

# Contesting Russia: Lessons from Central and Eastern Europe



**OCTOBER 23, 2024**

**Briefing of the  
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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**Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**  
**234 Ford House Office Building**  
**Washington, DC 20515**  
**202-225-1901**  
**csce@mail.house.gov**  
**<http://www.csce.gov>**  
**@HelsinkiComm**

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The Helsinki process, formally titled the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, traces its origin to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in Finland on August 1, 1975, by the leaders of 33 European countries, the United States and Canada. As of January 1, 1995, the Helsinki process was renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE].

The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 57 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <[www.osce.org](http://www.osce.org)>.

## ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is an independent U.S. Government commission created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <[www.csce.gov](http://www.csce.gov)>.

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# **Contesting Russia: Lessons from Central and Eastern Europe**

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**October 23, 2024**

## **Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC**

The briefing was held from 2:03 p.m. to 3:37 p.m., Room 210, Cannon House Office Building, Jordan Warlick, Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Ms. WARLICK: All right. Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us today. In case you are not already familiar with us, the Helsinki Commission is a bipartisan, bicameral Commission mandated to monitor compliance with the Helsinki Accords and advance comprehensive security in the 57-nation OSCE region. Today's event is on "Contesting Russia: Lessons from Central and Eastern Europe."

Before introducing our panelists, I will give a few short words about our discussion today. Russian aggression has long been a defining force in Europe's security landscape, from imperial Russia to Soviet Russia to now under Putin's Russia. The nations of the Visegrad-4 and the Baltics have been on the front lines of this imperialism, enduring decades of oppression and control. Their proximity to Russia, combined with their lived experiences behind the Iron Curtain, gives these countries an unparalleled perspective on the enduring Russian threat, a perspective that is invaluable to Europe's security and the broader international community.

Today, the V-4 and Baltic states are frequent targets of Moscow's hybrid warfare, including attacks on critical infrastructure, disinformation, election interference, airspace violations, cyber warfare, and the list goes on, all aimed at destabilizing their governments. As an early warning system for the rest of Europe, these nations have consistently sounded the alarm about the dangers Russia poses to European security. With Russia continuing its genocidal war in Ukraine and engaging in hybrid warfare directly on NATO soil, the lessons learned from this region are critical for strengthening our collective defense.

Building on the Helsinki Commission staff report "Contesting Russia: Preparing for the Long-Term Russian Threat," today's briefing will explore Russia's persistent aggression in the region and examine how the V-4 and Baltic states have responded. I am also interested in getting our panelists' perspectives on how the United States can deepen its support for these frontline states, strengthen regional security, and counter Russian influence over the long term.

We are fortunate to have with us three distinguished experts who will share their insights. First, we will hear from Dalibor Rohac, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Next, Indra Ekmanis, Baltic Sea Fellow for the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Finally, Andrew Michta, director and senior fellow of the Scowcroft Geostrategy Initiative at the Atlantic Council. I want to thank all of you for being here today and I'm looking forward to an insightful discussion.

With that, let us begin with Dalibor.

Mr. ROHAC: Jordan, thank you, and thank you all for coming today and for bearing with me for a few minutes. I think there is a degree of significance to the day on which we are meeting here in the Cannon Building.

On October 23rd, in 1956 a group of Hungarian students in Budapest called on the general public to join their protests and what ensued was one of the most impressive, largest acts of defiance against the Soviet domination of the Eastern Bloc.

It ended in a bloodbath—2,500 Hungarians killed, and a quarter million Hungarians who emigrated. As Russia is casting its shadow over Eastern Europe, interfering with elections in places such as Moldova and Georgia this coming weekend, I think there is, you know, some value in reflecting on how little has changed in those 70 years.

I should preface this by saying that I had the opportunity to spend a few days in various European capitals last week talking to a number of European policymakers including in Brussels and my basic message for fellow Americans and also for the Western Europeans I have encountered is very simple—that we are not alarmed enough and I do not think we are listening enough to those who know more about the Russian threat than we do.

Three very simple observations. In Ukraine, Russia is making slow but steady and sustainable progress in the Donbas. As one official I saw put it, these small tactical victories that we talk about may very well end up—adding up to a significant strategic advantage unless they are countered more effectively.

We are also in a situation in which Russia is waging the war using North Korean troops, and Iranian drones. This might be the closest, certainly in my lifetime, that we have come to a global war. I speak to friends in the Baltic states—Latvians, and Lithuanians. They have “dragon teeth” on their border crossings with Russia. They have mined some of these—some of these roads to Russia, and in the West I think we are summarily ignoring the main lesson from the most recent global war that ended in 1945, namely, that aggression by revisionists needs to be nipped in the bud, and today much more so than in the early months of the war there is growing demand for accommodating Russia in ways that will only entice Putin to test our resolve further.

I mean, as North Korean generals and officers are taking selfies on Red Square, you see the U.N. secretary-general hanging out with Vladimir Putin and the other BRICS leaders.

The other observation that I have to make based on some of these conversations I had last week is that allied militaries—and Andrew will probably expand on that a little bit—are seriously under-resourced, despite *Zeitenwende*, despite the increase in defense budgets. Relative to the needs of what might be looming as a global conflict, we are woefully ill-prepared. I mean, I would urge everybody to ask, you know, their local NATO official whether they think that the alliance's operational plans can be executed given the State of our militaries and our defense budgets.

Now, things did not have to turn this way. It was very clear back in 2007 after Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference that he already saw the West as an adversary, and that he had a very dismissive view of the sovereignty on self-determination of countries of Central and Eastern Europe. He saw NATO enlargements as a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust and he saw it as directed against him.

The question is, you know, if this was his reading of the situation what were we expecting him to do and, clearly, there were those in Eastern Europe who understood the message very clearly back then. In 2009, the famous open letter to the Obama administration from a group of Central Eastern European leaders, senior statesmen, and diplomats including Václav Havel of the Czech Republic, Emil Constantinescu of Romania, and Vaira Vike-Freiberga of Latvia warned the Americans that we are dealing with a revisionist power pursuing 19th-century agenda with 21st-century tactics.

They were brushed away as hysterics. Yet, this was already after the 2008 attack on Georgia. There was this notion prevailing in the West for a very long time that Russia, despite all this, can be engaged and made a responsible stakeholder in the international system, and this sort of haughty dismissive attitude toward those in Central and Eastern Europe who sort of knew better continued well into the 2014 invasion of Ukraine.

Ukraine got, you know, the infamy of the Minsk Accords, basically setting the stage for further aggression instead of rectifying the original sin of the Budapest Memorandum. There is more than just a hint of a drift to push Ukraine to negotiations without first establishing a favorable balance of power on the battlefield.

I think it is hugely dangerous. It is another iteration of the same mistake as before, and it is not just the problem of the Trump-Vance campaign. I mean, it is also the attitude of a large chunk of Europe's political class. I would not be surprised that if former President Trump is elected and if he forces some sort of settlement on Ukraine, we will see much of Western Europe to be happy to go along.

We can also expand on the halfhearted approach of the, you know, Biden administration—the sluggishness, the almost homeopathic drip of aid throughout these past two and a half years that has contributed to the problem.

My message—I do not want to go on for any longer—my message is very simple. We are running out of time to establish deterrence and to prevent Europe's descent into a conflict that will be much worse than the one we are looking at in Ukraine, and so I would urge everybody with—to act with urgency that this moment needs.

Thank you.

Ms. WARLICK: Thank you very much, Dalibor, for that message.

Indra?

Mr. EKMANIS: Well, thank you, Jordan, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all today.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, while they are comparatively small countries with combined population of just 6 million people, make up this key region, bridging the West and Russia, right?

Among their strongest unifying factors are their experiences under five decades of repressive Soviet occupation, their post-Soviet reversion to liberal democracies, accession to critical international institutions—the EU and NATO—their responses to revanchist Russia on their borders, and currently their leadership and ironclad military, humanitarian, and political support for Ukraine in its war against Russian aggression.

