do you see this problem in Estonia, in Ukraine? Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: And then right behind you, please.

MS. ZHANG: Hi, Mr. Minister, thank you for being here. My name is Olivia Zhang and I am a Defense and Foreign Policy Intern at the KATO Institute. So I have a question to you about the Trump Administration pulling out of the Intermediate Nuclear Force Treaty. What's your opinion on the implications in Russia and NATO relationship in the future? Do you think that the United States should deploy more intermediate nuclear weapons to the NATO allies in the future in order to counter the Russian threats to the region?

MINISTER LUIK: Thank you. Thank you for that question. Let me start with the propaganda issue. I must say, and I might be surprising people here. I don't see it in Estonia as a major problem. Estonia is an EU country, relatively wealthy. The Russian community in Estonia is relatively

integrated to the fabric of our society. So the likelihood that somebody can simply, with fake news or with some kind of info operation, change their views about Estonia, are very slim. I don't see a tool of doing that.

And you know it better than I do, but in Ukraine it's also not an ethnic conflict. So there are Russian speakers often on both sides of the administrative line. So I'm not too worried about that. And in a surprising way, Russians lately don't spend much money in their immediate neighborhood.

I mean basically they have two tools for propaganda. One is the Channel 1, Russia Today, sorry, the Russian, what is it, Russia 24. Which are meant mainly for internal consumption. And Russians now have a problem how to move these channels also to relate to the Russians living in the neighborhood in other countries. But these channels are not meant, for instance, for Estonia. When a Russian in Estonia looks at the first Russian channel, he or she doesn't relate to it in a way that the person in Russia, who is in a closed information space, relates to it.

When I was in Russia as an ambassador during the Russian attack to Ukraine, the Russians didn't have any other tool so they used the Rossiya, the Russian main news every day, one hour, from 9:00 in Russia is the big newscast, Rossiya. This was all about Ukraine. So when I looked at it, it was like a Ukrainian newscast, a fake Ukrainian newscast. They had to use it to exercise influence on Ukraine.

They don't have good targeted, not that I'm sad about it, but they do not have good targeted policies towards the neighborhood when it comes to propaganda. Because the neighborhood Russians don't trust the simple party lines. They have internal propaganda and then they have RT, which is meant for you guys. Which is meant to deceive Western Europe, the United States. Now you might say they are not necessarily very successful. But this is meant for the Western audience. And I think we have found good ways to push back RT because I don't think we should consider them a proper news channel, but rather a tool of the Russian government.

And your question about the arms control. Well, Russia violated the treaty, it deployed the weapon. It not only developed the weapon, but it deployed the missiles. So if one side violates the

treaty, it is, for me, essentially totally pointless. I know that there are arms control enthusiasts who believe that whatever happens in real life, the arms control treaty is something good in itself. But I'm not from that group, I'm not an arms control specialist.

So I believe that the treaty became moot. I think the enormously smart thing the United States did was to garner a consensus among NATO allies who supported, including all Western European countries, who supposed the U.S. decision to withdraw from that bilateral treaty. Because the treaty has a lot of relevance of course to countries like Germany and others. So that there was a unified understanding that one should withdraw, and there was a unified understanding why one should withdraw. I think this was of great benefit. And if somebody says that, you know, NATO is brain dead, NATO's political side is brain dead, I always bring this INF debate as an example, that you can actually use NATO for political purposes if you work and diligently consult with allies and try to achieve consistency.

MR. O'HANLON: Fantastic. I think we have time for one more question. And I think we'll come here to the fourth row if we could please.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Mr. Minister, thank you for a wonderful discussion. I am Amelia, I'm from the Ukraine myself. As you may know, on February 18th, there has been another massive provocation created by Russian militants in the Donbass region of Ukraine. And even our president has said it like this provocation was caused to disrupt this peacemaking process because Putin wants to establish peace in his own way. And as you can see, Ukraine has been following all the international treaties, we've been employing the Normandy format to show our international partners that we are ready to create peace, we're ready to establish it, but without giving up the territory of Ukraine and our people.

So I'm just wondering if you could give any particular advice to what may be possible most of Ukraine can take to prevent Russian aggression or how to minimize any risks from Russia.

Thank you.

MINISTER LUIK: There's probably no one good answer for it. I think Ukraine has done a lot, and in the end I think sanctions helped, and western policy helped. But in the end it was the

Ukrainian Army which stopped the movement of Russian forces. I think people still remember the concept of New Russia, or Novorossiya, which Putin spoke about when I was there as an Ambassador. It was almost an official concept because the President spoke about it all the time.

Novorossiya was, as you know, the idea would that it would to nip essential half of Ukraine. So we are lucky to be very far from that. And the Ukrainian Army did a very good job in fighting.

I'm also very supportive of President Zelensky's approach to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. And I really applaud his bravery. I know that it is not easy to do that. Finding peace is always very difficult, not easy at all.

But I think it's unrealistic to shoot for a solution whereby all these problems will be suddenly solved. I'm very skeptical of the fact that one day Putin arrives in his office and says "What the hell, let's go out of Ukraine, let's be friends, all of us." I think the idea that we should step by step exchange prisoners, enlarge the line of neutrality between the two opposed armored forces, etcetera, etcetera. We start with the small steps and perhaps at some point it will generate enough good will that we can manage to do something bigger.

But you're absolutely right, these armed incursions, of course, immediately destroy not only the logic of peace talks, but the whole atmosphere of peace talks. And that's really sad, that's really sad.

MR. O'HANLON: Mr. Minister, I've learned a lot. I value your wisdom and thoughtfulness in discussing these issues. Very best of wishes going forward and thank you for all you've done for NATO and for your country.

MINISTER LUIK: Thank you.

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ANDERSON COURT REPORTING  
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190