In the Baltic states, Russian aggression has effectively operated in the gray zone, skirting the edges of what might trigger NATO's Article 5 and taking the form of cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, military provocations, and exertions of political and economic pressure on the countries.

The Baltic states, in turn, have responded by turning areas of risk into areas of expertise, for example, by establishing the NATO Centers of Excellence for cyber defense in Estonia, which weathered the world's first large-scale cyberattack coming from Russia on government and society in 2007, on energy security in Lithuania where previous dependency on Russia left the country vulnerable to energy blackmail, and on strategic communications in Latvia where ethno-linguistic divisions have exposed the population to Russian disinformation assaults.

While there is much room to strengthen these efforts and to do so in partnership with the U.S. and other allies, the Baltic perspective offers key lessons for countering Russia today.

First is our understanding of NATO as an effective bulwark against Russia. While initially, largely, recipients of NATO's collective defense the Baltic countries have emerged as leaders in the alliance and are taking an active role in strengthening deterrence on their eastern flank through their own defensive posture.

Since 2014 the Baltic states have accelerated their defense spending. Their 2025 budgets, all three of them, foresee more than 3 percent of GDP on defense and they are actively encouraging their NATO partners to join them.

They have undertaken multiple military procurement projects including deep strike capabilities that would put Saint Petersburg within range of guided missiles from Estonia and building this land-based counter mobility area which Dalibor mentioned—the Baltic defense line—to slow a potential incursion of enemy forces.

Active lobbying from the countries has also helped to increase, though there is always room for more, NATO allies' presence in the region, including work to upgrade their enhanced forward presence brigade—battalions to brigades on either permanent, persistently deployed, or high readiness bases. Continued defense cooperation including with the U.S. including through the funding for the Baltic Security Initiative is also a critical component of these deterrence efforts.

As direct targets of Russia's hybrid warfare, the Baltic countries have adopted defense models that include not only developing military capabilities but also a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. This includes establishing public-private cooperation, introducing a national defense curriculum, enabling population readiness, bolstering psychological defenses, and securing strategic communications and economic and energy resilience.

Some tangible examples of this include cybersecurity education, civil defense drills, the expansion of the national service recently in Latvia, and forward-thinking energy infrastructure development enabling diversification and a pivot away from reliance on Russia.

This whole-of-society approach is possible because of the Baltic states' successful post-Soviet transition including integration with the European Union and NATO since 2004. They have developed a strong rule of law, ranking highly in global indices and on some indicators outperforming the U.S. which has been a remarkable, rapid, and stable transi-

tion, and today the Baltic states stand out for their progressive political systems in comparison to much of the rest of Europe where fringe parties are gaining traction.

Similarly, the Baltic states support a robust civil society seen, for example, in the local response to supporting Ukrainian refugees. Part and parcel of this is their work to counter disinformation and better integrate society. In Estonia and Latvia, ethno-linguistic cleavages have been key leverage points for Russia, which exploits their so-called compatriots and seeks to paint the Baltic states as failing democracies.

This narrative is subverted not only through media literacy education, debunking efforts, and achievements in social integration but also through lived experiences. When Russian-speaking populations, diverse in their own right, can contrast the quality of life, opportunity, freedom, and peace in the Baltic states with the realities of Russians just across the border the impact of these narratives becomes blunted, which is a takeaway here for Americans, perhaps, while improving the social and economic safety net helps mitigate existing divisions in society and builds a population that is less vulnerable to exploitation by Russian information manipulation. A strong democratic, engaged civil society and a high quality of life are also critical components to countering Russia.

When the Baltic states joined NATO in 2004 there were some who argued that the expansion of the military alliance was provoking the Russian bear. These arguments, again, resurfaced after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

I think this is a concerning if, perhaps, also instructive narrative, not only because the argument prioritizes the comfort of the aggressor and diminishes the agency and self-determination of the sovereign states but also because the argument has already been in some ways proven wrong with Ukraine as the devastating counterfactual.

The Baltic states know from their own experience that a strong and resilient NATO, one that offers maximum support to and eventually includes Ukraine, is critical to countering Russia.

Perhaps the fundamental lesson from the Baltic experience which has gone unheeded for too long is a clear-eyed understanding of today's Russia and the world view in which it is steeped. Russia's perception of international affairs relies on opposition, on Russia versus the West. Soft power has not been an effective deterrent. Interdependence heightens rather than mitigates risk and appeasement does not and will not bring peace.

Rather, it emboldens aggressors and results in oppression and future conflict. The Baltic countries have long been testing grounds for the hybrid tactics Russia has gone on to use elsewhere including in Georgia, Ukraine, and also the U.S.

Now it is imperative that Baltic warnings continue to resonate not as paranoia from traumatized states but, rather, as key insight into the nature of an aggressive neighbor with expansive imperial ambitions predicated on manipulating government and society.

Thank you.

Ms. WARLICK: Thank you very much, Indra.

Andrew?

Mr. MICHTA: Yes. Please allow me to enter these initial comments into the record. I want to underscore that the principal problem we are facing is that we consistently misunderstand what Russia is and what drives its behavior both in the region and globally.

Let me put it up front, and Dalibor already highlighted that Russia is a quintessentially revisionist State. It is aligned today with three other powers, Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. I call those four the axis of dictatorships.

We could debate whether or not there are things bringing them together other than the opposition and the intention to overthrowing the international system put in place by the United States and its democratic allies after the cold war.

I would submit to you that for over two decades now Russia has been relitigating the post-cold war settlement, driven by its determination to restore the inner core of its former empire and to establish a sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.

The war in Ukraine is not a *sui generis* event. It is a manifestation of Vladimir Putin's drive to restore *Viliki Russkiy Mir—Pax Russica*, to put it differently—that is rooted in the fundamentals of Russian thinking about geopolitics and strategy that inform formative experience as an empire.

This strategic culture sees the empire as rooted in the Eastern Slavic core of three nations: The great Russians, as they call themselves, the little Russians, as they refer to the Ukrainians sometimes, or Ukrainians, and the Belarusians.

Russian imperialism perceives itself to be in fundamental civilizational opposition to the West, the roots of which go back to the 19th century and the introduction of the official national policy that rested on three principles at that time: The Orthodox faith, autocracy and what they called nationality, *narodnost*, whereby nationality meant walling off the empire from the West and fighting foreign influences alien to Russia and the Russian national ideal.

The triad that came to be known as the official nationalism in the 19th century became the dominant ideological doctrine of the Russian empire and it generated a policy of Russification in the 19th century of all non-Russian imperial lands. I bring this bit of history up here to make the following point.

Today, in my view, there are persistent echoes of this ideology and Putin's insistence that, "There is no such thing as a Ukrainian nation," and his focus on Eurasianism as a pathway to de-Westernize Russia.

Moscow's overarching objective is to reconquer its near abroad by relying on military power to score geopolitical wins and restore itself as a great power in other theaters as well. This process began in 2008 with the Russian invasion of Georgia in the aftermath of which Moscow severed two provinces, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

It continued with the 2014 seizure and incorporation of Crimea, Moscow's entry into Syria in 2015, and most recently with the second invasion of Ukraine in 2022. I want to underscore that even before Russia launched its military conquest it had already been shaping the battlefield, so to speak, through information operations, cyberattacks, espionage, and attempts at elite bribery and corruption with the objective of achieving partial elite capture across the region.

As I have written elsewhere, Russia is already in what I call phase zero of a protracted conflict with the West, targeting Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltic states as its near-term strategic objectives and planning a long game to force the United States and its European allies to accept Russia's status as a major power in Europe entitled to an exclusive sphere of domination in Eastern Europe and a sphere of privileged interest in Central Europe including in the countries that are members of NATO and the European Union today.

At risk of over-rationalizing history, I submit that there are striking parallels between the trajectory followed by Germany after its defeat in World War I and the road

Russia has traveled since the end of the cold war. In both cases, the dominant narrative produced for domestic consumption during the Weimar Republic in Germany and the Yeltsin decade in Russia was one of betrayal rather than defeat.

In Germany, the so-called *dolchstoßlegende*, the “stab in the back” myth, claimed that Germany was never defeated but, rather, was betrayed. In Russia, Putin has offered the population a similar narrative, blaming the West for the alleged treachery that brought down the Soviet Union.

I bring this up because that imperial narrative, much as it led to the rise of Hitler in Germany, continues to sustain Putin’s revisionism in Central and Eastern Europe. According to this view, the great Russian nation was robbed of its greatness by the United States and by the West, and, hence, any action to remedy this perceived injustice is justified in the eyes of Russian imperialists.

Hence, I would submit the threat Russia poses to Central and Eastern Europe and to peace and stability worldwide more broadly will not abate as long as the Russian revisionist narrative holds. Until then Russia will remain a chronic threat to the United States and to its allies.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to your questions and the discussion.

Ms. WARLICK: Thank you very much, and thank you to all of you for these really insightful and powerful statements.

We will open it up shortly to question and answer—questions from the audience so please think a little bit about what you may want to ask our experts here.

I will start with a question of my own, which is on hybrid warfare. The Helsinki Commission recently had a hearing on, you know, what we called Russia’s shadow war where we explored the impact of Russian hybrid warfare on NATO countries, and it is clear that the Visegrad-4 and Baltic states are some of the hardest hit by these operations.

Could you share a specific example of Russian hybrid warfare in your region of work, whether it is disinformation, cyberattacks, infrastructure attacks, or other forms that you have been examining or you think are particularly important to highlight?

Mr. ROHAC: Thank you, Jordan. I am happy to make an initial stab at answering that.

I should probably preface that by saying that I was struck by in a conversation recently with Edward Lucas, the long-term Eastern European editor of *Economist* by his insight that talking about hybrid warfare or gray zone warfare kind of diminishes the size of the threat in popular imagination.

Most people just tune it out. It seems like it is not a significant enough subject. Russians themselves call these operations active measures. I think maybe that is something that sort of might have more resonance.

The reality of it is that some of this stuff is really dangerous. I mean, sending intelligence officers to assassinate people in Salisbury or blowing up munition depots in NATO member states, I mean, it is not just a sort of innocuous thing. It is not—I do not think the term hybrid operation or gray zone warfare sort of does it justice.

There are plenty of examples across Central and Eastern Europe and, indeed, across the Western world that we could draw on from. Some of the well-documented Czech and British examples but also last year in France in the immediate aftermath of the October

7 attack in Israel, clearly, the Russians were very keen to sort of insert themselves into what was a sort of controversial and tense moment in French politics.

You know, Stars of David were being painted by Russian undercover agents in Muslim-majority neighborhoods. More recently a Holocaust memorial in Paris was defaced, again, by people who were being paid by the Russians.

I mean, wherever there is an opening for sort of sowing discord Russia sees it. That goes on top of actually blowing up stuff and poisoning people. The most grotesque example, I think, from the very recent and most immediate past is the Moldovan referendum and the first round of the Presidential election this past week. A country of 2 million people Russia spends a hundred million euros on buying votes. Moldovan officials say that it resulted in a sort of switch of around 300,000 votes in an election in a very small country.

In September alone, Moldovan authorities intercepted 50 million euros going to bank accounts of a hundred and thirty thousand Moldovan citizens and there is ample anecdotal evidence from this weekend of people sort of going to the polls asking for money or expecting money or, you know, who knows what they were promised—what they were promised. It has been done in a very brazen way. The main reason I bring it up is that I am not aware of any response that could establish deterrence by punishment in response to this act. Maybe we will sort of talk about it more in the next round of questioning.

It is critical to me that we think in the West about a sort of escalatory ladder that can deter all these measures that are sort of short of kinetic war because we have done a really miserable job at it.

Ms. WARLICK: Thanks. Would either of you like to add? Yes.

Mr. EKMANIS: Sure. I think that—Dalibor made a really good point that it is very hard to narrow down on one example of hybrid war because it is all working together in concert, right? I was thinking about, you know, what kind of example is good to highlight in this scenario but it is just—you just have to kind of list them out, right? Exactly as Dalibor kind of mentioned these are becoming more and more scary.

Russian scrambling of GPS, for example, in the Baltic Sea region, which is causing civilian aircraft to be diverted. The barrage of cyberattacks in the Baltic states has also increased some 40 percent I think the Latvian service mentioned since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and these are often following, you know, decisions by the government in support of Ukraine.

This year the Estonian security service detained 13 individuals for desecrating national memorial sites. There was evidence of kind of young criminals being recruited to do some sort of sabotage work—throwing firebombs, attempting to set fire to the Museum of Occupation in Latvia, for example.

Then, of course, there is just this constant sort of barrage of disinformation that is happening. In the Baltic countries this summer there was significant misinformation that those in power were trying to drag the Baltic countries into war with Russia.

They were trying to provoke a nuclear escalation with Russia and, of course, this disinformation I think—we can talk about all of the examples of hybrid warfare that are happening in the Baltic region in particular or in Eastern Europe more broadly but also I think it is important to remember that part and parcel of this is Russian disinformation operations that are about, perhaps, the Baltics but are also geared toward Western audiences, right?

The idea that we are—or the efforts to depict the Baltic states as backward or oppressive or fascist to exploit really complex histories, to undermine State legitimacy not only within the populations within the Baltic states but also with partners abroad and, therefore, sort of undermine resolve to support the efforts at countering Russia more broadly.

Mr. MICHTA: Let us put this in perspective. Russia has had, in effect, unconstrained access to every level of European societies for the past three decades. The Chinese were in a similar situation. That is a separate conversation; it is not a subject of our discussion here.

The point I am trying to make is that over those three decades, the Russians have been going to school on the vulnerabilities of the West, on how to exploit our own value set, our own institutions, and our own media, against us.

Rather than talking about hybrid threats, I would prefer to talk about a continuum between non-kinetic at one end and kinetic at the other, and the Russians have been very adept at exploiting the levels of vulnerability, testing us in terms of when we will respond.

Let me walk through what happened between 2008 and the present day. I would submit to you that it was the lack of a decisive response from the West. When Putin crossed the line, when he used military power to redraw the map, when he occupied terrain, at every single turn the response was muted, wanting, and then there was a return, to some extent, to business as usual.

Every single time we did this we increased the level of threat and the level of vulnerability. That is the first point I would like to make.

Today we are in a situation where, I would argue, through both non-kinetic and kinetic operations Putin wants to fracture the NATO alliance politically. We are obsessed with vertical escalation to nuclear, and you can never dismiss this when you are dealing with a power like Russia that has nuclear weapons, so it is always there.

I would argue that relative to the threat of horizontal escalation of the war in Ukraine, creating a crisis in NATO—let us say, a rocket flying into a NATO country, into a Baltic State, into Finland, into Warsaw, hitting a school, hitting a hospital—that is going to be a moment of decision for the alliance in terms of how we respond to this. We are obsessing with vertical and he is playing it out very, very well.

In effect, he is creating a system through the information operations, through propaganda, through constant threats, to actually compel us to self-deter in this process and so if we do not respond in a decisive way it does not matter that we have capabilities that outmatch what the Russians have.

If you look at crisis after crisis after crisis, even when we use ordinances to defend our allies as we did in Israel we shoot at arrows. We do not shoot at archers. We do not allow the Ukrainians to reach deep into the sources of attacks.

Let me give you one specific example and show you how pernicious Russian behavior can be. The question of asylum policy, migration, and human rights, are vital topics for any conversation in the European Union. Poland has been under assault, in effect, from Belarus with wave after wave of migrants, most of them largely delivered, if you will, to Belarus through a network that has been established in place, sustained, and supported by the Russian FSB and the Belarusian KGB.

These men and women, some of them are trained. Some of them are accidental, if you will, bystanders who have been recruited into this. Nonetheless, they are forcing the

Polish government to deploy a large portion of their military, in effect, in a guard duty to keep the border from being overrun.

What that means is those thousands of Polish soldiers with reserves and rotations that are required are taken out of training. They are taken out of learning new equipment that Poland is buying. They are taken out, if you will, from the ledger of the balance of forces between NATO and Russia.

This is just one example of why Russia is doing this, and I would argue it targets Poland specifically because that country today is what the Bonn Republic was in the cold war. It is the hub on the frontier connecting, actually, our regional defense plans critical to the security of the Baltic states, to the security of our Scandinavian allies, and also to what's going to happen further down, especially in Romania.

The Russians in the Black Sea are jamming GPS. They are running their vessels through exclusive zones where they are not supposed to be, and every single time they do that deterrence continues to lag because they are getting away with it. I think this is the biggest threat we are facing right now when it comes to Russians pushing us in Europe, pushing us in Central Europe, and the Baltics, and testing the limits of what they can get away with.

Ms. WARLICK: Thank you very much for these—you know, for giving us these ideas of the various active measures that Russia is pursuing in the region. I will ask one more question and then open it up to questions from the audience.

You know, as mentioned the Helsinki Commission recently published this report on contesting Russia and one of the main conclusions is that the Russian threat is not going anywhere anytime soon. Even if there was a regime change in Moscow tomorrow we need to be prepared to contest Russia for the long term.

As we have discussed, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have had remarkable resilience in the face of Russian aggression and imperialism. Can you give us, you know, some examples of effective strategies or tactics that have been used in these countries to combat Russian hybrid warfare and are there any lessons the United States can take from these approaches?

Mr. ROHAC: We take turns again. I am not sure if I will sort of point you to specific examples but I would like to, I mean, use this to kind of, like, frame the problem in a way that I think is really important.

We want to establish deterrence against Russian gray zone warfare or active measures if you will. The way we establish deterrence, as any sort of undergraduate student of international relations will tell you, is either by denial or by punishment.

Clearly, countries such as Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, have established themselves as very effective in putting in place deterrence by denial. They have done it through active sort of whole of government measures, training of local mayors, preparedness, education, helping their societies understand trustworthy versus untrustworthy sources of information.

I would say that Central and Eastern Europe at large is not a homogenous, unambiguous success story because there are countries that are far more vulnerable to Russian hybrid measures, disinformation, et cetera, than others, and if there is I am sure Indra knows much more about this than I do, but if there is one common pattern I think the success stories is that it is much easier to me to sort of establish deterrence by denial in societies that are reasonably homogenous, that have high levels of trust, that—kind of

understanding we are all in this together. Drawing lessons from, say, Finland and trying to transplant them into a sort of big Federal, argumentative, rambling society like the United States might not really get you where you want to be.

An equally important part of the story, I think, is deterrence by punishment and that is where we are much, much weaker. Basically in our escalatory ladder, we have sanctions. Then there is this big void and then we have kinetic war and potentially nuclear war, and I think we have to get much more creative somewhere in that middle.

I am not saying we should be replicating Russian approaches. Like, ours is a society governed by the rule of law. We do not go abroad to assassinate people or set things on fire but, boy, could we maybe look for little openings to keep Putin on his toes and, you know, for him to sort of wake up in the morning wondering what it is that we might do like whether, you know, some of his friends might find their assets frozen in an offshore jurisdiction.

You know, if Israel can disrupt ATMs in Iran, you know, maybe we should be also able to inflict pain, destabilize, embarrass the regime—you know, flood Telegram channels with a bit of nonsense here and there, and we have just been sort of collectively unwilling or unable to sort of even think about that, the domain of warfare, and I think it is to our collective detriment.

Mr. EKMANIS: Yes. I think you have alluded a little bit to some of the examples from the Baltic states. The Baltic states have done, I think, a relatively good job at learning how to either respond quickly and effectively to Russian aggression or to preempt it and prepare themselves for areas of potential aggression on the front end.

I think that Lithuania's approach to energy diversification, for example, is a good one here. You know, they were a hundred percent dependent on Russian natural gas. They, recognizing this as a vulnerability, you know, took early steps to diversify their supply already in 2014 and then, you know, by April 2022 they were able to fully shut off gas—natural gas imports from Russia.

The Baltic states in general have been building their energy infrastructure that is allowing them to kind of more quickly pivot than they had anticipated necessarily and synchronize with Europe.

Estonia is another good example. Of course, I think we are probably all familiar with the cyberattack of 2007, possibly the first of each of its kind. You know, it took out banks, media institutions, and government services, but also included these violent riots that were really stoked by misinformation and weaponization of historical memory.

Now we know of what is maybe the most common understanding of Estonia is Estonia, right? They are at the forefront of cybersecurity building not only the technological prowess but also building resiliency within their populations and doing so in, like, public-private sort of cooperation.

I think a really interesting example from the Estonian Defense Forces is their cyber conscription which recruits from secondary schools but also information technology companies to build competencies that work both for the state's defense needs—cyber defense needs—but also in the private sector.

An example, if I may, from Latvia as well we know that Latvia is—has a large Russian-speaking population. Over a third of the population is Russian-speaking, and so whether they like it or not they are often referred to as these compatriots. They fall under Russia's compatriot policy. [LAUGHS.] I want to stress, though, of course, that the Russian-

speaking population is quite diverse and we can see in there also a kind of diversity of support—a large support for the Ukrainians in the war with Russia.

Latvia has also, you know, developed this sort of wealth of expertise knowing that they are going to be the subject of frequent disinformation. You know, the narratives there, again, are—perhaps have a little—you can hear a little bit of an echo in our own situation in the United States. The narratives are directed at undermining trust in government, drawing on nostalgia, alleging mistreatment and, you know, the response has been pretty multi-pronged. It is a legislative action. Latvia was the first to prosecute successfully an individual with regard to spreading disinformation.

There are also journalists and nonprofit organizations that are working to actively kind of help the public better understand media literacy. They are kind of—you might have heard of the elves fighting the trolls in Lithuania and these institutions around debunking and pre-bunking these narratives.

You know, the Baltic states are working on kind of a variety of these different sort of practical terms. I think, you know, the takeaways here also are some of those practical applications so improving our cybersecurity, improving media literacy, and the ability to discern what is good and what is bad information.

The U.S. also has a role to play here in supporting these efforts in the Baltic states but also at home and recognizing the kind of multilayered approach that the Baltics, I think, are taking is also critical. If we think—talking, again, about hybrid attacks, they are coming in on multiple planes. We have to think about cross-sectoral cooperation, public-private, military, and civil kind of responses.

Mr. MICHTA: Let me be very blunt. There is no greater imperative, in my view, for the European allies than simply to rearm at speed and scale. If there is anything that is going to deter Russia it is real exercised military capabilities with appropriate air and missile defense system integration, finding a way to actually meld the different disparate digital infrastructures of 32 allies, and coming up with an unequivocal message that the new regional plans that NATO has can be implemented because the capabilities commitments that are required are there.

Every time I am in Europe I preach this message to any audience that I have an opportunity to speak to and, again, this is not about percentages of GDP. Although countries along the flank are leading the way—Poland is now advocating 4 percent. The Baltics are stepping up. The Scandinavians. It is about what you spend that money on.

If 80 percent of your budget goes on personnel, retirement, and other costs and you are not really producing the real capabilities that the SACEUR can plug into his operational planning, that money—you know, you could go to 10 percent of your GDP; it is the structure of what you spend on. That is the first thing.

The second thing is we are paying the price for the fact that we did not respond appropriately already in 2008, not to mention 2014. Every time he used military power he scored a geopolitical win—I am talking about Putin—and paid only a marginal price for that. He invades Georgia. Nord Stream 1 is completed. He invades the Syrians. He is a big player, you know, now in the Middle East. He takes Crimea. Nord Stream is still initiated as another project. The message that was given to the Russians is that the West has no willpower and energy dependence, his ability to manipulate the political elites, to influence public debate, will allow him to get to where he needs to be.

That is why I think 2022 is such an important year for us because all of a sudden for the first time we stood up. We responded from the strategic gut, so to speak, and NATO is politically unified.

What worries me when it comes to Ukraine and deterrence and defense is that political unity is slightly thinner than I would have wanted it to be because when it comes to an appetite for risk-taking it depends on where you sit on the map. When I am in Tallinn, Helsinki or Vilnius, Warsaw, or Bucharest it is Russia, Russia, Russia. They get it. I was recently in Stockholm. Same thing with the Swedes. Same thing with the Norwegians.

When I start moving away geographically from the flank, from the frontier, things begin to change. Germany is now no longer a frontier country. France is preoccupied with the Mediterranean. In Paris, I hear, you know, Europeans' southern border is now in the Sahel. It is in the Med. We need to be paying attention over there.

I sometimes joke that when I get to Portugal I have no idea what we are talking about other than migration issues and economic development. Jokes aside, my point is the following. We need to get to a unified threat perception across the alliance because only that will trigger a genuine commitment to invest in necessary military constitutions.

Here is the bad news. The war in Ukraine has been going on for 3 years now. Okay. The Russians are now on track and at least trying to field a 1.5 million military. The Chinese People's Liberation Army is about 2 million. If you look at the sizes of European militaries outside of the flank, if you look at the stocks of munitions, they are virtually nonexistent.

If you look at the number of operational tanks, which are very, very few, and compare that to the level of Russian force reconstitution and how much armor they are putting back into service—relying on old stocks, some of the new production—this is going to look very, very dangerous for us.

Second, the Russians remember. We have 1,800 miles of NATO's border now to defend. Finland itself is 830 miles. Okay. We have no infrastructure north-south that is adequate for the task of military mobility across the theater.

We need to invest in that. Yet, at the political level, the military side is on track. Our military gets it. They have developed regional plans. They have capabilities, and commitments attached to them. They are working on force integration and the rest of it.

What is missing is the political will to speak to the public in Europe and, frankly, here in the United States as well to say how dangerous the situation is becoming. We have an ongoing war in Ukraine. We now also have a war in the Middle East.

In effect, the front of confrontation with the axes of dictatorships is expanding. We may have instability on the Korean Peninsula and then, of course, the Indo-Pacific. If you look at the size of the European militaries, they are inadequate to the task with very few exceptions.

Let me say a few words about the flank. Small nations like Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, and especially Finland, are doing their part. Finland has 5.5 million people. They can field an army of 280,000 at the drop of a hat. They have the largest conventional artillery. They have resilience programming built into their total defense concept. This is where the rest of the alliance needs to go.

Frankly, the same goes for our own military. We are spending now, roughly, 3.1 percent of our GDP on defense. That is half—roughly, half of what we spent during the cold

war. Our joint force is probably in NDAA at about 1.3 million. It was never less than 2 million during the cold war, roughly speaking.

If you looked at the defense spending—so we are playing catch up and I think in large part because the three decades of the peace dividend were so good and it is very hard to let go and recognize the realities on the ground. I think it is way past time to do that.

Ms. WARLICK: Thank you. Questions from the audience?

Yes, please. We have a mic coming.

QUESTION: Greetings. I am Karl-Heikki. I am from the Joint Baltic American National Committee. We are all aware that the Baltic states have a very strong attitude in regards to Russia.

However, Western European states and the United States do not have this attitude. How do you suggest that Baltic states and individuals here in the United States can push for our elite to adopt the necessary mindset to combat Russia?

Mr. EKMANIS: Yes. You know, I read in the—there was a piece published in the Kyiv Independent yesterday that was talking exactly about this. The main takeaway is that Europeans are starting to listen better to the Baltic states but Washington is not.

I do not know that I know the answer to how we make our allies listen a little bit better. I mean, I think that this kind of forum is important. I think that the Baltic political leadership is really doing a lot of work in this field. I mean, I think that they are trying from the position that they are able to.

I remember, you know, when the war began in—when the invasion—after the invasion there was rarely a day that you could open up The New York Times or The Washington Post or the Guardian and not see an interview with, you know, Kaja Kallas or Edgars Rinkēvičs or Gabrielius Landsbergis. You know, I think that there is a concerted effort and an understanding in Baltic political leadership that they have to be as loud as they can and as loud as they can in as many forums as they can so in expert forums, in public forums.

I think there is a recognition that it would be really hard, you know, to convince Americans that the Baltic states are worth defending if they have no idea where the Baltic states are or what they do, right? [LAUGHS.] Or even that they are allies and have been for decades, right?

I am not sure what the answer is but I think that you are pointing to a considerable and important issue that still remains.

Mr. ROHAC: Two cents?

Ms. WARLICK: Yes, please.

Mr. ROHAC: Let me—if I can just add two cents to it, probably not in the sort of most constructive manner, but there was a time when I was reasonably hopeful that the message had started sinking in. I remember President Macron's visit to Bratislava, Slovakia in 2022, his speech in which he said, we should have listened. You were right. We were wrong. I think people are sort of keen to kind of forget the lesson and move on.

I have one little anecdote from my trip to Italy last week which suggests that actually the message is not sinking in. Prime Minister Meloni I think she has been terrific on Ukraine and, you know, deserves all the credit.

When you look at whether it is her party or the Italian political class at large I think the sort of commitment to Ukraine goes an inch deep. I was in a conversation with senior Italian officials—one legislator, and one former diplomat. Does not really matter who they were or what their affiliations were.

The common themes coming from their side of the table were that Russia was entitled to a buffer zone, that we mistreated Russia or neglected Russian concerns, and one of the guys then turned to me after the conversation in a very sort of paternalistic, sort of friendly way trying to lecture me on how I should not be sort of invoking these Balts and Poles because, you know when I was a diplomat I worked with them; they are insufferable—they were so pushy, so aggressive. We can work with the French and the Germans, but those Eastern Europeans really did not master the art of diplomacy the way great nations such as Russia did.

As long as this mindset is still present, and I suspect that it is more present than not in places like Paris Rome, and Berlin, I think it will be very hard to make collective progress in Europe. On that somewhat pessimistic note.

Mr. MICHTA: I have just one comment. To quote the great philosopher, the meaning of life is to show up. You need to work with countries in the region. If you look at the size of the Baltic states in terms of population and economic base and the rest of it—and I say this is a great friend of the Baltic countries—but you are city-states. You are very small in terms of the population base. Okay.

If you start working on a regional basis, aligning with Finland, with Poland, with the Scandinavian countries, then your voice will be heard that much more. That is No. 1.

No. 2, what Dalibor said is very true. It is easy to dismiss countries that were once within the Soviet empire as somehow Russophobes and, you know, irrational and too emotional. Well, work with the Finns. The Finns understand the Russians. They are probably the toughest nation when it comes to opposing Russia you can find out there.

I can tell you a proverb that a Finnish soldier taught me. He said, my grandmother said to me you can fry a Russian in butter but he is still a Russian. Tastes the same. That tells you how tough they are, and at the same time in this town, the Finns are not perceived in any shape or form in a similar way as the countries that were once occupied.

Develop a regional strategy, No. 1, glue yourself at the hip to countries like Poland, Finland, and Sweden. Operate jointly, No. 2. No. 3, make sure that the American public—the congressional leadership—knows what you are doing. Because I hear how important the relationship between the Baltics and the United States is. Most of the time I hear this in Vilnius, Tallinn, and Riga.

You need to deliver this message here, that you are spending the money, that you are building the real capabilities. With Finland and Sweden and NATO the center of gravity of the alliance has shifted to the northeastern corridor. It is critical both for our plants and for our ability to deter and defend.

At the same time, there are only three countries on the flank that have population resources large enough to build large conventional armies. That is Poland, Romania, and Ukraine. Ukraine is not—Ukraine is the best NATO ally that is not in NATO—that NATO never had. You can bring so much to it and now with Finland and Sweden in it you have the geostrategic depth to actually be defensible and make a difference.

Stay on the message. Show yourself up here. Reach out. Write about it. Talk about it. Show up.

Ms. WARLICK: Thank you. Any other questions from the audience?

Yes, Karl?

QUESTION: Hi. On behalf of my Baltic colleagues and the two other Estonians including myself who are in the audience today, I would like the three of you—I appreciate you all being here and thank you for all the well wishes with the Estonian embassy—I would like you to delve deeper into things you all three alluded to, the escalation ladder.

We are the Baltics and NATO is operating under the idea that in two to 4 years Russia will have reconstituted its military capabilities behind the Baltic borders—Russian military reforms and all this stuff.

That does not mean that in two to 4 years there will be a kinetic onslaught incoming, though it may. In talks with our military leadership and such I have heard that we rather expect it to be an attack—a probing attack, probably intended to fragment NATO, more along the lines of what you have been talking about in terms of hybrid threats. It could be a swarm of drones smuggled into one of the Baltic countries and let loose to target our army bases, for example. What measures would you—or, twofold question. If you were Putin, what would you do to really go after—so we would be better prepared, I guess, in that with that purpose? If you were Putin, what do you think would be—what might he do that would really bring a moment of decision to NATO, such as the example I just brought, that this is either Article 5 or it is not, but also—well, I guess that is good enough. Sorry for rambling. Thank you.

Ms. WARLICK: Thank you, Karl. Who would like to take that?

Mr. MICHTA: Let me start, okay? I will be the last one to be advising Putin on what to do. I do not want to make his job any easier. [LAUGHTER.] Jokes aside, look, there is a temporal dimension to war. You are absolutely right. The Russians are reconstituting their forces much faster than many analysts anticipated. Remember, the Russian Air Force and the Navy are barely touched. It is mainly the land forces that have been mauled by the Ukraine, but it is one thing.

He is going into old stocks, pulling out T-72, even T-62. He has some small percentage of a new tank production. At the rates that he is going, and the estimates that were in the public domain last year were between 1,4[00] and—1,3[00] and 1,500 tanks per year that the Russians were putting back into service. Ask yourself, how many tanks are in the British Army? How many tanks are in the Bundeswehr? How many tanks—Poland sent tons of armor, you know, and equipment to Ukraine. Everybody is trying to buy new equipment, but the defense industrial base in the United States and in Europe cannot sustain that pace of orders in terms of contracts.

We will be living, in the next two, 3 years, in a very fluid and a very dangerous situation. Because if this is his rate of reconstitution, and he wants to fight a dumb fight, he wants to come close and force NATO to play on his rules—look at the Baltic states. How far is it to Vilnius from the Belarusian border? Twenty miles. How far is it to Warsaw from the border? Less than 200 kilometers. What if he has this armor there, and starts driving it? There are no stocks of munitions. Every tank takes a Javelin, a round, or whatever you need to do. He clearly demonstrated—I am speaking of Putin again—that he

does not care about the lives of his people and his crews. What happens if we get into this situation?

What I fear the most is, as I said at the very beginning, the Atlantic and the Pacific are not an either/or proposition. They are part of the same problem set. They are interconnected theaters. If you look at the size of the U.S. military, if we have crises expanding, right—remember what happened after Hamas attacked Israel. Ukraine disappeared in this town from the headlines. All the oxygen went into that theater. If there is another crisis, I would submit to you that Putin will be waiting for the other members of this axis of dictatorship to stir up trouble, expand the theater, and put pressure on us.

What can you do? Again, this is no rocket science. Rearm, push allies in NATO to spend the money. I find it to be unacceptable that a continent as wealthy as Europe is, with half a billion people, cannot raise conventional capability to contain what is basically a shadow of the Soviet Union. Russia is at 400 and—what, 140 million people today. Compare this to the Soviet Union which was sitting in the middle of Germany, had 54 non-Soviet Warsaw Pact divisions at a snap of a finger, you know, China was not really a player in this game.

You are telling me that Europe is not able to generate, within NATO, I emphasize. I think the ideas for strategic autonomy and all of that are really, really counter-productive. Resource the regional plans of NATO. Europe should be able to do it. You, as Baltic states, every time you talk to a leader in a major European capital, especially of larger states, tell them: You need to rearm. You need to spend the money. There is no free lunch.

Again, democracies move very slowly, and governments move when public opinion moves. We are in a—you know, I once made a joke that fat times tend to produce managers, not leaders. Unfortunately, Europe's been rolling in butter for 30 years, quite frankly. I am being blunt here. I also know that in a crisis, democracies are unbeatable. Democracies then rise up to the occasion. I am—my money is on democracies, not on Mr. Putin. We are in a very dangerous situation right now.

Ms. WARLICK: Dalibor.

Mr. ROHAC: Happy to add two things. First, on military capabilities, I mean, there is this divergence in threat perceptions. Of course, there are also great differences in productive capabilities and sort of the size of the defense industrial base across Europe. Unfortunately, it is the countries that actually could be stepping up and could be, you know, getting stuff on the market that feel the most complacent or feel kind of constrained by fiscal considerations.

There was a—there was a really disturbing paper that came out of the Kiel Institute back in September. That is the organization that tracks, among other things, assistance to Ukraine. They sort of looked at the effects of *Zeitenwende* on German military capabilities. Made the observation that while Russians can shoot around 100,000 rounds of ammunition, that is both rockets and artillery shells, a day, and kind of maintain this at a sort of—that is a sort of sustainable rate for the Russians. If Bundeswehr tried to do the same thing in a kinetic war, they would run out of arterial shells within 70 days.

That is—you know, that is after, you know, much of that 100 billion of *Zeitenwende* money has already been sort of spent and allocated, and contracts have been signed. They also look at the rate at which the German defense forces are rebuilding themselves because of this additional money. They take 2004 as the benchmark and conclude that

if things continue on the current trajectory, and Germany would sort of keeps on buying the stuff that it is buying and adding to the stocks, it will take something like 20 years to get back to 2004 levels of fighter jets, 40 years to get back to the 2004 levels of the number of tanks that they had, and century to get back to the 2004 levels of howitzers that they had. Clearly, this is not good enough. That even sets aside the question of, like, what happens once this money is spent and Germany sort of goes back below 2 percent, as it seems likely, in terms of defense spending.

To the question itself. I mean, I do not want to offer advice to Putin, not that he would need my advice, but I think we set a really dangerous precedent in Ukraine when we heard from the administration that it was an utmost priority to keep the war contained to Ukraine. Because that, in a different context, would really run contrary to the idea of collective defense, where a conflict that happens, you know, in Estonia should not be contained to Estonia if NATO is going to act as a collective body.

If I were to make an educated guess on what Putin might try to do, it is to try to establish a new geopolitical reality on the ground in one of these frontline states, which can be done I suppose very quickly, relatively easily. And while doing that, try to split the alliance on what is to happen next, because NATO is not—Article Five is not a sort of automatic trigger that just gets pulled whenever something happens on the ground. I mean, it does require deliberation. It does require consensus. I think the idea is to split the alliance, establish a foothold, and basically, you know, declare NATO vacuous. I think we have to do our utmost to prevent that.

Mr. EKMANIS: Yes, I will just say a couple of additional words. I think, yes, rearmament is critical. I will not go into what has already been spoken about except for, you know, this relates exactly to the point that the previous questioner brought up is, how do we make the argument outside of the Baltic states, outside of the frontline states, that they those states are worth defending? How do we make those arguments in the capitals and with decisionmakers, but also with the people who have to support the—or, who have to at least have some impact with their elected representatives?

I mean that, I think, is the critical question for the Baltic states as well, is that this needs—the importance of defending Baltic territory from the first—and defending NATO territory—from the first yard has to resonate beyond, you know, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, beyond Poland, beyond the Eastern European states. I think in addition to these military steps and measures, we have to think also about that information campaign that the Baltic states are engaged in as well.

Ms. WARLICK: Thank you. Any other questions? Yes, please.

QUESTION: Hello. My name is Oskar. I am from the Slovak embassy.

This might be more remarks and a followup rather than a question, but please I will encourage you to followup. I spent 4 years in Berlin. At the time I was there, the defense minister was Ursula von der Leyen. Well, she went over to the EU, and the German military did not do any huge lifts under her tenure. The cu is called Rutte. Yes, you might be right. It is about politics.

Mr. MICHTA: I am not sure I understand what you are asking. I think you're—and correct me if I am wrong—I think you are making a comment that political leadership that you saw in Europe before that—before the crisis in Ukraine, before the war started, these are still people who are there, right, who are calling the shots. That is true, but also the environment in which we all operate has changed dramatically. I think the flank

countries should appreciate the role that they have played. You could not have supplied Ukraine without Poland, without the J-Town base in Rzeszów, and, you know, all the transit and logistics. What also became, I think, very clear to the Europeans, that they urgently needed the United States in Europe for their own security and defense. Nobody could have executed this logistical operation but the Americans, in terms of capabilities.

I not so much hope, I sincerely believe that the events on the ground will force the Europeans to revisit the question of defense industrial base, munition production, and armament production. Frankly, the same applies to us. I mean, we lived for three decades with the just-in-time delivery system mindset. You know, because the wars that we fought, we knew when those wars would start, we could plan for the logistics that we would use, and our logistical supply chains were not threatened. We are in a completely different environment. In Washington, in Berlin, in Warsaw, in London, in Paris we need to move to a just-in-case mindset. Stockpiling, redundancies in the system, and threatened logistics.

Again, this will require considerable leadership in Europe and in the United States to articulate to the public. I have a running argument with a number of colleagues who tell me, well, the American public will not support higher defense spending than what we currently do. My answer is, has anybody asked? Has anybody made the case and presented the reality of the situation on the ground? If we do not do that, sure, who wants to spend money on things other than social programs and things that benefit you? It is really not, I guess, an answer to you, per se, but also a comment from my end.

I think this crisis has now deepened to a point that we will see pressure buildup for some action. The question is time, because, you know, the Finns are buying the F-35s. The Poles are buying the F-35s. The Romanians are buying the F-35s. Well, how many can we produce a year to actually deliver at speed and scale? That is the question for the U.S. side. We need to invest in our own defense industrial base and expand. The larger question is, you know, what the Russians have shown in Ukraine is that mass still matters. We have lived in this world of thinking in high tech terms. You know precisions, you know, unmanned systems, and all of that. In fact, yes, this is important, but in the final analysis if you do not have the mass, if you do not have the capability, the brigades, the tanks, the ammunition, your precision weapons will only take you so far. My comment, not really an answer.

Ms. WARLICK: Thank—

QUESTION: [Off mic.]

Mr. MICHTA: If you read what I have written, I mean, you know, Rutte is a very accomplished politician, and full respect for what he has done. The message, in my view, and I wrote about this, of selecting somebody from the flank would be the right message to send to the Russians at that time, yes.

Ms. WARLICK: If I can just expand a little bit on your question, which, I think, is, you know, about political leadership, just to the rest of our panelists. You know, do you see the center of gravity shifting east, you know, in these European institutions? You know, how can we better leverage the expertise of, you know, our Central and Eastern European colleagues on the eastern flank?

Mr. ROHAC: Not to repeat myself too much, but I just still do not see the message sinking in enough in key Western European capitals. I think it is, you know, laudable that the French president acknowledged that Eastern Europeans had been right. It is a

sign of progress that there is a commissioner no other than Andrius Kubilius is in charge of building up some form of European defense industrial base. If you sort of look at the budget he will be operating with, we are still sort of talking about very, very modest amounts and sort of baby steps at the time when much more is needed. I do not think there is a sort of easy way out, other than, I mean, events. I mean, events do shape politics. The world is getting progressively more dangerous. I think that sort of what awaits us will not be linear. I think we will be sort of confronted with crises and sort of turmoil that will force change. I just hope it is not too late.

Ms. WARLICK: Thank you.

Mr. EKMANIS: To put maybe a slightly more optimistic spin. You know, I think that it is important that we are seeing people like Kaja Kallas, you know, assume the role of chief diplomat of the European Union. Andrius Kubilius, the former Lithuanian PM, is the first leader of the defense and space portfolio. I think that there, in some ways, also is starting, you know, so—we are having this acknowledgment that these frontline countries have the expertise and, you know, deserve to be at the—kind of the big boys' table, if you will, right?

I think that you know, the Baltic states, for example, right, are also doing as much as they can by leading by example, right? They are really putting their money where their mouth is in terms of their support for Ukraine. It is difficult to fault them, right? Like they are—they are the biggest contributors to Ukraine, with Denmark. They are consistently making the case for Ukraine's path to membership in the EU and NATO. As Andrew mentioned, it is more effective because they are working together with their other partners. It is not—you know, this Latvian delegation can say whatever it wants, but it is only useful if they are working together with partners.

The Baltic states are a little bit notorious for not being always so great at working together, except for when it kind of matters. Working with their allies in Poland, in Finland, making the Nordic Baltic eight a bigger kind of influence in these international institutions I think is really important. I think that you know, Kaja Kallas talked about this in a way that perhaps is important to amplify. When you sit in Kyiv, she said, you know, it is the same distance to Tallinn as it is to Berlin, more or less. You know, we have to kind of help to reposition our thinking that this is not something so far away, really, from the centers of power, right? Really almost, in some ways, just as close as it is to the Baltic states.

Ms. WARLICK: I think—oh—

Mr. MICHTA: I—oh, sorry.

Ms. WARLICK: Please.

Mr. MICHTA: I just wanted to make one comment about regional cooperation. It is not just about politics. It is just about bringing the capabilities together. The Scandinavians will bring 250 fourth-generation aircraft to the table. The Finnish F-35s, the Polish F-35s, the Romanian ones. When I say that Poland is buying 250 SEPv3 Abrams, this is the most capable tank out there in the world right now. The very fact that this will be a formidable force that those states will bring to the table, in and of itself, will be a huge asset in the political conversation that takes place. When I say the center of gravity is shifting northeast into this corridor, it is not just because of the politics of it, or NATO enlargement, and the longer border. It is the real capabilities that these countries will bring.

Ms. WARLICK: Thank you

We are getting low on time, but I just will do one last round here and take two—I think I saw two questions. We will take both of them. Starting with Paul.

QUESTION: Okay. Well, thank you all very much. Paul Massaro, staff director of the Helsinki Commission.

Dr. Rohac, Dr. Michta, I mean, these are, these are terrific interventions. I mean, I could not agree more with what you—what you said earlier about where we need to get. I also could not agree more than it has not really sunk in. I sort of feel like it is hard for me to see where we are, after almost 3 years of war, how little it has sunk in, and particularly in a number of—a number of different countries that should sort of know better. I mean, this seems like we barely averted disaster, and all thanks to the Ukrainians. I mean, if Russia had been successful if Zelensky had left Ukraine, Poland would now have a giant border with Russia, effectively. The Russians would have 40 million new slaves to mobilize into their, essentially, conscript army to throw at Poland, the Baltics, or Romania.

That was the goal. I mean, it is very extraordinary thinking back how they even posted the op-eds they were going to publish the next day after the successful decapitation of Kyiv, how the—you know, the American-led world order had been destroyed, and this is a new age, and all that kind of stuff. You know, for the first couple weeks, it did—I mean, there was a feeling of, I mean, at least for me, you know, this is something new. Like, we are finally going to move into a new paradigm. Scholz immediately gave the very famous Zeitenwende speech.

I mean, it is really hard for me, 3 years later, to think that really any of this has come to fruition. I mean, there are certainly things with Poland and Finland. I mean, you know, again, I think that these states being presented today, you know, are countries that took this seriously, have taken it seriously, and have—but, I mean, I also cannot help but feel a sort of a sense of dismay that, you know, there has not been more of an evolution on the side of people that should really know better. I guess I wonder what it is going to take. I mean, if it is not going to take a brush with death, I mean, essentially the end—I mean, what would have been the end of everything as we know it—[LAUGHS]—what is it going to take to finally get us serious on this?

Is there another question?

Ms. WARLICK: Thanks, Paul. I think there is one question behind you.

QUESTION: Hi. First of all, thank you for your insights.

I come from the Western Balkans, so I could not help but notice the absence of Western Balkans in the conversation. We have seen that Russia's diplomacy has turned into blackmail diplomacy, especially when it comes to the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Russian ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina stated that if Bosnia and Herzegovina decides to continue pursuing NATO membership, then Russia has a right to defend itself. This is despite the fact that Bosnia-Herzegovina is not a neighboring country, it does not have a significant Russian-speaking population, and it is not a former part of the Soviet Union. Given these circumstances and the fact that Western Balkan countries are not frequently seen as frontline states, where do you see the opportunities for engagement with the countries of the Western Balkans, especially in its relation to Central and Eastern Europe?

Ms. WARLICK: Yes, I mean, whoever wants to respond to that first, please.

Mr. MICHTA: To your question first. You know, if you do not know where you are going any road will get you there. You know the cliché, right? I mean, listen to our debate on national security strategy. It is all normative. It is all defensive. We are defending the rules-based international order. We are on our heels. You know, we are arguing in a way that does not articulate a vision of what the post-war order is supposed to be. Russia cannot win. Ukraine cannot lose. What does that really mean? I mean, how do you build operational planning around this?

The first point I would make is I think the biggest shortcoming, because my money is on the West—if you combine our economies, if you combine our population resources, our technology, it should not even be a conversation, right? Is the absence of a strategic vision that actually outlines the end State—what does victory look like? I hear strategic competition all the time, great-power competition, strategic—what does the win look like? What is the geostrategic map that you want to get to? What are the end states, not just in Ukraine but also in the Balkans? What are the end states in Russia itself? What is it that we would consider to be the end result we want to work for, and spend money on, and move in that direction? I have not heard that conversation yet.

I share your dismay, because I remember when the *Zeitenwende*—I was still posted in Germany when the *Zeitenwende* speech was delivered by Chancellor Scholz. You know, everybody was talking about the great change and the rest of it. Frankly, I would like less *zeit* and more *wende* today, when it comes to the decisions that are being made. I am not just singling out Germany. I am just saying most of the political class still lives in this crisis of disbelief, that somehow—things were so fat, so good, so wonderful, maybe we can patch it up, figure it out, do something. Yes, that is a huge disappointment.

I think what we need is a strategy that the American citizenry will understand. That if you go to a farmer in Iowa and you say, pay your taxes because X, Y, Z, it is not because you are defending the rules-based international order, because that is abstract. That is normative. Why is it important for our prosperity? Why is it important for homeland security that we should build this military capability? Why are alliances force multipliers for us? Why do we stay, you know, engaged in Europe? Why the loss in the Atlantic mean that we will eventually lose in the Pacific? Why are these problem sets interrelated? for that, it takes leadership to articulate this.

On the Balkans, ma'am, it is a tough one, because it is a very difficult neighborhood right now. The Russians and the Chinese have been running all over, in different shapes or forms. It is very difficult now to generate any sort of sense, you know, of a shared future, at least some sort of a coherent policy. Because the Ukrainian problem set is so huge, you know, we do not have the attention span we once had, I would argue. That applies both to Western Europe, Central Europe, and the United States and its allies in this hemisphere. Will it change? I fervently hope so, but I am not very optimistic that you will see a sudden evolution of policy in that—in that direction.

Ms. WARLICK: Indra.

Mr. EKMANIS: Yes. I think, you know, to your question, Paul, it seems that the West is still stuck in this conception that I think both of my co-panelists have referred to, that, you know, if only we can pull Russia as, you know, into this sort of Western mind frame, that that economic growth, you know, or something like this, is going to lead to some sort of remarkable, like, blooming democracy in Russia—you know, like, we are still kind of stuck in this mindset, right? Like it has not. You know, neither has the dissolution of the Soviet Union sort of diminished Russia's understanding of itself as an empire.

You know, so I think it is also important for us to listen to the people who are closest to it, who say that—remind us that also this all does not go away the day that Vladimir Putin, you know, drops dead, right? Like this is not only in Russian leadership, but it is also part and parcel of Russian society in the way that it conceives of itself. It is also, importantly, worryingly, part of the Russian opposition as well. The idea that, you know, the West also risks sort of infantilizing Russian society, you know, as kind of non—as people with without agency of their own, right, is also a problem that that we have to think of today as well, right? Like, this does not all change with leadership change. How are we going to get ahead of that as well?

I will not even pretend to give an answer to the Balkans question. You know, yes, it is disappointing. It is remarkable that, with all that we know, and all of the resources that we have, and all the insight that our allies are telling us, we have not been able to make and effect change. This drip, drip, drip of aid is—you know, it is, you know, a thousand paper cuts sort of a situation. Not very optimistic. [LAUGHS.]

Mr. ROHAC: I mean, I am happy to cosign everything that Andrew and Indra put to you, and maybe just add a couple of very, very quick thoughts. It strikes me that part of the problem is, indeed, thinking in abstract categories instead of having a sort of strategic understanding of geography and interests. Like, weirdly enough, Trump, with all his flaws, had sort of intuitive understanding of sort of power and power relations that kind of, like, rubbed many foreign policy professionals the wrong way, but had a sort of insight that I think was very often—very often lacking.

I mean, when you look at, say, the European Union's response to China's Belt and Road, the Global Gateway, which, again, talks about connectivity and talks in these sort of abstract categories, without really having any sense of geographic focus, priorities, resources allocated, you know, achievable sort of goals, countries that we want to engage with, countries that are kind of out—of out of region. I think that really makes a sort of proactive sort of decisionmaking very, very difficult. I was—I hosted yesterday a panel on Georgia and the upcoming Georgian election. One of the speakers was Chairman Turner from the Intelligence Committee.

What he said that sort of still keeps sort of nagging at me is that Russia right now is pretty busy with what is happening in Ukraine. Georgia is a small country—like Moldova, perhaps, like, you know, many countries of the Western Balkans. Like, should not we be trying to do something proactively in these—in these places? You know, like, some of this should be fairly low-hanging fruit. I mean, I would think of the Western Balkans, you know, by virtue of their geography—like, you know, they're not, you know, neighboring Russia. They are kind of, like, encapsulated by EU and NATO members in this little pocket. Like that should not be that difficult.

Yet, you know, in the mid-noughties, the European Union basically decided to sort of put the region on autopilot, made these sort of commitments to eventual membership, without really any intention of kind of delivering through political leadership. Then everybody was sort of surprised by the end of the previous decade, that sort of autopilot did not really deliver the results we were—we were hoping for. I think, you know, from Georgia, through Moldova, to Western Balkans, I think, you know, people say, oh, like, we do not have infinite bandwidth to do all this stuff. Especially as a global superpower, we should be able to do more than one thing at once.

I think that sort of applies to this idea that we have to just focus on competition with China, to the detriment of everything else. I think it also applies in a sort of more regional

context, that we should be able to—we should be obviously helping Ukraine win this war. We should, you know, simultaneously be able to, you know, allocate fairly modest resources to actually make, you know, progress in these—in these other places. Whether it is the EU or the United States, I do not think we are doing, you know, a good enough job at that.

Ms. WARLICK: I will also just add that we expect to do an event on the Balkans soon. We have a chapter in our report also dedicated to the Western Balkans. Stay tuned for more from the Commission.

I just want to thank our incredible panelists for some really great insights today. What an incredible discussion. Thank you to the audience for participating and for some great questions. That concludes the briefing. [APPLAUSE]

[Whereupon, at 3:37 p.m., the briefing ended.]







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